

Exploring the Importance of Forgiveness as a Character Strength: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract. Forgiveness character plays a crucial role in emotional recovery and personal growth, particularly when individuals face painful experiences or interpersonal conflict. This article aims to analyze the importance of forgiveness across different age groups, the influencing factors that shape this character, and counseling or intervention approaches that have been implemented to enhance it. The study employs a Systematic Literature Review approach based on the PRISMA framework, using databases such as Scopus and ScienceDirect with clearly defined inclusion and exclusion criteria. From the selection process, ten relevant articles published between 2019 and 2024 were identified. The review reveals that forgiveness contributes significantly to restoring social relationships, reducing negative emotions, and improving mental health. Key influencing factors include personality dimensions (HEXACO), religiosity, positive affectivity, and supportive parenting styles. Effective interventions identified in the literature include community-based approaches, forgiveness psychoeducation, Enright's forgiveness therapy model, and the development of psychological suzhi.

Key words: Forgiveness Character; Character Strength; Strength-Based Counseling; Systematic Literature Review

INTRODUCTION

The character strength of forgiveness plays a crucial role in emotional healing and personal development, particularly when individuals face unpleasant experiences or interpersonal conflicts. Forgiveness functions not only as a mechanism to alleviate negative emotions but also contributes to improved interpersonal relationships through reconciliation and long-term psychological well-being. Kuang et al. (2024) identified self-forgiveness as an essential component of therapeutic programs aimed at optimizing clients' self-efficacy. Similarly, Tirrell (2022) emphasized that forgiveness is an adaptive and beneficial response that can be cultivated as a character strength, supporting social justice while enhancing individual well-being and interpersonal harmony. Thus, forgiveness can be regarded as a vital character strength that promotes adaptive social relationships and personal growth. Despite its importance, research that specifically explores forgiveness as a character strength and how it can be cultivated remains relatively limited. Given this context, the aim of this study is to conduct a systematic literature review to provide a deeper understanding of forgiveness as a character strength, identify the contributing factors to its development, and examine various intervention strategies to foster forgiveness. Furthermore, this study highlights the role of counselors in supporting individuals to develop forgiveness as part of broader mental health enhancement strategies.

METHODS

In this study, the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method was employed to examine the significance of forgiveness as a character strength, the factors influencing the development of forgiveness, and various intervention strategies aimed at enhancing this character trait. A Systematic Literature Review is a structured and methodical approach to reviewing existing literature (Munn et al., 2018). It involves a comprehensive search for relevant studies, a systematic selection and evaluation process, and the synthesis of research findings to provide an objective and reliable summary of a specific topic or research question. This approach aims to minimize bias and offer a solid foundation for evidence-based decision-making and recommendations.

The article search was conducted using two academic databases: Scopus and ScienceDirect, employing the Boolean operation: ("forgiveness" OR "forgivingness") AND ("importance" OR "factors" OR "counseling" OR "intervention") AND ("individual" OR "age groups"). The selection and evaluation of relevant articles followed the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic

Reviews and Meta-

Analyses) guidelines, which include the stages of identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion (Simamora et al., 2024).

The initial search retrieved 498 articles from Scopus and 11,979 articles from ScienceDirect, totaling 12,477 articles. After screening for duplicates and applying inclusion and exclusion criteria, 304 articles proceeded to the screening phase. Among these, 57 articles were excluded due to external factors, and 187 articles were removed for failing to meet the inclusion criteria. Consequently, 60 articles advanced to the eligibility stage. Based on the research questions and thematic relevance, an additional 50 articles were excluded, resulting in 10 articles being selected as the final sample. The final selection process is illustrated in the PRISMA flow diagram presented in Figure 1.

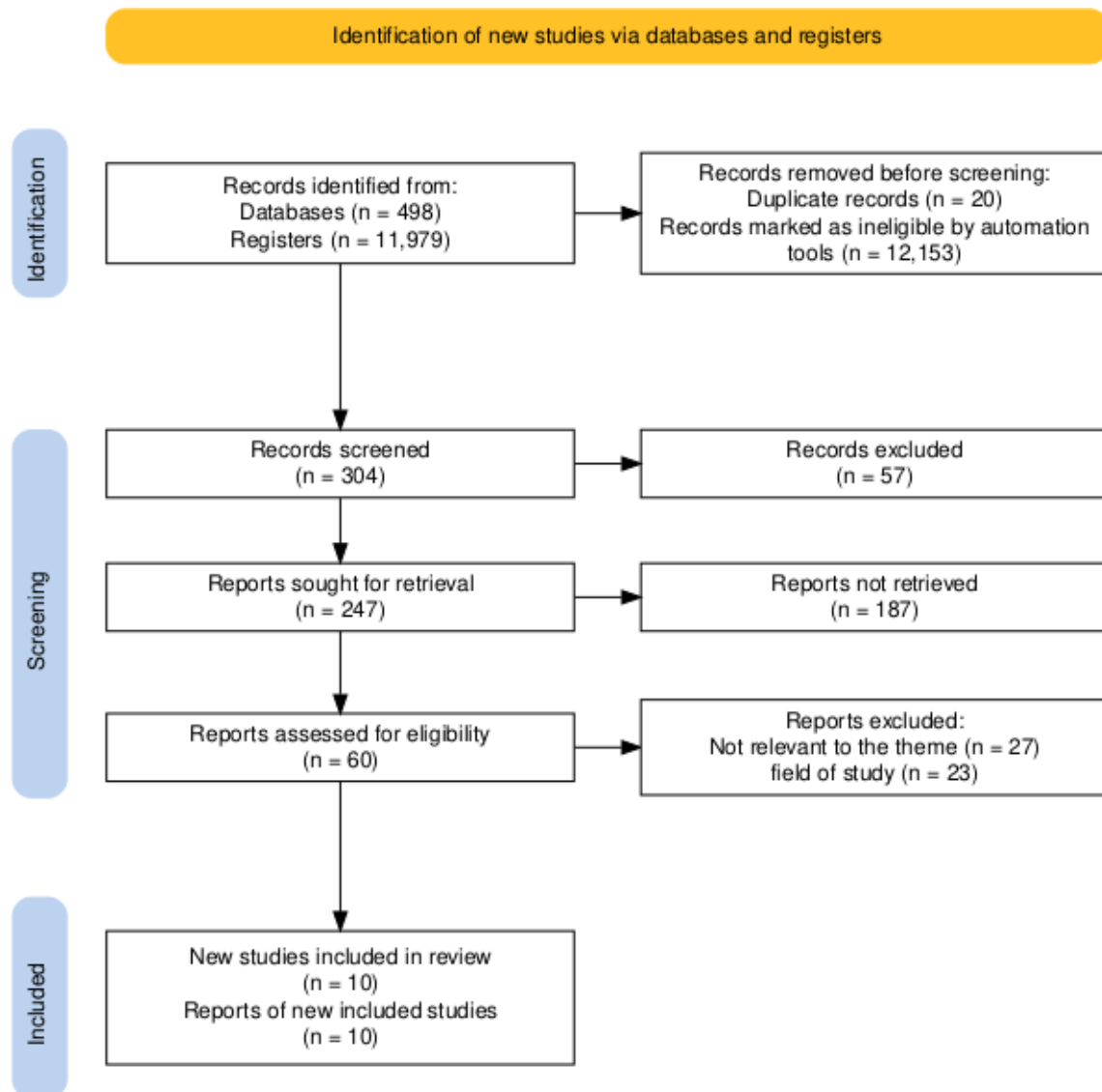


Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram

The screening process in this study was based on inclusion and exclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria comprised the following, and the exclusion criteria were as follows:

<i>No</i>	<i>PICOS</i>	<i>Inclusion Criteria</i>	<i>Exclusion Criteria</i>
1	Population	All ages	-
2	Intervention	All of counseling/intervention approaches that have been implemented to enhance the character of forgiveness	Interventions primarily aimed at developing character strengths other than forgiveness
3	Outcomes	Forgiveness Character Strength	Not Forgiveness Character Strength
4	Database	Scopus, Sciencedirect, Sage Pub	Pubmed, etc
5	Type of Publication	Articles published in journals	Articles published in proceeding, conference
6	Journal Specifications	International journal	National journal above Sinta 2
7	Publication Year	2019-October 2024	Less than 2019
5	Independent Variable	Forgiveness	Not Forgiveness
6	Field	Psychology, Guidance and Counseling, Social Science, Education	Outside of Psychology, Guidance and Counseling, Social Science, Education
7	Language	English	Non English or Non Indonesia

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The Research Questions (RQ) developed in this study are as follows:

Code	The Research Questions (RQ)	Objective
RQ1	How important is forgiveness as a character strength (O) for individuals across different age groups (P)?	To examine the importance of forgiveness as a character strength possessed by individuals across different age groups.
RQ2	What factors influence the development of forgiveness as a character strength (O) in individuals across different age groups (P)?	To identify the factors that influence the development of forgiveness as a character strength in individuals across different age groups.
RQ3	What counseling approaches or interventions (I) have been implemented to enhance forgiveness as a character strength (O) between the years 2019 and 2024 (T)?	To explore the counseling approaches or interventions that have been implemented to enhance forgiveness as a character strength from 2019 to 2024.

Table 2. The Research Questions (RQ)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the results of the systematic literature review conducted through searches in the Scopus and ScienceDirect databases, a total of 10 articles met the inclusion criteria. These articles were then analyzed to address the previously formulated research questions. A comprehensive overview of the selected articles is presented in Table 3. To address RQ1, three articles were identified, with detailed descriptions provided in Table 4. Similarly, three articles were used to answer RQ2, with further details outlined in Table 5. For RQ3, four articles were reviewed, and their specifics are presented in Table 6.

No	Title	Country & language	Research Objective	Type & Method	Population & Sample	Findings
1	Understanding of the functions of forgiveness among preschoolers	Japan, English	To investigate the understanding of forgiveness among preschool children aged 4 to 6 years, with a focus on the function of forgiveness in restoring damaged relationships and facilitating positive emotional changes in victims toward offenders. This study aims to explore how children's understanding of forgiveness develops in relation to age and social interaction.	A descriptive study using a qualitative approach. An experimental method employing a story-based design.	Participants: 48 four-year-old children (25 girls, 23 boys; M = 54.06 months, SD = 3.14), 50 five-year-old children (21 girls, 29 boys; M = 64.26 months, SD = 2.90), and 50 six-year-old children (21 girls, 29 boys; M = 73.04 months, SD = 3.19) from Osaka, Japan. Inclusion criteria: correctly answered all four comprehension questions in two trials. Total participants: 148 children (67 girls, 81 boys).	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Six-year-old children understood that forgiveness leads to positive emotions and the restoration of relationships. Four- and five-year-old children believed that positive emotions could occur even without forgiveness. All age groups recognized that forgiveness restores relationships; however, six-year-olds were more likely to expect victims who do not forgive to become separated from the offender. Understanding of forgiveness develops with age—young children are more influenced by apologies, while older children have a better grasp of the function of forgiveness.
2	Forgiveness as a character strength: Toward a developmental model and research agenda	USA, English	The objective of this article is to assess forgiveness as a character strength from an RDS-based perspective. The article proposes that character strengths, including forgiveness, foster adaptive and mutually beneficial relationships between individuals and their surrounding contexts.	Qualitative research, functional analysis.	Literature review and theoretical evidence from previous studies.	This article demonstrates that forgiveness is an adaptive and beneficial response that can be developed as a character strength, promoting social justice and enhancing individual well-being as well as social relationships in contexts such as bullying and criminal behavior.
3	Qualitative analysis of a slovakian sample Of the lay population's understanding of Forgiveness with regard to age differences	Slovakia, English	Aims to explore general understandings of forgiveness, with a focus on differing perspectives between young adults and older adults. .	Qualitative research, semi-structured interviews.	20 participants from two age groups (21–29 years and 61–68 years).	The results indicate that for most individuals across both generations, the essence of forgiveness lies in letting go of anger and hurt. The most supportive positive factor for forgiveness was an apology, while the greatest negative factor was the depth of the harm experienced. Young adults viewed forgiveness as an interpersonal process, whereas older adults perceived it as an internal process. These findings may assist counselors in designing interventions that support forgiveness by taking into account generational differences in perspective..
4	The HEXACO Model of Personality, Religiosity, and Trait Forgiveness	Polandia, English	The objective of this article is to examine the incremental validity of religiosity beyond the six-dimensional personality structure in predicting dispositional forgiveness, namely self-	Quantitative research, hierarchical regression.	The sample of this study consisted of 176 individuals (106 women, 70 men) aged 22–42 years. The study population comprised Roman Catholic individuals	The results of the study indicate that religiosity has incremental validity in predicting tendencies toward forgiveness, particularly forgiveness of others. Dimensions of religiosity associated with religious

			<p>forgiveness, forgiveness of others, and forgiveness of situations. This study focuses on how religiosity may contribute to predicting an individual's tendency to forgive, particularly in forgiving others, while also suggesting that religiosity can influence self-forgiveness and situational forgiveness in different ways depending on its specific dimensions.</p>		<p>with higher or secondary education who described their socioeconomic status as average or good.</p>	<p>struggles were linked to lower levels of self-forgiveness and forgiveness of situations. In contrast, higher centrality of religiosity was associated with a greater tendency to forgive others</p>
5	Affectivity and self-forgiveness. the role of control of negative emotions: Short report	Polandia, English	<p>The objective of this article is to investigate how affectivity and emotional control (including anger, depression, and anxiety) influence self-forgiveness in individuals. The study also aims to examine the moderating role of emotional control in the relationship between affectivity and self-forgiveness.</p>	Quantitative research using a cross-sectional approach.	381 respondents (274 women, 104 men, 3 unspecified), with a mean age of 36.26 years (SD = 11.84, range = 20–67 years).	<p>The results of the study indicate that positive affect is positively associated with self-forgiveness, whereas negative affect is negatively associated with it. Emotional control, particularly control over anger, functions as a buffer that reduces the impact of negative affect on self-forgiveness.</p>
6	Parenting profiles and adult children's internalizing and externalizing symptoms: the protective role of forgiveness	USA, English	<p>This study aims to investigate how parental parenting behaviors interact with adult children's forgiveness toward their parents in influencing internalizing and externalizing symptoms in adulthood.</p>	Quantitative research using a survey approach, with Latent Profile Analysis (LPA).	The study sample consisted of 287 adults (mean age = 24.17 years; 74.2% female).	<p>The results indicate that forgiveness toward parents can protect adult children from mental health problems; however, the effect of paternal parenting on externalizing symptoms varies depending on the individual's level of forgiveness toward their father.</p>
7	Evaluating the effectiveness of a community based forgiveness campaign	USA, English	<p>This study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of a community-based campaign in promoting forgiveness among university students by comparing pre-test and post-test scores on measures of forgiveness and related indicators such as love and conflict in social relationships</p>	Quantitative research employing a quasi-experimental design with pre-test and post-test assessments.	The sample in this study consisted of university students who participated in a community-based campaign aimed at promoting forgiveness.	<p>The results of the study indicate that the community-based approach is effective in promoting forgiveness. This approach has proven to be a feasible method for fostering forgiveness, offering lower costs and greater scalability compared to traditional psychological interventions. These findings pave the way for further research and clinical applications in the development of community-based interventions.</p>
8	The Effectiveness of a Forgiveness Intervention on Mental Health in Bereaved Parents—A Pilot Study	Slovakia, English	<p>The objective of this study is to examine the effectiveness of a forgiveness education intervention on the mental health of bereaved parents.</p>	Quantitative research, experimental design with control and experimental groups.	The study sample consisted of 21 bereaved parents who were randomly assigned to two groups: an experimental group and a control group.	<p>The results of the study indicated that the experimental group experienced significantly greater improvements in forgiveness of others, self-forgiveness, and reductions in depression at post-intervention and follow-up assessments. Additionally, they showed decreases in anxiety and anger at the post-intervention assessment, as well as increased post-traumatic growth at the follow-up assessment,</p>

						conducted four months after the intervention ended.
9	Psychological interventions to promote self-forgiveness: a systematic review	India, English	The objective of this study is to understand the implementation and effectiveness of various interventions aimed at enhancing self-forgiveness.	Qualitative research, systematic review method.	This study includes 21 articles that met the inclusion criteria after the selection process, encompassing a variety of methods, participants, research designs, durations, measurement tools, and outcomes.	The review findings indicate that 13 out of the 21 articles involved interventions specifically designed to promote self-forgiveness. These interventions were implemented at both individual and group levels. Self-directed interventions, particularly those based on Enright's process model, were found to be effective in enhancing self-forgiveness. Moreover, self-forgiveness interventions also demonstrated effectiveness in improving other positive psychological and clinical variables.
10	Forgiveness as a Mediator between Psychological Suzhi and Prosocial Behavior in Chinese Adolescents	China, English	The objective of this study is to uncover the underlying mechanisms linking psychological suzhi and prosocial behavior among Chinese adolescents, with consideration of temporal factors.	Quantitative research, longitudinal design with two waves of data collection. .	477 adolescents (228 males, 49.1%; mean age = 14.04 years, SD = 1.77) from the southwestern region of China.	The results of the study indicate that psychological suzhi and forgiveness are positively associated with prosocial behavior at both time points. Psychological suzhi significantly predicted prosocial behavior both concurrently and three months later. Forgiveness served as a mediator in both the immediate and long-term effects of psychological suzhi on prosocial behavior. Psychological suzhi and forgiveness are important predictors of prosocial behavior among Chinese adolescents, and interventions based on these constructs are essential for promoting the development of prosocial behavior.

Table 3. Summary of studies included in the review

How important is forgiveness as a character strength possessed by individuals across different age groups?

Based on the findings of the reviewed studies, forgiveness is essential in restoring cooperative relationships and reducing negative impacts on social interactions, both in children and adults. Within the Relational Developmental Systems (RDS) framework, forgiveness is viewed as a character strength that supports adaptive social relationships and positive development across the lifespan. Forgiveness also plays a crucial role in reducing anger and emotional pain, while enhancing mental health and social connectedness, proving beneficial for individuals of all age groups.

No	The Importance of Forgiveness as a Character Strength Across Different Age Groups
1	Forgiveness plays a vital role in restoring and maintaining cooperative relationships from an early age, as well as in facilitating positive emotional change in victims toward transgressors.(Toda et al., 2024)
2	Within the Relational Developmental Systems (RDS) framework, forgiveness is regarded as a character strength that supports adaptive social relationships and sustained positive

development across age groups, particularly in the context of interpersonal conflict. (Tirrell, 2022)

- 3 Forgiveness plays a crucial role in reducing anger and emotional pain, as well as in enhancing mental health and social relationships among both younger and older generations. (Záhorcová et al., 2023)

Table 4. Results for RQ1 Importance of Forgiveness Across Age Groups

What factors influence the development of forgiveness as a character strength in individuals across different age groups?

Based on the review findings, several factors influence the development of forgiveness as a character strength, including the HEXACO personality dimensions, levels of religiosity, positive and negative affectivity, and nurturing parenting experiences characterized by warmth and effective control. Moreover, forgiveness toward parents serves as a protective factor for mental health, even in the presence of negative parenting practices

No	Factors Influencing the Development of Forgiveness as a Character Strength Across Different Age Groups
1	Studies indicate that personality dimensions within the HEXACO model—such as honesty–humility, extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness to experience—along with the centrality of religiosity and religious struggles, contribute to predicting dispositional forgiveness. These factors strengthen individuals’ tendencies to forgive others, themselves, and situations. (Matuszewski & Morof, 2022)
2	Research shows that positive affectivity enhances the tendency toward self-forgiveness, whereas negative affectivity is inversely related to self-forgiveness. . (Mróz & Kaleta, 2022)
3	Nurturing parenting experiences characterized by warmth and effective control support forgiveness toward parents, which in turn reduces internalizing and externalizing symptoms. Although negative parenting may exacerbate such symptoms, forgiveness still functions as a protective factor for mental health. (Zhang et al., 2024)

Table 5. Results for RQ2 Factors Influencing Forgiveness

What counseling/intervention approaches have been implemented to enhance forgiveness character from 2019–2024?

Counseling/intervention approaches aimed at enhancing forgiveness character include community-based interventions that effectively strengthen social relationships, forgiveness education interventions that are more effective in supporting the mental recovery of grieving parents, the use of Enright’s process model to improve psychological well-being, and the development of psychological suzhi and forgiveness among adolescents to promote prosocial behavior.

No	What counseling/intervention approaches have been implemented to enhance forgiveness character from 2019–2024
1	This study shows that the community intervention was effective in promoting forgiveness and strengthening interpersonal relationships within social environments, such as with friends, roommates, teachers, and parents. (Griffin et al., 2019)
2	This research is a comparative intervention study, where the results indicate that forgiveness-based education interventions are more effective than grief psychoeducation in supporting the mental recovery of parents who lost a child, by enhancing forgiveness and accelerating the grieving process. (Záhorcová et al., 2023)

- 3 The intervention based on Enright’s process model has proven to be highly beneficial, both in individual and group settings, with positive outcomes including improved psychological well-being and reduced emotional stress. (Vismaya et al., 2024)
- 4 This study focuses on the development of psychological suzhi and forgiveness, aiming to promote prosocial behavior in adolescents. (Chen et al., 2022)

Table 6. Results for RQ3 Approaches to Enhancing Forgiveness (2019–2024)

1. The Importance of Forgiveness as a Character Strength Across the Lifespan

Forgiveness plays a vital role in restoring and maintaining cooperative relationships, which is evident across different age groups. In early childhood, children are already capable of forgiving transgressors, both as third parties and as direct victims. The understanding of the function of forgiveness begins to emerge around age 4 and becomes more mature by age 6, encompassing two main functions: restoring the relationship between the victim and the transgressor, and promoting emotional change in the victim toward the offender (Toda et al., 2024). This research suggests that forgiveness not only aids in relationship recovery but also fosters emotional transformation in individuals, providing benefits in resolving interpersonal conflicts at various life stages.

As individuals age, forgiveness continues to play a significant role in strengthening social relationships and mental health. In later adulthood, forgiveness is more often viewed as an internal process focused on transforming negative thoughts, emotions, and behaviors into positive ones. However, there are differing views about forgiveness—some perceive it as a sign of weakness or a disregard for justice, whereas figures like Gandhi consider it a reflection of high moral character (Tirrell, 2022). These perspectives highlight the need for more targeted interventions to promote a deeper understanding of forgiveness across age groups, particularly among the youth and the elderly, to support their psychological well-being.

2. Factors Influencing the Development of Forgiveness Character

A variety of factors influence the development of forgiveness as a character strength, including personality dimensions, religiosity, emotional regulation, and childhood parenting experiences. Personality traits such as honesty–humility, extraversion, agreeableness, and openness to experience—as outlined in the HEXACO model—are significant predictors of dispositional forgiveness (Matuszewski & Moroń, 2022). Additionally, religiosity—both the centrality of religious belief and religious struggles—also influences one’s propensity to forgive others and oneself. While religious struggles can hinder self- and situational forgiveness, religious centrality tends to support a greater tendency to forgive others.

Emotional regulation, particularly in managing anger, depression, and anxiety, also plays a key role in the forgiveness process. Studies show that positive affect is positively associated with self-forgiveness, while negative affect has the opposite effect. Good emotional control can buffer the negative impact of such affects, indicating that individuals who can manage negative emotions are more likely to engage in forgiveness (Mróz & Kaleta, 2022).

Moreover, childhood parenting styles significantly affect the development of forgiveness. Warm and well-controlled parenting promotes the ability to forgive one’s parents, which in turn contributes to reduced internalizing and externalizing symptoms in adulthood. In contrast, negative parenting may exacerbate these symptoms; however, forgiveness toward parents still serves as a protective factor for mental health (Zhang et al., 2024).

3. Counseling and Intervention Approaches to Enhance Forgiveness Character (2019–2024)

From 2019 to 2024, various counseling and intervention strategies have been implemented to foster forgiveness, both at the individual and group levels. One approach is community-based intervention, such as forgiveness campaigns conducted within university settings. These initiatives have proven effective in promoting forgiveness and enhancing interpersonal relationships within broader social contexts, such as those involving friends, roommates, faculty, and family members. A key advantage of this method lies in its cost-effectiveness and ease of dissemination across diverse populations (Vismaya et al., 2024).

Forgiveness education interventions have also been applied to grieving parents. Research indicates

that such interventions enhance forgiveness toward others and oneself, while also reducing symptoms of depression, anxiety, and anger. Notably, these benefits persist up to four months after the intervention, highlighting their relevance in psychological recovery (Záhorcová et al., 2023). The Enright Process Model of Forgiveness has similarly demonstrated positive outcomes in both individual and group settings, resulting in improved psychological well-being and reduced emotional distress (Vismaya et al., 2024).

Another study emphasizes the importance of psychological suzhi (psychological resilience) and forgiveness in fostering prosocial behavior among adolescents. Interventions based on psychological suzhi and forgiveness not only have immediate effects on prosocial behavior but also show sustained positive outcomes up to three months later, demonstrating their long-term value in supporting adolescent social development (Chen et al., 2022).

This review provides a recent and comprehensive synthesis (2019–2024) of forgiveness as a character strength across different age groups, highlighting effective counseling interventions and psychological factors that promote forgiveness. The findings contribute to the development of evidence-based counseling practices and character education, offering practical insights for enhancing emotional well-being and social harmony

CONCLUSION

Forgiveness has been proven to be important in restoring social relationships, reducing anger, and enhancing mental health across different age groups, with the Relational Developmental Systems (RDS) approach highlighting forgiveness as a character strength that supports adaptive social development. Its contributing factors include personality traits (HEXACO), religiosity, positive affectivity, as well as affectionate and well-controlled parenting patterns. The most effective interventions include community-based approaches to strengthen social relationships, forgiveness education interventions that support emotional recovery among grieving parents, the Enright process model to reduce emotional stress, and the development of psychological suzhi to promote prosocial behavior among adolescents. Based on these findings, it can be concluded that the character of forgiveness has a significant impact on individuals' psychological well-being across age groups and on interpersonal relationships. With increasing evidence supporting the effectiveness of forgiveness-based interventions, it is important to continue developing approaches that enhance forgiveness, whether through individual, group, or community-based interventions. Future research should examine the long-term effectiveness of forgiveness interventions in various social and cultural contexts. In addition, further studies could explore the factors that influence the acceptance and development of forgiveness across age groups to design more targeted and measurable interventions.

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