

Webb, J. R., Jeter, B. R., & Brewer, K. G. (2012, August). Psychological distress as a mediator of the relationship between forgiveness and alcohol problems. Abstract submitted for presentation at the 120<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention of the APA, Division 50 – Addictions: Orlando, Florida.

### Statement of the Problem

The constructive association between forgiveness and health-related outcomes is beginning to be established (Webb, Toussaint, & Conway-Williams, in press; Worthington, 2005; Worthington, Witvliet, Pietrini, & Miller, 2007). Consistent with Alcoholics Anonymous, or the 12 Step model of recovery from addiction (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1981, 2001), forgiveness has been proposed and observed to be associated with alcohol-related outcomes through both direct and indirect effects (see Webb, Hirsch, & Toussaint, 2011; Webb & Trautman, 2010). In particular, psychological distress has been proposed as a mediator of the forgiveness-alcohol association; however, much of the empirical support for this notion has focused on symptoms of mental health, or lack thereof, in general (Webb, et al., 2011). As such, the purpose of this study was to examine particular dimensions of psychological distress and our general hypothesis was that depression, anxiety, and stress would each mediate the relationship between forgiveness and alcohol problems among college student drinkers. That is, higher levels of forgiveness would be associated with lower levels of each of depression, anxiety, and stress, and that lower levels of such dimensions of psychological distress would, in turn, be associated with fewer alcohol-related problems.

### Method

College students from two eastern Tennessee institutions were recruited for this study and received extra credit for their participation. Volunteers completed a series of self-report questionnaires, including measures of demographic information, lifetime religiousness, multiple dimensions of forgiveness (of self, of others, and by God), multiple dimensions of psychological distress (depression, anxiety, and stress), and alcohol problems.

In our cross-sectional analyses of participants who self-identified as drinkers ( $n = 276$ ; ♀ = 76.45%;  $M_{\text{age}} = 22.22$  years), we employed Preacher and Hayes' (2008) method of multiple mediation to examine the association of forgiveness with alcohol problems, as mediated by dimensions of psychological distress. When conducting our analyses, we controlled for gender, age, education, ethnicity, marital status, and lifetime religiousness.

### Results

The overall model was significant ( $R^2 = .17, p < .001$ ) and reflected a salutary relationship between forgiveness and alcohol problems for forgiveness of self and feeling forgiven by God,

but not for forgiveness of others, which was non-significant. More specifically, forgiveness of self was associated with fewer alcohol problems only through psychological distress (no direct association), whereas feeling forgiven by God was associated with fewer alcohol problems in a direct fashion, only. While the total indirect effect (each dimension of psychological distress considered together; not as a collapsed single measure, but the effect of all potential mediators as a whole) was significant, the specific indirect effects of depression, anxiety, and stress were each non-significant. As such, the effects of the three specific dimensions of psychological distress measured were indistinguishable.

### Conclusions

In sum, our general hypothesis regarding the association between forgiveness and problems with alcohol as mediated by specific dimensions of psychological distress received partial support. Of the three dimensions of forgiveness and the three dimensions of psychological distress measured, the only significant associations observed were: 1) psychological distress, as a whole and as an indirect only pathway (as opposed to full or partial mediation), in the context of forgiveness of self and 2) a direct only association in the context of feeling forgiven by God.

Consistent with prior theory (Webb, et al., 2011; Webb & Trautman, 2010) and long-held anecdotal assumptions within the 12 Step model of addiction and recovery (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1981, 2001), our findings provide support for a salutary relationship between forgiveness and alcohol-related problems and in the particular context of psychological distress. However, while the current student explicitly focused on the specific dimensions of depression, anxiety, and stress, their particular effects remained indistinguishable. Future research may benefit from employing alternative research designs, such as using more sophisticated measures of such dimensions of psychological distress and/or examining the presence versus absence of symptomatic thresholds.

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