



Does It Help?

Forgiving Community
Members
for Spiritual Harms
after High-Cost
Religious Exits

Yehudis Keller

(Case Western Reserve
University)

Julie J. Exline

(University of Virginia)

Presentation at the annual meeting of the
American Psychological Association,
Washington, DC. August 8, 2026



Funding

- John Templeton Foundation (grant #62948)
- Yotzim LeShinuy (Out for Change)
 - Ron David Award for Outstanding Graduate Student Research
- Sorenson Legacy Foundation

Project Team



Daryl Van Tongeren, PhD



Bridger Lisonbee, MS



Sam Hardy, PhD

Forgiveness



Release resentful, bitter feelings toward an offender

To assess, consider 3 dimensions:
(TRIM-18-R; McCullough & Hoyt, 2002)

- Reduced vengefulness
- Overall positive shift in emotions (benevolence)
- Could lead to reduced avoidance
 - But not necessarily
 - Can blur line with reconciliation (Worthington, 2006)
 - May require trust and some desire for contact

**Forgiveness
usually relates to
better mental
health.**

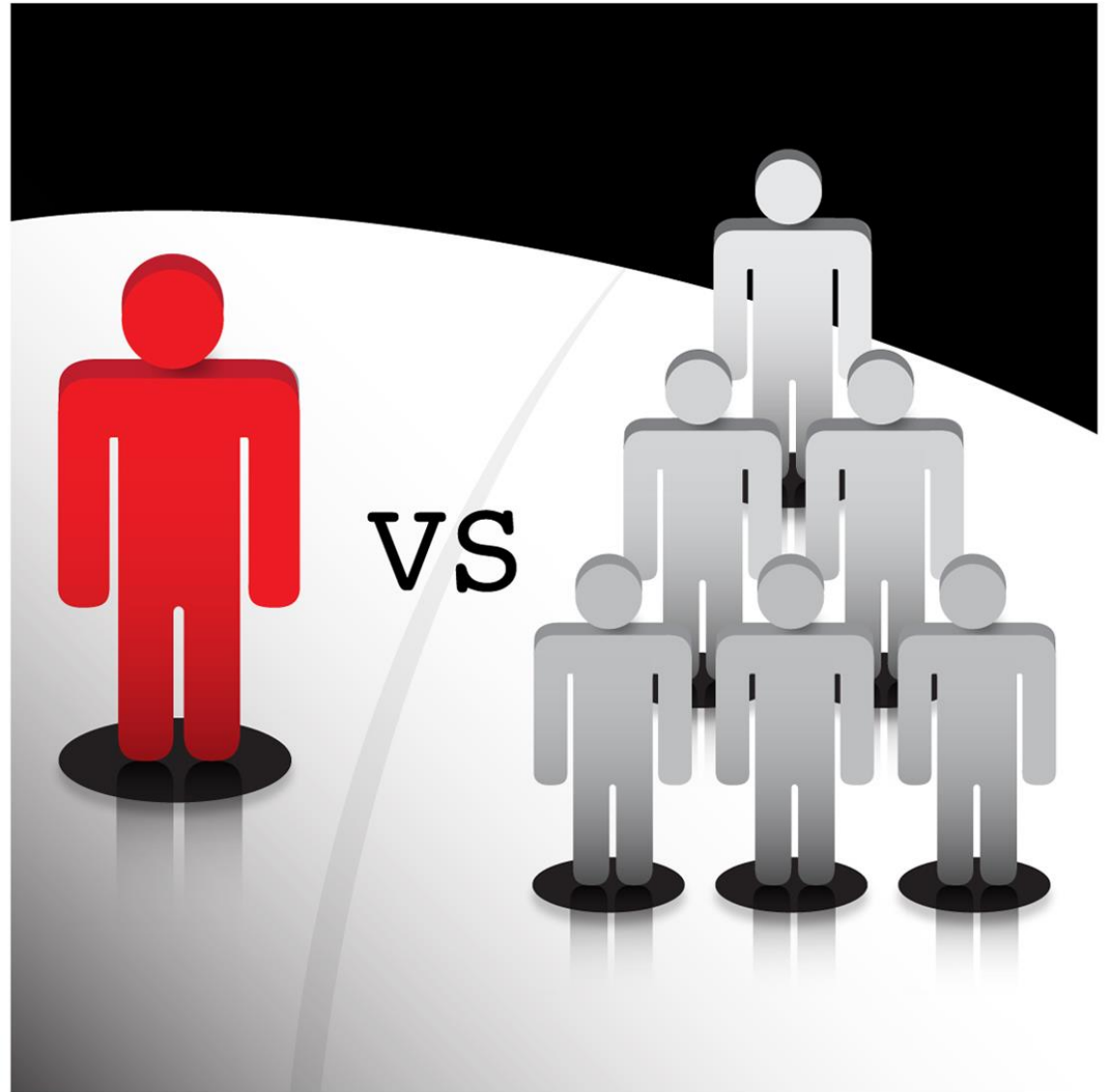


Group Forgiveness

Clinical work and research often focus on forgiving **one person**.

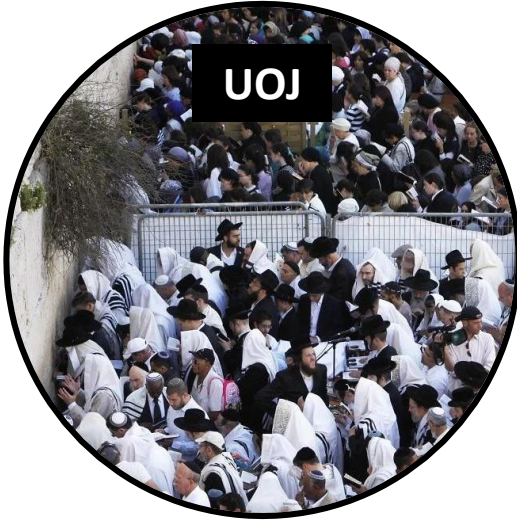
Trying to forgive a GROUP of people can be complicated...

- Different relationships (closeness and quality)
- Different offenses
- May get apologies from some and not from others



Our focus:

Forgiving members of religious communities



UOJ
Ultra-Orthodox
Judaism



LDS
Church of Jesus
Christ of Latter-
Day Saints



FUND
Fundamentalist/
evangelical
Christianity



MOD
Moderate
Christianity
(mainline, liberal,
Catholic)



Forgiving religious community members
may be especially difficult for those who
have
experienced **spiritual harm and abuse.**

Spiritual Harm and Abuse (SHA)

- Maltreatment of individuals within religious and spiritual contexts (Johnson & VanVonderen, 1991)
- Spiritual Harm and Abuse Scale (Koch & Edstrom, 2022)
 - Maintaining the system
 - Embracing violence
 - Controlling leadership
 - Gender discrimination
 - Harmful God image
 - Internalized distress



Spiritual Harm and Abuse (SHA)

- More likely within high-cost (or high-control, high-demand) religions (Keller, 2026; Lisonbee et al., 2026)
- Links with emotional distress (Ellis et al., 2022; Monroe et al., 2026)
- Often cited as a reason for leaving religion (or changing religions) (Ellis et al., 2025; McLaughlin et al., 2022)
- Has been documented among:
 - Broad Christian samples (Koch & Edstrom, 2022)
 - Former LDS (Harper, 2025)
 - Former ultra-Orthodox Jews (Keller et al., 2025)



Forgiving the Ultra-Orthodox Community

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR THE PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION
2026, VOL. 36, NO. 1, 301–322
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10508619.2025.2567727>



Forgiving Hurts from Religious Communities: Forgiveness of Self and Others, Anger toward God, and Psychological Adjustment after Deidentification from Ultra-Orthodox Judaism

Yehudis Keller ^a, Julie J. Exline ^{a,b}, Sarah Swartz ^a, and Maria Lindquist ^a

^aDepartment of Psychological Sciences, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, USA; ^bDivision of Perceptual Studies, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, USA

ABSTRACT

Individuals who deidentify from high-cost religions often feel anger or other negative emotions toward God, themselves, other individuals from their religious communities, or their former religious group as a whole. What role might forgiveness play in response to these hurtful experiences? In a mixed-methods survey study of 293 individuals who pulled away from ultra-Orthodox Judaism, we examined situational forgiveness toward oneself, God, specific others, and the religious community of origin. Qualitative coding revealed a wide range of offenses and hurts experienced in religious communities, where experiencing or witnessing abuse was the most commonly reported transgression. In line with preregistered predictions, we found that forgiveness toward most parties was associated with higher levels of wellbeing and posttraumatic growth and lower levels of distress and spiritual struggles. Findings around the idea of “forgiving God” were complex and nuanced. Our findings suggest that forgiveness is an important factor when considering the psychological adjustment of those who pull away from high-cost religions.

Sample: Adults who had left ultra-Orthodox Judaism

Forgiveness toward religious community members:

- Was linked with better mental health
- Was less likely in cases of spiritual harm and abuse

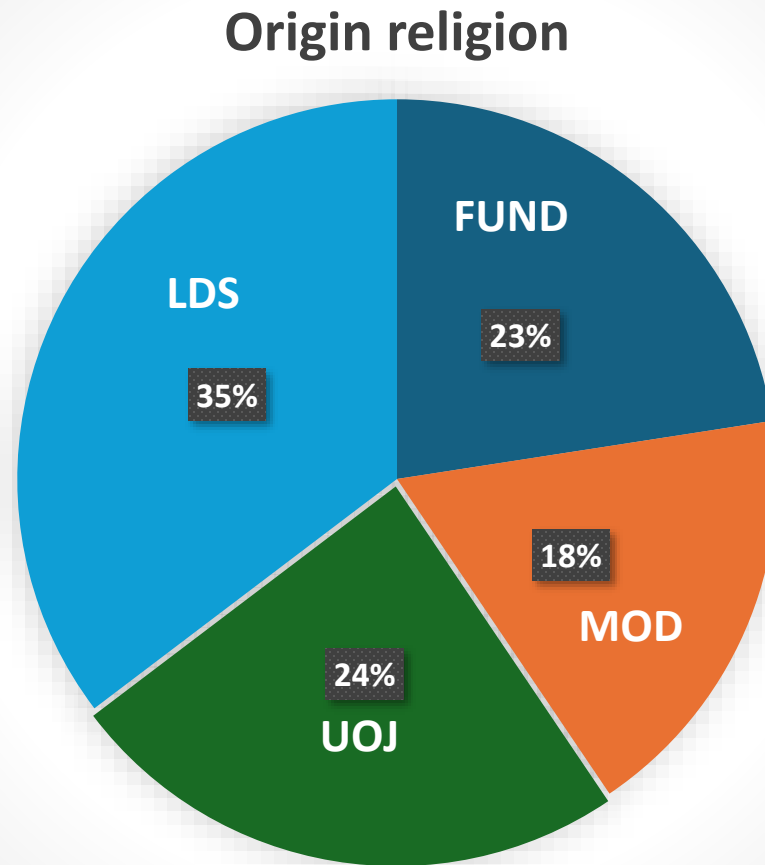
CURRENT STUDY: Focus on a broader sample of religions

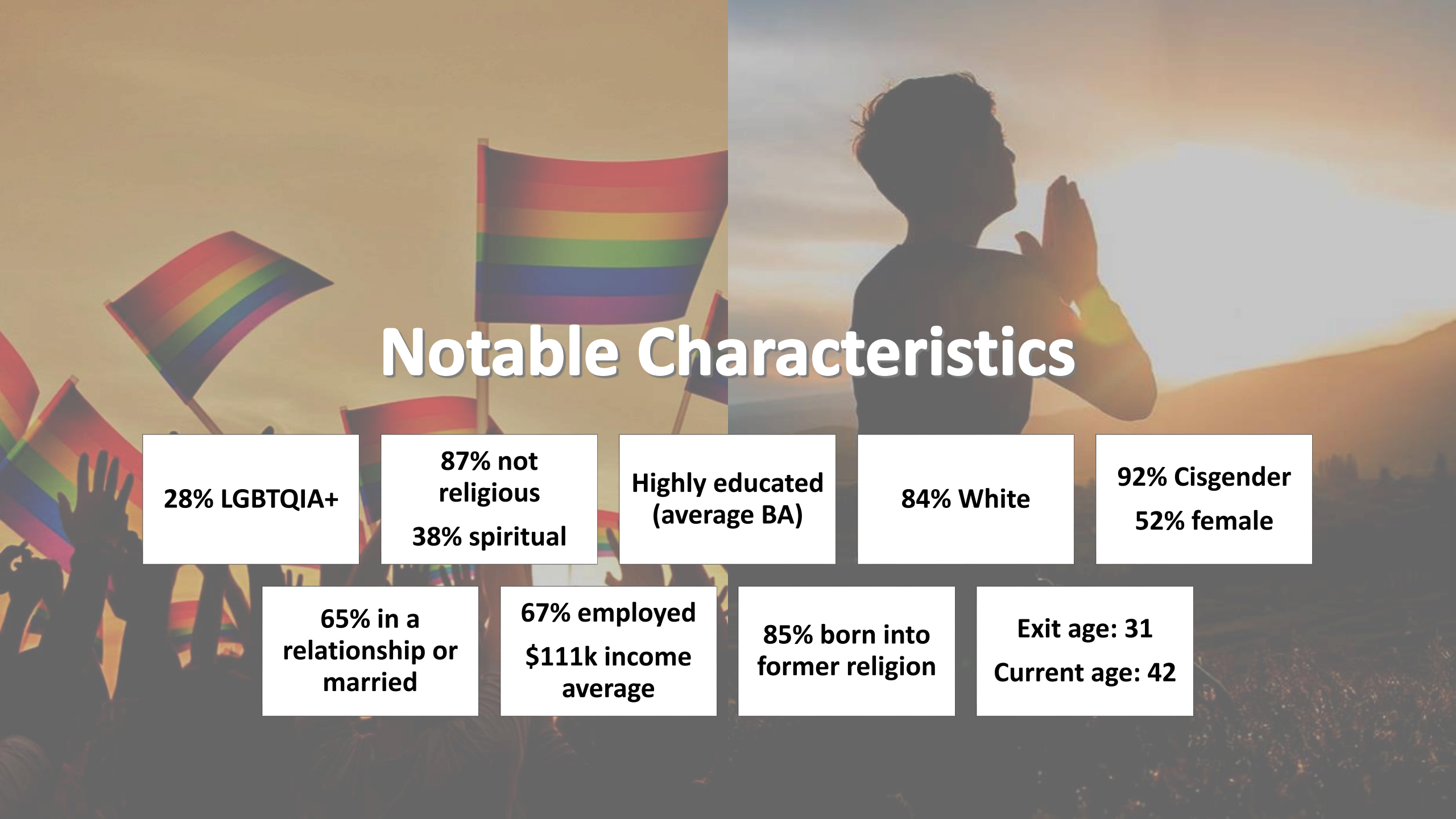
Sample and Procedure



- Part of larger online survey on people who have pulled away from religion
- Former religious communities
 - Fundamentalist/evangelical Christianity (FUND) (Prolific)
 - Moderate/liberal Christianity (MOD) (Prolific)
 - Ultra-Orthodox Judaism (UOJ) (specialized sampling)
 - Latter-day Saint/Mormon Church (LDS) (specialized sampling)
- Specialized sampling: Snowball sampling, email panel, online support groups, organizations, direct contact
- Compensation based on sample (\$3-\$15)

Religious Groups of Origin





Notable Characteristics

28% LGBTQIA+

**87% not
religious
38% spiritual**

**Highly educated
(average BA)**

84% White

**92% Cisgender
52% female**

**65% in a
relationship or
married**

**67% employed
\$111k income
average**

**85% born into
former religion**

**Exit age: 31
Current age: 42**

Key Measures

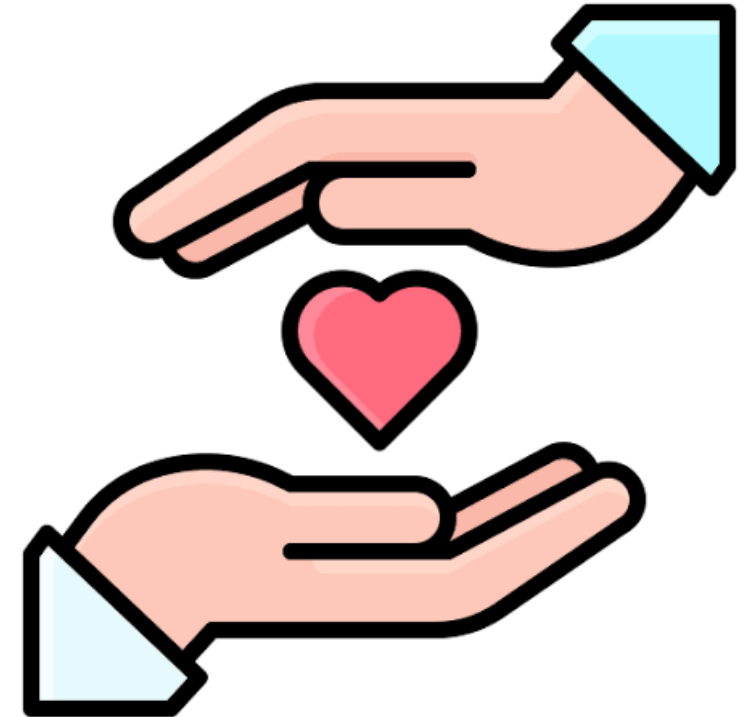
SPIRITUAL HARM AND ABUSE

- Spiritual Harm and Abuse Scale (Koch & Edstrom, 2022)

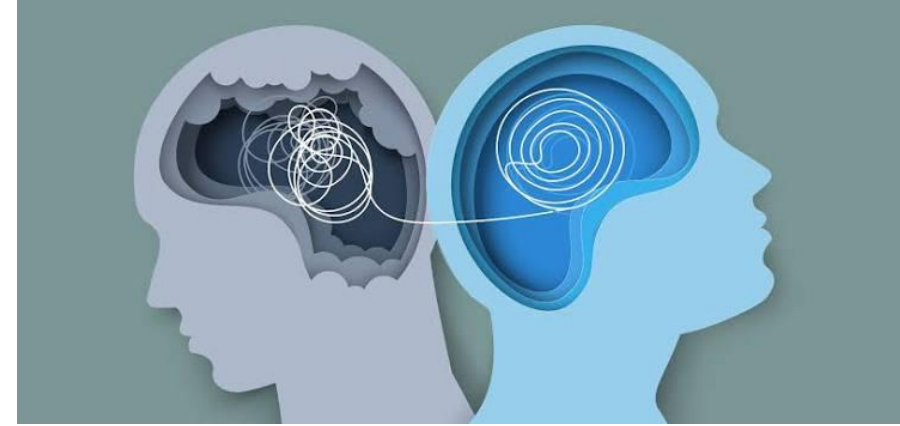


FORGIVENESS

- Abbreviated TRIM-18-R (McCullough & Hoyt, 2002)
 - Benevolence (3 items)
 - Vengefulness (5 items)
 - Avoidance (3 items)

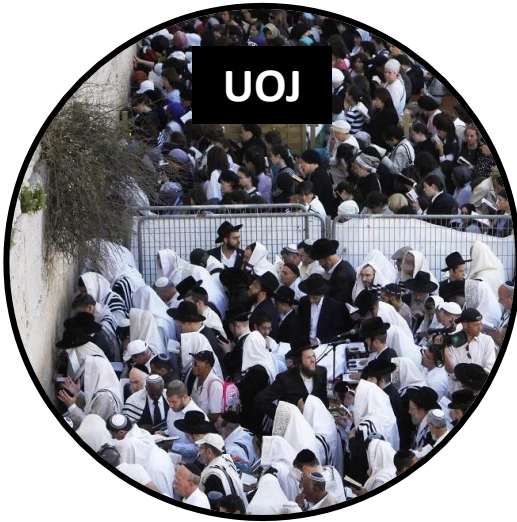


Mental Health Measures



- Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9; Kroenke et al., 2001)
- Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale: 7-item (GAD-7; Spitzer et al., 2006)
- Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985)
- Challenged Sense of Belonging Scale (CSBS; Fuchs et al., 2021)
- Posttraumatic Stress Disorder-8 (PTSD-8; Hansen et al., 2010)
- Posttraumatic Growth Inventory-10 (PTGI-10; Cann et al., 2010)

Forgiveness: Differences based on religious group of origin



UOJ

UOJ
Ultra-Orthodox
Judaism



LDS

LDS
Church of Jesus
Christ of Latter-
Day Saints



FUND

FUND
Fundamentalist/
evangelical
Christianity

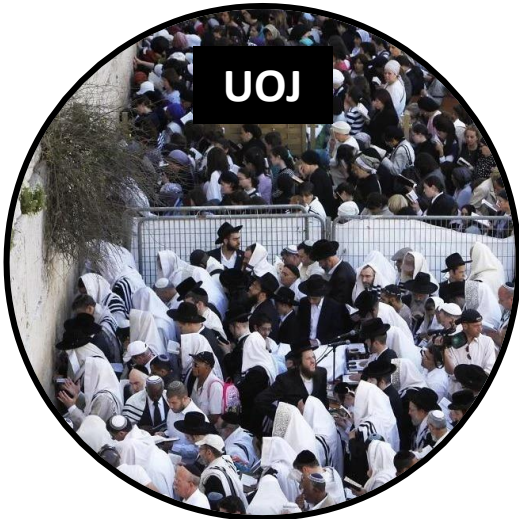


MOD

MOD
Moderate
Christianity
(mainline, liberal,
Catholic)

Forgiveness (Abbreviated TRIM All)

$M = 3.0$



$M = 3.2$



$M = 3.3$



$M = 3.4$



Scale: 1 to 5

Benevolence (TRIM-B)

$M = 2.9$



$M = 3.2$



$M = 3.2$



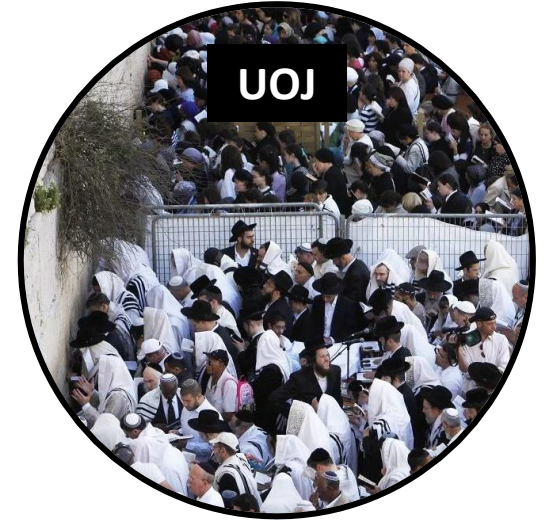
$M = 3.2$



Scale: 1 to 5

Vengefulness (TRIM-V)

$M = 2.0$



$M = 1.6$



$M = 1.5$



$M = 1.5$



Scale: 1 to 5

Avoidance (TRIM-R)

$M = 3.6$



$M = 3.7$



$M = 3.9$



$M = 3.9$



Scale: 1 to 5



What about spiritual harm and abuse?

Should we control for
this??

Spiritual Harm and Abuse & Forgiveness

Partial correlations, controlling for religious group

Spiritual harm and abuse correlates with:

- Less forgiveness overall $-.45^{**}$
- Less benevolence $-.31^{**}$
- More vengeance $.24^{**}$
- More avoidance $.45^{**}$

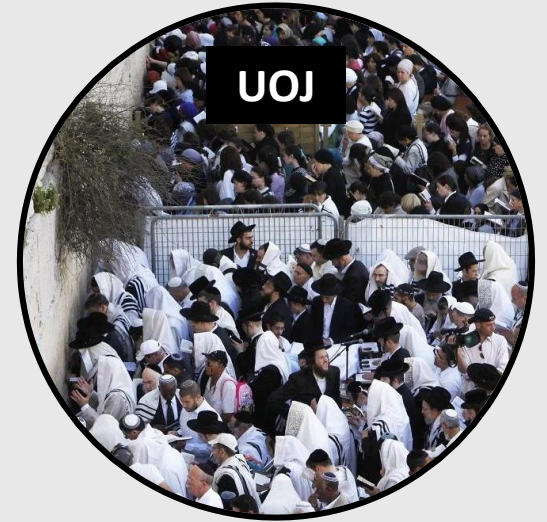


Spiritual Harm & Abuse (SHA)

$M = 2.9$



$M = 2.9$



$M = 2.4$



$M = 2.0$



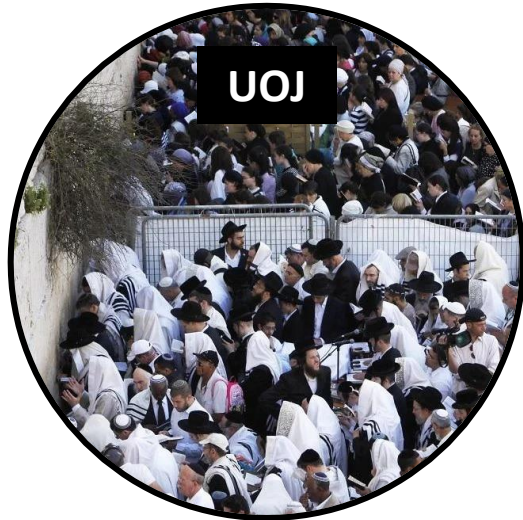
Scale: 1 to 5

Forgiveness, controlling for spiritual harm & abuse

$M = 3.4$



$M = 3.1$



$M = 3.1$



$M = 3.1$



Scale: 1 to 5

What would it take to forgive? (Open-ended)

Based on preliminary coding (only one rater so far):

Category	Percent
Repentance/restitution	32%
Group-level change	16%
Time/space	9%
Being able to understand them	7%
Personal healing or growth	6%
Improvement in personal situation	1%
Punishment / retribution	1%
Justice	1%

Other forgiveness responses (Open-ended)

Based on preliminary coding (only one rater so far):

Category	Percent
Unwilling/uninterested/unable to forgive	32%
Already forgave	15%
Nothing to forgive	12%
I blame the institution or its leaders (not individuals)	9%
Unsure	2%
I don't value forgiveness	<1%

Forgiveness and Mental Health

Forgiveness: Mental Health Correlations



More forgiveness of former religious communities relates to:

- Less depression $-.22^{**}$
- Less anxiety $-.25^{**}$
- Less posttraumatic stress $-.39^{**}$
- More life satisfaction $.10^{**}$
- Greater sense of belonging $.16^{**}$
- Posttraumatic growth $.02$

(Correlations control for religion of origin)

Forgiveness: Mental Health Correlations



More forgiveness of former religious communities relates to:

• Less depression	-.22**	-.08**
• Less anxiety	-.25**	-.10**
• Less posttraumatic stress	-.39**	-.17**
• More life satisfaction	.10**	.11**
• Greater sense of belonging	.16**	.01
• Posttraumatic growth	.02	.13**

(Correlations control for religion of origin and SHA)

Forgiveness Subscales: Mental Health Correlates



	Forgiveness (all)	Benevolence	Vengefulness	Avoidance
Depression	-.22**	-.19**	.17**	.14**
Anxiety	-.25**	-.22**	.21**	.15**
Posttraumatic stress	-.39**	-.28**	.22**	.37**
Life satisfaction	.10**	.19**	-.11**	-.08**
Belonging	.16**	.05	-.09**	-.08**
Posttraumatic growth	.02	.10**	-.05	.16**

(Correlations control for religion of origin)

Forgiveness Subscales: Mental Health Correlates



	Forgiveness (all)	Benevolence	Vengefulness	Avoidance
Depression	-.22**	-.19**	.17**	.14**
Anxiety	-.25**	-.22**	.21**	.15**
Posttraumatic stress	-.39**	-.28**	.22**	.37**
Life satisfaction	.10**	.19**	-.11**	-.08**
Belonging	.16**	.05	-.09**	-.08**
Posttraumatic growth	.02	.10**	-.05	.16**

(Correlations control for religion of origin)

Limitations

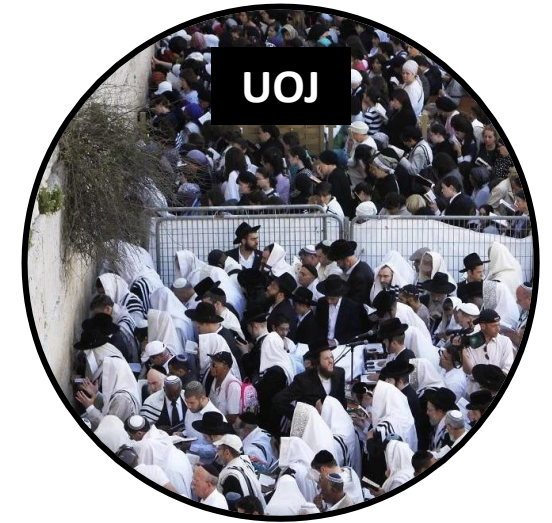
Cross-sectional design

WEIRD, Judeo-Christian samples

Distinct sampling methods across groups

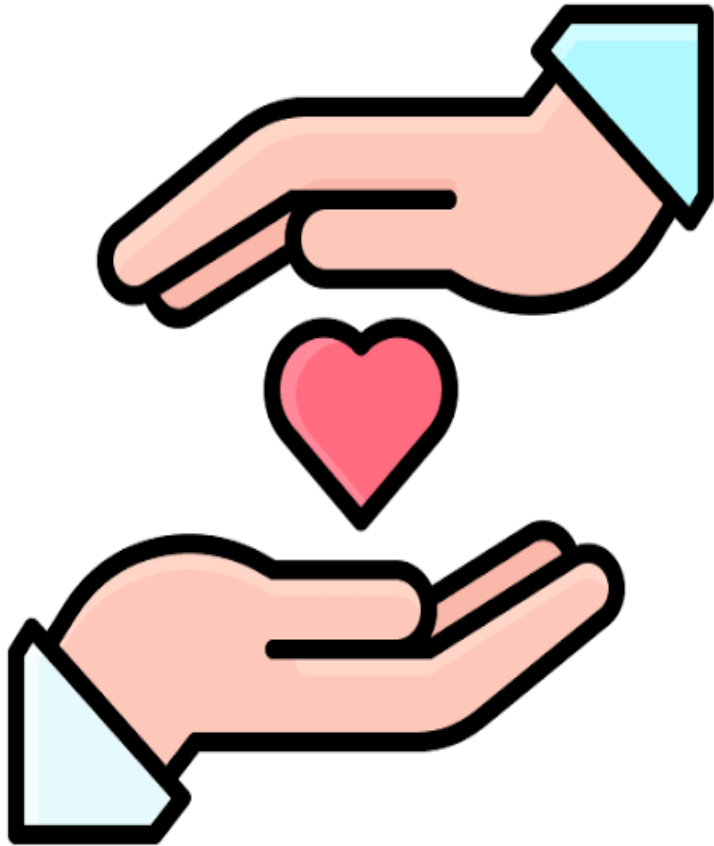
No comparison with current or never religious samples

Conclusions: Group Differences in Forgiveness & SHA



- Former LDS and ultra-Orthodox Jews (UOJ) reported more spiritual harm and abuse than the other two Christian groups
- On the surface, UOJ looked the least forgiving
- But when we controlled for SHA:
 - the UOJ group looked more forgiving than before
 - the LDS group was the most forgiving

Conclusions: Forgiveness and Mental Health



- Forgiveness of religious community members was linked with better mental health
 - Especially clear with posttraumatic stress around exit
 - Weaker links when controlling for SHA
- Avoidance is complicated
 - These are people who have already pulled away from religion
 - For some, pulling away might be a source of perceived growth

Thank You!

Yehudis.Keller@case.edu

Julie.Exline@uvahealth.org

