

# Transgressions and Well-Being: Exploring the effectiveness of Positive Psychology Interventions among young adults

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\*Selene Khosla  
\*\*Monika Misra

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## Abstract

Positive Psychology has gained significant attention ever since its inception in the 1990s. Exploring the factors that contribute to a “good” life is extremely imperative, keeping in mind the advent of the pandemic. The present study explores the effectiveness of Positive Psychology Interventions on enhancing forgiveness, gratitude and well-being. Forgiveness was assessed using the Transgression Related Interpersonal Motivation Inventory (TRIM-18, McCullough et al., 1998), gratitude using the Gratitude Questionnaire 6 (McCullough et al., 2002), and subjective well-being was assessed using the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985) and Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (Watson, Clark & Tellegen, 1988). A pre-test was taken before commencing the interventions, and a post test was taken two months after the interventions. A significant difference was obtained in the level of revenge motivation, benevolence motivation and gratitude.

**Keywords:** Positive Psychology, Positive Psychology Interventions, Gratitude, Subjective Well-being

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## Introduction

The discipline of Psychology has undergone a great deal of change ever since Dr. Seligman’s presidential address at the APA in 1998. The shift from mainstream psychology towards positive psychology and moreover positive psychology interventions (PPIs) has been the harbinger of change in the field of well-being. The introduction of neoteric methods has laid down a path leading towards flourishing and happiness. Forgiveness has been recognized by almost all cultures as a quintessential quality that contributes to well-being. Gratitude on the other hand, is an important variable of study under the umbrella of positive psychology that has implications for understanding well-being. Subjective well-being, encompassing life satisfaction and affect too, is an important correlate of forgiveness. The notion of forgiveness and well-being has been propagated in almost all Indian texts. The Vedas lay out a detailed path to attaining true happiness and bliss, by embarking on the journey to self-realization. The emphasis on the

oneness of the mortal being with the all-pervasive *Brahman or Atman* leads to the realization that humans have a far greater purpose that goes beyond materialistic possessions.

## Forgiveness (TRIM)

Forgiveness has been studied as a human virtue since time immemorial. Conflict is an inevitable evil that harbors the power to alter relationships. Working actively to restore cordial, positive relationships post a conflict is like the norm of the society that humans are born into (Aureli and deWaal, 2000). Forgiveness then, is the way to overcome the deleterious effects of conflicts on relationships, and mend them (McCullough et al., 1998). It is a positive, psychologically oriented response when the individual is faced with an interpersonal harm (Emmons and McCullough, 2003). Worthington et al. (2005) defined forgiveness as both, an interpersonal and an intrapersonal process. The latter refers to reduction in negative emotions, thoughts, motivation and behavior by changing one’s behavior and inculcating pro-social emotions.

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\*Research Scholar, Discipline of Psychology, School of Social Sciences, Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi.

\*\*Faculty of Psychology, School of Social Sciences, Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi.

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Transgressions in the present research were considered to be acts of psychological harm or wrongdoing done to the participant by a loved one. Forgiveness is granted more freely when the perpetrator is considered as an appropriate recipient for compassion and kindness, which is often when the victim feels closely for them. In such a case then, maintaining a vengeful attitude may often seem difficult (Karremans & Aarts, 2007). Feeling empathic for a transgressor has also been associated with a higher propensity to forgive (McCullough et al., 1998). Empathy mediates the desire to forgive transgressors since forgiveness here, is seen akin to an act of altruism (Batson, 1991). The decision to forgive is an amalgamation of many factors, such as judgment of responsibility or blame; the intentionality of the transgression; severity of the event and so on (Girard & Mullet, 1997). It also comes about when one feels that the transgressor has been punished in a way, which is appropriate (Strelan & Van Prooien, 2013). In romantic relationships for example, the level of commitment impacts forgiveness (McCullough et al., 1998). A deep wound following a severe transgression, one that left a huge impact on the victim is less likely to be forgiven because the pain is deeper. In such a scenario, the perception of the transgressor as dangerous makes forgiving difficult (Hoyt et al., 2005). Forgiveness then, is a result of letting go of the anger, resentment and bitterness towards the transgressor which the victim has the right to hold on to, and instead replacing it with a gift. This gift is that of kindness, consideration, altruism and benevolence which ultimately leads to forgiveness (Hall & Fincham, 2005). Forgiveness in this sense can be seen as an act of liberation that frees the victim from the shackles of pain caused because of holding onto the narrative of the transgression (Thompson et al., 2005).

The benefits of forgiveness on psychological and physical well-being have been innumerable (Fincham, Beach & Davila, 2004). Forgiveness has been associated with lesser anxiety and depression (Hirsch et al., 2011; Sadiq & Zehra-Al, 2012; Toussaint et al., 2008). It is related to better mental health (eg: Krause and Ellison, 2003; Rye et al., 2000). Further, forgiveness is negatively correlated with perceived stress (Lawler et al., 2003). Both trait and state forgiveness have a negative correlation with physical health and fatigue (Lawler et al., 2005).

### Gratitude

Gratitude has been conceptualized as an unparalleled human strength. It is not only the propensity to respond positively to the positive strokes in life, but also as a state of mind, or an emotion that aids adaptive responding (Bartlett, 2006). Emmons et al. (2003) defined gratitude in terms of both emotional and cognitive factors. It plays a pivotal role in establishing inner peace by fostering feelings of gratefulness and altruism (Friedman, 2008).

Gratitude in the present study has been conceptualized as a disposition, i.e., a generic tendency to respond with a thankful emotion when faced with a positive experience (McCullough, 2004). It has been conceptualized as an emotion, an attitude, a moral virtue, a habit, a personality trait, or a coping response. As an emotion, gratitude is an attribution-dependent state (Weiner, 1985) that results from a two-step cognitive process: (a) recognizing that one has obtained a positive outcome, and (b) recognizing that there is an external source for this positive outcome. Lazarus and Lazarus (1994) argued that gratitude is one of the “empathic emotions” whose roots lie in the capacity to empathize with others, reflecting recognition or appreciation of an altruistic gift (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000). Lazarus and Lazarus (1994) argued that gratitude is one of the “empathic emotions” whose roots lie in the capacity to empathize with others, reflecting recognition or appreciation of an altruistic gift (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000). McCullough et al. (2002) in a study with the GQ-6 found increased trait gratitude predicted lower levels of anxiety and depression. Hence gratitude functions as moods having a prolonged effect to experience positive affect and decline in negative affect. Gratitude is considered as a desirable human characteristic, from ancient scriptures to modern research due to its ability to improve one’s own life and that of others. However, it is easier said than to imbibe the feeling of being grateful since our natural tendency is to respond with resentment, jealousy or other negative emotions.

It has a positive impact on psychological and social well-being (Emmons, & Larson, 2001; Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Studies have shown that an increase in gratitude results in an increase in positive affect and decrease in negative affect (Emmons, 2008). Fostering gratitude has been associated with better health outcomes (Singh, Khan & Osmany, 2014;

Emmons, 2014). It also predicts higher life satisfaction (Froh et al., 2009b; Froh et al., 2011). In addition, both gratitude and forgiveness are positively associated with psychological well-being, life satisfaction, and positive affect (Shourie & Kaur, 2016).

### **Subjective Well-Being (SWB; Life Satisfaction and Affect)**

Subjective well-being (SWB) has been an area of interest since the early Greek era. It can be understood as the perception that an individual holds about their life in terms of its purpose, value, worth and experiences like contentment (Bono & McCullough, 2006). It is a part of the wider construct of well-being that includes personal satisfaction, SWB and life fulfillment (Park & Seligman, 2004). Diener et al. (2010) defined subjective well-being as an individual's self-perceived success in terms of their relationships, optimism, self-esteem and purpose in life. It is the amalgamation of an individual's satisfaction with their experiences in life, along with low negative affect and high positive affect (Diener, Oishi & Lucas, 2016). SWB can be highly contextualized, and influenced by one's life experiences (Lucas, 2007; Luhmann et al., 2012). On one hand, it is determined by genetic factors in the individual (Lykken and Tellegen, 1996) whereas on the other, well-being is dependent on circumstantial factors (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005). However, intentional activities that are very much subjected to an individual's volition also impact well-being (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). SWB therefore, is an outcome of both innate factors as well as cognitions resulting from various life situations, which is in sync with the bio-psychosocial model (George, 1980). Various interventions and techniques to enhance SWB hence, can prove effective in therapy and counseling. The malleability of the construct can be useful in modifying affective, behavioral and cognitive patterns.

Forgiveness has been linked to the prevention of psychiatric problems, reduction in negative affect along with an increase in positive affect (Karairmak & Guloglu, 2014). Forgiveness is positively associated with life satisfaction (Toussaint et al., 2001) and subjective well-being (Gull & Rana, 2013). Gratitude too, has been a predictor of well-being as established by previous literature (Froh, Yurkewicz, & Kashdan, 2009; Wood, Joseph, & Maltby, 2009; Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, and Schkade, 2005). Counting

blessings has shown to enhance the association of gratitude and forgiveness to well-being is mediated through a series of cognitive and affective changes, ultimately resulting in enhanced subjective well-being (Emmons, McCullough & Tsang, 2003; Worthington, Sandage, & Berry, 2000).

### **Positive Psychology Interventions**

Positive psychology aims to focus on the positive aspect of human functioning, and includes interventions to enhance thriving among both individuals as well as communities (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Its emergence has widened the scope of studying the determinants of happiness, along with other dimensions of well-being and mental health (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Positive Psychology Interventions (PPIs) include different methods and techniques to promote happiness, flourishing that make up the "good life". The upward spiral and enhanced emotional well-being resulting due to the experience of positive emotions, as postulated by the broaden and build theory is the premise behind many PPIs (Fredrickson and Joiner, 2002). Some PPIs inculcate novel habits in the individual, whereas others like strength-based PPIs promote traits and strengths that the person already possesses (Peterson and Seligman, 2004). These in turn, result in greater positive affect, self-esteem and vitality (Park, Peterson & Seligman, 2004; White & Waters, 2015). In a nutshell, PPIs have proven effective in enhancing overall well-being among different populations (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). Both multicomponent programs as well as specific interventions have a considerable impact on well-being (eg: Seligman, Steen, Park and Peterson, 2005; Burton and King, 2004).

PPIs such as imagining one's best possible self (Burton and King, 2004) or recognizing the positive aspects of a missed opportunity (Gander, Proyer, Ruch, & Wyss, 2013) have proven highly effective to enhance well-being as well. Moreover, gratitude PPIs (Emmons and McCullough, 2003) along with those intended to aid forgiveness of others (Worthington, 1998; Worthington & Scherer, 2004) promote positive changes in behavior. Kindness PPIs (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005) and those involving savoring (Seligman et al., 2006) significantly enhance well-being not just in the general population, but in the clinical settings as well (Sin and Lyubomirsky, 2009). Group or one-on-one interventions have significantly better outcomes as compared to self-administered interventions (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009).

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### Methodology

#### Present Study

The present study was aimed at exploring the effectiveness of positive psychology interventions on individuals who had undergone transgressions by a loved one.

Although the constructs of forgiveness, gratitude and well-being have been an area of interest to researchers since long, the conceptualization of a model contributing to an enhanced propensity to forgive via positive psychology interventions has not been undertaken in the Indian context. The present study is a novel contribution to the field, and a step further in contextualizing western notions of well-being to the Indian population. The multicomponent group program used in the present study was devised using different PPIs involving gratitude, forgiveness, savoring, and recognition of character strengths to name a few. The interventions were designed keeping in mind the need to cater to both eudemonic and hedonic well-being.

The study was conducted online, via Google Meet (conducted during COVID-19 pandemic). A total of 7 sessions were conducted, ranging between 60-90 minutes each. Ten participants were screened based on high scores obtained on revenge and avoidance motivation, and low scores on benevolence motivation from the Transgressions Related Interpersonal Motivation Inventory (TRIM-18, McCullough et al., 1998). The participants were divided equally into males and females, in the age range of 20-25 years, residing in Delhi-NCR. All the participants could communicate

in English, were technologically savvy, and had access to high-speed internet.

#### Hypothesis

H1: There will be a significant difference in the level of forgiveness post the interventions

H2: There will be a significant difference in the level of gratitude post the interventions

H3: There will be a significant difference in well-being post the interventions

#### Instruments

**TRIM-18-** The Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory (McCullough et al., 1998) is an 18-item scale that measures three components of forgiveness, i.e., revenge, avoidance and benevolence on a 5 point scale.

**GQ-6-** The Gratitude Questionnaire – 6 (GQ-6) devised by McCullough et al., 2002 is a 6 item, self-report measure of gratitude. The items are responded to on a scale ranging from 1 to 7, with the former denoting strong disagreement, and the latter denoting strong agreement.

**SWLS-** The Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985) is a 5 item scale that measures the participant's cognitive judgment of their life satisfaction on a 7 point scale.

**PANAS-** The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (Watson et al., 1988) measures the experience of positive and negative affect through a 40 item measure. Half the items are scored for positive affect and half for negative affect. The scale is rated on a 5 point scale.

### Results

**Table 1**  
**Mean scores obtained before and after the intervention**

Variables	Mean Scores	
	Pre-Test	Post-Test
Avoidance motivation	23.4	25.1
Revenge motivation	13.9	9.3
Benevolence motivation	13.7	20.4
Gratitude	33.8	37.6
Life Satisfaction	23.7	24.3
Positive affect	30.7	31.7
Negative Affect	27.3	28.4

**Table 2**  
**Comparison of scores obtained before and after the intervention**

	<b>Z value/ W value</b>	<b>p value</b>
Avoidance Motivation	-.76	.45
Revenge Motivation	-2.76**	.006
Benevolence Motivation	-2.80**	.005
Gratitude	-2.75**	.005
Life Satisfaction	-.66	.51
Positive Affect	-.47	<.05
Negative Affect	-.56	.57
Significant difference at ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05 based on Z statistics		

Computation of the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank test indicates that there was no significant difference in the scores on avoidance motivation before and after the intervention ( $Z = -0.76, p < 0.05$ ). Although the mean scores obtained post the intervention were slightly higher (mean = 25.1) than that obtained before (mean = 23.4), the difference was not significant. A significant difference was obtained in the scores on revenge motivation before and after the intervention ( $Z = -2.80, p < 0.01$ ). The participants' revenge motivation after the intervention (mean = 9.3) was significantly lower than the baseline (mean = 13.9). No significant difference was obtained in the scores on benevolence motivation before and after the intervention ( $Z = -2.80, p < 0.01$ ). The participants' benevolence motivation after the intervention (mean = 20.4) was significantly higher than the baseline (mean = 13.7).

Computation of the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank test also indicates that a significant difference was obtained in the scores on gratitude before and after the intervention ( $Z = -2.803, p < 0.01$ ). The participants' level of gratitude after the intervention (mean = 37.6) was significantly higher than the baseline (mean = 33.8).

However, no significant difference in the scores on life satisfaction, positive affect, and negative affect before and after the intervention ( $Z = -0.47, p < 0.05$ ;  $Z = -0.56, p < 0.05$ ). The mean scores obtained for life satisfaction post the intervention were slightly higher (mean = 24.3) than that obtained before (mean = 23.7), but the difference was not significant.

For positive affect too, the mean scores obtained post the intervention were slightly higher (mean = 31.7) than that obtained before (mean = 30.7), but the difference was not significant.

The mean scores obtained for negative affect post the intervention were also slightly higher (mean = 28.4) than that obtained before (mean = 27.3), but the difference was not significant.

**Discussion**

The present research was aimed at exploring the effectiveness of PPIs on facilitating forgiveness, enhancing gratitude and subjective well-being. Gratitude and forgiveness are seen as interpersonal strengths, which contribute to psychological health by consolidating positive emotions, adaptive social behavior and well-being. It is therefore, important to work on these character strengths to enhance well-being (Breen, Kashdan, Lensen & Fincham, 2010). Gratitude contributes to well-being by inculcating positive affect and optimism, whereas forgiveness cultivates inner peace by letting go of the resentment towards the transgressor (Breen et al., 2010). The latter has also been seen in terms of a decision to let go of the resentment, cultivate inner strength, and a change in perception towards the transgressor (Berry, 2005). The fact that forgiveness is seen as a virtue, is in itself depicting its worth in terms of greatness and the harmony it brings to the victim by a restoration of inner peace. However, it is not just an emotional revelation, but a conscious and well thought out

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decision that the victim makes. The process of regaining inner peace through forgiveness is facilitated by projecting and replacing the feelings of injustice with those of harmony (Worthington & Scherer, 2004).

The present PPI module was based on a multicomponent program model, including several PPIs. These ranged from activities to enhance forgiveness, to recognizing personal strengths, to inculcating and practicing gratitude, savoring and so on. Multicomponent programs have been highly effective in promoting well-being (Mazzucchelli, Kane, & Rees, 2010; RuiniMasoni, Ottolini, & Ferrari, 2014; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005).

The first hypothesis which states that there will be a significant difference in the level of forgiveness after the PPIs was partially accepted. There was a significant difference in the level of revenge motivation ( $z = -2.76$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), wherein participants reported a decreased intent to take revenge from the transgressor post the PPIs. A significant difference was also reported in benevolence motivation ( $z = -2.80$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), since the participants reported a higher benevolence score post the PPIs. No significant difference was found in the level of avoidance motivation ( $z = -.76$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ). Forgiveness in the Indian context needs to be contextualized in the value system that governs our society. The trait of 'ksama' or forgiveness has been mentioned innumerable in the Hindu scriptures as being quintessential for living a good life. The collectivistic system further, fosters close interpersonal relationships which often undergo turbulence, but forgiveness here plays a restorative function to mend the differences. The result of the present study in terms of the high benevolence, low revenge and high avoidance motivation towards the transgressor can be understood from a culturally rooted lens. The moral obligation to be empathic towards others, and forgive one's transgressors may lead to a reduced desire to seek revenge or hurt the transgressor. The high avoidance however, exemplifies how perhaps the deeper, more painful emotions pertaining to the transgression have not been sufficiently worked out which is why the victim wants to keep distance from those who hurt them. Another reason for the present result could be attributed to how the PPIs contribute towards enhancing positive affect, leading to an increase in subjective well-being or even benevolence motivation. However, keeping in mind the fact that working through

painful and traumatic instances is far more personal, individual sessions would perhaps be more essential to devise individualized PPIs depending on the nature of the transgressions. The paucity of time and psycho-educational nature of the present study does not allow for devising individualized therapeutic modalities, but it is nevertheless, an important direction to pursue based on the present findings.

The second hypothesis which states that there will be a significant difference in the level of gratitude after the PPIs was accepted. The participants reported higher gratitude ( $z = -2.75$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) after the PPIs. The present intervention module comprised of many gratitude activities such as "three good things", "gratitude journal", etc. that have shown to enhance gratitude (Seligman et al., 2005; Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Practising gratitude through various activities leads to an increase in different components of well-being, such as life satisfaction and positive affect, which in turn enhances gratitude (Emmons and Sheldon, 2002). The third hypothesis stating that there will be a significant difference in the level of subjective well-being was rejected. No significant difference was found in the level of life satisfaction ( $z = -.66$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), positive affect ( $z = -.47$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and negative affect ( $z = -.56$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). It is important to keep in mind that the current research was undertaken during the second wave of the pandemic which has been devastating for the nation. In lieu of this, it is imperative to note that the current results could have been largely dependent on the prevailing situation. Although previous literature has shown how PPIs positively enhance well-being (Kashdan et al., 2006; Keyes et al., 2002; Wood et al., 2009), it is important to study these constructs in greater detail, in the backdrop of the pandemic.

Moreover, the module used to adapt the present intervention was conceptualized and standardized on a predominant western population. The language in both the manuals was at some points difficult for the participants for the grasp, as mentioned in the comments post individual sessions. Furthermore, even though a secular adaption of the REACH manual was used, there were gaps in terms of contextualization of the concepts by the participants. The increase in avoidance motivation hence can be attributed to this gap in literature and practice, which perhaps opened certain wounds for the participants that could not be closed appropriately. This could be both, due to the

nature of the interventions as an adaptation of the western module, and to the format of the sessions which were not individualized. Forgiveness and gratitude have not only been studied as contributors to well-being, but often as contributors to ensuring that the negative strokes of life are well balanced and managed by individuals, i.e., it is as much about controlling or neutralizing the impact of the negative, as it is about enhancing the positive (Emmons et al., 2003). The results of the present study can be explained via such an assertion, keeping in mind that the study was conducted during COVID-19. Seeing from such a lens, one can delve into how cultivation of these traits, along with other positive psychology interventions that were administered was perhaps, mitigating the role of the negative rather than enhancing the positive.

### Conclusion

The present study was aimed to explore the effectiveness of PPIs on enhancing forgiveness, gratitude and well-being. The results indicate that a significant difference was found in the level of revenge motivation, benevolence motivation and gratitude before and after the interventions. In-depth research is needed to study the impact of the pandemic on well-being and how PPIs can mitigate the impact of such unprecedented situations on individuals. Indian psychology has the concept of forgiveness and attaining bliss embedded in various texts and scriptures. From the Vedas to the Samkhya-Yoga philosophy, a well-structured path to attain this bliss, which is the ultimate goal of humankind, has been laid out. It is therefore, impetative to conduct further research on integrated a cultural model with the existing PPI framework.

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