Forgiveness and Suicide

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A study of college students suffering from depression found that students who are more capable of forgiving themselves and others after stressful life events or interpersonal problems have lower rates of suicidal behavior than their peers who are less able to forgive. The authors of this study point out that other research demonstrates that interventions that boost levels of forgiveness can increase self-esteem, hopefulness, positive emotions toward other people, and perceived self-control while reducing levels of depression, anxiety, and drug use. They suggest that therapies and public health interventions promoting forgiveness may help prevent suicidal behaviors and associated risk factors among college students.

The research indicated that the ability to forgive others was directly related to lower levels of suicidal behavior regardless of the effects of depression. The authors propose that the ability to forgive others may help students move beyond emotionally stressful experiences as well as reconcile relationships injured by these events. In contrast, the impact of the ability to forgive oneself on suicidal behavior appeared to be mediated by depression – that is, greater forgiveness of self was associated with lower levels of depressive symptoms, which in turn were associated with lower rates of suicidal behavior. Additional research by the authors of this study found that forgiveness of self also moderates the association between anger and suicidal behavior.

The authors suggest that the impact of forgiveness may stem from its character as a coping process that replaces negative with positive cognitions, behaviors, and attitudes, its association with reduced levels of stress and a greater sense of personal self-control, and its contribution to re-establishing social relationships (and social support) that have been disrupted by life events or interpersonal problems.

The research used a racially and ethnically diverse sample of college students, 78 percent of whom were female. Forty-two percent of the sample had severe depression; the rest were suffering from at least mild depression. Almost half had a history of suicidal ideation or attempts, while 37 percent had suffered from ideation in the past year. Forgiveness was measured using three questions about each subject's ability to forgive him- or herself, ability to forgive others, and belief that God forgives them. A belief in forgiveness by God was not found to have an impact on suicidal behavior.


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