FORGIVENESS, RELIGIOUSNESS, SPIRITUALITY, AND HEALTH IN PEOPLE WITH PHYSICAL CHALLENGES: A REVIEW AND A MODEL

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ABSTRACT

Research shows that lowering depression, anxiety, and hostility is beneficial for physical health, and some evidence suggests that forgiveness, religiousness, and spirituality function as potential mechanisms of the reciprocal connection between mental and physical health. In recent years, scholars examined the forgiveness-health relationship specifically in people who face chronic physical health challenges. We propose a stress-and-coping model to explain the effects of forgiveness, religiousness, and spirituality on health among various patient populations. We conclude that investigating religious coping, especially forgiveness, in rehabilitation settings is a welcome progression and recommend that future research examine potential mediators of the forgiveness-health relationship, including self-forgiveness and feeling forgiven by God.

Keywords: forgiveness, religiousness, spirituality, health, stress, coping, physical challenges

The connection between physical and mental health dominates centuries of physiological and psychological thought. In fact, explanations of the mind-body relationship may be traced as far back as the progenitor of Western medicine, Hippocrates of Kos, who concluded that psychological traits are manifestations of physiological humors (Hippocrates, trans. 1886). In the modern era, researchers who similarly investigate the connection between physiological and psychological health chiefly explore the effects of poor mental health on the body. For example, a study conducted by Smith, Glazer, Ruiz, and Gallo (2004) revealed the negative influence of anger on physical, namely cardiovascular, health. Related factors including stress, anxiety, and depression have also been associated with poor physical health outcomes (McEwen, 1998). The dissemination of this research has greatly affected American society and is a frequent focus of media ranging from health magazine articles to daytime talk shows.

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The connection between psychological conditions and physical conditions also functions as the impetus for the field of psychoneuroimmunology (Daruna, 2012), and a branch of the National Institutes of Health (National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine; NCCAM; http://nccam.nih.gov/) currently funds research in this area. Another recent development, positive psychology, emerged at the turn of the 21st century from a desire to complement psychologists’ focused analysis of pathology, mental illness, and behavioral disorders (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Whereas negative outcomes of mental illness previously dominated psychological literature, positive psychologists examine character strengths in the context of both ill and healthy populations (Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2006). Currently, psychoneuroimmunology is a rich enough area to fill a large textbook. If we add the complementarity of positive psychology, even limiting our review to the health aspects of Fredrickson’s broaden-and-build model of positive emotions (Fredrickson, Cohn, Coffey, Pek, & Finkel, 2008), we face an unreasonably huge literature. Thus, we cannot hope to provide a theoretical and empirically relevant model that will account for the entire body of knowledge.

We therefore restrict the content of this review to examinations of individuals with chronic physical challenges who employ forgiveness as a religious coping mechanism. Although researchers only recently began to study the physiology associated with positive psychological constructs, the subject of forgiveness champions this growing scientific exploration. Scholars continue to call for more studies on forgiveness as it relates to both mental and physical health (McCullough, 2000; Thoresen, Harris, & Luskin, 2000; Worthington, Witvliet, Pietrini, & Miller, 2007). In this article, we propose a model that relates forgiveness, religiousness, and spirituality to mental and physical health outcomes in people with physical health challenges.

The Entangling of Forgiveness, Religiousness, and Spirituality

Researchers struggle to separate the unique effects of forgiveness from those of religiousness and spirituality on health. Disentangling the effects is difficult for primarily two reasons. First, the virtue of forgiveness is present in major religious belief systems practiced across the globe (Rye et al., 2000). Although forgiveness is not exclusive to religious populations, its effects and moral implications are frequently observed within the context of a religious framework. A relationship therefore exists in which religion