

2011

# Responding to Our Own Transgressions: An Experimental Writing Study of Repentance, Offense Rumination, Self-justification, and Distraction

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## Recommended Citation

Witvliet, C.V.O., Hinman, N.G., Exline, J.J., & Brandt, T. (2011). Responding to our own transgressions: An experimental writing study of repentance, offense rumination, selfjustification, and distraction. *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, 30, 223-238.

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Running head: OFFENDER REPENTANCE, RUMINATION, SELF-JUSTIFICATION, and  
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Responding to our own Transgressions:

An Experimental Writing Study of Repentance, Offense Rumination, Self-Justification, and Distraction

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Abstract

This between-subjects experiment focused on offender responses to their past interpersonal transgressions in self-identified Christian undergraduates (55 M, 85 F). Participants completed pre-post measures for one of four randomly assigned 20-minute writing conditions: *repentance* (i.e., writing about constructive sorrow, apology, restitution, behavior change), *offense rumination* (i.e., negative wallowing), *self-justification* (i.e., externalizing blame, minimizing costs), or *distraction* (i.e., daily details). Offense rumination and repentance writing included the most cost-oriented language; rumination had the most negative emotion language. Mixed within (pre vs. post) X between group ANOVA interactions yielded theoretically meaningful results. Repentance reduced self-condemnation and regret while increasing conciliatory motivations toward victim (to apologize, make restitution, and seek forgiveness). Offense rumination was associated with remorse and self-condemning isolation from the victim and God. Self-justification reduced remorse and self-condemnation, and exaggerated perceptions of divine forgiveness. Implications for the interrelated literatures on interpersonal offenses, confession, apology, restitution, repentance, forgiveness-seeking, and self-forgiveness are addressed.

Words: 150

**Keywords:** Forgiveness seeking, confession, apology, restitution, perpetrator, offender, offense rumination, forgiveness, guilt, self-condemnation, self-forgiveness, responsibility, humility

**Responding to our own Transgressions: An Experimental Writing Study of Repentance, Offense  
Rumination, Self-Justification, and Distraction**

How offenders respond to their own acts of interpersonal offense has implications for the well-being of victims and themselves in community and before the face of God. Offenders may 1) repent of their actions, 2) ruminate negatively on their offense, 3) justify the transgression by externalizing blame and minimizing its significance, or 4) distract themselves from focusing on the offense. Each of these responses has connections with both psychological and theological literatures. The goal of our experiment was to learn from psychological research findings and to consider connections with both psychology and theology on related themes: confession, apology, restitution, remorse, self-condemnation, forgiveness-seeking, and self-forgiveness (Augsburger, 1996; Exline, Root, Yadavalli, Martin, & Fisher, 2010; Fisher & Exline, 2010; Hall & Fincham, 2008; Narramore, 1984; Smedes, 1996). These themes, in turn, are related to two core features of justice and grace that are often implicit in the literature: truth-telling and transformation. Healthy responses to offenses—by offenders and victims alike—depend upon an accurate understanding of the offense and an approach to it that transforms destructive outcomes into constructive and prosocial ones.

**Repentance**

Repentance in the Christian tradition can be summarized as remorse, restitution, and renewal—a change in the direction of one’s life (Augsburger, 1996). It hinges on an honest understanding of the problem and involves constructive sorrow for one’s transgression, which Narramore (1984) distinguishes from self-condemning punishment. This echoes themes in 2 Corinthians 7:10, in which godly sorrow produces repentance that leads to salvation but not regret; whereas worldly grief is linked to death. Narramore (1984) explains that constructive sorrow is a desire to change that is motivated by loving concern for others, whereas psychological guilt—what Tangney and Dearing (2002) refer to as shame—is self-punitive and destructive toward oneself. Christian college students were able to distinguish Narramore’s (1984) concepts of godly sorrow and psychological guilt in scenarios based on whose actions and attitudes were in focus for the transgressor, the changes made, and the transgressor’s attitude toward God (but not attitude toward the self), and this distinction was facilitated by Christian maturity (Bassett, Hill, Pogel, & Lee et al., 1990).

Factor analytic research by Bassett, Bassett, Lloyd, and Johnson (2006) has also distinguished godly sorrow and psychological guilt items. Sorrow items, however, split into behavior and spiritual items, with behavioral sorrow associated with forgiveness-seeking.

Repentance, a central practice of the Christian faith, is a two-part response to transgression. It involves both facing sin and turning away from it, both looking back and looking forward, both “dying” and “rising.” Believers are called to face their culpability, God, and the victim as they humbly and honestly confess their wrongdoing, apologize, make amends, seek forgiveness, and reconcile with God and with the other to the extent that it is possible and wise (see Smedes, 1996). Because interpersonal reconciliation is not always possible, safe, or wise, repentance may refocus its reparative actions on fitting ways to apologize, make amends, and/or seek forgiveness. Believers are further called to turn away from sin—to die to it—and to come to new life as they receive a life-giving identity and cultivate faithful responses. The arc of Psalm 51 embodies the facing of sin, engaging it, turning from it to God, being transformed, rejoicing, and sharing this new life with others.

Varied Christian catechisms, confessions, and creeds across the ecumenical spectrum also address themes of repentance. For example, the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) includes three succinct repentance questions and answers that integrate Scriptural references. Question 88 asks, “What is involved in genuine repentance or conversion?” and answers, “Two things: the dying-away of the old self, and the coming-to-life of the new” (Romans 6:1-11; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 4:22-24; Colossians 3:5-10). Question 89 asks, “What is the dying-away of the old self?” and answers, “It is to be genuinely sorry for sin, to hate it more and more, and to run away from it” (Psalm 51:3-4, 17; Joel 2:12-13; Romans 8:12-13; 2 Corinthians 7:10). Question 90 asks, “What is the coming-to-life of the new self?” and answers, “It is wholehearted joy in God through Christ (Psalm 51:8,12; Isaiah 57:15; Romans 5:1; Romans 14:17) and a delight to do every kind of good as God wants us to” (Romans 6:10-11; Galatians 2:20).

With insights from ancient Middle Eastern cultural studies, Bailey (2005) views repentance as an identity shift that happens in the process of *accepting that we are found*. He emphasizes the importance of realizing the truth of who we are in light of whose we are—found and embraced by God—with the

transformed new life that springs from this deeper identity. This approach goes deeper than surface examinations of behavior. It anchors our seeing, perceiving, naming, and acting in an identity as people who belong to God (see Labberton, 2010). Likewise, Roberts (2007) describes contrition as a spiritual emotion which links identity and behavior, recognizing that we have both offended God and can trust God's transforming mercy in living a new life. Wright (2006) describes the rebirth of faith and repentance as inhaling God's love and exhaling that first cry of distress, which leads to life. These theologically-shaped approaches emphasize that transformation is both gift and response.

Theologically, Smedes (1996) places responsible, remorseful, repentant change toward the victim and God as prerequisites for forgiving oneself. The psychological literature also places an emphasis on responsibility taking in offenders as an essential step before any self-forgiving action can be considered (e.g., Enright, 1996). Beyond a privatized, emotion-focused response to oneself by oneself and for oneself, studies are emphasizing the importance of both responsibility and reparative behaviors toward the victim as important precursors to self-forgiveness (Fisher & Exline, 2006; 2010; Holmgren, 2002). In an experimental paradigm, Exline et al. (2010) found that first focusing on personal responsibility and relational repair facilitated self-forgiveness. For those who first focused on self-forgiveness, however, relational repair was less likely. These findings suggest that if people can easily find relief from guilty feelings, they might not take the potentially difficult steps required for repentance.

Relational repair behaviors often include conciliatory efforts such as apology and restitution, concepts that resonate with repentance and forgiveness-seeking, even where full reconciliation does not occur. Perpetrators who apologized were more likely to reduce their feelings of guilt (e.g., Meek, Albright, & McMinn, 1995), and they were more likely to regret non-apology than apology (Exline, DeShea, & Holeman, 2007). Exline et al.'s (2007) review of the literature shows that apologies tend to evoke victim forgiveness, provided the apologies are full and sincere. When perpetrators acknowledge the transgression and the harm it caused, they socially validate victim perceptions, facilitating forgiveness responses (Eaton, Struthers, & Santelli, 2006). Similarly, restorative justice scenarios were more likely than retributive scenarios to promote victims' forgiving responses (Witvliet et al., 2008). Honest, sincere, and full apologies

imply that the perpetrator understands the nature and the extent of the harm done, acknowledges responsibility for wrongdoing, expresses sincere sorrow and regret, and promises not to commit the transgression again (Augsburger, 1996), giving evidence of sincerity in restitution behaviors (see Witvliet et al., 2008).

The empirical literature on forgiveness-seeking in perpetrators is growing in integrative journals (e.g., Bassett et al., 2006; Riek, 2010; Sandage, Worthington, Hight, & Berry, 2000; Toussaint & Williamson, 2008; Witvliet, Ludwig, & Bauer, 2002). We echo Sandage et al.'s (2000) emphasis in their definition of forgiveness-seeking, which places the burden on perpetrators to accept personal moral responsibility for their culpable behavior while investing in efforts to repair the relational damage done. Hence, we situate forgiveness-seeking within the broader category of repentance.

In an experimental paradigm, Witvliet et al. (2002) linked confession and apology to forgiveness-seeking. Imagery of these repentant responses—versus reliving the transgression—was associated with less negative and aroused emotion, less sadness, guilt, and shame, but significantly more effort. Imagery of confessing, apologizing, and seeking forgiveness was also associated with perceptions of significantly more victim forgiveness and self-forgiveness, but significantly less divine forgiveness than imagery of reliving the transgression. In correlational research, transgressors were more likely to report forgiveness-seeking intentions if they were close to the victims, or if they experienced guilt which increased when offenders frequently thought about their offense, felt responsible, and perceived their transgression as severe (Riek, 2010). Forgiveness-seeking was also positively correlated with more mature developmental reasoning about forgiveness (but inversely related to narcissism and to self-monitoring; Sandage et al., 2000).

In the present experiment, the repentance writing condition draws on elements in psychological theory and research as well as Christian theology and practices. It seeks to engage the changes involved in repentance, including honest engagement with one's transgression, turning away from the attitudes and actions of the transgression through writing about constructive sorrow, apology, restitution, and cultivating new behaviors that will resist future transgressions.

### **Offense-Focused Rumination**

Rumination about one's responsibility for committing a hurtful transgression can go beyond honest engagement with it and become a process of negative wallowing. By dwelling on the wrongdoing, its implications, and oneself as wrongdoer, offense rumination can become what Narramore (1984) describes as psychological guilt that punishes, rejects, and devalues the self. Such an approach is like the worldly grief that in 2 Corinthians 7:10 produces death. Wallowing could isolate and work against differentiation, as the self is viewed as the solely responsible party for all negative aspects that were there, exist now, and are to come. Wallowing emphasizes the internal, stable, and global factors that form a helpless, hopeless explanatory style, associated with depressive qualities (Abrahmson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978).

Offense rumination may be associated with some behavioral regret, but is characterized even more by self-condemnation in misguided efforts to self-atone (Narramore, 1984). Tangney and Dearing (2002) suggest a distinction between behaviorally-focused guilt versus self-focused shame. In parallel fashion, Exline and Fisher (2006) showed that remorse (a parallel to behaviorally-focused guilt) was associated with reparative behavior and an ability to learn from one's mistakes. In contrast, self-condemnation (a parallel to self-focused shame) was linked with indicators of poor mental health (Exline & Fisher, 2006) and may impede self-forgiveness (Fisher & Exline, 2006; 2010).

In this experiment, we aimed to induce offense-focused rumination by adapting instructions for a negatively focused writing condition in a study of the victim perspective by McCullough, Root, and Cohen (2006). These writing instructions echoed the negative focus of victim rumination that was associated with a broad array of negative and intense emotion ratings, narratives, and physiological responses (Witvliet, Knoll, Hinman, & DeYoung, 2010). The instructions also placed a more negative frame on reliving the past transgression than the manipulation used in the research on offenders (Witvliet et al., 2002). The current study prompted participants to consider the negative impact on the victim, one's negative feelings about the event, and the ways one's life is still negatively affected. Whereas reliving the transgression was associated with higher perceived divine forgiveness than seeking forgiveness from the victim (Witvliet et al., 2002), we predicted that the negative rumination induction in this study would not induce perceptions of divine



forgiveness associated with honest confession, but rather would prompt strong enough negative emotion that people would experience greater self-condemnation and distance from God's forgiveness.

### **Self-Justification**

Awareness of our own culpability can make us shift our attention to the mitigating circumstances and external causes that minimize our responsibility (Augsburger, 1996; Baumeister, Stillwell, & Wotman, 1990). When participants provided two narratives—one from the victim perspective and one from the perpetrator perspective—offender narratives were more than twice as likely as victim narratives (44% vs. 20%) to emphasize external circumstances in portrayals of offense behaviors (Zechmeister & Romero, 2002). Further, perpetrators who reported forgiving themselves were more likely to justify their actions and attribute blame to the victims (Zechmeister & Romero, 2002), suggesting they were self-condoning (Fisher & Exline, 2006). Augsburger (1996) described the activation of inner defenses in justifications that provide the least incriminating and most plausible account to defend our pride. This is similar to Narramore's (1984) description of guilt disguised in rationalization, hiding, projection, and displacement. Jones and Musekura (2010) also addressed the temptation to place blame on others rather than oneself. Fisher and Exline (2006) found that when college students did not own responsibility for their offenses (i.e., self-condoned), they experienced low remorse that was associated with egotism, and they reported lower levels of humbling change and less effort at relational repair. Bassett et al. (2006) found that perpetrator forgiveness-seeking was inversely related to justifying one's own actions.

The self-justification writing condition both externalized responsibility for the instance and minimized the severity of it. This condition clearly differed from offense rumination and from repentance, both of which emphasized one's own responsibility for the offense. Whereas offense rumination exaggerated the negative significance of the event, repentance sought to honestly see the legitimate significance of it, and self-justification minimized the event as insignificant. Both externalizing and minimizing were predicted to decrease the negative emotions associated with the event and open up the possibility of positive emotion through routes quite different from repentance.

### **Distraction**

The control writing condition in this experiment was designed to mimic the distractions of daily life that can become our focus rather than our own transgressions. Plantinga (1995) has described compartmentalization as one way people avoid engagement with their own transgressions. Similarly, Jones and Musekura (2010) address the human tendency to ignore our own transgressions. We adapted the control condition writing instructions of McCullough et al. (2006), which focus on logistical plans for tomorrow, a task not associated with emotional effects. To connect with real-world processes, participants used left over time to write about the material covered in their classes. We tested the use of emotional and cost-related language in the control writing condition, predicting that it would be lower than for the three transgression-focused conditions. If so, we attributed changes from the pre-writing to post-writing measures in the control condition as consequences of reflecting a second time on questions about one's transgression.

### **The current study**

This between subjects experiment randomly assigned Christian undergraduates to four writing conditions about a transgression in which they believe they are responsible for having hurt another person: repentance, negative rumination about the offense, self-justification, or distraction (control). We studied implications for their behavioral remorse, self-condemnation, subjective emotion, their conciliatory motivations toward the victim (apology, restitution, seeking forgiveness) and God (apology, seeking forgiveness), their perceptions of victim forgiveness and God's forgiveness, and their self-forgiveness.

Participants' written responses in each condition were analyzed for the use of emotional and cost-related words (i.e., language reflecting a physical or psychological burden, sacrifice, or price incurred as a result of the experience as found by McCullough et al., 2006). We hypothesized that negative rumination would prompt the most cost language and negative emotion word use, whereas the control condition would yield the least cost-related and negative emotion language. Because repentance involved constructive sorrow, we predicted moderately high use of cost and negative emotion language—both higher than for self-justification.

Our primary aims were to test the pre-post changes based on writing condition. We hypothesized that because repentance writing involved elements of constructive sorrow over the past transgression, participants

would report reduced remorse and self-condemnation afterward, whereas negative rumination would increase remorse and self-condemnation. We predicted that participants would view their transgressions as less negative after the self-justification writing, but more negative after rumination.

Our hypotheses about perceptions of humility, victim forgiveness, and God's forgiveness were that negative rumination would reduce forgiveness perceptions across all measures, whereas humility would increase. We predicted greater humbling change after repentance. If repentance findings paralleled the forgiveness-seeking results of Witvliet et al. (2002), participants would show increased perceptions of being forgiven by the victim and themselves, but not by God. We viewed self-justification as unlikely to induce humble change, although we predicted it would significantly increase self-forgiveness. The control condition was considered unlikely to have an effect on measures, although examining one's culpability a second time would yield pre-post changes.

Our hypotheses about conciliation were that participants would be less motivated to apologize and ask for God's forgiveness, and to apologize, make restitution, and seek forgiveness from the victim after self-condemning rumination. Repentance participants included an apology and restitution in their writing, not requiring additional motivation to do so afterward. We predicted that self-justification would not prompt conciliatory responses (e.g., apology, restitution, forgiveness-seeking).

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Participants included 168 Introduction to Psychology students (67 men, 101 women) at a midwestern Christian liberal arts college who chose to be in the study as one way to meet a research requirement, and who self-identified a transgression committed by oneself against another person. All participants were randomly assigned (blocked by gender) to one of four experimental conditions. Each participant had a private room to complete an initial set of questionnaires, a 20 minute writing task in which participants typed on a private computer, and then a final set of questionnaires, with all data linked only to a number. Analyses revealed that 90% of the participants ( $N=151$ ) responded to an open-ended question about their religious identity by self-identifying in their own hand-writing as Christians (either as "Christian" or a denominational

term), with no other group large enough for meaningful analyses. Of these self-identified Christians, 93% ( $N=140$ ) produced typed narratives that were consistent with the experimental instructions for the condition to which they were randomly assigned. One hundred percent agreement about writing compliance with instructions was achieved by two independent raters who thoroughly read each narrative for evidence that writing instructions for the assigned condition were followed (e.g., that participants assigned to the self-justification condition referenced factors beyond their control that influenced the transgression), while at the same time confirming that participants' narratives were not suitable for an unassigned condition (e.g., that participants assigned to the self-justification condition did *not* focus on taking responsibility for their actions). This resulted in a final sample of 140 participants (55 men, 85 women) who self-identified as Christians and who wrote narratives congruent with their randomly assigned experimental condition, and incongruent with the alternative conditions. Each condition contained 23% (Control), 25% (Repentance, Self-Justification), or 27% (Offense Rumination) of the sample.<sup>1</sup> Participants' average age was 18.8 ( $SD = 1.01$ ) years.

### **Design**

This experiment used a mixed 2 Repeated Measures (Pre-Post Questionnaires) X 4 Group (Control, Offense Rumination, Repentance, Self-Justification Writing Task) design. We analyzed the written content across all conditions using one-way analyses of variance and planned pairwise comparisons

### **Procedure**

Participants arrived at the laboratory, completed informed consent, were given an overview of the study and were randomly assigned to an individual research room. Rooms were rotated so that each room had an equally likely chance of being paired with a particular experimental condition. In the room, participants privately completed a pre-intervention questionnaire identified by a number. On the questionnaire, participants identified an incident in which they had personally offended or hurt a particular person, and answered questions about it. Upon completion of the questionnaire, the participant placed the questionnaire through a slot into a closed box, so that it could not be viewed again by the participant and would not be seen by the experimenters (who were also rotated so as not to be paired with a given condition).

Subsequently, the participant completed a randomly assigned 20-minute writing task by typing responses into a computer file identified only by number in the same private room. Finally, the participant completed post-intervention questionnaires and placed these through a slot in a box.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four experimental writing conditions. These included: a *control* condition in which participants were distracted from thinking about their transgression by writing about non-emotional details of their college schedules; an *offense rumination* condition in which participants wallowed in their wrongdoing and its implications; a *repentance* condition in which participants expressed remorse, apology, restitution, and wrote about ways to change their future behaviors in positive ways; and a *self-justification* condition in which participants externalized blame and minimized personal responsibility for the incident. The instructions for each condition are in the Appendix.

### Measures

The initial questionnaire first gathered demographic information about age, gender, ethnicity, and a blank in which to write one's religious identity. Subsequently, the participant identified one well-remembered, significant instance in which he or she hurt, offended, wronged, or mistreated someone. The participant answered questions about the nature of the offense and his/her responses to it, and this set of questionnaires was administered again after the writing task. We first describe the word content in the writing produced in the four conditions.

**Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC: Pennebaker, Booth, & Francis, 2007).** We used LIWC software to count the number of words produced by each participant in each of the four experimental writing conditions. We used the standard LIWC English dictionary categories for affect words and a cost dictionary developed by McCullough et al. (2006) that included words and wordstems produced by their participants who referred to problems and negative emotions (e.g., pain\*, sick\*, problem\*, regret\*, worthless, dejection).

**Responsibility Scale (Fisher & Exline, 2006).** This and all subsequent measures were assessed before and after the writing task. The scale asked respondents to "Please state the degree to which you agree or disagree with each statement: *I feel I was responsible for what happened, I wasn't really to blame for this,*

*I was in the wrong in the situation, this was clearly my fault, I didn't really do anything wrong,*" with responses for each of the 5 items on a scale from 0 (*completely disagree*) to 10 (*completely agree*). Items 2 and 5 were reverse scored. The items have shown good internal consistency ( $\alpha = .83$ ; Fisher & Exline, 2006).

**Remorse and Self-Condensation Scale (Fisher & Exline, 2006).** We used this scale to assess how the participant feels in relation to the incident *now*. The remorse (behavioral regret) items were *remorse, regret about what I did, sad about what I did, disgusted with what I did, and sorrow about what I did* (score range 0-50). The self-condensation items were *like a bad person, like I deserve(d) to suffer for this, angry at myself, hateful toward myself* (score range 0-40). Alphas have ranged from .91 to .93 for remorse and from .88 to .91 for self-condensation (Exline et al., 2010; Fisher & Exline, 2006).

**Humbling change items (Fisher & Exline, 2006).** We used the three items Fisher and Exline (2006) found to indicate humbling change: *I have become more aware of my ability to hurt others, the bad and good aspects of me feel more integrated into who I am, and I am less judgmental of other's mistakes*. Each item was rated from 0 (*No, this isn't true of me at all*) to 10 (*Yes, this is very true of me*). An alpha of .60 has been reported for this measure (Fisher & Exline, 2006). Although somewhat low, the reliability of this measure is similar to those of other measures used to assess humility and egotism.

**Conciliatory Behavior Measure (Hall & Fincham, 2008).** Our instructions asked, "*To what extent do you want to do each of the following?*" Items were rated from 1 (*Not at all*) through 5 (*Extensively*), with 3 rated as *Somewhat*. Victim conciliation items were: *apologize to the other person for my behavior, ask the other person to forgive me, and do something to make amends for my behavior*. Conciliation with God items included: *apologize to God for my behavior and ask God to forgive me*. We did not refer to "Higher Power" as in the original scale because the term is less apt for the participants in this study.

**Forgiveness by God and the Victim (Witvliet et al., 2002).** Participants rated how much they felt that God has forgiven them, and how much they felt the person has forgiven them. Ratings were on a scale from 1 (*Not at all*) to 7 (*Completely*).

**State Self-Forgiveness Scale (Wohl, Deshea, & Wahkinney, 2008).** We obtained the scale from the authors and administered it using the same method and format. Two subscales were calculated: Self-

Forgiving Feelings and Actions subscale (SFFA; Items 1-8; score range of 8-48), and Self-Forgiving Beliefs subscale (SFB; Items 9-17, score range of 9-54), with item 18 (score range of 1-4) as a validity check.

Reverse scored items included items 2, 4, 7, 8, 11, 12, 13, 16, 17.

**Individual Emotion Ratings about the offense (adapted from Witvliet et al., 2010).** Items prompted participants to rate how *happy*, *joyful*, and *sad* they felt on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*completely*).

## Results

### Transgression Characteristics

Participants in this study reported transgressing against friends ( $N=72$ ), parents ( $N=26$ ), romantic partners ( $N=19$ ), siblings ( $N=11$ ), classmates ( $N=5$ ), teammates ( $N=3$ ), roommates ( $N=2$ ), and strangers ( $N=2$ ). Over 86% of participants knew their victims well (scoring 5-7 on a 0-7 scale).<sup>2</sup> Less than 4% of the transgressions occurred days prior to the study, 10% were within weeks of the study, 41% were within months of the study, and 45% were years prior to the study (range 1 day to over 12 years). Participant ratings of transgression severity did not differ across groups, averaging 3.74 ( $SD=1.54$ ) on a scale from 0 *not at all severe* to 7 *extremely severe*,  $F(1, 3) = 0.62$ ,  $p = .60$ , *partial*  $\eta^2 = .01$ .

### Analyses of writing condition texts by condition.

We first used Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC; Pennebaker et al., 2007) software to analyze emotion and cost dictionary word counts (McCullough et al., 2006; Witvliet et al., 2010) using one-way analyses of variance and planned pairwise comparisons. Results showed that writing condition groups differed overall for each type of word use. Consistent with McCullough et al.'s (2006) findings, the distraction writing task of the control condition was non-emotional, stimulating the lowest levels of positive and negative emotion words; it also had the lowest cost-related word counts.

As shown in Table 1, negative emotion words were lowest for the control condition, next lowest for the self-justification condition, and highest for offense rumination; repentance levels were equal to self-justification and marginally lower than rumination. Similarly, sadness words were lowest for the control, next lowest for self-justification and repentance, and highest for offense rumination. However, anger word use was lower for the control condition than all other experimental conditions that addressed the offense. The

use of cost language was significantly lower for the control condition than self-justification, which was lower than both repentance and offense rumination levels.

### **Analyses of Pre-Post Measures by Condition.**

Analyses of variance were then conducted for questionnaire scores before and after the writing interventions, using 2 Repeated Measures (Pre, Post) x 4 between groups Writing Conditions (Control, Offense Rumination, Repentance, Self-Justification). Before addressing the interactions, we identify variables that were unaffected by condition. As shown in Table 2, perceived responsibility for causing the offense using Fisher and Exline's (2006) measure was high across groups and stable over time. A repeated measures main effect of pre-post change showed that as this sample of self-identified Christians reflected on their offense a second time, they had greater humble change, self-forgiveness, and happiness, with less sadness.<sup>3</sup>

Writing condition interacted with repeated measurement of pre-post scores for remorse, self-condemnation, conciliatory motivations toward God, and perceptions of God's forgiveness. To follow-up these significant interactions, we report the results of planned pairwise comparisons of pre-post change scores for the four conditions.

First, remorse showed an interaction of Repeated Measures X Condition; rumination's increase in remorse was significantly greater than repentance's decrease ( $p = .01$ ), and self-justification's decrease ( $p < .001$ ). Additionally, self-justification decreased remorse to a significantly greater degree than did the control condition ( $p < .04$ ).<sup>4</sup>

Second, self-condemnation reflected a significant interaction of Repeated Measures X Condition; pre-post delta comparisons show that offense rumination's increase in self-condemnation was significantly different from repentance's decrease in self-condemnation ( $p < .006$ ) and from the decrease for self-justification ( $p = .05$ ).

Third, conciliatory responses toward God reflected an interaction of Repeated Measures x Condition; the increase in conciliation motivations toward God associated with the control and self-justification conditions differed significantly from the offense rumination condition's decreased motivation to apologize



and seek God's forgiveness (rumination vs. control  $p = .02$ ; rumination vs. self-justification  $p < .01$ ). In terms of conciliatory behavior toward the victim, we conducted a pairwise comparison of rumination and repentance; rumination showed the only decrease in the motivation to apologize, seek forgiveness, and conciliation toward the victim, and this differed from repentance's increased conciliation as a statistical trend ( $p = .06$ ).

Fourth, perceived forgiveness by God showed a significant interaction of Repeated Measures x Condition; self-justification's increased perceptions of Divine forgiveness differed significantly from the decreases associated with the control ( $p = .03$ ), repentance ( $p = .054$ ), and rumination ( $p = .001$ ) conditions. Finally, perceived forgiveness from the victim showed no main effect of repeated measurement and no interaction with condition. However, pairwise comparisons of the change scores across conditions showed a difference between the increase in perceived victim forgiveness associated with repentance versus the decrease associated with rumination ( $p = .03$ ).

### Discussion

This study examines the implications of how we respond to our own interpersonal transgressions through offense rumination, self-justification, distraction, and—ideally—through repentance. We examine findings in light of the psychological and theological literatures, with attention to the emerging area of self-forgiveness (e.g., Enright, 1996; Exline et al., 2010; Hall & Fincham, 2005; 2008; Smedes, 1996).

#### **Offense rumination, Repentance, Self-Justification, and Distraction: Word Use in Writing**

Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count analyses showed significant differences between writing conditions consistent with hypotheses. Offense rumination produced the most negative emotion, sad, and anxious word use, as expected. Both rumination and repentance had the highest cost references that were equal to each other and higher than self-justification. This fits with the focus that offense rumination and repentance both had on personal responsibility for the offense and its implications, whereas self-justification shifted blame and downplayed costs of the offense. Despite their different foci, repentance and self-justification prompted equivalent and moderate use of negative emotion, sad, and anxious words. All three of the transgression-focused conditions used more cost words and emotional words than the control condition,

supporting the use of distraction as a control condition. This also suggests that daily distractions may be immediately easier and less emotional alternatives to facing our transgressions (cf. Jones & Musekura, 2010; Plantinga, 1995).

### **Writing Condition Effects**

**Regret and self-condemnation.** Offense rumination had the most adverse effects. Negative rumination increased feelings of remorse (behavioral regret) in comparison to repentance and self-justification. Negative rumination also increased self-condemnation, whereas repentance reduced self-condemnation—creating a significant difference in these change scores. These findings underscore the power of negative offense rumination to generate not only psychological guilt/remorse about the transgression, but to exaggerate self-condemning responses. Christian notions of confession are not negative ruminations that exaggerate and wallow. Rather, Christian confession needs to humbly and appropriately name the transgression and its effects, linking this to godly sorrow that turns from sin and cultivates new behaviors instead (see Narramore, 1984; Smedes, 1996; Wright, 2006).

**Conciliatory motivations toward the victim and God.** Because of our interest in conciliatory motivations to apologize, make restitution, and seek forgiveness from the victim, we conducted post-hoc comparisons, which showed a trend for pre-post change scores to differ by condition: repentance increased conciliatory motives toward the victim, which is contrasted with no increase for offense rumination. Thus, the godly sorrow of repentance was associated with motivation to engage in relational repair, whereas offense rumination produced a self-condemnation that resisted changes in motives for interpersonal repair. This is consistent with evidence that increased self-punishment was associated with lower forgiveness-seeking (Chiaromello, Sastre, & Mullet, 2008).

Offense rumination also decreased conciliatory motivations toward God, whereas the control condition and self-justification showed equivalent increases. The default response in these self-identified Christians (i.e., in the distraction condition) was to feel more inclined to apologize to God and seek God's forgiveness when confronted a second time with the fact of their transgression. Repentance participants may not have been so inclined because they had just engaged these conciliatory behaviors in the writing itself.

Just as offense rumination reduced relational repair with victims, it had a dampening effect on apologizing and seeking forgiveness from God—an important insight for those considering devotional and worship practices for confession and repentance. If such acts are misappropriated to exaggerate and wallow in negative rumination, worshippers may immediately feel less inclined to respond with constructive sorrow for sin and conciliatory responses toward God (*i.e.*, apology and forgiveness-seeking).

**Feeling forgiven by the victim and God.** Perceptions of the victim's forgiveness were unaffected by condition overall, but pairwise comparisons showed that the pre-post decrease for rumination differed from the pre-post increase for repentance. This echoes prior research in which offenders felt more forgiven by victims after forgiveness-seeking imagery than after reliving their transgression (Witvliet et al., 2002).

Perceptions of God's forgiveness differed significantly based on writing condition. Self-justification led to the perception of an increase in God's forgiveness, unlike the control, offense rumination, and repentance conditions. If these participants were just as likely as controls to increase in conciliatory motivations toward God, why did only the self-justifiers feel significantly more forgiven by God? This finding raises concerns because the self-justification condition is the one in which participants externalized blame and minimized the significance of the harm done. By reducing their own culpability, did participants project this view as if it were God's? Did they misperceive excusing themselves as divine pardon? Further insight into these questions is important for Christians, given that we can only measure the degree to which people perceive or feel God's forgiveness, not the degree to which God has forgiven the person. It is important that Christians experience the assurance of God's pardon after they confess their transgressions. Lawler-Row (2010) found that feeling forgiven by God fully mediated the relationship between religious variables (attendance, prayer frequency, belief in a watchful God) and measures of successful aging.

### **Implications of Offense Rumination, Repentance, and Self-Justification**

This experiment provides a useful perspective on the psychological and spiritual implications that self-identified Christian college students face when responding to their own transgressions. Offense-focused rumination alone may lead people to wallow in the negative only, therefore missing behavioral and affective transformation and hope that lie at the heart of these young adults' religious faith. Self-justifications that

externalize blame and minimize responsibility may provide psychological relief from self-condemnation and remorse, even leading offenders to perceive an increase in God's forgiveness. Theologically, however, the self-justification condition instructions did not include any relational repair or godly sorrow (cf. Narramore, 1984). Participants' writing did not show cost language, and the condition failed to increase motivations to apologize, make restitution, or seek forgiveness from their victims. To the extent that interpersonal offenses call for justice, the self-justification task did not embody or yield reparative responses.

In between the myopic vision of self-justification that evades responsibility and the myopic vision of offense rumination that wallows only in the negative, repentance seeks to honestly see and name one's culpability, apologize, make amends, and cultivate new behaviors that create positive relational possibilities for the future. This repentant mode includes both addressing the negative and cultivating positive change in a move of transformation. We see the psychological outcome of this action in participants' subsequent decrease in self-condemnation and regret, and in the trend to want to engage in conciliatory responses toward one's victim.

### **Implications for Seeking Forgiveness and Self-Forgiveness**

Seeking forgiveness from victims has begun to garner empirical attention, particularly in integrative research (Bassett et al., 2006; Sandage et al., 2000; Riek, 2010; Toussaint & Williams, 2008; Witvliet et al., 2002). Seeking forgiveness without the prelude of repentance may add salt to the wound. Victims who are already burdened by the offense may perceive a request for forgiveness in the absence of apology and restitution to place an additional burden on them. Similarly, aligning the perpetrator's goals in repenting with the victim's goals is most likely to facilitate interpersonal forgiveness (Santelli, Struthers, & Eaton, 2009). Authentic repentance plays a foundational role in forgiveness-seeking, just as it does in self-forgiveness.

Self-forgiveness, Smedes (1996) said, requires reflection on who is forgiving whom, what right one has to do so, for what offenses, and what is involved in the process. Smedes (1996) posited that within the self, one part may be the actor and the other acted upon. To the extent that one part of the self experiences rejection and resentment from another, self-forgiveness may heal that split. However, while only victims are in a position to forgive, in self-forgiveness the culprit forgives. So, who gives the right to forgive oneself and

validates the process? Smedes argued that only the person wronged and God—who experiences sorrow on our behalf—can forgive. Similarly, Volf (2006) considered offenses within the triad of self, other, and God. Everything is done before the face of God.

In Smedes' (1996) view, only the contrite have any right to consider forgiving themselves. And, when they do, self-forgiveness is a response to discrete offenses that deserve blame, something quite different than merely accepting our personal qualities. Ideally, self-forgiveness does not occur in isolation, but in concert with repentance toward and forgiveness from others and God. In light of this, we have placed emphasis on repentance, examining measures related to the other humans and God affected by one's wrongdoing. Repentance engages humbling elements, such as confession, apology, and restitution, which may also restore status to victims (Exline, Worthington, Hill, & McCullough, 2003), especially if the process is appropriately made known to them. According to Exline et al. (2003), if self-forgiveness involves offender self-justification and curtails repentance, self-forgiveness may perpetuate injustice. By contrast, if self-forgiveness involves a deliberate process that humbly and fully acknowledges wrongdoing to offended parties, then forgiving the self could be part of a positive transformation. In the current study's participants, reflecting on one's personal transgression a second time increased humble awareness of one's own capacity to harm others, conciliatory relational motives toward the victim, self-forgiveness, happiness and reduced sadness. Whether these shifts reflect appropriate perspective-taking from examining one's transgression or self-serving bias is unclear.

The forgiveness literature has primarily studied processes within individuals. Jones and Musekura (2010) critique forgiveness as an individualistic response that is concerned especially with emotional change for the sake of the self. Yet, transgressions occur in relational contexts, with implications not only for individuals, but for the persons involved, their communities (Augsburger, 1996), and future generations (Hargrave, 2001). We are concerned about approaches to self-forgiveness that are largely individual, private processes wherein the offender relinquishes self-blame and guilt while cultivating benevolent and compassionate responses toward the self in the absence of appropriate apology, restitution, and behavior transformation toward the victim(s), community, and God. Enright (1996) considered the objective wrong

and one's abandonment of self-resentment while fostering self-compassion in the context of considering oneself as a member of the human community. Smedes (1996) pushed this further by stating that self-forgiveness is best pursued only after one has engaged in repentance toward the victim and God.

Without reparative and repentant elements, self-condoning may masquerade as self-forgiveness (Fisher & Exline, 2006). Offenders may risk reducing behavioral regret (guilt) and self-condemnation through processes akin to denial, excusing, minimizing, or tolerating the transgression (Fisher & Exline, 2006; 2010). Such short-cuts lack responsibility and have been called *pseudo-self-forgiveness* (Hall & Fincham, 2005). Just as the field of interpersonal forgiveness has faced challenges in distinguishing forgiveness from pseudo-forgiveness and as more than merely low unforgiveness, the self-forgiveness literature faces these challenges. It is valuable to consider distinguishing self-forgiveness from self-condoning, low self-condemnation, acceptance, excusing oneself, or minimizing the extent and impact of one's wrongdoing. We urge researchers in scale development to consider these theoretical issues.

### **Limitations, Future Directions, and Conclusions**

Although we thoroughly assessed each written narrative in this study for instruction compliance and found theoretically supported differences between these conditions, substantive change beyond the laboratory may require more sustained and repetitive practice. Future work may use an incremental, repeated measures approach with follow-up questions as manipulation checks or an intervention study approach allowing more opportunity to engage participants and clarify instructions. Although we were able to assess transgressors' relational motivations, we were not able to bring real-world victims into the laboratory alongside their offenders to study relational outcomes. We hope the current work provides a foundation for dyadic research in understanding the lived relational outcomes of repentance, offense rumination, self-justification, and distraction.

Additionally, we studied Christian undergraduates. Future research may fruitfully examine repentance and faith formation in younger and in older samples (see Ingersoll-Dayton & Krause, 2005; Lawler-Row, 2010). In the context of interpersonal transgressions, offenders are aware of how important it is for victims to genuinely forgive, and victims are aware of how important it is for offenders to genuinely

repent (cf. Baumeister et al., 1990; Zechmeister & Romero, 2002). The challenge is for each player to see his or her roles accurately and with humility so that genuine positive personal and interpersonal transformation can occur. Recent work by Bassett et al. (2011) presents a typology of offender remorse that identifies constructive aspects of guilt, sorrow, and brokenness for forgiveness-seeking from God and the victim as well as self-forgiveness, in contrast to the impairing function of shame. Future research may integrate these concepts with questions of human and divine agency in the process of repentance.

We propose that parallel issues are operative for interpersonal forgiveness and for repentance, both of which are themes that are central in the Hebrew Bible, New Testament, Christian theology, and faith practices. Granting forgiveness to another begins with understanding the transgression and its impact (blaming fairly, not exaggerating or minimizing), and then experiencing transformation of one's responses, decreasing negative responses (bitterness, anger, revenge, avoidance) through cultivating positive, prosocial responses toward the offender (empathy, compassion, benevolence; see Witvliet & McCullough, 2007). Similarly, repentance begins with understanding the transgression and its implications (blaming oneself for one's responsibility, not exaggerating or minimizing), and then transforming one's responses through expressions of remorse, apology, restitution, contrition (facing and turning away from the wrong, actively rooting it out), and cultivating positive prosocial responses (facing the future with a new set of behaviors). Psychological investigations (Chiaramello et al., 2008) are beginning to show parallel psychological processes in seeking and granting forgiveness.

Integrative theory, research, and practices are needed to aid Christians in appropriate perspective-taking about their transgressions. Taking appropriate account of one's own responsibility involves understanding personal and situational factors involved, as well as the nature and the extent of the damage done. Theorizing (Augsburger, 1996) and empirical research (Ingersoll-Dayton & Krause, 2005; Sandage et al., 2010) underscores the importance of maturity and self-differentiation in responding appropriately to interpersonal transgressions. For individuals with sufficient spiritual formation, the process of self-differentiation could be aided by an approach that examines situational factors in addition to one's culpability. Indeed, it may be that participants formed to take on an overdose of personal responsibility for

wrongdoing may benefit by offsetting this with a realistic assessment of the contextual factors that contributed to the transgression setting and transactions. This may set the foundation for repentance. Repentance comes to terms honestly with our transgression, its relational context, and impact, and then cultivates changes that can contribute to relational flourishing with others and God.

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Table 1

Writing Condition LIWC Word Count Means (*SDs*) and One-Way Analysis of Variance Weighted Linear *F* (*df*)

Word Category	Control	Negative Rumination	Repentance	Self-Justification	<i>F</i> ( <i>I</i> , 3)
Cost	0.34 <sup>a</sup> (0.27)	2.51 <sup>c</sup> (1.19)	2.21 <sup>c</sup> (1.06)	1.63 <sup>b</sup> (0.83)	33.92***
Positive Emotion	1.84 <sup>a</sup> (0.96)	3.62 <sup>b</sup> (1.36)	4.23 <sup>b</sup> (2.06)	4.23 <sup>b</sup> (1.68)	46.99***
Negative Emotion	0.40 <sup>a</sup> (0.32)	3.91 <sup>d</sup> (1.48)	3.15 <sup>c</sup> (1.53)	2.74 <sup>b</sup> (1.18)	55.60***
Sadness	0.11 <sup>a</sup> (0.18)	1.29 <sup>c</sup> (0.77)	0.88 <sup>b</sup> (0.68)	0.58 <sup>b</sup> (0.48)	7.74**
Anger	0.11 <sup>a</sup> (0.15)	0.75 <sup>b</sup> (0.77)	0.75 <sup>b</sup> (0.87)	0.92 <sup>b</sup> (0.73)	24.37***

Note. For each variable, superscripts that vary are significantly different  $p < .05$ .

Table 2

Pre-Post Writing Condition Score Means (*SDs*) by Condition, Time *F*, *partial*  $\eta^2$ , *F* Time X Condition, *partial*  $\eta^2$ 

	Control		Negative Rumination		Repentance		Self-Justification		Time <i>F</i> (1, 136) <i>partial</i> $\eta^2$	<i>F</i> Time X Cond. (1, 136) <i>partial</i> $\eta^2$	Difference in pre-post change
	Pre- <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Post- <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Pre- <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Post- <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Pre- <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Post- <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Pre- <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Post- <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )			
Responsibility	39.16 (9.65)	38.29 (10.31)	37.43 (10.20)	36.78 (10.49)	38.38 (10.25)	38.04 (10.22)	37.97 (10.35)	37.94 (10.07)	1.40 .01	0.22 .01	--
Remorse	34.34 (14.01)	32.97 (14.63)	35.34 (13.59)	37.06 (14.31)	35.11 (13.98)	32.00 (14.63)	36.00 (12.79)	30.86 (13.43)	9.52** .07	4.93** .10	RUM > REP* RUM > SJ*** CTRL > SJ*
Self-Condensation	11.61 (8.85)	11.18 (7.04)	13.53 (8.78)	15.16 (11.04)	14.51 (8.33)	11.74 (8.19)	14.17 (9.23)	12.71 (9.56)	1.96 .01	2.83* .06	RUM > REP** RUM > SJ*
Victim Conciliation	10.95 (3.12)	11.24 (3.33)	11.41 (3.19)	11.34 (3.38)	11.94 (3.08)	12.63 (2.71)	10.46 (3.26)	10.80 (3.27)	5.23* .04	1.20 .03	REP > RUM <sup>+</sup>
God Conciliation	7.58	7.95	7.66	7.34	8.23	8.14	7.60	8.09	1.18	3.14*	CTL > RUM*

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	(2.47)	(2.35)	(2.86)	(3.04)	(2.46)	(2.45)	(2.51)	(2.29)	.01	.07	SJ > RUM**
Forgiveness by	5.53	5.50	5.59	5.38	5.23	5.37	5.26	5.18	0.67	1.63	REP > RUM*
Victim	(1.72)	(1.72)	(1.48)	(1.48)	(1.66)	(1.74)	(1.58)	(1.59)	.01	.04	
Forgiveness by God	6.55	6.50	6.42	6.19	6.34	6.31	5.97	6.21	0.14	3.76**	SJ > CTL*, SJ > REP*
	(0.92)	(0.95)	(0.92)	(1.33)	(1.06)	(1.11)	(1.38)	(1.17)	.00	.08	SJ > RUM ***
Self-Forgiving	30.34	34.21	28.75	31.16	28.34	33.86	29.49	32.86	69.82***	1.99	--
Feelings/Actions	(8.07)	(7.46)	(8.53)	(10.00)	(8.12)	(6.70)	(8.30)	(7.79)	.34	.04	
Self-Forgiving	40.13	43.32	38.41	38.09	39.97	42.60	40.20	41.69	10.91***	2.08	--
Beliefs	(10.22)	(7.71)	(10.64)	(11.25)	(6.66)	(7.01)	(7.89)	(8.59)	.07	.04	
Humbling Change	19.26	20.66	19.63	20.56	18.94	19.40	19.29	20.31	8.75**	0.37	--
	(7.02)	(5.92)	(6.63)	(6.95)	(6.42)	(6.35)	(5.74)	(6.01)	.06	.01	
Happy	3.82	4.21	3.28	3.59	3.20	3.74	3.15	3.79	16.93***	0.41	--
	(1.72)	1.70)	(1.75)	(1.66)	(1.59)	(1.58)	(1.79)	(1.41)	.11	.01	
Sad	3.45	2.97	3.91	3.97	4.20	3.80	3.56	3.26	4.21*	0.76	--
	(1.57)	(1.40)	(1.82)	(1.80)	(1.71)	(1.55)	(1.80)	(1.71)	.03	.02	

Note: \*p ≤ .05, \*\*p ≤ .01, \*\*\* p ≤ .001, + p ≤ .09. Single-item ratings of happiness, joy, and sadness were missing for one person, so *d.f.s* were (1, 135).

### Appendix: Experiment Condition Instructions

#### Control

For the next 20 minutes, we would like for you to write an essay about your plans for tomorrow. As you write really try to write freely and just describe the content of your plans and—if there is time—the content of your classes. The focus here is *not* on how you feel about your plans or classes. Rather the focus is on the content of your plans and classes. As you write, please try to address the following points:

- Write about your specific plans for tomorrow.
- Imagine yourself waking up tomorrow morning. From that moment on, what will you do, in order?
- What routes will you take to and from all of the places you will go?
- If, after having written about your plans for tomorrow, you still have time left before the 20 minutes are completed, then, please write about your classes.
- Beginning with your first class of the week, describe the material being covered—(*not* how you are doing in the class). If you still have time left, describe the material covered in your other classes.

#### Offense rumination

In the questionnaire you just completed, you gave us some information about an instance in which you hurt, offended, or wronged someone else. For the next twenty minutes, we would like for you to write an essay about your experience of that negative event. As you write, really try to write freely and express your ideas and feelings. Try not to hold anything back. Be honest and candid about this event, the negative feelings it created in you, and any negative effects on the other person and on you. As you write, please try to address the following points:

- What happened in the instance you identified on the questionnaire? What were the consequences?
- How did your actions negatively impact this other person?
- How did you feel about the event right after it happened? Especially consider the ways in which you felt ashamed, guilty, or upset after the event.
- How was your life negatively affected by what you did to this other person? In what ways is your life *still* negatively affected by the event?
- What sorts of negative emotions do you experience at this time in your life when you think about the hurtful event?

#### Repentance

In the questionnaire you just completed, you gave us some information about an instance in which you hurt, offended, or wronged someone else. For the next twenty minutes, we would like for you to write an essay about that event, focusing on ways you can acknowledge your role in the offense and develop positive responses to it. As you write, really try to write freely and express your feelings. Try not to hold anything back. Be honest and candid about this event, your humble regret, your desire to make things better, and your intentions to develop positive behaviors that will help cultivate good habits of interacting with others. As you write, please try to address the following points:

- What happened in the instance you identified on the questionnaire? What were its consequences?
- Write in a way that takes responsibility for your actions. What are you responsible for? To whom are you responsible?
- Give an honest expression of being sorry for your actions and how they affected the other person.
- In what ways have you or could you realistically make amends for your actions? If it is not possible to make things right for the past situation, then write about what you could do differently next time.
- Write about your commitment to not commit that transgression again and to develop positive habits or behaviors for interacting with others in the future.



## Self-Justification

In the questionnaire you just completed, you gave us some information about an instance in which you hurt, offended, or wronged someone else. For the next twenty minutes, we would like for you to write an essay about that event, focusing on external reasons that help explain why it happened. As you write, really try to write freely and express your ideas and feelings. Try not to hold anything back. Be honest and candid about this event as you write about factors that can account for why it happened. As you write, please try to address the following points:

- What happened in the instance you identified on the questionnaire?
- What circumstances influenced why you acted the way you did? What are other factors beyond your control that help account for the incident?
- What is it about the other person that might help explain why the event occurred?
- Are there ways in which you can see the event as relatively insignificant in your life?
- What are some reasons why you can feel okay about the incident at this time in your life when you think about that past behavior?

## Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge grant support to the first author from the Fetzer Institute. The work of the second author was supported in part by a grant to Hope College from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute through the Undergraduate Science Education Program. This work contributes to a project on The Pursuit of Happiness in Interdisciplinary Perspective directed by the Center for the Study of Law and Religion at Emory University and is supported by a grant from the John Templeton Foundation. The views expressed do not necessarily reflect the views of the Fetzer Institute, the Center for the Study of Law and Religion, or The John Templeton Foundation. We thank Lindsey Lawrence, Courtney St. Clair, Megan Sweet, and Ronna Warner Zeluff for their assistance with the study. We are grateful to Everett Worthington, Jr., Steven Sandage, Nathaniel Wade, Mark Rye, Jo-Ann Tsang, Wayne Ramsey, an anonymous reviewer, and Peter Hill for insights about repentance and self-forgiveness.

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<sup>1</sup> Post-hoc analyses examined effects of experimental conditions in a broader cross section of participants who did not self-identify as Christians, but nevertheless attended religious services, scored 15 or higher on the Religious Commitment Inventory-10 (Worthington et al., 2003), and whose narratives were congruent with their experimental condition. This set of analyses showed the same effects as with the self-identified Christians, except that offense rumination no longer significantly increased self-condemnation scores.

<sup>2</sup> Over 80% of the sample reported they had apologized, 79% were still in a relationship with the victim, and 76% reported having repaired the relationship when given a yes or no response option.

<sup>3</sup> Ratings of feeling joyful showed the same pre-post main effect as feeling happy,  $F(1, 136) = 13.15, p \leq .01, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .09$ . The single-item validity check for self-forgiveness showed the same effect as the two self-forgiveness scales,  $F(1, 136) = 8.45, p \leq .01, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .06$ .

<sup>4</sup> For this variable, the unequal  $N$  across groups was associated with unequal variances, and so we used a corrected model for the one-way ANOVA, resulting in an  $F(1, 3) = 4.93, p = .003, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .10$ , and an adjusted  $R^2 = .08$ .