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Review

Forgiveness Psychoeducation with Emerging Adults: REACH Forgiveness and Community Campaigns for Forgiveness

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Abstract: Much attention has been devoted to the effectiveness of forgiveness interventions in children and adolescents featuring two premier programs by Enright and his colleagues. Little attention has been given to psychoeducational forgiveness interventions with emerging adults. This is a narrative review of REACH Forgiveness studies with emerging adults (ages 18–25). The life tasks of emerging adults justify offering psychoeducational interventions to emerging adults. Research studies on REACH Forgiveness (k = 17), non-REACH Forgiveness studies (k = 4), and community campaigns at universities (k = 4) with emerging adults are summarized. Effect sizes per hour (d/h) for REACH Forgiveness studies (k = 13 for psychoeducational groups; k = 4 for self-administered workbooks) are reported. The proto-REACH groups (k = 5) had mean d/h = 0.104; REACH groups (k = 9) had d/h = 0.101; self-administered workbooks (k = 3) had mean d/h = 0.15; non-REACH Forgiveness studies (k = 4) had d/h = 0.09. All studies were from the USA, and most were from universities. However, a recent article reported randomized controlled trials in five non-USA samples of adults (N = 4598). A 3.34-h workbook had d/h = 0.16, suggesting that the workbook might be effective with emerging adults around the world. Finally, three USA Christian universities had public health immersion campaigns to promote forgiveness, and a community psychoeducational campaign in 2878 secular university students in Colombia (of ~9000 total) allowed choices among 16 psychoeducational activities. The number of activities used was proportional to forgiveness experienced. For forgiveness, d = 0.36 plus substantial reductions in depression and anxiety, indicating strong public health potential of forgiveness psychoeducation in emerging adults worldwide.

Keywords: forgiveness; psychoeducation; emerging adults

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1. Introduction

Whereas forgiveness interventions have been reviewed in a meta-analysis for youth and adolescents (for a review and meta-analysis, see [1]), less attention has been paid to psychoeducational interventions to promote forgiveness within emerging adults. Are psychoeducational interventions useful for emerging adults? If so, how effectively do they promote forgiveness?

The stages of development are somewhat fluid and depend on particular contexts, but there is good evidence for neurological change across adulthood [2]. But generally, adolescents move through early (10 or 11 to 14), middle (15 to 17), and late adolescence (18 to 21). Often, late adolescence is considered to blend into emerging adulthood (18–25). Early adulthood is generally considered to be from around 18 to around 40. When emerging adulthood is spoken of, the entire period of early adulthood (18 to 40) seems to have similar life tasks as the early part—emerging adulthood (18 to 25). At the age of 25 or 26, major brain development is slowing down. Therefore, there is a physical reason for considering emerging adulthood as its own stage of development. This article considers emerging adulthood to be from 18 to 25. The focus is on the extent that psychoeducation of forgiveness can help emerging adults.

2. Psychology of Emerging Adulthood

In emerging adulthood, common life tasks include establishing a sense of identity, relationships with a romantic partner, and a productive career or job path. Havighurst [3] identified nine tasks for early adulthood, which he considered to be from 18 to 40. The nine included becoming an independent adult (task 1), establishing identity (task 2), enhancing emotional stability (task 3), creating an adult living space (task 4), committing to an initial career path (task 5), engaging with the community (task 6), building intimacy (task 7), adjusting to marriage or cohabitation (task 8), and parenting (task 9).

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, [4]), some problems are especially common in emerging adulthood. For example, the leading causes of death for emerging adults in the U.S. are unintentional injury (largely drug over-doses and auto accidents), cancer, homicide, heart disease, and suicide. Most of those lead to perceptions of injustice that can lead to unforgiveness. One characteristic problem is substance misuse, which tends to reach a maximum during emerging adulthood. Much of the misuse of substances involves binge drinking, which is considered to be drinking at least five drinks at a single sitting. The prevalence in emerging and early adulthood is substantial. In 2014, binge drinking within the most recent six months was reported by 28.5 percent for people aged from 18 to 20 and 43.3 percent for people aged from 21 to 25 [5]. Not only is substance misuse a direct contributor to deaths, but substance misuse is associated with impaired judgment, reduced inhibitions, and altered moods that can all contribute to reckless driving, violent conflict, relationship problems, unsafe sex, and unwanted pregnancies. Substance abusing young adults might encounter perceived injustices because they have conflicts with dating or intimate partners, parents, siblings, teachers, and friends whom they might feel are judging them. Unforgiveness can exacerbate problems with substance use and misuse in many ways. Unforgiveness is stressful, which adds to the allostatic load. Unforgiveness also leads to rumination, which makes most mental health problems seem more omnipresent. Unforgiveness also can itself be a stressor, and people who are already predisposed to cope with stress by substance abuse might intensify such coping efforts. Besides this extended look at substance misuse, which can yield multiple ways that unforgiveness is experienced in emerging adults, we can also see that homicide and suicide leave many emerging adults with forgiveness deficits. Emerging adulthood is a time when stimuli for unforgiveness are ubiquitous.

3. Roles Forgiveness Can Play in Emerging Adulthood

We might inquire whether forgiveness might aid in meeting Havighurst's [3] life tasks and whether forgiveness might ameliorate or prevent some of the common mental health risks, particularly those associated with emerging adults. To begin this inquiry, let us note that there are four types of forgiveness [6].

3.1. Four Types of Forgiveness

Divine forgiveness is the apprehension that God or some Higher Power forgives one for one's wrongdoing. This could be a state of divine forgiveness, if one has committed a single wrongdoing. However, one might feel unworthy of forgiveness as an imperfect person and might experience a sense of divine forgiveness for that "wrongbeing". That might be considered a trait-like divine forgiveness.

The second type of forgiveness is self-forgiveness, which is experienced as forgiveness for some transgression that one has committed. Self-forgiveness seems to operate only at the state level, although it could be generalized.

A third type of forgiveness is person-to-person forgiveness, which is one person's forgiveness of another person or persons. There are several subtypes of person-to-person forgiveness. A person might forgive someone for a specific transgression. This is state forgiveness. That differs from trait forgivingness, which is generalized forgiveness across people, situations, and time. Between trait forgivingness and state forgiveness is a grey area. When the same offender commits many transgressions against a person, the person might

forgive two or three transgressions and then generalize to forgiving the person, which we might call person forgiveness, although it has no agreed-upon label in the literature.

The fourth type of forgiveness (besides divine, self-, and person-to-person forgiveness) is intergroup forgiveness. A person might generalize to a group a sense of unforgiveness (i.e., complex emotion consisting of mixed resentment, bitterness, hate, hostility, anger, and fear, plus usually vengeful or avoidant motivations). Generalized unforgiveness felt toward out-group members might be due to transgressions received at out-group members' hands followed by generalization from a single individual offense.

3.2. Person-to-Person Forgiveness Opportunities as an Emerging Adult

Forgiveness intersects with the major life tasks of emerging adults in many ways (for a review, see [7]). Havighurst [3] identified two major groups of life tasks for emerging adults. The first, development of personal maturity, is a primary emerging-adult life-task (tasks 1, 2, and 3 in the previous list). He identified becoming autonomous as an independent adult as a primary task. Likewise, his second task was to establish identity and stabilize one's beliefs, values, and practices. Emerging adults often attribute a litany of offenses to parents, teachers, and peers whom they might feel have negatively affected their autonomy and identity as an adult. They might dredge up many past hurts as representative of those offenses such as the emotional highs and lows involving romantic rejections, friendship hurts, disappointments in pursuing one's career, and disappointing oneself and others due to failed "adulting". That gives multiple opportunities to develop mature emotional regulation and control. Emotional forgiveness in the face of resentment, bitterness, and unforgiveness that often attends interpersonal hurts provides opportunities to practice emotional regulation.

As a bridge between maturing (Havighurst's tasks 1 to 3) and relating (tasks 5 to 9), the person must set up a living space and practice "adulting". This requires making decisions about how to live, and inevitably those decisions will involve conflicts with landlords, realtors, merchants, credit card companies, and many others that the person must negotiate with. With conflicts come the opportunities to practice forgiveness.

The second group of life tasks of emerging adults involves relating to people from intimate relationships to acquaintances. This involves workplace relationships (task 5). Most people leave jobs because of poor relationships with supervisors, co-workers, and subordinates. In the workplace, there are many chances to practice forgiveness.

Emerging adults must learn to seek and engage with community groups besides their naturally occurring micro-communities (e.g., project-related and work-colleague-related communities) in the workplace (task 6). For the rest of life, the person must find groups that make up mediating structures that go together to make a broader community–all of which provide opportunities to practice forgiveness [8].

One of the most important life tasks of emerging adults is to build intimate long-term relationships (task 7). Those that progress beyond "dating" require negotiation with partner, extended family members, friends, and potentially exes and children from prior relationships. Once partners live together (task 8), more time is spent together, more differences need resolution, and thus more chances to practice forgiveness occur. It should not be a puzzle why many romantic relationships fail (for reviews, see [9,10]). There are many times to practice forgiveness. Those can be multiplied if partners have children (task 9). The transition to parenthood is fraught [11].

Overall, the life tasks of emerging adults—identity development, relationship formation and maintenance, and career development—engage the ego, heighten a sense of fair play and justice, and thus make perceived injustices frequent. These set the stage for needed forgiveness. It might seem logical to look to traditional sources of wisdom for aids in how to forgive better. Thus, religion and philosophy come under scrutiny for what they can tell young adults about forgiveness.

4. Where Can Emerging Adults Find out about Forgiveness?

4.1. Religious and Philosophical Approaches to Forgiveness

Forgiveness was, in ancient history, not a preferred way of dealing with transgressions. However, with the advent of Christianity, which was characterized by two primary virtues—love and forgiveness—theologians and philosophers became attracted to writing about it. A thorough account of religious and philosophical approaches through history is given in the edited volume by Pettigrove and Enright [12]. Major theological approaches from Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism receive chapter-level summaries. Philosophical approaches that were summarized included classical Greeks, Stoicism, Christian philosophers (e.g., Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Joseph Butler, and Kierkegaard), Enlightenment philosophers (e.g., Hume, Hegel), and more modern approaches (e.g., Jung, Simon Wiel, and French philosophers).

Many traditions have written and taught that forgiveness is helpful and is needed, and many have described boundary conditions for when forgiveness is (or is not) called for. Religions have focused on divine forgiveness with less attention to person-to-person forgiveness and little attention to either self-forgiveness, which is often portrayed as usurping divine forgiveness, and intergroup forgiveness. Practical theologians [13] and pastoral counselors [14], who seek to apply theological principles to problems of daily living, have developed ways of helping religious adherents forgive. These include (a) searching sacred writings, (b) praying for the offender, the strength to forgive, or comfort during forbearance, tolerance, or acceptance, (c) drawing on support from the community, (d) relying on leaders' directives, advice, and teaching, and (e) seeking advice from popular writing or teaching of spiritually wise people. Little attention was given to scientific approaches to forgiveness until the forgiveness movement exploded around 2000. Since then, scientific approaches have been accommodated into religious traditions, especially into practical theology approaches.

4.2. Science, Clinical Science, and Dissemination of Science

Many emerging adults seek to learn about forgiveness from clinical psychology, reading or consuming through media pop psychology, or listening to other influencers who have themselves been influenced by research, clinicians, or other influencers. There are many ways for emerging adult consumers to learn to practice forgiveness. These can include forgiveness education in middle and high schools (for a review and meta-analysis, see [1]). Forgiveness therapy ([15]; for a review, see [16])—forgiveness used intensively in psychotherapy or counseling to deal with a particular person struggling with unforgiveness—is helpful. This is especially true in affluent WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic) countries. Forgiveness therapy can be enormously impactful. Yet, most of the world does not have access to, cannot afford, or cannot cope with the stigma of attending psychotherapy. Thus, other ways of delivering forgiveness education and promoting psychological healing for people not able to use forgiveness therapy are needed. Delivering it in schools can get material to many people (see [1]). But adult psychoeducation for the remainder of the population has advantages. First, it can reach people throughout the post-school lifespan. Second, there is no stigma. Third, often there is no cost. Adult psychoeducation is often provided free by churches, workplaces, university counseling and outreach services, and media (i.e., podcasts, social media, websites (e.g., https://reach.discoverforgiveness.org; https://internationalforgiveness.com, www.EvWorthington-forgiveness.com, accessed on 8 June 2024), free information sites like YouTube, TikTok, Wikipedia, etc., apps, and traditional information sources like newspapers, television, etc.

5. Psychoeducational Intervention in Emerging Adulthood

5.1. Philosophy of Psychoeducation

Psychoeducation is the dissemination of psychologically accurate, useful, accessible, and affordable (or cost-free) information to the entire spectrum of people. Unfortunately, some subpopulations cannot use the material. For example, people who cannot read

usually cannot use written material unless someone or a text-to-voice program reads to them. Severely traumatized or psychologically impaired people might not be able to use information without a therapist's help. Yet most people can benefit, at least to some extent, from psychoeducation.

5.2. Public Health and Psychoeducation

5.2.1. What Is Public Health?

Public health is the science of assessing and finding factors that inhibit and promote good health and that cause and cure diseases in a population and then intervening to improve health across the population by manipulating those variables. A staple intervention of public health is provision of information in ways that it can be used by most of an at-risk population. When psychological difficulties are the focus, then psychoeducation targeted at how to deal with health-inhibiting and disease-causing factors (like unforgiveness) and doing so by health-promoting and disease-curing factors (like promoting forgiveness) is a public health intervention. Besides preventing ill physical health, poor mental health, poor relationships, or damaged spirituality, forgiveness might contribute to goals for positive living. These might include virtue formation or spiritual formation, moral betterment, or relational improvement.

5.2.2. How Is Forgiveness Psychoeducation Disseminated in Large Systems?

Importantly, forgiveness psychoeducation is not the sole treatment for any large system, such as a country, city, or community within the city (i.e., like a university, workplace, place of worship, or even individual family). Each of these micro-communities is a complex adaptive system in its own right [17]. These are arrayed in an ecology [18] in which smaller systems are nested within larger systems.

To administer psychoeducation as public health, one targets mediating organizations [19], which are smaller organizations in which, if change is produced in many people, it will result in change in the larger system. For example, mediating organizations in a city might be universities, schools, workplaces, places of worship, or public libraries. Then one uses an intervention (perhaps adjusted for each mediating organization). If change is felt in enough mediating organizations, the system will be changed.

5.2.3. Why Study Untargeted Psychoeducational Interventions?

The present review is limited to the study of interventions that did not target specific problems. Examining psychoeducational interventions with untargeted populations (i.e., not requiring adaptations aimed at specific populations) makes the findings widely generalizable because they were derived from a broad sample. While many general psychoeducational interventions (e.g., Enright's, Greenberg's, Luskin's, etc.) are almost certainly useful to many potential users, studies that target limited populations (like people with a particular medical problem, deep psychological wound, or couple conflict) do not establish widely generalizable validity evidence. Thus, to prevent limiting the scope of evidence, this review focused on broadly generalizable evidence. There are many times when such interventions would not be appropriate for individuals (i.e., such as those easily triggered to psychological reactions) or for very serious types of injustices such as incest, sexual abuse, murder of a loved one, violent assault, etc. Those are discussed in the limitations section of the Section 8 of this article.

5.2.4. Method of the Review

Inclusion criteria were established: (1) focus on forgiveness of others (rather than divine forgiveness or self-forgiveness); (2) treatment exclusively of young adults aged 18–25; (3) untargeted forgiveness concerns; and (4) published studies in reviewed journals. The intervention studies from several reviews (e.g., [16,20–23]) and meta-analyses [24–27] on forgiveness interventions identified studies meeting the inclusion and exclusion criteria

(k = 25). PsycINFO was searched for additional studies, but none were found that met inclusion criteria. Most of the studies identified were variants of REACH Forgiveness [28].

Beginning in the 1980s, Worthington and his graduate students began to develop the REACH Forgiveness intervention as a psychoeducational group intervention aimed broadly at emerging adults in college. Other general psychoeducational approaches were in their early stages of development in the 1990s (e.g., [15,29]); however, many studies investigating their efficacy sought to apply them to specific targeted problems [30–33]. Because REACH Forgiveness was initially aimed directly at the early-adult target population using untargeted psychoeducation, we describe it below.

6. REACH Forgiveness as Psychoeducation

The REACH Forgiveness protocol, as it was practiced as fully developed, did not begin as REACH Forgiveness. Rather, several proto-REACH Forgiveness interventions were developed on the way to the final structure of the REACH Forgiveness model. McCullough and Worthington [34] initially sought to help people make a decision to forgive, so in that early experiment [34], two ways to encourage students to make a decision to forgive were compared using a one-hour group intervention. Motivating people to make a decision to treat offenders more forgivingly was attempted in two ways. One was appealing to the mental health and physical health benefits they would receive as forgivers. The other appealed to the benefit of restoring relationships. Neither had much impact, though appealing to mental and physical health benefits was superior to appealing to relationship benefits. Both aspects relate to decisional forgiveness and were subsequently incorporated into the full REACH Forgiveness model. But the study of intervention to promote forgiveness afterward targeted emotional forgiveness first. The assumption was that if people can be led to experience emotional forgiveness, they will more easily make a decision to forgive. McCullough et al. [35] tested an 8-h empathy-forgiveness intervention aimed at promoting understanding and empathy for the offender, thus encouraging emotional forgiveness. That had a larger impact than simply appealing to self-beneficial motives to make a decision to forgive. The empathy-forgiveness protocol was compared to an 8-h self-benefit group treatment, and empathy promoted much more emotional forgiveness. In that experiment, the vital steps of recalling the hurt, promoting empathy, and stating one's commitment to forgiveness were used as was some attention to maintenance, though it was unlike the H step in the current REACH model. However, little attention was given to humble altruism as a motivator, doing exercises to promote explicit commitment to one's forgiveness, current maintenance exercises, or generalizing forgiveness beyond forgiving the target transgression. Another set of studies [36] systematically dismantled the REA steps in the model with no intervention lasting more than two hours and some lasting only 10 min. Those five studies (see Table 1) were termed "proto-REACH" models because none tested the full model even though McCullough et al. [35] captured more of the essence of the model than the other brief proto-REACH studies and, as such, could be considered as close to the current protocol as some other studies that attempted to modify the current REACH Forgiveness model.

Worthington developed the REACH Forgiveness groups because he was primarily interested in helping students struggling with unforgiveness. He was trained in psychoeducational group treatments at the University of Missouri-Colombia in the 1970s, and tailored those groups to the psychological experiences frequent among university students. In addition, he sought to develop a protocol that was robust at the level of group experience of the facilitators so that intervention experiments could be conducted on untargeted transgressions, making the groups applicable to a wide population of users. Until 2010, only one published study from Worthington's lab used a population other than college-aged students [37], although other research groups had applied it to other treatment populations (for example, see [38]). Whereas studies were being conducted on other populations from the early 2000s, publication of those did not explode until the mid-2010s (e.g., [39,40]).

Typical studies with college students compared a treatment with a group built on self-benefits to promote forgiveness (see [34–36,41]. Wade's lab conducted a series of studies comparing REACH Forgiveness groups with process-oriented group psychotherapy groups (see [40,42,43]).

6.1. Content of the REACH Forgiveness Model

Worthington [44] eventually presented the full REACH Forgiveness model. The REACH core provides its name. REACH is an acronym to cue memory for steps in emotional forgiveness: R = Recall the hurt; E = Empathize; A = Altruistic gift of forgiveness; C = Commit to forgiveness; H = Hold onto forgiveness. Many activities are undertaken at each step to promote emotionally forgiving a target transgression.

However, the REACH Forgiveness protocol involves far more than the emotional REACH core. First, participants identify a target transgression that will be worked on as the person learns to apply the method and self-assesses the level of forgiveness and unforgiveness using a scale. This assessment is not part of any experimental assessment of effectiveness. It is a private benchmark that the participant can compare to their score on the same scale at the end of the protocol. Improvement in scores demonstrates the power of the intervention. Second, people identify the most difficult hurt or offense that they have already successfully forgiven. That shows them that they have forgiveness coping skills already and sometimes puts their current struggle to forgive in broader perspective.

Third, people reflect on two or three quotes about forgiveness taken from well-known people. Fourth, they define both the decision to forgive and emotional forgiveness by selecting definitions from fourteen options, twelve of which are not forgiveness. Those include things like denying one is hurt, excusing the perpetrator, reducing unforgiveness by getting revenge, and reconciling. Definitions of decision to forgive and emotional forgiveness are identified and differentiated. They are taken as the working definitions.

Fifth, people are invited to make a decision to forgive the offender and commit to treating the person as a more valued and valuable person. Few people make such a decision to forgive at that point. Rather, they are told that they will be re-invited to make a decision to forgive after they have worked to build emotional forgiveness for the offender. Sixth, as the final preparatory step, psychological, relational, spiritual, and physical health benefits of forgiveness for the forgiver are identified. The benefits to the offender of being forgiven—such as reduced guilt and shame and perhaps a move toward reconciliation—are also noted.

Seventh, the REACH steps are worked through using several activities for each. This is the bulk of the entire protocol. Two key steps are E = Empathize and A = give an Altruistic gift of forgiveness. An empty-chair dialogue is a key part of the E-step: the person pretends to talk to the offender who is imagined to sit in an empty chair across from the participant. After expressing the participant's feelings and thoughts, the participant changes chairs and responds as he or she believes the offender might. The conversation continues. About 15 min is allowed for this. Greenberg and Meneses [45] have shown that the empty chair dialogue by itself can produce substantial empathy and forgiveness, and it is a staple of emotion-focused therapy. Within the A = Altruistic gift step, participants are invited to estimate what percent of the unforgiveness they had at the outset of the intervention that they have forgiven emotionally. They will write it and, if within a group, state it aloud. This helps them forgive by taking a concrete position admitting to their forgiveness, but it also strengthens the C = Commit to forgiveness experienced so that they will H = Hold onto forgiveness during doubts.

Eighth, after working through all five steps, participants are invited to make a decision to treat the person as a more valued and valuable person, solidifying decisional forgiveness. Ninth, to promote generalization, participants apply the REACH steps to other identified hurts. Finally, they complete the self-assessment again and compare their final and initial scores.

In REACH Forgiveness psychoeducational groups, content is due to an integrative theoretical approach that uses group and psychotherapeutic techniques that facilitate the stress-and-coping theory of forgiveness [28]. Information-giving per se hardly happens. Group members learn content and skills through completing activities that lead them to change emotion and motivation while also affecting their cognition and behavioral intentions. Activities have been drawn from a variety of psychotherapy approaches, but activities emphasize emotional and motivational change.

Psychoeducational forgiveness groups primarily provide gains in knowledge and psychological skill development. In REACH Forgiveness groups, the group process is managed by having conversation partners paired within the group. Conversation partners share deeply about the hurt they are working to forgive. They help each other by supporting and providing insights. Facilitators monitor conversations informally to observe how people handle emotional revelations. Furthermore, they assess whether someone might not be fitting well into the group. Sometimes, facilitators whip around the group to engage the entire group emotionally.

6.2. Self-Administered REACH Forgiveness Workbooks

About 25 randomized controlled trials (RCTs) have been published on the group psychoeducational model (for a review and meta-analysis, see [23]), suggesting wide applicability. REACH Forgiveness interventions have not only produced changes in forgiveness but also reliably produced reductions in depression and anxiety and increases in hope, well-being, and flourishing (for meta-analyses of REACH Forgiveness, see [23], and for forgiveness interventions in general, see [27]). Thus, when Kazdin and Rabbit [46] issued a call for novel mental health interventions that could affect mental health and well-being, REACH Forgiveness groups were transformed into REACH Forgiveness DIY workbook interventions that could affect forgiveness and contribute to Kazdin and Rabbit's call. Harper et al. [47] created a self-administered do-it-yourself (DIY) workbook treatment that mirrored Worthington's six-hour psychoeducational groups. The workbook took an average of seven hours to complete. Several trials showed it to be effective (see Table 1). Busy college students responded well to recruitment into intervention studies using REACH Forgiveness workbooks relative to the many studies using psychoeducational REACH Forgiveness groups. Much of this is because college students have busy and stressful lives. Fitting into a schedule that is acceptable to six to twelve adults who are attending a group together is difficult and often requires rearranging schedules to accommodate group times. Also, the DIY aspect allows college students to do such work at times when they prefer, and those times are often late at night when it is impossible to schedule groups. Young adults are computer savvy, and being able to access and work on the brief workbooks through a computer is almost second nature in the modern generation.

Responding to Walton's [48] call for developing very brief "wise treatments", Ho et al. [49] shortened the DIY workbook. They selected practice-informed, highly effective activities. Pilot testing in an elite college suggested that the DIY workbook might take two hours on average to complete. Ho et al. tested the workbook's effectiveness in five countries (China, Indonesia, Ukraine, Colombia, and South Africa). For that project, which enrolled a few college students and adults of all ages and educational levels, the workbook took a mean of 3.34 h to complete. Several recent studies have examined the broad effectiveness of this workbook, but they have used samples more inclusive than early adults (aged 18 to 25), which is the range to which the present review is restricted.

6.3. Effectiveness of the REACH Forgiveness Model with Emerging Adults

6.3.1. A Perspective on Effect Sizes

To help readers unfamiliar with effect sizes, this might provide some context. A meta-analysis by Cuijpers et al. [50] examined the efficacy of cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT). The mean treatment time was 26 one-hour sessions. CBT produced a mean $d = 1.24$. In forgiveness intervention research, a linear dose-response relationship has been found

(see [27]). Thus, to allow comparisons of the strength of interventions of different durations, a metric of d/h is apropos. For CBT, the mean d/h was about 0.045.

6.3.2. A Perspective on Effect Sizes for Forgiveness Interventions

Effect sizes for forgiveness interventions were established by a meta-analysis of all RCTs on forgiveness interventions by Wade et al. [27]. They found k = 54 RCTs including data on 62 interventions (N = 2323). Of those, one-third investigated Enright's process model [14]; one-third, REACH Forgiveness [28]; and one-third, all others combined. The mean effect size irrespective of models was d = 0.56; the mean duration of treatment was 10 h. Thus, the combined effect size per hour was 0.056—comparable to the d/h from CBT for depression. Other major findings were (a) a linear relationship existed between time (T) in hours trying to forgive and amount of forgiveness (d) experienced (d = 0.124 + 0.046*T); (b) participation in a forgiveness intervention lowered depression (d/h = 0.032) and anxiety (d/h = 0.028), and increased hope (d/h = 0.058).

6.3.3. Effect Sizes per Hour for Proto-REACH and REACH Psychoeducational Groups

Five studies tested the proto-REACH model with emerging adults (see Table 1 for data for each individual study on N, type of participants, duration of treatment, d, d/h). The mean N for the five studies was 93, and the d/h was 0.104. In 1998, the entire model was complete [44], and studies on REACH Forgiveness psychoeducational groups began to be published in 2002. Nine studies investigated REACH Forgiveness psychoeducational groups with emerging adults (see Table 1 for characteristics of each study). The mean number of participants per study was N = 99. The mean d/h = 0.104, as with proto-REACH studies.

Four of those nine studies (see Table 1) were with Christian samples (mean N = 84 and mean d/h = 0.078). Three of the four accommodated REACH Forgiveness for Christian beliefs, values, and practices [51–53]; one used the secular REACH Forgiveness group protocol with the Christian sample [54]. For Christian-accommodated REACH Forgiveness, mean N = 79 and mean d/h = 0.077. For the study using the secular REACH Forgiveness protocol with a Christian sample, N = 99 and d/h = 0.080.

6.3.4. Effect Sizes for Self-Administered DIY Workbooks

The self-administered DIY workbooks took a mean of 7 h to complete. Three studies were conducted with emerging adults (see Table 1). Harper et al. [47] and Lavelock et al. [55] used secular DIY workbooks; Greer et al. [56] used a Christian-accommodated DIY workbook. Altogether the three studies had a mean N = 41 and d/h = 0.15. The two secular studies had N = 35 and d/h = 0.12. The Christian-accommodated DIY workbook (with a Christian sample) had an N = 52 and d/h = 0.20.

6.3.5. Non-REACH Forgiveness Interventions

Four non-REACH Forgiveness interventions that met inclusion criteria for application with early adults (e.g., [33,54,57,58]) were included in Table 1 under the heading of Non-REACH Forgiveness Interventions. Two studies used Luskin's Forgive for Good (FFG) intervention [29]. Luskin et al. [33] randomly assigned N = 55 college students to either a FFG group intervention or a waiting list. The treatment condition had higher mean forgiveness scores than the waiting list. Duration and effect sizes were not available. Toussaint, Griffin et al. [54] compared REACH Forgiveness and Luskin's FFG intervention. Averaging the four measures of forgiveness, both performed equally (d = 0.51 and 0.052, respectively).

Two studies adapted Enright's forgiveness process model by integrating it with different versions of author-identified Chinese cultural values but did not compare the integrated model with the Enright model without cultural integration, not allowing interpretation of whether cultural adaptation hurt or helped promote forgiveness. Zhang et al. [58] treated N = 31 women students who had been hurt in a romantic relationship. They compared that treatment with a passive and an active non-forgiveness-focused control. Each treatment

included six sessions. Session duration was not reported, preventing a *d*/hour computation. Women in the forgiveness group showed greater reductions in vengeance (d = 1.66) than did those in the active control treatment (d = 0.51) or control condition (d = 0.10). Ji et al. [57] developed a 10-week forgiveness program lasting 10 total hours. They randomly assigned participants to an experimental (n = 16) or a waiting-list condition (n = 12). Effect sizes ranged around 1.0 (d/h ~0.10).

6.4. Lessons Learned in Promoting Person-to-Person Forgiveness in Emerging Adults

Four lessons might be drawn from this review. First, untargeted psychoeducation for emerging adults has been effective at promoting forgiveness. Second, REACH Forgiveness has been repeatedly evidence-based, and both Luskin's FFG [54] and Enright's process model also have some supporting evidence with untargeted interventions (although both have evidence for targeted interventions) (see [27]). Third, DIY workbooks have proven numerically more effective than for groups (see Table 1). Workbooks provide individual treatment rather than treatment within a group, and their higher effectiveness is consistent with similar findings from the Wade et al. [27] meta-analysis. Fourth, despite high expectations that using REACH Forgiveness with Christian samples (which generally highly value forgiveness) would be effective, adapting to Christians appears less effective than secular application, though no statistical test has assessed the differences due to small numbers of studies (see Table 1). Fifth, all studies of early adults for REACH proper have been conducted within the United States with college students. Thus, testing in an international context with non-college students is needed. Enright's process model has been tested twice in China, but confounds with cultural adaptation prevent clear interpretation of results of the model per se.

6.5. The Promise of Effectiveness for Application in International Contexts

In an RCT of 3.34-h DIY REACH Forgiveness workbooks in five countries (People's Republic of China, Indonesia, Ukraine, Colombia, South Africa) involving N = 4598 participants (more than all previous studies of forgiveness interventions combined), effectiveness was high in all sites [49]. No site focused on emerging adults, so this study is not included in this limited review beyond a mention. The d/h = 0.16 for all sites combined. These samples were not as well educated as college students, and some (like war survivors in Colombia and people in Kyiv and near the Russian-Ukrainian front) were dealing with substantial harms beyond the seriousness of most college students, yet brief psychoeducation worked and produced no adverse events. This suggests that brief REACH Forgiveness workbooks might be effective for emerging adults in non-Western countries.

7. Community-Based Psychoeducational Campaigns

Recall that psychoeducation aims to provide psychological education to promote both knowledge and skill improvement. The study of community campaigns to promote forgiveness in emerging adults began almost serendipitously. Two studies [51,53] compared REACH Forgiveness groups carried out within a community-based, university-wide campaign involving lectures, chapel talks, newspaper articles, essay contests, etc. aimed at promoting knowledge and awareness of forgiveness but not forgiveness skills. Subsequently, Worthington received a grant from the Fetzer Institute to test the effectiveness of community campaigns in Christian colleges. Eight such studies were completed, and one representative study was published—Toussaint, Griffin et al. [54]. These studies are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. A Brief Summary of Articles on REACH Forgiveness with Emerging Adults.

Authors	Date	Sample	*N*	Hours	Effect Size (*d*)	*d* per Hour (*d*/h)
Proto-REACH Group Studies ($k = 5$)						
McCullough and Worthington [34]	1995	USA university students	65	1	0.15	0.15
McCullough et al. [35]	1997	USA university students	134	8	0.93	0.12
Worthington, Kurusu et al. (Study 1) [36]	2000	USA university students	96	2	0.08	0.04
Worthington, Kurusu et al. (Study 2) [36]	2000	USA university students	64	1	0.03	0.03
Worthington, Kurusu et al. (Study 3) [36]	2000	USA university students	106	2	0.36	0.18
Mean N and Effect Size per Hour			93			0.104
Psychoeducational Group Studies of REACH Forgiveness ($k = 9$)						
Rye and Pargament [52]	2002	USA; Christian women students; Christian REACH	58	12	1.53	0.13
Lampton et al. [51]	2005	USA; Christian students; Christian REACH	65	6	0.15	0.03
Stratton et al. [53]	2008	USA; Christian students; Christian REACH	114	5.5	0.42	0.07
Wade et al. [42]	2009	USA university students	42/144	6	0.52	0.09
Sandage and Worthington [41]	2010	USA university students	97	6	0.53	0.09
Goldman and Wade [43]	2012	USA university students	112	9	0.36	0.04
Lin et al. [59]	2018	Half foreign students, half USA students	78	6	0.53	0.09
Toussaint, Griffin et al. [46]	2020	USA; Christian students; secular REACH	32/99	6	0.51	0.08
Toussaint, Worthington, Cheadle et al. [60]	2020	India university students; Muslim ($n = 100$); Hindu ($n = 18$); Christian ($n = 5$); Jain ($n = 1$); secular REACH	124	6	1.80	0.30
Mean N and Effect Size per Hour			99			0.104
Mean N and Effect Size per Hour (All Christian Samples, Groups; $k = 4$)			84			0.078
Mean N and Effect Size per Hour (Christian Sample with Christian REACH, $k = 3$)			79			0.077
Mean N and Effect Size per Hour (Christian Sample with Secular REACH, $k = 1$)			99			0.080
Self-administered REACH Forgiveness (DIY workbooks, $k = 3$)						
Harper et al. [47]	2014	USA university students	41	7	1.05	0.15
Greer et al. [56]	2014	USA; Christians college students from community churches; Christian REACH	52	7	1.37	0.20
Lavelock et al. [55]	2017	USA university students	30 REACH/168 overall	7	0.65 (dispositional forgiveness)	0.09
Mean Effect Size per Hour			41	7	1.02	0.15
Non-REACH Forgiveness Intervention Studies ($k = 4$)						
Ji et al. [57]	2016	Chinese university students	28	10	~1.0	~0.10
Luskin et al. [33]	2005	USA University students	55	NR	NR	
Zhang et al. [58]	2014	Chinese university students	31	NR	1.66	

Table 1. *Cont.*

Authors	Date	Sample	*N*	Hours	Effect Size (*d*)	*d* per Hour (*d*/h)
Toussaint, Griffin et al. [54]	2020	USA; Christian students; secular Forgive for Good (Luskin)	30/99	6	0.52	0.08
Mean Effect Size per Hour			53			0.09
Community Campaigns (k = 4)						
Lampton et al. [51]	2005	USA university students at Christian university (2 weeks)	23		0.40	
Stratton et al. [53]	2008	USA university students at Christian university (2 weeks)	29		0.18	
Toussaint, Griffin et al. [54]	2020	USA university students at Christian university (2 weeks)	881		0.34	
Ortega Bechara et al. [61]	2024	Colombia private secular university (4 weeks)	2878		0.36	
Mean Effect Size					0.32	

Several weaknesses were noted in studies of community campaigns [61]. First, all three studies were on Christian campuses in the USA, limiting generalizability. Second, all were aimed at supplying information about forgiveness. Third, sample sizes of those assessed within the university were small. Fourth, the university-wide campaigns seemed uniformly effective. A weakness was the absence of skill-based psychoeducation integrated within the campaign. Fifth, in each instance, little attention was given to specifying the content of the campus campaign activities. A list of over 25 activities was recommended, but each campus designed its own campaign, and investigators did not specify the activities to be used, who used them, and how effective each might have been.

In Colombia, Ortega Bechara et al. [61] sought to correct these weaknesses. They tested Colombian students (N = 2878) at a private, nonreligious university (i.e., emerging adults). They were exposed to a four-week forgiveness community campaign and were assessed pre- and post-campaign in forgiveness, mental health, and flourishing. They offered 16 activities. Some were aimed at knowledge. Many students completed a competency-based knowledge test (which could be completed multiple times). Students were incentivized to learn the knowledge about forgiveness. Scoring at least 90 percent on one's highest attempt could enter a student's name into a lottery for a paid vacation in Cartagena, Colombia. Other activities (i.e., posting a piece of paper at a forgiveness wall to indicate that one had decided to forgive a person; sitting under a forgiveness tree and thinking, meditating, or praying about forgiving a person) aimed at engaging people actively. Some activities, such as completing the 3.34-h DIY REACH Forgiveness workbook and listening to online and live talks by forgiveness intervention experts (e.g., Enright, Luskin, Toussaint, and Worthington), were aimed at skill-building as well as knowledge. On average, participants reported engaging in 7.18 (SD = 3.99) of the 16 types of campaign activities. The number of types of campaign activities engaged in was directly related to forgiveness (five measures, mean d = 0.36), decreased depression (d = −0.18) and anxiety (d = −0.10) symptoms, and increased flourishing (d = 0.24). However, participating in three or fewer activities seemed to have little effect. Also, activities that took less than one hour were highly subscribed to but had little effect. Activities that took more than 3.5 h were rarely subscribed to, but when they were used were effective. Most activities needed to be between one and 3.5 h to be effective and widely used.

8. Discussion

The present non-systematic narrative review has been limited in several ways. First, the range of studies was limited to untargeted interventions for early adults 18–25. Second, most interventions that were studied were REACH Forgiveness psychoeducational interventions. Other untargeted psychoeducational interventions—two using Luskin's

FFG [33,54] and two adapting Enright's process model for Chinese culture 57, 58]—were tested with early adults. Both were initially promising, but require additional study to be designated evidence-based. Third, many of the interventions to promote forgiveness that have been studied in wider reviews and meta-analyses have targeted particular populations have been used psychotherapeutically or have studied self-forgiveness or couples. General psychoeducational interventions such as those used in schools (see [1]) have proven effective. Fourth, psychoeducational interventions for emerging adults have been tested largely in the United States in colleges (secular or explicitly religious). They have involved either psychoeducational REACH Forgiveness groups or psychoeducational DIY workbooks for REACH Forgiveness. More attention is needed to non-college student emerging adults, including early adults who do not attend college and post-college emerging adults. There has been much effort in recent decades to test models—particularly REACH Forgiveness [28] and Enright's process model [15]—in many non-western, non-WEIRD countries (see reviews by [16,23]. An example is Ho et al. [49], briefly mentioned above. The sheer size of that study skews the research findings toward non-USA samples, although early adults were not targeted in those studies. Fifth, religious populations have been tested; because they value forgiveness, it would seem that they should do better than emerging adults from secular sources. That has not been the case. In the few studies on Christians, the effect size per hour has actually been numerically less than in secular samples (see Table 1). At this point, only Christians have been tested with religious interventions, though one study was conducted in India using mostly Hindus and Muslims [60]. Additional psychoeducational interventions with people of other religions than Christianity are needed. Sixth, there are many times when untargeted psychoeducational interventions would not be appropriate. Such cases might include people still experiencing PTSD from an injury or offense, people who are easily triggered to psychological reactions, people who have sustained very serious types of injustices (such as incest, sexual abuse, murder of a loved one, violent assault, etc.), people with psychological disorders or proclivities whose reactions would be magnified by dwelling on their hurts and offenses even though they might be trying to forgive, and people who do not wish to forgive but prefer dealing with injustices through other means.

Future research is needed on psychoeducational forgiveness interventions with early adults. Some targeted studies could address forgiveness when injustices arise for early adult issues such as rejection of one's identity with people who identify as LGBTQ+, job-related discrimination in early career, failed romantic relationships, family conflicts, etc. The brief 3.34-h DIY workbook [49] shows promise in adult samples in five non-USA countries, but it has not been tested specifically with emerging adults in other countries or in the USA. However, it would seem to be especially attractive to busy college students where every hour seems jam-packed with activity; the 3.34-h (on the average) duration makes it attractive as does the downloadability that allows students and other busy non-students to download it and work on it on their own schedule. Also, the workbook is free and self-interpretable, making it convenient for a computer-literate and web-oriented generation. The iterations of the REACH Forgiveness treatments are getting progressively more refined. In Wade et al. [28], the mean intervention time was 10 h to achieve a *d* about 0.5. As we see from Table 1, many REACH Forgiveness groups had a duration of only 6 h and achieved *d* about 0.5. DIY workbooks began at 7 h and achieved *d* about 1.0, so Ho et al. [49] refined the DIY workbook to 3.34 h and achieved *d* about 0.5. Most interventions can be improved. With apps becoming popular, can REACH Forgiveness be shortened further to achieve the same results? Finally, Ortega Bechara et al. [61] have shown that a general community-based psychoeducational program can have strong effects. Additional research in other countries is needed to generalize that finding.

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