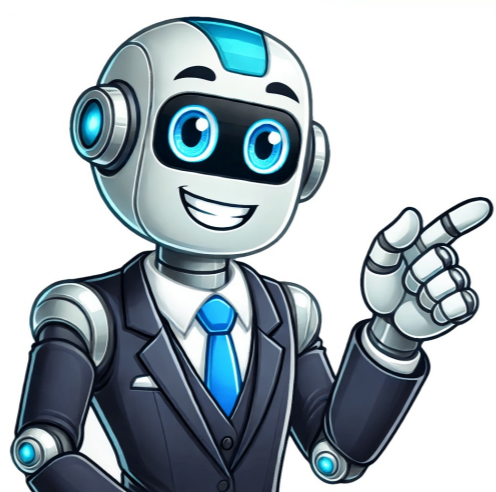


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changes. There are no differences whatsoever in those emotional and spatial aspects of our memory after we forgive, says Felipe De Brigard, a coauthor of the study and a researcher at Duke University studying the role of forgiveness in peace processes. All the difference is in the [feeling] that those memories bring about at the time of retrieval. Forgiveness doesnt involve forgetting In this study, De Brigard and his colleagues conducted a series of experiments in which people were asked to recall and write about a time when they were harmed by another person. What most people recalled, according to De Brigard, involved some kind of betrayal, either in their closest relationships or with work colleagues, sometimes but not always involving emotional or physical harm. After writing about what they experienced, participants noted how morally wrong the transgression was (in their view) and whether or not theyd forgiven the transgressor. Then, they filled out a questionnaire designed to measure how much detail they remembered about the event, including episodic characteristics (such as where it took place, how vivid it was in their minds, and sensory details) and emotional characteristics (its emotional impact and the intensity of the feelings, as well as how they felt now recalling the event). The research team then did a series of analyses that showed people who forgave were able to recall details of the event as clearly as people who didnt forgive, including their emotional pain at the time. Yet those whod forgiven also felt less negative emotion in the present recalling the memory, suggesting that they might have experienced some kind of healing through forgiveness. This surprised De Brigard, who had hypothesized that peoples emotional memories of the harm might fade after forgiving someone, which would explain why they felt better now. But that wasnt the case. I thought that people were going to retroactively remember the [emotion] . . . as being less negative, he says. But that didnt happen at all. The memory was just as bad regardless of whether or not they had forgiven the perpetrator. His findings suggest that forgiving doesnt lead to forgetting, after all. Instead, we change our emotional relationship to what happened, allowing us to recall our past hurt and whos responsible without harming our own well-being. This could have important implications for those who might want to forgive, but are afraid it will impact their fight for justice or their seeking amends from transgressors. One possibility is to think that when we forgive, we change our judgment of what happened during the wrongdoing. But I think thats just wrong, he says. We still consider the people that wronged us as being culpable and morally responsible for what happened to us. He and his team also found that the greater the emotional relief people who forgave experienced, the more they felt benevolent toward the transgressor, and the less likely they were to avoid the person or seek revenge no matter the severity of what happened to them. However, De Brigard warns that these findings on benevolence have to be taken with a grain of salt, because so many of the transgressions recalled in his study involved people in close relationships, who may have more of an incentive to forgive and possibly reconcile. Another reason we shouldnt conclude that people might not always feel more benevolent after forgiving is that the transgressions reported in his study werent as severe as some that hes seen in other contextslike war and genocide. The relationship between improved well-being in the present and benevolence toward perpetrators might not hold in those situations, he says. Forgiveness in certain social contexts serves different purposes. It might be different to forgive someone who just gossips behind your back versus forgiving someone that sexually harassed you or raped you, he says. Nevertheless, regardless of the relationship that you have with the perpetrator, and regardless of the severity of the wrong done, if you have forgiven, your [emotion] at the time of retrieval is going to be less negative and less intense, he adds. Forgiveness can be cultivated From a research perspective, says De Brigard, forgiveness is some kind of memory recoding process that probably involves taking a different perspective on a hurtful event to lessen your negative emotional response. For example, if you can look back on a memory and revise its meaning in your life, or somehow recognize how it inadvertently led to something positive, this may help you forgive, shift your feelings about the memory, and move on. This seems to support past views on forgiveness as being primarily a means of helping us manage past hurts. Studies on forgiveness suggest it can be cultivated directly through programs designed to guide people toward re-processing their hurts, helping protect their mental health and, potentially, improve their relationships if they so choose. De Brigard doesnt necessarily promote forgiveness in all situations. There are some, he says, where people dont want to forgive where, perhaps, they think forgiving would be morally reprehensible because of the level of harm done. And they should never be forced to forgive or cajoled into it, he says. On the other hand, some people want to forgive even the worst offenders, he says, so they can experience the emotional release. For those people, reappraisal techniques (i.e., changing how they think about a transgression by considering the context or the limitations of the person involved) or finding other ways to process their experience might help them to forgive and heal. And, for some, that might tip the balance toward trying to forgive. Forgiveness might open the door for people that . . . want the emotional change, he says. There are some people that might be scared or that dont want to forgive, but, with the right reasons, they might get closer.

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