



# Forgiveness and Resiliency: The Role of Forgiveness in Mitigating the Effects of Daily Stressors and Fostering Overall Wellbeing



Danielle C. Free, MS  
Dedicated to the Memory of Dr. Kirsten Calleja Salerno  
University of North Florida

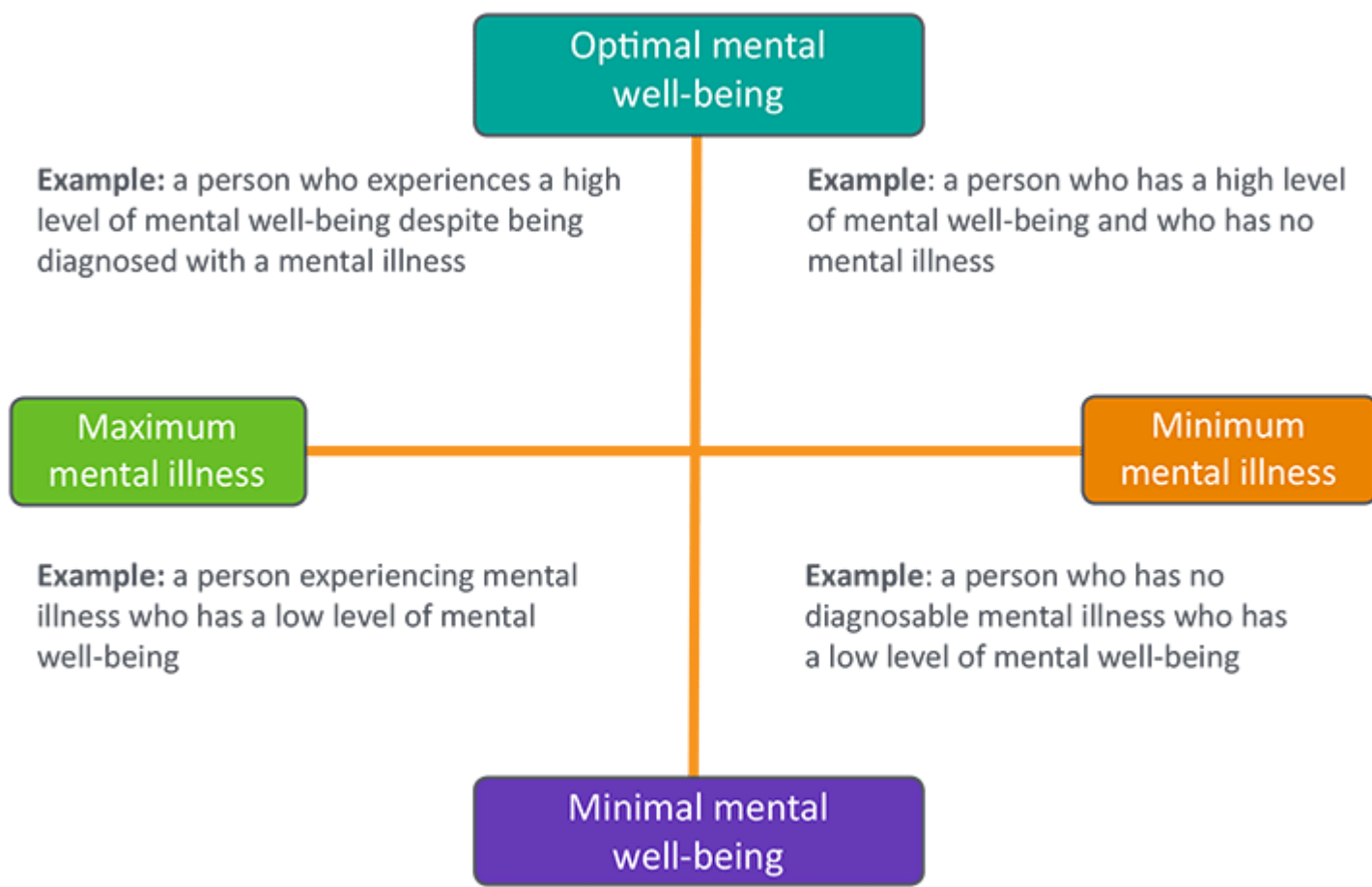
## ABSTRACT

The field of contemplative science has produced promising research supporting the connection between prosocial skill-building and mental health. From a counseling perspective, this information can be utilized to improve present methodologies and analyze how concepts like forgiveness and meaning-making effect areas of dysfunction, mitigate the effects of daily stressors, and transform the impact of transgressions. The current presentation examines data from two pilot studies (St1 and St2) analyzing the theorized constructs of dispositional forgiveness, how these constructs can be reliably measured, and the benefit of cultivating forgiveness as a form of mental wellness inoculation.

## BACKGROUND

### Overall Wellbeing & New Definitions in Mental Health

Keyes (2002) redefined mental health by intersecting standard psychological ranges of dysfunction to non-dysfunction with flourishing and languishing. States of flourishing are determined through multiple factors of wellbeing such as enjoyment in life, feeling socially connected, and finding an identity beyond illness (Keyes 2007).



### Forgiveness

According to Free and Ozawa-de Silva (2016) and Worthington (2007), forgiveness is defined as a cognitive, behavioral, and emotional shift towards the elimination of vengeance against someone who has committed an offense and the generation of positive will toward the offender. Prior research has shown forgiveness has an inverse relationship with depression (Ross et al., 2004) and chronic pain (Carson et al., 2005).

## PILOT STUDY 1, 2016

**Study 1** (St1): Isolating constructs of forgiveness and creating the 32-item Dispositional Forgiveness Scale (DFS)

This Master’s Thesis research examined six theorized constructs of dispositional forgiveness based on intensive literature review and created a conglomerate pilot scale of items related to the six constructs. The DFS was then tested for internal and construct validity/reliability against existing measures related to each forgiveness construct.

<b>Trait</b>	The tendency to be forgiving across time, person, and situation.
<b>Value</b>	The ethical weight a person places on forgiveness through religion or otherwise.
<b>Empathy</b>	The development of a deeper sensitivity, understanding, and concern for the feelings, thoughts, and existence of others.
<b>Flexibility</b>	The openness of adopting cognitive elements of perspective taking and ability to act on prosocial inclinations to resolve a transgression.
<b>Impartiality/Equanimity</b>	The sense of even-mindedness as a state of non-attachment and non-aversion while still recognizing one’s own biases.
<b>Common Humanity</b>	The understanding that all human beings experience joy and suffering regardless of gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, religion, etc. and to develop positive regard for others as one would for themselves.

## PILOT STUDY 2, 2019

**Study 2** (St2): Examining the relationship between levels of dispositional forgiveness, as measured by the DFS, and resiliency to daily stress-inducing experiences as well as facets of overall wellbeing.

This Master’s level project was modeled after a similar study conducted by Mascaro and Rosen (2006) which analyzed the role of meaning in life on the impact of daily stressors and well-being. The authors found that there was an inverse relationship between meaning and negative effects of daily stressors and extrapolated that overall well-being was improved due to less reactivity. For St2, the Mascaro and Rosen 2006 study was recreated with the Meaning in Life Questionnaire, MLQ (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006) and the Daily Stress Inventory, DSI (Brantley, Waggoner, Jones, & Rappaport, 1987); however, the study was enhanced by adding the DFS and the socially-minded Keyes (2007) Mental Health Continuum-Short Form, MHC-SF.

- **H1:** Meaning and forgiveness will have a positive relationship with resiliency against the effects of daily stressors.
- **H1²:** Meaning and forgiveness will have a positive correlation to overall wellbeing.
- **H2:** The presence of high forgiveness levels will better predict resiliency against stressors and overall wellbeing than meaning.
- **H2²:** Levels of forgiveness will have a positive relationship with the social/community construct of wellbeing in the MHC-SF.

## METHODS

	St1	St2
<b>Participants</b>	41 participants ranged in age from 21 to 54 yrs. (M= 33.3, SD= 6.8), which consisted of 24 females (male= 17). Participants identified as Caucasian (78%), Hispanic (9.7%), Asian (7.3%), Native American (2.4%), and African American (2.4%).	131 participants ranged in age from 19 to 75 yrs, (M=36.66, SD 15.90), predominately female (n=99). Participants identified as Caucasian (78.6%), Hispanic (9.9%), African Descent (2.2%), American Indian/Alaska Native (2.2%), Asian (5.3%), and Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (1.5%).
<b>Procedures and Data Collection</b>	Participants were sampled from an Atlanta-based community center across multiple events from May-July of 2016. Volunteers were asked to complete a 20-30 minute paper survey packet. No compensation was offered for completion.	Participants were recruited through social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, and via snowballing. Participants were instructed to complete a survey in Qualtrics. The survey took 10-15 minutes to complete. No compensation was offered for completion.
<b>Measures</b>	The survey packet consisted of the DFS, The Forgiveness Scale (TFS), the Forgiveness Likelihood Scale (FLS), Attitudes Toward Forgiveness Scale (ATF), Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), the Transgression-Related Interpersonal Inventory (TRIM-m), and the Identification with All Humanity Scale (IWAH).	The study utilized items from four existing scales: the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ-10) (Cronbach’s $\alpha=.73$ ), the Dispositional Forgiveness Scale (DFS) ( $\alpha=.89$ ), the Daily Stress Inventory (DSI)( $\alpha=.95$ ), and the Mental Health Continuum-Short Form (MHC-SF) ( $\alpha=.92$ ).

## RESULTS

### Study 1

The main purpose of this study was to assess the accuracy of the Dispositional Forgiveness Scale (DFS). Cronbach’s alpha was calculated for the entire instrument and subscales.

Theoretical validity was assessed for the entire measure and subscales by examining correlations with established measures.

Results indicated that DFS and its theorized constructs

correlated significantly with existing corresponding measures.

Note: Over 154 pairwise correlations between various instruments, their subscales, and the DFS were considered. 86 were significant with

<i>Construct</i>	<i>Cronbach Alpha</i>
Constructs	Alpha
Overall	0.8988
Trait	0.5987
Value	0.8245
Empathy	0.5928
Flexibility	0.5871
Impartiality	0.7664
Common Humanity	0.5118

### Study 2 with Bulleted H Findings

Primary analysis revealed significant correlations were observed between the DFS and both the MHC-SF and MLQ survey instruments.

When examining how demographic information affected measured variables, only one significant relationship was discovered-- Age and DSI scores were found to be negatively correlated ( $r = -0.26, p < 0.0021$ ).

- **H1:** The DFS total composite score exhibited negative correlation with DSI total ( $r = -0.17, p = 0.04$ ). Subscales of the DFS with the exception of the values subscale correlated negatively with the DSI. Of these subscales, trait and impartiality were significant ( $r = -0.02, p = 0.01$ ;  $r = 0.22, p = 0.01$  resp.). MLQ was not significantly correlated with DSI totals. Both the presence and search subscales of the MLQ did correlate significantly with the DSI; however presence was negatively correlated ( $r = -0.24, p = 0.00$ ); search was positively correlated ( $r = 0.24, p = 0.00$ ).
- Results suggest that higher trait forgiveness and impartiality scores indicate more resilience to the effects of daily stressors.
- **H1²:** The DFS and MHC-SF totals were significantly correlated ( $r = 0.45, p < .0001$ ). All subscales of the DFS positively correlated with the MHC-SF total. The correlated subscales were trait ( $r = 0.44, p < 0.0001$ ) and value ( $r = 0.44, p < 0.0001$ ). MLQ was positively correlated with the MHC-SF ( $r = 0.52, p < 0.0001$ ). Only the presence subscale significantly correlated with the MHC-SF ( $r = 0.66, p < .0001$ ).
- **H2:** Study findings support the hypothesis that higher levels of forgiveness may be better at mitigating the effects of daily stressors over levels of meaning. However, meaning seems to be a more significant influencer of overall wellbeing than forgiveness.
- **H2²:** The DFS total correlated positively with the MHC-SF social subscale ( $r = 0.36, p < 0.0001$ ). Findings suggest that higher levels of forgiveness may not just have intrapersonal benefits, but also influence social constructs of wellbeing.

Multivariate											
Pairwise Correlations											
Variable	by Variable	Correlation	Count	Lower 95%	Upper 95%	Signif Prob					
DFS_Total	DSI_Total	-0.1774	131	-0.3386	-0.0061	0.0426*					
MLQ_Total	DSI_Total	0.0414	131	-0.1310	0.2114	0.6386					
MLQ_Total	DFS_Total	0.3132	131	0.1498	0.4601	0.0003*					
MHC-SF_Total	DSI_Total	-0.1407	131	-0.3049	0.0316	0.1089					
MHC-SF_Total	DFS_Total	0.4507	131	0.3025	0.5776	<.0001*					
MHC-SF_Total	MLQ_Total	0.5263	131	0.3899	0.6400	<.0001*					

## LIMITATIONS & DISCUSSION

**Limitations:** The largest limitations of both studies is the relatively small and homogenous sample size compared to the number of variables under consideration. Data collection was limited to St1- 12 weeks and to St2- 6 weeks, limiting the full potential of long term snowballing recruitment. Due to the length of the surveys, there were a considerable number of incomplete packets which had to be removed. St1: 68 respondent packets, and St2: 52 respondent packets.

**Discussion and Future Research:** Data yielded from these studies may help researchers and counseling professionals better understand what forgiveness entails and potential therapeutic benefits to cultivating forgiving behaviors. Results from St2 show compelling data that forgiveness may be just as important as existential meaning to human resiliency in counseling settings. More research is needed to understand how supplementing traditional psychotherapeutic counseling interventions with prosocial cultivation materials may be beneficial to the client. Future research will be needed to replicate findings and to determine if demographic factors aside from age play a more significant role in forgiving attitudes than the sample data provided.

### REFERENCES

- Carson, J. W., Keefe, F. J., Goli, V., Fras, A. M., Lynch, T. R., Thorp, S. R., & Buachler, J. L. (2005). Forgiveness and chronic low back pain: A preliminary study examining the relationship of forgiveness to pain, anger, and psychological distress. *The Journal of Pain*, 6(2), 84-91.
- Free, D. C. (2016). The dispositional forgiveness scale: Research in the measurement of trait forgiveness (Unpublished master's thesis). Life University, Atlanta, GA.
- Free, D. C., Medeiros, J., Cheva, A., Rentz, T., Bibby, M., & Tasson, T. (2019, April). Stressed out? Try Forgiveness!: The Role of Meaning and Forgiveness in Mitigating the Effects of Daily Stressors and Fostering Overall Wellbeing. Poster Presentation at the 2019 Graduate Student Research Symposium at the University of North Florida, Jacksonville, Florida.
- Keyes, C. L. M. (2002). The mental health continuum: From languishing to flourishing in life. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 43(2), 207-222.
- Keyes, C. L. M. (2007). Promoting and protecting mental health as flourishing: A complementary strategy for improving national mental health. *American Psychologist*, 62, 95-108.
- Mascaro, N., & Rosen, D. H. (2006). The role of existential meaning as a buffer against stress. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 46(2), 168-190.
- Ross, S. R., Kendall, A. C., Matters, K. G., Wrobel, T. A., & Rys, M. S. (2004). A personalization examination of self- and other-forgiveness in the five factor model. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 82(2), 207-214.
- Steger, M. F., Frazier, P., Oishi, S., & Kaler, M. (2006). The Meaning in Life Questionnaire: Assessing the presence of and search for meaning in life. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 53(1), 80-93.
- Worthington, E., Winsler, C., Petrait, P., & Miller, A. (2007). Forgiveness, health, and well-being: A review of evidence for emotional versus decisional forgiveness, dispositional forgiveness, and reduced unforgiveness. *J Behav Med*, 30(4), 291-302. doi:10.1007/s10865-007-9105-8