

Psychologist finds gender differences in forgiving

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Forgiveness can be a powerful means to healing, but it does not come naturally for both sexes. Men have a harder time forgiving than women do, according to Case Western Reserve University psychologist Julie Juola Exline. But that can change if men develop empathy toward an offender by seeing they may also be capable of similar actions. Then the gender gap closes, and men become less vengeful.

Exline is the lead author on the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology's* article, "Not so Innocent: Does Seeing One's Own Capability for Wrongdoing Predict Forgiveness?" She collaborated with researchers Roy Baumeister and Anne Zell from Florida State University; Amy Kraft from Arizona State; and Charlotte Witvliet from Hope College.

In seven forgiveness-related studies Exline conducted between 1998 through 2005 with more than 1,400 college students, gender differences between men and women consistently emerged. When asked to recall offenses they had committed personally, men became less vengeful toward people who had offended them. Women reflecting on personal offenses, and beginning at a lower baseline for vengeance, exhibited no differences in levels of unforgiving. When women had to recall a similar offense in relation to the other's offense, women felt guilty and tended to magnify the other's offense.

"The gender difference is not anything that we predicted. We actually got aggravated, because we kept getting it over and over again in our studies," said Exline. "We kept trying to explain it away, but it kept repeating in the experiments."

The John Templeton Foundation-supported studies used hypothetical situations, actual recalled offenses, individual and group situations and surveys to study the ability to forgive.

Exline said prior studies have shown that at baseline (without any interventions), men tend to be more vengeful than women, who have been taught from childhood to put themselves "in the shoes of others" and empathize with them.

In Exline's study, women who recalled similar offenses of their own did not show much difference in their levels of vengeance, in contrast to men. Women, having been taught from an early age to be more empathetic, lean toward relationship building and do not emphasize the vengeful side of justice to the degree that men do.

The researchers found that people of both genders are more forgiving when they see themselves as capable of committing a similar action to the offender's; it tends to make the offense seem smaller. Seeing capability also increases empathic understanding of the offense and causes people to feel more similar to the offenders. Each of these factors, in turn, predicts more forgiving attitudes.

"Offenses are easier to forgive to the extent that they seem small and understandable and when we see ourselves as similar or close to the offender," she said.

Exline found this ability to identify with the offender and forgive also happens in intergroup conflicts in a study that she related to forgiveness of the 9/11 terrorists.

"When people could envision their own government committing acts similar to those of the terrorists, they were less vengeful," she stressed. "For example, they were less likely to believe that perpetrators should be killed on the spot or given the death penalty, and they were more supportive of negotiations and economic aid."

Source: Case Western Reserve University

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