

# Forgiving others protects women from depression, but not men

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Credit: George Hodan/Public Domain

Forgiveness is a complex process, one often fraught with difficulty and angst. Now, researchers in the University of Missouri College of Human Environmental Sciences studied how different facets of forgiveness affected aging adults' feelings of depression. The researchers found older women who forgave others were less likely to report depressive symptoms regardless of whether they felt unforgiven by others. Older

men, however, reported the highest levels of depression when they both forgave others and felt unforgiven by others. The researchers say their results may help counselors of older adults develop gender-appropriate interventions since men and women process forgiveness differently.

"It doesn't feel good when we perceive that others haven't forgiven us for something," said Christine Proulx, study co-author and an associate professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Science. "When we think about forgiveness and characteristics of people who are forgiving - altruistic, compassionate, empathetic - these people forgive others and seem to compensate for the fact that others aren't forgiving them. It sounds like moral superiority, but it's not about being a better person. It's 'I know that this hurts because it's hurting me,' and those people are more likely to forgive others, which appears to help decrease levels of depression, particularly for women."

Proulx and lead author Ashley Ermer, a doctoral student in the Department of Human Development and Family Science, analyzed data from the Religion, Aging, and Health Survey, a national survey of more than 1,000 adults ages 67 and older. Survey participants answered questions about their religion, health and psychological well-being.

Proulx said they studied forgiveness among an older population because of the tendency among older individuals to reflect on their lives, especially their relationships and transgressions, both as wrongdoers and as those who had experienced wrongdoing.

"As people get older, they become more forgiving," Ermer said. "Our population also predominately was Christian, which may influence individuals' willingness to forgive and could function differently among individuals with different beliefs."

The researchers found men and women who feel unforgiven by others

are somewhat protected against depression when they are able to forgive themselves. Yet, the researchers said they were surprised to find that forgiving oneself did not more significantly reduce levels of depression.

"Self-forgiveness didn't act as the protector against depression," Proulx said. "It's really about whether individuals can forgive other people and their willingness to forgive others."

The study, "Unforgiveness, [depression](#), and health in later life: the protective factor of forgivingness," was published in July in *Aging & Mental Health*.

**More information:** *Aging & Mental Health*,  
[www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/26133952](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/26133952)

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