



# Forgiveness

## SESSION 1

*On the cross Christ not only forgave his enemies—he embodied forgiveness. Yet forgiveness is often scarce in the “texts” of our lives.*

### Introduction

Forgiveness goes to the heart of what we believe as Christians, and nothing is more important to our life together. Yet this topic is neither easy to conceptualize nor easy to practice in our life. Definitions of forgiveness vary, and personal understandings of how we ought to behave, after we are hurt or have hurt others, differ by family, religious beliefs, and cultural perspective. Unhealthy myths about faith, forgiveness, and healing can complicate this painful process, but the power of the Holy Spirit makes the impossible possible.

At the heart of the gospel is God’s gracious reconciliation with our broken world. On the cross Christ not only forgave his enemies; he embodied forgiveness. His saving work makes it possible for us to believe that we are forgiven *and* that we can forgive each other. This is not simply something we do every once in a while, but it is a way of life that reflects Christ. This new state of affairs, in turn, creates a wild and wonderful reality in which living as a human being comes to mean something brand new. It’s not that we have left our humanity behind, but rather that we are set free to recognize ourselves as embraced by God.

In this first session we will consider definitions of forgiveness and its complexity. The second session will be a more practical examination of how we live or don’t live forgiveness in our lives together.

Christ’s incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection have set us free to be in the world in a joyful new way, and his example has shown us what it looks like to live as a per-

son who is freed from the bounds of pride, shame, and fear. Yet it is often difficult to spot this freedom in the “texts” of our daily lives. We strongly resist saying the words “I’m sorry,” and it takes only an hour of listening to the evening news, or a few



minutes of reflection on our personal lives, to remind us that we do not consistently, or even faithfully, pass on this great gift of forgiveness. Both media reports of war, genocide, and revenge and the less-dramatic stories of our own family relationships portray a human tendency to lash out and to use harmful defenses during times of stress and conflict. These attempts at self-protection lead, at worst, to physical or verbal violence and, at best, to the breakdown of community. Busily looking after our pride, desperately trying to preserve a frail sense of self, we sacrifice the mutuality and respect that are necessary for productive, enjoyable relationships. And sometimes we sacrifice life itself, going to war, as individuals and as nations, for reasons we can neither explain nor justify. We label, we exclude, we push away, we sabotage the safety and dignity of others—especially those we don’t understand. We try all manner of ways to explain these acts, so that—whether we are speaking crudely with obvious malice or using the disguised language of polite discourse—we can rationalize the pain we are causing. Simultaneously, we insist that we are disciples of the Prince of Peace. Only rarely is forgiveness the theme of human history,

including the history of the people of God. Perhaps the greatest mystery of all is that we continue to believe in the possibility of human forgiveness in the face of such overwhelming evidence to the contrary!

It is hard to think of our own brokenness, but truth telling is crucial when we begin to consider forgiveness. Our human defenses “click in” so readily, even when we are committed to being as honest as possible. As C. S. Lewis wrote, forgiving right in and for the moment is not the great challenge—it is to “go on forgiving, to forgive the same offence again every time it recurs to the memory—there’s the real tussle.”<sup>1</sup> Whether we are currently being attacked or on the attack, we’d rather ignore the most painful truth of all—that each one of us is, at one time or another, both perpetrator and victim. Who wants to look at herself and see a person who has hurt others? Who wants to admit he has allowed himself to be victimized? Most of us prefer denial. Recently a client in my pastoral counseling office told me, “I just pack up all my relationship problems in a ‘box’ and put them under the bed each night.” She had decided that anything, even a nightmare, was better than the hard, painful work of forgiving!

## What Forgiveness Is

First, none of us begins the work of forgiveness with a “blank sheet.” Memories of being hurt and of hurting others, family and cultural “scripts,” social values around “otherness” and revenge, personal theologies (including the legal, economic, or therapeutic language we use), and our deepest hopes and fears for tomorrow—all of these combine with both our personality traits and the specifics of a broken situation to create a unique context for forgiveness. Some of the attitudes, beliefs, and practices influencing our reactions to relational harm (our scripts) are conscious, but many remain below the surface of our awareness. In addition, misunderstandings and confusion muddy the waters. As any parent knows, often it is not clear who did what to whom or who “started it.” Another challenge is trying to determine the level of harm done. Not surprisingly, research has shown that perpetrator and victim reach very different conclusions here! Clearly, forgiveness is a complex and messy matter. The simple injunction (most often used by perpetrators, of course) “You must forgive because you’re a Christian!” falls short of

being helpful in light of the infinite differences among our stories.

What is forgiveness? The definition is complicated, since forgiveness is used in three senses—as a response to harm, as a personality disposition, and as a characteristic of what people in social groups tend to do. Because forgiveness is so complex, a variety of definitions is helpful, each getting at some aspect of the truth about this process. One common, everyday definition is letting go of the desire for revenge. This rings true, yet it does not include the experience of all persons, such as abused women, who can have more difficulties with powerlessness than with fantasies of revenge. The Human Development Study Group defined forgiveness as an abandoning of one’s right to resentment, negative judgment, and indifferent behavior.<sup>2</sup>

The definition I have created is a somewhat strange one: forgiveness means exchanging one form of suffering for another—namely, the passive suffering of victimhood is exchanged for the more active suffering of forgiving. This definition points to an important benefit of forgiveness—the move from a reactive stance to a more proactive position. It also emphasizes the cost of forgiving—suffering as one forgives occurs when we grieve, when we come to accept an unchangeable past, and as we slowly move on. Since I worship a suffering God who forgave me, a sinner, and since I have accompanied many persons who suffer greatly as they struggle to forgive, I feel it is important to name this aspect of the process in my definition.

## What Forgiveness Is Not

I often find it helpful to have conversations with students and clients about what forgiveness is *not*. We typically begin by clarifying the difference between *event* and *process*. Although we may fantasize about a dramatic reconciliation scene, most of the time forgiveness is a long, difficult journey. After situations of serious hurt, it frequently takes months, maybe even years, to forgive. I confess that I have often found myself wishing for a quick, one-time event in which the perfect words (of apology and acceptance) are spoken, the most beautiful gestures (of peace and love) are performed, and everything ends with a nice, warm hug, but there is no nice match of my dreams with the long, slow business of

learning to forgive those who have hurt me nor with the hard, protracted route I sometimes take toward accepting my own responsibility for harm.

Forgiveness is not the same as forgetting. Memory can certainly be problematic, especially when memories are used to reinforce anger and/or to justify future acts of violence. There must be some letting go, but this does not mean we can or should completely forget. Rather, forgiveness means giving up the inordinate energy people use to ruminate, keep score, and plan revenge. If forgiveness depended on forgetting, it would seldom occur, nor would we have a safe world. We need to remember our stories in order to grow wiser through our life span and to keep ourselves out of harm's way!

It is also important to distinguish forgiveness from reconciliation. Although forgiveness and reconciliation always occur together in the New Testament, they do not and cannot always occur simultaneously in everyday life. It is important, for example, that victims of physical violence and/or sexual abuse are supported in making choices that include separating forgiveness and reconciliation. A victim *may* choose (but it must be her choice!), over time, to let go of her anger and reach peace with her own story of abuse—but without seeking a restored relationship.

For Christians forgiveness is not dependent on repentance and an apology, although a sincere apology often makes the process a great deal easier. Reparations may or may not be present and are not even always helpful, since agreement over the degree of hurt and the "price" of repairing that hurt is difficult to establish (particularly between victim and perpetrator). On the other hand, reparations can help to heal by *symbolizing* the seriousness of the harm done—one thinks of the powerful image of Willy Brandt kneeling before the Polish Holocaust Memorial. There is really no way to either change the past nor to fully repay the terrible evils of history, no matter what "dues" are paid, but blessed are the peacemakers who try to bring together former enemies.

One especially harmful myth, taught in some families and cultures, is that forgiving your enemy is a sign of personal weakness. Anyone who has struggled for years knows that the opposite is the case—it takes courage and strength to go through this process. As Christians, we have less trouble with this if we have appropriated our theology; we are not surprised that strength is hiding

behind what appears to be weakness, even as the power of God was most clearly revealed after the shame of death on a cross.



## Ordinary vs. Extraordinary Forgiveness

It is helpful to separate the need for forgiveness between individuals (interpersonal forgiveness) from the forgiveness we experience within ourselves (intrapersonal forgiveness). An even more important distinction is between the need for individual forgiveness and the need for forgiveness between groups (for example, ethnic factions or nations) after a war or other horrific historical event or in the face of continuing conflict. When I attended a forgiveness conference in Jerusalem several years ago, I found my clinical experiences as a pastoral counselor valuable in some ways, but there were limits to the parallels I could make between sitting with angry individuals and understanding persecuted communities. In large groups, "differentness" becomes a far more extensive and complex matter, and histories of harm become even more difficult to unpack. Often stories of violence and revenge are passed on (and enhanced by gossip, fear, and political rhetoric) from generation to generation, gaining momentum and leading to increased enmity over time. As we consider such events as the Rwandan genocide and the European Holocaust, we find that words fail us. We ask how such unbelievable, systemic malevolence can exist. How could survivors ever forgive their persecutors after such deeds?

Yet our theology does not leave us speechless, even in the face of extreme evil. Against easy resolutions and cheap words, Christians are called, in confronting extreme suffering, to respond with both outrage and purpose. We must protest the injustices that resulted in these evils *and* work responsibly to prevent their reoccurrence. This is costly business—being a healer and peacemaker is dangerous work, not passive acceptance. Here the work of Desmond Tutu and the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission is particularly inspiring. A confident yet compassionate man, Tutu never stopped living out of the radical freedom that has been given him by God through Christ. Neither is he naive about what

must be achieved if true reconciliation is to be sought and how long it may take!

## Forgiveness: Our Christian Treasure

One moment of the Jerusalem conference was particularly important to me: a peacemaker named Rabbi Kelman told our group of theologians, “You Christians have a treasure you must share with the world. Forgiveness is the heart of your theology.” Sometimes a person from another tradition can see more clearly than those standing up close. I had never before visualized forgiveness in quite this way, as a treasure we must intentionally share with the world.

Many passages in the Bible portray God’s mercy and forgiveness, and the Old Testament is no exception. In 2 Samuel, for example, we have a vision both of God’s intolerance of injustice and of God’s outpoured mercy. Nathan’s words to David, “You are the man!” (2 Sam. 12:7) remind us that a straightforward naming of the offense can be a vital part of the forgiveness process. But we read, too, of God’s willingness to forgive David and to continue to use him to play a major role in salvation history—a reminder that it is “as we are” that God loves and accepts us! David’s story also points to the complexity of forgiveness with regard to the consequences of sinful deeds. Even though David’s repentance paved the way for his return to a relationship with God, he could not undo all the costs to himself or his people of what he had done (including murder and adultery). Because all our human deeds participate in the structure of reality itself, the consequences of David’s sin played themselves out in the years to come. We read that tragedy after tragedy unfolded in his kingdom.

The New Testament is filled with forgiveness stories, perhaps none more moving than that of the prodigal son (Luke 15). This story of homecoming is a reminder of God’s parental embrace of us all, of God’s affirmation of our fallen humanity. As Henri Nouwen wrote, God’s forgiveness “comes from a heart that does not demand anything for itself, a heart that is completely empty of self-seeking.”<sup>3</sup> Christians often identify more fully with the “righteous” brother who stayed at home and who passed judgment on his brother, under the grip of anger and jealousy. It is only when we recognize ourselves in both the righteous son and in the prodigal one that we can experience the fullness of the Father’s embrace and accept the free gift of God’s forgiveness.

For Christians, forgiveness is, above all, about choosing a new life. When we resist forgiveness, it is like having an unwrapped Christmas present under the tree that we can neither appreciate nor use. If, on the other hand, we enter a lifestyle of continual repentance and forgiveness, we spring into life itself. In session 2 we will learn more about both the impediments to forgiveness and the freedom and peace that we receive along with this great gift.

## About the Writer

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## Endnotes

1. C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1964), 30.
2. For information on this and other definitions of forgiveness, see “The Forgiveness Web” at [http://www.forgivenessweb.com/RdgRm/definitionpsychological\\_.htm](http://www.forgivenessweb.com/RdgRm/definitionpsychological_.htm).
3. Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 129–30.



# Forgiveness

## SESSION 2

*On the cross Christ not only forgave his enemies—he embodied forgiveness. Yet forgiveness is often scarce in the “texts” of our lives.*

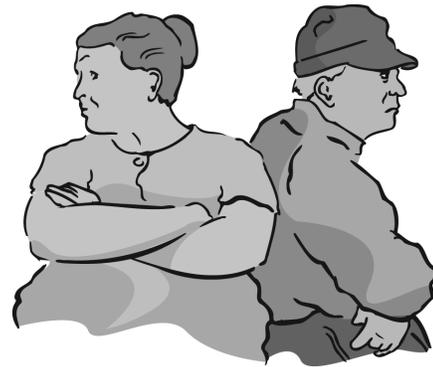
### Introduction

Typically, committee meetings at First Presbyterian Church began with good-natured banter about sport teams, but one night things were quite subdued. Everyone was thinking about how things had ended the previous month. Charley had called Alice “immature” and “stubborn” and said she “never listened.” They had been calmly disagreeing about purchasing a new computer for the church office, when suddenly Charley became agitated and angry. Alice looked like she was about to break into tears and said quietly, “I’m sorry you feel that way about me.”

Everyone knew that this last year had been difficult for Charley—he and his wife were caring for his very critical and domineering mother in their home after her serious fall. Only the pastor was also aware that Charley had recently been turned down for an expected promotion at work.

What was so surprising to everyone was that Charley would behave this way with Alice, of all people—they’d been friends for years! No one knew quite what to say or do. Would Charley apologize? Would Alice forgive him? Or would nothing be said and their relationship continue as before? As she sat down at the table, the pastor worried. Would this important committee be able to work together effectively on behalf of the congregation and its mission?

The story of Alice and Charley is a familiar one. Much of what happens in our lives, both in families and in congregations, centers on relational difficulties. At times we find ourselves wishing we could eliminate all differences and conflicts among Christians. But a reading of 1 Corin-



thians 12 suggests this would not be best—Paul believed that a variety of gifts (and the differing opinions they lead to!) actually builds up the kingdom of God. Only a diverse “body” can effectively work together, hands, arms, feet, and all. Accepting differences makes sense psychologically and socially as well—attempts to avoid all disagreements is doomed to failure and reflects an immature level of development.

But what of Alice’s pain? This disagreement is ordinary, but the brokenness she feels still hurts. It is inevitable for friends to disagree and sometimes even to say insensitive and hurtful things. We do not have total control over how we will be treated by others. But we can choose how we will respond. Alice and Charley both have choices to make about what happens next in their relationship. Hostility is one possible reaction. Another is to imitate God’s gracious reception of sinful humanity, making space for what seems “other” and “different” within our very selves. Or we can also choose to build fortresses behind which we hide and/or prepare to go to war. But the walls we build, attempting to keep ourselves safe, prevent constructive ways of dealing with conflict. They do not allow us to assume a third position, which is a place of neither

capitulation nor warfare, a place where a mature self can respond to differences calmly and patiently.

Reaching this place was, for Paul, part of being grown up in Christ. A man all too well acquainted with conflict, the apostle certainly spoke his mind forcefully (and sometimes tactlessly!), but he also recognized that the capacity for moving back and forth between himself and others was crucial for life together in Christian community. He called for humility, patience, and gentleness and for “bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:2–3). It would be hard to argue against these goals for any family or congregation. Yet applying them in real-life situations is far from easy.

## Forgiveness Is Difficult

Difficulties with family members and friends accumulate as the years pass, and unresolved interpersonal problems tend to multiply. All of us, at one time or another, must come to terms with our own relationship disillusionments—with ourselves, with others, and, at times, with God.

Although we have history’s most powerful model of forgiveness in Christ on the cross, there is no question that forgiveness is difficult work, more so for some than others—and more so at some times than others. Christians do not escape these difficulties. It is possible to listen to sermon after sermon on forgiveness yet remain locked inside one’s own bitter stories. For some people hurt has a certain tenacity that makes moving on almost impossible. Breaking the cycle sometimes means going beyond theological understandings for formal counseling so that psychological and social insights can be brought to bear, in addition to spiritual care. Like all knowledge, the social sciences are a gift from God; they can help us understand ourselves and our complex world.

## Psychological Factors

Alice and Charley may want to get past their difficulties, but what happens next between them will also be based on their personalities and life experiences. We all know people who seem bitter, calculating, and wrapped up in themselves. We also know people who are generous, patient, and charitable in their interpretations of others. Personality traits do not actually change much over time and lead us to expect certain patterns of relating. They also work for or against forgiveness.

Narcissism, which occurs frequently in our society, is a pervasive disposition that has repeatedly been shown to be inconsistent with a forgiving personality. All of us have narcissistic traits, more so early on in life. Young children believe they are the center of the universe, which is quite normal. But when narcissism lingers into adulthood, it precludes the humility, empathy, and compassion that we need to forgive. Narcissists have a sense of entitlement, and underneath all their demands lies a very fragile sense of self. Their anxiety is so great that they cannot forget themselves even briefly, let alone sustain a wider vision of the needs of others for an extended period of time, the time needed to accept personal responsibility or to forgive others.

Other emotional traits and disorders cause difficulties with forgiveness as well, including neuroticism, hostility, and “trait anger.”<sup>1</sup> Those persons with a tendency to ruminate can be locked into old stories that hold them prisoner for years, unable to accept a past they cannot change. But what causes these traits and disorders in the first place?

Some personal characteristics are genetically linked, as twin studies have shown, but most are the result of our early life experiences. Psychologists believe that our relations in early childhood—memories of experiences with caregivers—are internalized and then used as templates for our later relationships. As children we form, or fail to form, healthy attachments to other people, and we make (subconscious) decisions about the state of the world. If things go well, we learn how to go back and forth from others without being overly anxious. We begin to trust that the world is basically a safe place, and we start to care for other people just as we have been cared for. We also learn, or fail to learn, to empathize with the pain of others. Researchers have found that even infants in the first years of life can respond empathetically to other crying infants. These early interpersonal experiences combine to form positive or negative models of the world and how it works. We later form relationships in which our automatic reactions depend partly on internalized representations (objects) of those persons who were important in our earlier lives.

But every person has some emotional obstacles to forgiveness. For some, for example, the fear of being out of control is most troubling. They decide to “go to war” as a way out of the powerlessness that frightens them and feel psychologically safer marching off to become the

attacker. This strategy is evident in international politics but also in church parlors and at our kitchen tables.

Another obstacle, related to narcissism, is our desire to avoid shame. Here we worry about not just *doing badly* (as in guilt) but also about *being bad*. Since it always involves some fear of public exposure, shame is a psychosocial problem.

## Social Factors

Shame is common to us all, but the person who is permeated with shame fears that he will be exposed as essentially bad or flawed. One client told me, “It is as though that one B on the ‘report card’ I give myself cancels out all my As.” This man has not had the kind of “mirroring” that would have allowed him to see his worth reflected in the eyes of others; he did not know the unconditional regard that would enable him to see himself in a balanced way. Unlike guilt, an interior process that occurs when there is some degree of empathetic awareness, shame is centered on self and thus cuts short the forgiveness process. Persons who are filled with shame use a variety of defenses to externalize and avoid pain, including blaming others or withdrawing.

Differing families and cultures have differing ideas about shame, but the current context also has an impact on forgiveness. Charley has recently experienced a rejection (been turned down for a promotion) and is still coping with a harsh parent, who may well have shamed him throughout his life. Alice has known the shame of being ridiculed in front of a group, making it more difficult for her to forgive.

Another contextual consideration has to do with the setting in which an injury occurs. If, for example, we know that we will be forced to deal with the person who has hurt us, we are more likely to try to forgive. Faced with the choice of living with day-to-day anger and bitterness or making an attempt to forgive, we may find ourselves more motivated to try the second alternative. Alice could always quit the committee if she doesn’t want to deal with Charley, but in our families (or at our workplaces) we typically cannot avoid dealing with the people with whom we have troubled relationships.

## Religious Differences

Some interesting research has looked at ideas of what God is and compared them to the ways people forgive. It makes intuitive sense that those who conceptualize God

as a harsh, judging parent struggle to empathize and are more reluctant to forgive. They are also more likely to demand punishment and reparations. On the other hand, those who believe that God loves and forgives them are capable of deeper levels of empathy and are more ready to forgive.



## Forgiveness: A Costly Business?

Forgiveness always costs something, and it will not happen all at once. Alice must give up her earlier, perhaps naive perception of Charley, and she’ll have to give up being perceived as an innocent victim, a lukewarm comfort at best, but one many people cling to after being hurt. In situations of more extensive damage, the costs are far higher. We can be called upon to sacrifice our pride, our desire for getting even, even our sense of self-righteousness. We may have to forgo our desire for a real apology and our hope for appropriate reparations. Forgiveness is also costly because it forces people to remember details of a painful experience. This can mean, too, the possibility of being retraumatized, as memories of the original injury come flooding back. Remembering is a large part of the cost of forgiveness.

But the costs of *unforgiveness* are even higher. Research has shown that remaining angry and filled with resentment is damaging to both our psychological and our physical health.<sup>2</sup> Psychologically, vengeful ruminations are a real energy drain and rob us of the ability to concentrate on the real business of life. Physically, a variety of health factors, such as reduced hypertension and better cardiac health, have been positively linked to the practice of forgiveness. We have many urgent reasons to learn the craft of forgiveness, for when we lay aside old angers and guilt, we also lay aside heavy, costly burdens and discover increased joy, health, and vitality.

## Forgiveness and Faith

There are certainly moral reasons to forgive, since forgiveness is an act of justice toward another person that can’t help but improve society. But we have more than moral reasons to forgive—we have our faith in a gracious God.

We have the story of what God has done in Christ, and this gives us more than social motivations—it sets us free.

God's grace frees us from limitless shame. We know that story of God's entering our world and taking on our human nature. Our incarnate God blessed us forever and allows us to relate to the divine as to the only perfect, totally reliable parent—a parent who is always there. Just as Christ's arms spread out in forgiveness on the cross, so God's arms are open to us, waiting to embrace all prodigal sons and daughters. God's grace also sets us free from the pride of narcissistic self-centering. God has given us power beyond ourselves, so that we can feel safe enough to go out to meet and understand others. We can also begin, through God's strength, the process of suffering that forgiveness requires. God's grace grants us freedom from the fear that forgiveness will be too hard for us—from a human point of view, forgiveness *is* impossible. We trust that, with God, all things are possible, and that includes the strength to forgive.

We are, as the church, Christ's body in that world. As we live our everyday lives together, we embody, communally, a life of continual repentance and forgiveness. This is true whether we see it or not, because this is mysterious, gradual work being done by the Spirit. This Spirit will not abandon us if we allow ourselves to be formed into the body of Christ.

My years as a pastoral counselor have taught me that forgiveness is not an individual accomplishment; it is pure gift. Not something we achieve alone, not something of which we are even fully aware (except retrospectively), *forgiveness is a process that God makes happen*. It is a sign of the breaking in of God's kingdom on earth, and it is the heart of our sacramental life together. As

we come—Alice, Charley, and the whole imperfect lot of us—to receive the Lord's Supper, we eat and taste God's forgiveness. And, when we are baptized into Christ's death, we are raised to the resurrection of hope that flies in the face of our common sense. Perhaps we even dare to hope that forgiveness and peace will come to our violent, divided world.

There is a story I sometimes tell my clients that helps me visualize how my Christian faith intersects with my need for forgiveness: At a church in Virginia, a ritual occurs each year. Just before Lent begins, the women of that church hand out to each member a piece of cloth, with instructions to write on it all the "sins and burdens" they have carried around through the year. The pieces of cloth are then gathered and sewn together into a long shawl, which is wrapped around the body of Christ hanging on the cross in the front of the church. Throughout Lent, the congregation worships in the presence of this burdened, suffering Christ. But on Easter morning, the shawl is gone and the cross is empty. Christ is risen; Christ is risen indeed.

## About the Writer

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## Endnotes

1. L. E. O'Connor, L. Parrott, and N. G. Wade, "Forgiveness, Vengeful Rumination, and Affective Traits," *Journal of Personality* 73 (2005): 183–225.
2. E. L. Worthington and M. Scherer, "Forgiveness Is an Emotion-Focused Coping Strategy That Can Reduce Health Risks and Promote Health Resilience: Theory, Review, and Hypotheses," *Psychology and Health* 19 (2004): 385–405.