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Mental Health Outcomes in Adolescents: A Study of Self-Esteem and Forgiveness as Protective Factors

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the effect of self-esteem and forgiveness on the mental health of adolescents. Grounded in positive psychology, the research explores how personal strengths such as forgiveness and self-worth contribute to emotional well-being during a critical developmental stage. Using a correlational design, data were collected from 200 adolescents (120 males, 80 females) aged 13–18, selected from Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan. Participants completed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, Heartland Forgiveness Scale, and Mental Health Continuum-Short Form. Findings revealed significant positive correlations between self-esteem, forgiveness, and mental health. Regression analysis indicated that both self-esteem and forgiveness significantly predicted mental health. Gender differences were also notable: males reported higher self-esteem and better mental health, while females showed greater levels of forgiveness. These results highlight the psychological benefits of cultivating self-worth and the ability to forgive in adolescence. The study suggests the need for gender-sensitive mental health interventions that foster emotional resilience and interpersonal harmony. While the findings provide valuable insights, the study's cross-sectional design and limited demographic scope restrict generalizability. Future research should adopt longitudinal approaches and consider broader sociocultural variables. Overall, this study emphasizes the crucial role of self-esteem and forgiveness in promoting adolescent mental well-being.

Introduction

Adolescence is frequently characterized as a tumultuous period marked by both physical and psychological transitions from childhood to adulthood (Hurlock, 2002). During this critical time, adolescents encounter various developmental tasks that shape their future roles as adults. It is essential for this transition to be navigated positively and with a sense of happiness (Metzler et al., 2007). However, the developmental demands placed on adolescents, coupled with increasing expectations from themselves and others, can heighten their vulnerability to psychological issues, manifesting as mental, emotional, or behavioral disturbances (Havlicek et al., 2013; Hawkins et al., 2000; Metzler et al., 2007; Southerland et al., 2009).

The psychological challenges of adolescence—including stress, sadness, anxiety, loneliness, and self-doubt—can significantly increase the risk of delinquent behavior (Rojas & Coker, 2015; Fuhrmann, 1990). Hurlock (2002) found that adolescents are often more troubled by internal conflicts than by issues with others. When they struggle to adjust to their evolving roles, they may experience confusion, uncertainty, and heightened anxiety (Santrock, 2003).

Forgiveness is defined as the process of accepting the mistakes of a wrongdoer, aimed at healing emotional wounds and fostering the desire to rebuild a future relationship (Williamson & Gonzales, 2007). Thompson and Snyder (2003) identified two critical dimensions of forgiveness: interpersonal and intrapersonal aspects. The interpersonal aspect focuses on the relationship between the forgiver and the offender, while the intrapersonal aspect pertains to the forgiver's internal emotional processes. Furthermore, forgiveness can be categorized into three domains: forgiveness of self, forgiveness of others, and forgiveness of situations (Thompson et al., 2005).

Forgiveness serves as an adaptive and effective coping strategy, particularly for adolescents. By engaging in forgiveness, adolescents can maintain positive internal states and cultivate healthy interpersonal relationships with peers. This ability to forgive not only aids emotional regulation but also promotes social cohesion among adolescents. Flanagan et al., 2012)

Forgiveness is an important variable associated with subjective well-being (Chan, 2013; Peterson, 2015; Plauca & Bite, 2011). Adolescents often face numerous demands and expectations from their environment and themselves. When they struggle to meet these expectations, it can lead to psychological problems (Havlicek et al., 2013; Metzler et al., 2007; Hawkins et al., 2000). The inability to forgive and let go of past mistakes or disappointments can result in a dominance of negative emotions over positive ones, contributing to lower levels of subjective well-being (McCullough, 1988; McCullough et al., 2000).

Numerous studies involving college students have demonstrated that forgiveness is positively associated with global mental health and relationship quality (Berry & Worthington, 2001), as well as with levels of hope (Rye et al., 2000). In a study focused on elderly women, higher levels of forgiveness were linked to increased self-esteem and lower levels of anxiety and depression (Hebl & Enright, 1993). Furthermore, research by Al-Mabuk and Enright (1995) revealed that parents who exhibited high levels of forgiveness also tended to have higher self-esteem and adopt positive parenting styles, contributing to lower anxiety and depression among their college-aged children.

Individuals who struggle to forgive often experience persistent negative emotions, which can lead to feelings of anxiety, depression, and loneliness. Forgiveness can alleviate these negative feelings and promote emotional healing. By fostering positive emotions toward those who have caused

harm, individuals can significantly improve their subjective well-being and overall mental health (McCullough et al., 2001). When individuals engage in the process of forgiveness, they often develop positive emotions, thoughts, and attitudes toward those who have caused them pain (Enright, 2001; Thompson et al., 2005). This shift not only enhances life satisfaction but also increases positive affect while reducing negative affect (Chan, 2013; Peterson, 2015; Worthington & Wade, 1999).

Numerous studies have established a positive correlation between forgiveness and psychological well-being. For instance, Krause and Ellison (2003) found that individuals who practice forgiveness report higher levels of life satisfaction and lower levels of psychological distress. Wohl et al. (2008) demonstrated that forgiveness is associated with enhanced emotional well-being. Forgiveness can lead to significant improvements in overall mental health (Bono et al., 2007). Malone et al. (2011) indicated that the practice of forgiveness contributes positively to emotional well-being, reinforcing the idea that fostering forgiveness can be beneficial for individuals,

Literature examining the role of demographics in forgiveness indicates that women tend to report higher levels of forgiveness than men (Miller et al., 2008). In contrast, men often experience stronger feelings of revenge (Rijavec et al., 2010). Sadiq and Ali (2014) found that non-working married women display more benevolence towards their in-laws compared to their working counterparts. Factors such as the duration of the offense (Ling-hsuan, 2009), the presence of an apology or confession (McCullough et al., 2003), and relationship satisfaction (Fincham & Beach, 2002) significantly influence the likelihood of forgiveness.

Self-esteem refers to an individual's evaluation of one’s own worth; encompassing the belief that one is a valuable person. According to Rosenberg (1965), self-esteem is largely shaped by one's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. The adolescent period is crucial for the development of self-esteem, as it is during this time that individuals form lasting perceptions of themselves. Support from parents and teachers can significantly influence this process, fostering an environment that encourages positive self-assessment (Mogonea & Mogonea, 2014).

High self-esteem plays a crucial role in fostering resilience and positive adaptation among individuals (Moksnes & Espnes, 2012). Those with elevated self-esteem typically experience greater happiness, optimism, and motivation compared to their low self-esteem counterparts. Additionally, they report lower levels of depression, anxiety, and negative mood (Abdel-Khalek, 2011). Research involving Arab participants has demonstrated that self-esteem is significantly and positively correlated with life satisfaction, mental health, happiness, and hope (Abdel-Khalek, 2012, 2013; Abdel-Khalek & Snyder, 2007).

Individuals with high self-esteem possess the capacity to embrace joyful experiences, effectively navigate challenging situations, and cultivate close relationships. This positive self-regard not only enhances their ability to cope with adversity but also mitigates the expression of dysfunctional thought patterns and depressive symptoms in the face of negative life events (Stavropoulos et al., 2015). Low self-esteem has been consistently associated with a range of behavioral issues and poor academic performance. It can lead to serious problems, including suicidal tendencies, maladjustment, and psychological disorders such as depression, social anxiety, loneliness, and alienation (Sharma & Agarwala, 2015).

Individuals who have low self-esteem often find it more challenging to forgive. Self-esteem plays a crucial role in determining the perceived threat posed by transgressions, making it an important

factor in the study of forgiveness (Strelan & Zdaniuk, 2015). Researchers have emphasized the need to investigate the mechanisms driving the relationship between self-esteem and self-forgiveness. Lower self-esteem can lead individuals to adopt self-protective behaviors and avoidance strategies, which negatively impact their ability to forgive. Excessive self-protection stemming from diminished self-esteem may limit access to the psychological resources necessary for fostering forgiveness (Strelan & Zdaniuk, 2015). The severity of a transgression has been shown to hinder the forgiveness process in numerous studies (Fincham et al., 2005). Individual with high self-esteem tend to have more forgiveness Griffin et al., 2020). This highlights the need to assess the roles of positive self-resources in regulating forgiveness, as they may help mitigate the effects of low self-esteem on the ability to forgive (Strelan & Zdaniuk, 2015).

Men generally exhibit higher self-esteem levels than women, and both genders experience age-related increases in self-esteem from late adolescence through middle adulthood (Huang, 2010; Orth & Robins, 2014; Trzesniewski et al., 2013). Social media addiction leads to lower self-esteem and deteriorated mental health among adults (Batool et al., 2025).

Numerous studies indicate that males consistently report higher levels than females (Robins et al., 2002; Zeigler-Hill & Myers, 2012). Specifically, self-esteem tends to be relatively high in childhood, decreases during adolescence, gradually increases throughout adulthood, and then declines in old age (Orth & Robins, 2014; Robins & Trzesniewski, 2005; Wagner et al., 2013). Self-esteem has been found more in boys as compared to girls (Batool et al., 2018).

Thus, understanding the interplay between these variables is crucial for improving the effectiveness of emergency services. The study found a significant positive relationship between emotional intelligence, leadership skills, and organizational commitment among civil servants. Those with higher emotional intelligence yields positive mental health and higher job performance (Batool et al., 2024). The study concludes that stressors originating within the workplace are key contributors to occupational stress and play a substantial role in undermining employee performance within the banking sector (Batool et al., 2023). While empowering leadership is typically associated with positive outcomes, recent studies suggest that without adequate employee optimism or resilience, it may inadvertently increase stress by shifting responsibilities without sufficient support (Abbas et al., 2023). The study found that financial stress was a primary contributor to suicidal ideation during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly among male breadwinners in low-income families. The inability to provide financially led to feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness, increasing suicide risk (Rani et al., 2023).

Research objectives

1. To explore the relationship between self-esteem, forgiveness and mental health
2. To investigate the effect of self-esteem on mental health
3. To examine the effect of forgiveness on mental health
4. To compare the level of self-esteem, forgiveness and mental health between male and female

Hypotheses of the study

1. There would be a positive relationship between self-esteem, forgiveness and mental health
2. There would be a significant effect of self-esteem on mental health
3. There would be a significant effect of forgiveness on mental health

4. The difference of self-esteem, forgiveness and mental health between male and female would be significant

Method

Research Design

The nature of the study was quantitative. Correlational research design was used to accomplish the study. Survey was utilized as a method of data collection.

Population and Sample

Research aimed to study the effect of self-esteem and forgiveness on mental health among adolescent. Sample size was calculated through G Power formula a sample of (N=200) was suggested by the formula. The sample was comprised on female (n=80) and male (n=120), convenient sampling technique from Bahauddin Zakarya University Multan. Participant's age range was comprised from 13 to 18 years.

Instruments

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale

A 10-item Likert scale measuring global self-worth was used. Scores range from 0 to 30, with higher scores indicating higher self-esteem and its reliability was 0.978 (Rosenberg, 1965).

Heartland Forgiveness Scale

An 18 item Likert scale with reliability of 0.979 was used. It measures forgiveness in three domains—self, others, and situations. Scores range from 18 to 126, with higher scores indicating greater forgiveness (Thompson et al., 2005).

Mental Health Continuum-Short Form

A 14-item Likert scale assessing positive mental health was used. Scores range from 0 to 84, with higher scores reflecting better mental health and its reliability was 0.975 (Keyes, 2002).

Procedure

First of all, permissions from the authors of the scales were taken. Permissions from the administration of university were taken for the data collection. Data was collected from the University students by first taking informed consent and getting it signed by them and then taking demographic information on the demographic sheet and taking their responses on Effect of self-esteem and forgiveness on mental health among adolescent by requesting them to response carefully and sincerely, At the end participants were thanked for giving their considerable time and cooperation too). After data collection statistical analysis was done to test the hypothesis. On the basis of analysis hypothesis were either be accepted or rejected.

Data Analysis

Pearson product moment correlation was executed to assess the relationship between study variables.Regression analysis was used for the prediction of variables. Independent sample t-test was used to test the gender difference among study variables.

Results

Table 1: Correlation Matrix among Self-esteem, Forgiveness and Mental Health among Adolescents

	Variables	Mean	Std. Deviation	1	2	3
1	Self-esteem	36.24	11.68	1	.632**	.647**
2	Forgiveness	80.32	23.70		1	.724**
3	Mental Health	57.60	18.30			1

Table 2 shows the means, standard deviations, and Pearson correlation coefficients among self-esteem, forgiveness, and mental health. The mean self-esteem score was 36.24 (SD = 11.68), the mean forgiveness score was 80.32 (SD = 23.70), and the mean mental health score was 57.60 (SD = 18.30). Pearson correlation analysis indicated that self-esteem was positively correlated with forgiveness (r = .632, p < .01) and mental health (r = .647, p < .01). Additionally, forgiveness showed a strong positive correlation with mental health (r = .724, p < .01). All correlations were statistically significant at the **p** < .01 level.

Table 2: Standard Regression Model showing effect of Self-esteem on Mental Health

Predictor	B	Std. Error	Beta	t-test	P-value
(Constant)	20.91	3.23		6.47	.000
SE	1.01	.085	.647	11.92	.000

R^2= .418, Adjusted R^2= .415, (F (1, 199) = 142.205, p<0.05)

A simple linear regression analysis was conducted to examine the effect of self-esteem on mental health among adolescents. The results indicated that self-esteem was a significant predictor of mental health, *B = 1.01, SE = 0.085, β = 0.647, t (199) = 11.92, p < .001*. The constant was also significant, *B = 20.91, SE = 3.23, t (199) = 6.47, p < .001*, suggesting that when self-esteem is zero, the predicted mental health score is 20.91. The model explained 41.8% of the variance in mental health, R^2 = 0.418, adjusted *R^2 = 0.415, F (1, 199) = 142.21, p < .05.*

Table 3: Standard Regression Model showing effect of Forgiveness on Mental Health

Predictor	B	Std. Error	Beta	t-test	P-value
(Constant)	12.73	3.17		4.01	.000
F	.559	.038	.724	14.74	.000

R^2= .524, Adjusted R^2= .521, (F (1, 199) = 217.539, p<0.05)

A simple linear regression analysis was conducted to examine the effect of forgiveness on mental health. The results, presented in Table 3, indicate that forgiveness was a significant predictor of mental health, ***B** = 0.559, **SE** = 0.038, **β** = 0.724,* t *(199) = 14.74*, p < *.001*. The model explained 52.4% of the variance in mental health, ***R^2** = 0.524, adjusted **R^2** = 0.521,* F *(1, 199) = 217.54*, p < *.05.*

Table 4: Mean, Standard Deviation, t-value and score of Self-esteem, Forgiveness and Mental Health with respect to gender (N=200)

Variable	Gender	N	Mean	SD	Df	t-test	p-value
	Male	120	38.6	12.4	198	3.70	.000
Self-esteem	Female	80	32.6	9.3			
Forgiveness	Male	120	77.1	18.9	198	2.35	.002
	Female	80	85.1	28.8			
Mental Health	Male	120	60.2	17.4	198	2.49	.014
	Female	80	53.7	18.9			

Table 04 presents the mean, standard deviation, *t*-values, and significance levels for self-esteem, forgiveness, and mental health across gender. The results indicate that male adolescents reported significantly higher self-esteem (M = 38.6, SD = 12.4) compared to female adolescents (M = 32.6, SD = 9.3), t (198) = 3.70, $p < .001$. Similarly, female adolescents exhibited significantly higher forgiveness levels (M = 85.1, SD = 28.8) compared to males (M = 77.1, SD = 18.9), t(198) = 2.35, p = .002. Additionally, male adolescents demonstrated significantly better mental health (M = 60.2, SD = 17.4) than female adolescents (M = 53.7, SD = 18.9), t (198) = 2.49, p = .014. These findings suggest that self-esteem and mental health levels are higher among male adolescents, while female adolescents tend to exhibit greater forgiveness.

Discussion

The study was aimed at examining the impact of self-esteem and forgiveness on mental health among adolescents. The results of this study highlight significant associations between self-esteem, forgiveness, and mental health among adolescents. The correlation and regression analyses suggest that both self-esteem and forgiveness are strong predictors of mental health, underscoring the importance of these psychological constructs in promoting adolescent well-being. This suggests that adolescents with higher self-esteem tend to report higher levels of forgiveness and mental health. These findings align with prior research demonstrating that individuals with higher self-esteem are better equipped to handle interpersonal stressors and exhibit more prosocial behaviors, such as forgiveness (Orth et al., 2010; Tennen & Affleck, 2002). Furthermore, previous studies have shown that self-esteem plays a crucial role in maintaining positive mental health, as individuals with higher self-worth are more resilient to stress and mental health challenges (Robins et al., 2002). The positive correlation between forgiveness and mental health (r = 0.724) further supports the idea that forgiving others can lead to improved mental well-being. Studies by Toussaint et al. (2001) and Karremans et al. (2003) have shown that forgiveness is linked to lower levels of depression, anxiety, and other psychological distress, as it allows individuals to release negative emotions that could otherwise impair mental health. This finding suggests that adolescents who are more forgiving may experience less emotional turmoil, leading to better mental health outcomes. The results of a regression analysis examining the effect of self-esteem on mental health. The analysis revealed that self-esteem is a significant predictor of mental health, explaining 41.8% of the variance in mental health. The regression coefficient for self-esteem suggests that for every one-unit increase in self-esteem, mental health scores are expected to increase by 1.01 points. This finding is consistent with the theoretical understanding that self-esteem influences mental health by providing individuals with a positive self-concept and enhancing their ability to cope with stress and adversity (Markey & Markey, 2014). High self-esteem is associated with greater psychological resilience, emotional regulation, and fewer mental

health problems, supporting the idea that boosting self-esteem in adolescents can lead to improved mental well-being (Mann et al., 2004). This result highlights the importance of forgiveness in adolescent mental health, as forgiving others may reduce emotional distress, promote emotional healing, and increase well-being (McCullough et al., 2001). Forgiveness allows individuals to let go of negative emotions such as anger and resentment, which can otherwise undermine mental health, leading to greater psychological stability and happiness (Toussaint et al., 2001). Moreover, Karremans et al. (2003) suggest that forgiveness fosters healthier interpersonal relationships, reducing social conflicts and improving social support, all of which contribute to better mental health outcomes. In the context of adolescence, fostering forgiveness may be particularly important, as this period is marked by significant social interactions and potential interpersonal conflicts that can impact mental health.

The results of the study suggest significant gender differences in self-esteem, forgiveness, and mental health among adolescents. Specifically, male adolescents reported higher levels of self-esteem and mental health, while female adolescents demonstrated greater levels of forgiveness. These findings align with some established trends in adolescent psychology, while also adding novel insights into the nuanced relationship between gender and these psychological factors. The finding that male adolescents exhibited significantly higher self-esteem than female adolescents is consistent with previous research that has shown gender differences in self-esteem during adolescence. Studies by Kling et al. (1999) and Gentile et al. (2009) found that males tend to have higher self-esteem than females, particularly in areas related to physical appearance and social success. This may be attributed to societal norms and expectations that often encourage males to demonstrate assertiveness and confidence, which can foster a stronger sense of self-worth. In contrast, females may experience societal pressures that undermine their self-esteem, such as objectification or higher expectations in social and academic domains (Markey & Markey, 2014). This gendered socialization could lead to the observed lower self-esteem among females in the current study. It is also important to note that adolescence is a period of significant identity development, and gender roles can play a critical part in shaping adolescents' self-concept (Orth et al., 2010). Regarding forgiveness, female adolescents in this study exhibited significantly higher levels of forgiveness than their male counterparts. This finding is consistent with previous research suggesting that women generally score higher on measures of forgiveness than men. For example, Toussaint et al. (2001) and Karremans et al. (2003) found that women tend to be more forgiving than men, which could be attributed to gender differences in emotional regulation and empathy. Women are often socialized to be more nurturing and emotionally expressive, which may make them more attuned to the emotions of others and thus more likely to forgive. In contrast, male adolescents may have a stronger tendency toward anger or retaliation due to different emotional socialization and coping strategies. McCullough et al. (2003) propose that men may focus more on justice and retribution, which could inhibit their tendency to forgive. The current study's findings further underscore this gender difference in emotional processing and forgiveness, highlighting its potential impact on adolescent social relationships. The results also reveal that male adolescents reported significantly higher levels of mental health than females. This is somewhat contrary to some studies that indicate females report higher levels of depression and anxiety than males during adolescence (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001). However, the observed trend in this study may be due to differences in coping strategies. Tamres et al. (2002) suggest that women are more likely to internalize emotions, which may manifest as higher levels of mental health difficulties, while men may externalize problems, thus showing less visible signs of mental health issues. It is also possible that males report higher mental health scores due to social expectations that encourage them to present themselves as emotionally resilient or unaffected by distress, potentially leading to underreporting of issues like anxiety or depression (Meyer et al., 2004). This discrepancy in reporting might explain the higher mental health scores among male adolescents in the current

study. However, it is crucial to note that these gender differences in mental health could also be influenced by cultural and contextual factors, such as the societal pressures on males to appear emotionally strong or the unique stressors that affect females in adolescence, including body image concerns and academic pressures (Rosenfield, 2012). These variables may influence how mental health is perceived and expressed across genders.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to draw causal conclusions. Longitudinal studies would be necessary to understand the directionality of the relationships between self-esteem, forgiveness, and mental health over time. Furthermore, the sample was limited to adolescents from a specific geographic or cultural context, which reduces the generalizability of the results to other populations. The study also used a binary gender classification, which does not account for individuals who identify as non-binary or gender-fluid. Lastly, the study did not control for other potential confounding variables such as socioeconomic status, family dynamics, or peer relationships, which could have influenced the results.

Practical Implications

The findings highlight the need for gender-sensitive mental health interventions, with targeted programs for male and female adolescents to address their specific psychological needs. For example, promoting self-esteem may be particularly beneficial for female adolescents, while fostering emotional expression and help-seeking behaviors could support male adolescents who might underreport mental health issues. Furthermore, programs that focus on enhancing emotional intelligence, such as teaching empathy and conflict resolution skills, could be valuable for improving forgiveness and overall mental health. Given the observed differences in mental health, female adolescents might benefit from interventions that focus on boosting self-worth and addressing body image concerns. Finally, it is essential for mental health and educational programs to be inclusive of diverse gender identities, ensuring that all adolescents receive appropriate support tailored to their unique experiences.

Conclusion

The study's findings contribute to the growing body of literature on gender differences in self-esteem, forgiveness, and mental health among adolescents. The results highlight that male adolescents tend to have higher self-esteem and better mental health, whereas females exhibit greater forgiveness. These findings suggest that gender-specific interventions may be necessary to address the psychological needs of adolescents, particularly in promoting emotional well-being and self-concept. Further research could explore the underlying mechanisms of these gender differences, considering the role of societal norms, emotional regulation, and coping strategies in shaping adolescent development.

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