

Forgiveness in Enright's Theory: A Study of College Students with a History of Non-Suicidal Self-Injury

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Abstract. *Introduction* Forgiveness is an important psychological process that supports emotional recovery among individuals with a history of Non-Suicidal Self-Injury (NSSI).

Aim This study aimed to explore the self-forgiveness process based on Enright's Process Model of Forgiveness among female university students in Kupang City with NSSI experiences. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed involving five female university students. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis.

Result The findings showed that participants experienced four phases of forgiveness: Uncovering, characterized by guilt, shame, and self-blame; Decision, marked by the commitment to forgive themselves; Work, involving self-compassion, acceptance, and social support; Deepening, reflected in emotional relief, self-acceptance, and personal growth.

Conclusion Participants progressed through these phases at different paces depending on their personal experiences and social support. The findings suggest that self-forgiveness is a gradual process that promotes emotional healing and psychological growth among female students with NSSI histories.

Introduction

Deliberate self-injury without suicidal intent, commonly referred to as Non-Suicidal Self-Injury (NSSI), has become an important mental health concern among university students. Emerging adulthood is characterized by increasing academic demands, identity exploration, interpersonal challenges, and emotional instability, making students particularly vulnerable to psychological distress. When emotional distress is not managed adaptively, some individuals engage in NSSI as a maladaptive strategy to regulate overwhelming emotions without the intention of

ending their lives. A preliminary survey conducted among 559 university students in Kupang found that 22.7% reported having engaged in NSSI, indicating that this phenomenon warrants greater attention within the local context.

Previous studies have identified several protective factors associated with recovery from NSSI, including self-compassion, emotion regulation, resilience, and social support. Among these, forgiveness has received increasing attention because it enables individuals to transform negative emotions into more adaptive psychological responses. According to Enright's Process Model of Forgiveness, forgiveness is an intrapersonal process consisting of four phases: uncovering, decision, work, and deepening. Through these phases, individuals gradually reduce guilt, shame, anger, and self-condemnation while developing self-acceptance, compassion, and psychological growth.

Previous studies on forgiveness and NSSI have predominantly employed quantitative approaches, focusing on the relationships between forgiveness and psychological variables such as self-compassion, emotion regulation, resilience, or mental health outcomes. While these studies have demonstrated that forgiveness is associated with better psychological adjustment, they provide limited understanding of how self-forgiveness develops throughout the recovery process. Quantitative findings are valuable for identifying statistical associations but are less able to capture the subjective experiences, meanings, and contextual factors that shape individuals' movement through the forgiveness process.

Addressing this gap is important because self-forgiveness is not merely an outcome but a dynamic psychological process. Although Enright's Process Model proposes four phases of forgiveness—uncovering, decision, work, and deepening—individuals do not necessarily experience these phases in a fixed or linear sequence. Some may spend considerable time in one phase, revisit earlier phases, or progress differently depending on personal experiences, emotional readiness, and social context. Such variability cannot be adequately understood through quantitative measurement alone. Therefore, a qualitative phenomenological approach is

appropriate because it enables an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences and reveals how each individual interprets, navigates, and constructs meaning throughout the self-forgiveness process.

This study addresses this gap by employing a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of self-forgiveness among female university students with histories of NSSI based on Enright's Process Model of Forgiveness. Rather than treating forgiveness as a measurable outcome, this study seeks to understand how participants experience each forgiveness phase, how they move between phases, and how psychological and social factors facilitate or hinder their progression. By emphasizing individual experiences instead of statistical relationships, this study contributes to a process-oriented understanding of psychological recovery and extends previous quantitative findings within the local context of Kupang City, Indonesia.

Method

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the self-forgiveness process among university students with experiences of deliberate self-injury without suicidal intent. The study followed the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) to enhance transparency and reporting quality. Primary data were obtained through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling. The inclusion criteria were active undergraduate students aged 18–24 years, a history of deliberate self-injury without suicidal intent, engagement in self-injury as a response to emotional distress, and willingness to share their experiences. Five female students from University of Nusa Cendana, Kupang, Indonesia, participated in the study.

Data were collected between May and June 2026 using a semi-structured interview guide developed from Enright's Process Model of Forgiveness. The guide explored participants' experiences across the four phases of self-forgiveness: uncovering, decision, work, and deepening. Open-ended questions encouraged participants to describe their emotional experiences, self-injurious behaviors, and

recovery process. Interviews lasted approximately 30–47 minutes, were audio-recorded with written informed consent, transcribed verbatim, and complemented by field notes. To ensure participant safety, a referral protocol was established prior to data collection. If any participant exhibited significant emotional distress or disclosed an immediate risk of self-harm during or after the interview, the interview would be paused, emotional support would be provided, and the participant would be referred to a licensed psychologist or the university counseling service for further assessment and assistance. The researcher served as the primary research instrument by conducting interviews, documenting observations, and interpreting participants' narratives throughout the research process.

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase thematic analysis, including familiarization with the data, initial coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition and naming, and report production. Coding was conducted manually to maintain close engagement with the data. Although thematic analysis remained flexible in identifying meaningful patterns from participants' narratives, the analysis was theoretically informed by Enright's Process Model of Forgiveness. Specifically, the four phases of Enright's model (uncovering, decision, work, and deepening) served as an analytic framework to organize and interpret participants' experiences. During coding, data segments reflecting participants' emotional, cognitive, and behavioral experiences were first identified inductively and then examined in relation to the characteristics of each forgiveness phase. This approach allowed themes and subthemes to emerge from the data while ensuring that the interpretation remained grounded in Enright's conceptualization of the self-forgiveness process.

Thus, Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis was employed as the analytic procedure, whereas Enright's Process Model functioned as the theoretical lens for interpreting the findings. This combination enabled the study to capture participants' lived experiences while systematically examining how the process of self-forgiveness

unfolded across the four forgiveness phases without assuming that participants progressed through the phases in a fixed or linear manner.

To ensure methodological rigor, credibility was established through member checking, allowing participants to verify the accuracy of the interpretations. Dependability and confirmability were supported through an audit trail documenting data collection, coding decisions, and theme development. Participant confidentiality was protected through the use of pseudonyms, and all research procedures complied with ethical principles for voluntary participation and confidentiality.

Thematic analysis was selected because it provides a systematic yet flexible approach for identifying and interpreting patterns of meaning across qualitative data, making it appropriate for examining the dynamic process of self-forgiveness among university students with experiences of deliberate self-injury without suicidal intent (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Saldaña, 2021; Tong et al., 2007; Byrne, 2021).

Result

Five female university students aged 21–23 years participated in this study. All participants had a history of Non-Suicidal Self-Injury (NSSI). The age of onset and methods of self-injury varied. Three participants initiated NSSI during junior or senior high school, while one began during elementary school. Cutting was the most common method, although participants also reported self-hitting, hair pulling, scratching, skin picking, and self-burning. Thematic analysis generated four major themes corresponding to Enright's Process Model of Forgiveness, each consisting of several subthemes.

Theme 1. Uncovering Phase

The uncovering phase reflected participants' awareness of emotional pain and the psychological consequences of NSSI. Three subthemes emerged: (1) sources of psychological distress, (2) emotional regulation through NSSI, and (3) feelings of guilt, shame, and self-blame.

Subtheme 1.1. Sources of Psychological Distress

Participants described multiple stressors contributing to emotional distress, including academic pressure, family conflict, financial difficulties, adjustment problems, and limited social support.

"My mother always expected me to be in first place. When my grades dropped, she became very angry. I felt enormous pressure because nothing I achieved ever seemed enough." (Lisa, A2-B24)

Subtheme 1.2. Emotional Regulation Through NSSI

Participants reported engaging in NSSI as a maladaptive strategy to regulate overwhelming emotions. Although self-injury provided temporary relief, it did not resolve the underlying problems.

"I shifted the emotional pain into physical pain because physical pain disappeared after a day, while emotional pain stayed much longer." (Lisa, A2-B54)

Subtheme 1.3. Feelings of Guilt, Shame, and Self-Blame

Following NSSI, participants experienced guilt, disappointment, shame, and negative self-evaluation, particularly when seeing their scars.

"Whenever I see my scars, I remember why they are there. It makes me feel ashamed and disappointed in myself." (Gita, A1-B32)

Theme 2. Decision Phase

The decision phase represented participants' willingness to stop blaming themselves and begin pursuing healthier ways of coping. Two subthemes were identified: (1) recognizing the ineffectiveness of NSSI and (2) committing to self-forgiveness.

Subtheme 2.1. Recognizing the Ineffectiveness of NSSI

Participants realized that NSSI only relieved emotional distress temporarily and failed to solve their problems.

"I realized that self-injury only reduced the emotional pressure temporarily. The problems remained unresolved, and I understood that my coping strategy was unhealthy." (Hana, A4-B32)

Subtheme 2.2. Committing to Self-Forgiveness

Participants began to reduce self-blame and consciously decided to move toward self-forgiveness and healthier coping strategies.

"I wanted to stop hurting myself because I knew I deserved a better way to deal with my problems." (Hana, A5-B45)

Theme 3. Work Phase

The work phase reflected participants' active efforts to cultivate forgiveness and emotional healing. Three subthemes emerged: (1) developing self-acceptance, (2) receiving social support, and (3) strengthening adaptive coping.

Subtheme 3.1. Developing Self-Acceptance

Participants gradually accepted their past experiences and became more compassionate toward themselves.

"I finally realized that I was capable. I understood that many of the things I had feared were not as terrible as I had imagined." (Lisa, A2-B178)

Subtheme 3.2. Receiving Social Support

Support from family members, friends, and romantic partners facilitated participants' recovery and strengthened their motivation to continue healing.

"I started talking openly with my mother and my older sibling. We shared our feelings and discussed where our misunderstandings came from." (Desti, A3-B116)

Subtheme 3.3. Strengthening Adaptive Coping

Participants increasingly adopted healthier strategies, including open communication, emotional expression, and problem-solving.

"Keep fighting for your own life. Even if your family cannot always support you, you still have yourself. Live for yourself, not for other people." (Lisa, A2-B164)

Theme 4. Deepening Phase

The deepening phase reflected psychological growth following self-forgiveness. Two subthemes were identified: (1) psychological growth and self-acceptance and (2) hope and commitment to recovery.

Subtheme 4.1. Psychological Growth and Self-Acceptance

Participants reported greater emotional stability, confidence, and appreciation for themselves.

"I hope to live more peacefully with myself, appreciate my own efforts, become stronger when facing difficulties, and love myself more." (Gita, A1-B70)

Subtheme 4.2. Hope and Commitment to Recovery

Participants expressed optimism about the future and a commitment to maintaining recovery without engaging in NSSI.

"I no longer want to engage in self-injury. Whenever problems arise, I want to communicate and solve them in a healthier way." (Desti, A3-B124)

Discussion

The present study demonstrates that self-forgiveness among female university students with histories of Non-Suicidal Self-Injury (NSSI) is a gradual and dynamic process that unfolds through Enright's four phases of forgiveness: uncovering, decision, work, and deepening. Although all participants experienced these phases, their progression was not linear. Participants occasionally revisited earlier feelings of guilt and self-blame when encountering new stressors, particularly academic pressures, before continuing toward greater self-acceptance. This finding suggests that self-forgiveness is a recursive rather than a linear process, consistent with Enright and Fitzgibbons (2015), who described forgiveness as a developmental process shaped by cognitive, emotional, and behavioral transformation.

During the uncovering phase, participants recognized academic pressure, family conflict, financial difficulties, adjustment problems, and limited social support as major sources of emotional distress. These stressors contributed to NSSI as a maladaptive emotion regulation strategy, consistent with previous studies (Hasking et al., 2020; Victor & Klonsky, 2019). Consistent with Enright (2001), participants also experienced guilt, shame, and self-blame, indicating that awareness of emotional pain formed the foundation for self-forgiveness.

The decision phase marked participants' commitment to discontinue self-condemnation and adopt healthier coping strategies. This decision was strengthened by emotional support from family, friends, and significant others, supporting Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2020). In the context of Kupang, where family relationships are generally characterized by strong kinship ties and collective responsibility, emotional support from parents and siblings appeared to play an important role in facilitating participants' movement toward self-forgiveness. This cultural context was reflected in participants' narratives describing reconciliation through open communication with family members.

For example, Desti stated, "I started talking openly with my mother and my older sibling. We shared our feelings and discussed where our misunderstandings came from." This finding suggests that family support functioned not only as emotional reassurance but also as interpersonal validation that reduced self-blame and strengthened participants' commitment to recovery. These findings are consistent with studies showing that collectivist cultures emphasize family connectedness and interpersonal harmony, which can facilitate psychological recovery through supportive family interactions (Triandis, 1995; Kim et al., 2008).

During the work phase, participants gradually reconstructed the meaning of their experiences without denying responsibility for their actions. Instead, they developed greater self-understanding, self-compassion, and healthier coping strategies, including open communication, seeking social support, and constructive problem-solving. These findings support Enright and Fitzgibbons (2015) and Neff (2023), suggesting that self-compassion facilitates the development of self-forgiveness.

The importance of interpersonal relationships was also reflected in participants' preference for seeking support from trusted family members rather than coping independently. This pattern is compatible with the collectivist orientation commonly observed in Indonesian society, where emotional difficulties are often managed through close family relationships and mutual support. For instance, Lisa

emphasized, "Keep fighting for your own life. Even if your family cannot always support you, you still have yourself." Although this statement highlights personal resilience, it emerged after participants described the importance of rebuilding relationships with significant others during recovery. Thus, self-forgiveness in this study developed not solely through intrapersonal reflection but also through culturally embedded interpersonal experiences.

The deepening phase reflected psychological growth, greater self-acceptance, renewed hope, and commitment to recovery. Participants viewed their NSSI experiences as life lessons rather than permanent failures, supporting Wenzel et al. (2021), who argued that self-forgiveness contributes to moral repair and healthier self-evaluation. Participants' psychological growth was likewise expressed through renewed appreciation for family relationships and greater acceptance of themselves within their social environment. For example, Gita expressed her hope "to live more peacefully with myself, appreciate my own efforts, become stronger when facing difficulties, and love myself more." Such narratives indicate that recovery involved not only changes in self-perception but also restoration of interpersonal connectedness, which is particularly meaningful within collectivist cultural settings where personal well-being is closely intertwined with family relationships and social belonging (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Kim et al., 2008).

This study extends previous literature by applying Enright's Process Model of Forgiveness to the experiences of female university students with NSSI in Indonesia. The findings indicate that self-forgiveness is influenced not only by intrapersonal processes but also by contextual factors, particularly family relationships, academic demands, and social support.

The findings also have practical implications for university mental health services. Counselors may tailor interventions according to each forgiveness phase. During the uncovering phase, guided emotional disclosure and cognitive reframing may reduce shame and facilitate emotional awareness. During the decision and work phases, peer-support groups and family involvement may strengthen commitment to

recovery and adaptive coping. Such phase-specific interventions may promote psychological recovery beyond reducing self-injurious behavior alone.

This study has several strengths, including the application of Enright's Process Model and the use of in-depth interviews with thematic analysis. Nevertheless, the findings are limited by the small sample of five female participants from a single university. Future studies should include more diverse participants across genders and institutions and employ longitudinal designs. Because self-forgiveness develops over time, longitudinal research would provide greater insight into the stability of self-forgiveness, the recurrence of earlier forgiveness phases, and long-term recovery beyond university life.

Conclusion

This study explored the self-forgiveness process among female university students with histories of Non-Suicidal Self-Injury (NSSI) based on Enright's Process Model of Forgiveness. The findings indicate that self-forgiveness is a gradual and dynamic process that unfolds through the uncovering, decision, work, and deepening phases. Although all participants experienced these phases, their progression was not linear and was influenced by psychological distress, family relationships, social support, and individual readiness for change.

The findings extend the application of Enright's Process Model by demonstrating that self-forgiveness among university students with NSSI histories is shaped not only by intrapersonal processes but also by interpersonal and contextual factors. This study contributes to the literature by providing a qualitative, process-oriented understanding of psychological recovery following NSSI. Practically, the findings suggest that university mental health services should incorporate interventions that promote self-forgiveness, self-compassion, adaptive coping, and supportive interpersonal relationships. The study is limited by its small sample size and the inclusion of female participants from a single university. Future research should involve more diverse participants across different genders, universities, and

cultural contexts and employ longitudinal designs to further examine the development of self-forgiveness over time.

Suggestion

Universities are encouraged to strengthen student mental health services by incorporating self-forgiveness and adaptive emotion regulation into counseling and preventive programs for students with histories of non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI). Future studies should include more diverse participants from different universities and cultural backgrounds and examine additional factors, such as self-compassion, resilience, and social support, that may facilitate the self-forgiveness process and psychological recovery.

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Author contribution

HUS conceptualized the study, designed the research, collected and analyzed the data, interpreted the findings, and drafted the original manuscript. MYCM supervised the research process, contributed to the study design, and critically reviewed and revised the manuscript. DA contributed to data interpretation, provided scientific input, and critically reviewed the manuscript. MKPAK contributed to the methodological development, manuscript revision, and validation of the final version. All authors read and approved the final manuscript and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

Competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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