




Hurt to Healing: Exploring Forgiveness in Female Friendships

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ABSTRACT

Friendship plays a crucial role in emotional well-being by offering companionship, support, and a sense of belonging. However, conflicts can emerge within closely knit friendships, leading to profound emotional distress and resentment, hence challenging one's ability to forgive and heal. The study explores the process of forgiveness within the context of close female friendships, focusing on the emotional entanglements and challenges involved in this journey. Using a qualitative narrative research inquiry, six participants were recruited through a purposive sampling technique, engaging in semi-structured, in-depth interviews to gain deeper insights. Thematic analysis revealed six major themes including (a) Multifaceted nature of forgiveness, emphasizing the non-linear process of forgiveness; (b) anchors in female friendships including unconditional trust, emotional attachment and powerful shared memories; (c) breaking points in female friendships like betrayal, bullying, manipulation, hurt expectations and toll on self-esteem; (d) barriers to forgiveness like conflicted emotions, continuous remuneration, fear of recurrence, societal influence and unresolved confrontation; (e) coping strategies ranging from distraction techniques and religious guidance to social support and lastly (f) healing through forgiveness, offering inner peace, closure, personal growth and transformation in self-esteem. The findings offer insight into how forgiveness in female friendships is not only an interpersonal but also an intrapersonal act driven by a sense of self, memories, and adaptability. The study implies interventions to nurture emotional regulation, restoration, and enduring relationships among youth.

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1. Introduction

Friendships are a fundamental aspect of an individual's interpersonal relationship setting, which substantially shapes the social interactions, emotional well-being, and personal growth of that individual (Bagwell & Bukowski, 2018). It is defined as a dyadic relationship, which includes interaction between two people who know each other and share a sense of mutual understanding (Naeem et al., 2023). We live in a time where the current generation has become very insensitive to the needs of others around them. Mocking each other, manipulating, and bullying are common offenses in today's world. This escalating emotional detachment has prompted peer interactions to be more frail and susceptible to conflicts. The statistics of school bullying have tremendously increased, particularly among female students, going from 21% to 24% (Pontes et al., 2018). This surge in peer victimization highlights the dire need to explore how such events influence the affective structure of friendships, especially in female friendships. By focusing on female friendships, the current study expands the comprehension of forgiveness beyond familial relationships, offering cultural perspectives into how they reshape friendships after being hurt. Female friendships are characterised by extensive self-disclosure and a source of social support, leading to improved psychological as well as physiological health (Bedrov & Gable, 2023). Emerging research suggests that female friendships provide women with more prominent benefits across a variety of domains, including

improved health, increased longevity, and enhanced career outcomes as compared to experiences in male friendships (Okah, 2025; Uzzi, 2019). However, like all close relationships, friendships are also not immune to conflicts, betrayal, and emotional discord that lead to testing the principles of the bond formed between two friends over a long period. A friend who has a negative influence on an individual's thought pattern, attitude, or behavior causes that individual to internalise those same negative beliefs, making them more vulnerable to others' opinions (Esperansa et al., 2023). In such distressing circumstances, forgiveness can play a restorative role, offering a gateway to evade the internalised negativity. Forgiveness serves as a motivational tool that promotes emotional transformation by reframing the negative sentiments into more growth oriented emotions (Worthington & Scherer, 2004).

Forgiveness stresses the approach of allowing an internal shift within an individual to accept the past and move on from it. It encourages letting go of grudges, bitterness, anger, and eradicating the thoughts of taking revenge on the transgressor (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015; Warsah, 2020). Forgiveness is different from pardoning (i.e; a legal concept), condoning (i.e; justifying the transgression), forgetting (i.e; the memory of the offence has been erased from the conscious mind of the victim), denial (i.e; the inability to recognise the hurt one has endured) and the act of reconciliation which involves revamping a broken relationship (McCullough & Witvliet, 2001). When forgiveness is lacking, it can lead to disruptions even in healthier relationships due to unresolved confrontations. Forgiveness is deeply rooted in religious values (Warsah, 2020). In Islam, forgiveness has not only been viewed as a moral virtue but also a pathway towards emotional healing (Saleem & Sitwat, 2025). It stresses the need to ask forgiveness from those who have been wronged before seeking divine forgiveness.

2. Literature Review

Forgiveness has long been acknowledged as something beyond just moral value; rather it is a transformative process with extensive consequences for both emotional and social life. Within the field of psychology, it has been recognised as a powerful tool to heal patients who have been hurt by others (Zarzycka, 2019). It has numerous psychological and physiological benefits. Studies suggest that individuals who can extend forgiveness are less likely to show signs of stress, depression and are more likely to have improved well-being (Toussaint, Owen, & Cheadle, 2012). Forgiveness functions as an adaptive coping strategy, facilitating people to handle a variety of stressors (Ysseldyk, Matheson, & Anisman, 2019). In the context of friendships, forgiveness plays an important role. Unresolved transgressions in friendships can lead to long-term emotional distress, interpersonal breakdown, and psychological strain Naeem and Inam (2021), which makes forgiveness in friendships a crucial yet underexplored domain. From a psychological perspective, the act of forgiveness remains closely connected with internal emotional regulation. According to cognitive dissonance theory, individuals experience internal conflicts when their attitudes and behaviors are misaligned, giving rise to tension and feelings of guilt (Harmon-Jones, 2019). This inner conflict encourages people to seek clarity either through cognitive reframing or emotional liberation, which are central to forgiveness. To better comprehend this journey, psychologists have formulated structured models mapping the stages of forgiveness. Worthington and Scherer (2004)'s REACH model and Enright's process model (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015) outline the emotional and cognitive shifts. The models suggest steps for understanding forgiveness, including uncovering and recalling the hurt, empathising with the offender, decision to grant an altruistic gift of forgiveness to show compassion, developing a commitment to finally forgive the offender and holding onto forgiveness.

Forgiveness is a multilayered emotional journey characterised by conflicting states. Individuals oscillate with a variety of emotions ranging from hate, vulnerability, relief, and emotional release before finally letting go (Haikola, 2023). When forgiveness is lacking, particularly in the quest for friendships, unresolved conflicts erode a person's self worth, and emotional stability. On the other hand, extending forgiveness is linked to self-acceptance and improved relations (Raj, Elizabeth, & Padmakumari, 2016). Friendships, especially among women, hold a noticeable place in the emotional hierarchy of human relationships. Literature suggests that females are more likely to put forward other women as their close friends rather than their spouses (Guerrero et al., 2022). This elevated emotional commitment makes betrayal within these bonds more painful. When trust is broken, women tend to withdraw emotionally, hence diminishing the willingness to forgive others (Naeem & Inam, 2021).

Despite growing interest in forgiveness as a process, the existing literature focuses more on romantic and familial relationships. In romantic relationships, forgiveness mainly focuses on rebuilding trust and loyalty (Fincham, Hall, & Beach, 2006). Whereas, in familial or long-lasting relationships, it is concerned with fulfilling expectations of unconditional bonds, where people forgive only to stay together in that relationship (Fehr, Gelfand, & Nag, 2010). Unlike these interpersonal relationships, forgiveness in friendships is an entirely different debate devoid of any familial expectations, to which little attention has been paid. This research study aims to bridge that gap and explores how individuals, particularly women, navigate forgiveness within the context of broken friendships. The study highlights the emotional intensity of female friendships by giving voice to often invalidated or silenced stories. The study also illuminates how forgiveness converges with ideas like self-worth, healing, and future interpersonal patterns.

2.1. Research Objectives

1. To explore the narratives of females regarding forgiveness in their friendships and how conflicts within friendships can have a psychological impact.
2. To explore the barriers that hinder forgiveness within female friendships.
3. To explore the coping mechanisms used by females to get over the barriers to forgiveness.

3. Method

To uncover the intricate and deeply personal stories of forgiveness shared by females within their friendships, the following methodical approach was employed to gather and interpret the data thoroughly and accurately.

3.1. Research Design

Qualitative narrative research design (Cresswell, 2013) was used to explore the journey of forgiveness in prolonged female friendships. It allowed the researcher to understand how the participants navigated their lives in the aftermath of what had commenced. It helped the participants express their conflicts, forgiveness, and the healing process in regards to their friendships. Furthermore, it helped in revealing the complexities and the coping strategies employed by the participants in their friendships.

3.2. Sampling strategy and sample characteristics

For the current study, a purposive sampling strategy (Cresswell, 2013) was used with a sample of six participants. This technique allowed the researcher to recruit those participants who met the predetermined inclusion criteria, which included individuals being over 18 years, having been involved in a prolonged friendship, and demonstrating forgiveness at certain points in their friendships. The sample participants were between the ages of 20-25. Three were undergraduate students, while the other three participants had graduated. All of them belonged to a middle socioeconomic status and identified as Muslims, which reflects the cultural context of the sample.

3.3. Procedure

The study was conducted using in-depth, semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately an hour. An interview guide was constructed by the researcher in order to collect in-depth data from the participants. It was composed of main questions along with their probes in order to collect the relevant data. The interview guide began with preliminary questions in order to build rapport with the participants. Preliminary questions were then followed by central questions investigating the hurtful events in the participants' friendships, such as "Can you share an incident where you have forgiven your friend?" or the forgiveness process, like "What do you think makes it hard to forgive a friend?" The use of probes enhanced the deeper reflection, for instance, "Did you also reconcile with your friend after forgiving them?" Before the conduct of the main study interviews, a pilot study was done to review the credibility of the interview guide. After the success of the pilot study, the main interviews were conducted. The collected data was then analyzed using thematic analysis. The researcher used thematic maps and tables to make the process easy. Peer review was carried out at all critical stages of the research, including formulating the interview guide, developing themes, and interpreting results, to enhance the validity of the research.

3.4. Data Analysis

The researcher followed all six steps of thematic analysis offered by Braun and Clarke (2006). The transcripts were first read and reread by the researcher for familiarization. Then the initial codes were formulated manually, generating short and crisp terms from the data, such as “unintentionally letting go, forget vs forgive, moving on, emotional neglect, religious guidance, avoidance”, etc. These codes depicted the interesting features of the data. Once the initial coding was completed, the codes were finalised and themes were generated into major and minor themes. For instance, the codes such as baking, reading, painting, etc were grouped under one theme called “distraction techniques”. In the next stage, the themes were reviewed to ensure that no two themes highlight the same thing and to eliminate ones that were not supported by the data. In order to enhance the validity of the analysis, peer review was conducted with a research supervisor and another colleague. Reviewers independently reviewed 20% of the data to ensure the consistency and validity of the research. Finally, the interpretations were written in a detailed manner.

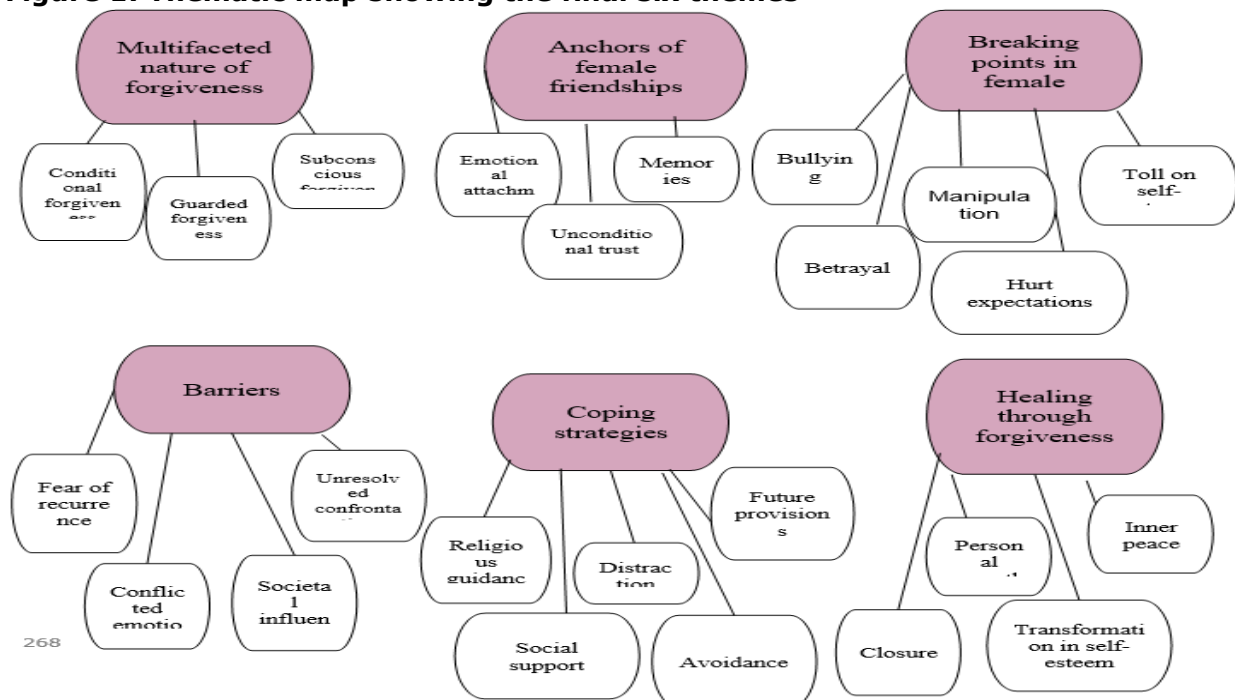
3.5. Ethical Considerations

- All the participants were given informed consent prior to the interviews.
- All the interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants.
- All the participants were given the right to withdraw if the interviews became troublesome for them.
- The data of participants was kept confidential to respect their right to privacy and confidentiality.

4. Results

The findings of the study, extracted in the form of themes and subthemes, are as follows.

Figure 1: Thematic map showing the final six themes



4.1. Multifaceted nature of forgiveness

This theme suggested that forgiveness is not a linear or universal process, but multifaceted. It has many layers and aspects depending on every individual’s subjective experience. It included three sub-themes that are as follows.

4.1.1. Conditional forgiveness

The participants expressed that forgiveness is not granted easily; rather it comes after many terms and conditions that individuals use to protect themselves. This perspective highlights that forgiveness is never given freely, but with conditions that make people feel

protected and in control of their decisions. All the participants expressed that they extended forgiveness to their offenders either to find inner peace or to sustain their meaningful and long-lasting friendships.

4.1.2. Subconscious forgiveness

Subconscious forgiveness suggests the unintentional letting go of resentment towards the offender over a period of time. This highlights that forgiveness is a time-driven process instead of thought driven. The participants revealed that after a course of time, they realised that they had already forgiven their transgressors, once faced at some point in life. P1, P2, and P5 expressed that forgiveness has been a byproduct of time for them. After some time, they did not feel the strong resentful and negative emotions towards their offenders. They revealed that oftentimes holding onto negative emotions is only harmful to the person who is harbouring grudges against someone.

4.1.3. Guarded forgiveness

The findings revealed that participants extended forgiveness towards their transgressors while still holding onto the emotional barriers. The sole purpose of this was to protect themselves from the recurrence of the offense. P4 and P6 expressed that they forgave their friends who had wronged them, but they could not feel the same pure and friendly emotions towards them again. This highlights the "forgive vs forget" concept, where people forgive but do not forget the offense, for the fear of repetition. P3 and P2 revealed that they would still get along with their old friends when the need struck, but it would be hard for them to forget the negative events experienced while being friends with those people.

4.2. Anchors of prolonged female friendships

This theme suggests the factors that serve as the basis for longevity in female friendships. Participants talked about their friendships that had been maintained over a long period of time, i.e, since their childhood. These kinds of friendships are maintained on certain grounds such as emotional attachment, powerful positive memories, and reciprocating unconditional trust between two friends.

4.2.1. Unconditional trust

The findings revealed that unconditional trust is the most significant anchor in female friendships that helps sustain the friendships. It served as the foundation for sharing emotional moments without the fear of being judged, showing the vulnerable sides to each other, and the unwavering support that friends had for each other. P1, P2, and P4 narrated that their friends were the only ones they could share all their secrets and personal experiences with. This aspect revealed that confiding in a friend strengthens the bond. Other than sharing personal details, P2 and P6 revealed that they always confided in their friends in times of emotional support. They always shared their family dealings with their friends with the hope of being listened to, as they could not talk to anyone else about such deep and emotional matters.

4.2.2. Emotional attachment

The findings highlight that emotional attachment is a defining element of prolonged female friendships, which is characterized by sharing personal struggles, treating each other like family members, and depending upon each other for the smallest of things. P2, P3, and P4 revealed that they were very much attached to their friends, to the extent of considering them as family members. Most of the time, their friends felt like siblings to them. They cared for them like a sibling too, with whom they shared deep emotional connections.

4.2.3. Memories

A friendship's foundation is anchored by the number of experiences shared that later forge into happy memories. These memories provide a sense of security to friends at times of need or when they are dealing with the ups and downs of life. The participants emphasised that simply spending time together, whether through routine conversations or rare occasions, fostered their emotional bond. P1 shared the precious moments spent together with her friend, ranging from sitting together in class to spending time with each other in school cafes. P1 and P3 admitted that they still reminisced about these moments that served to strengthen their connection with their friends.

4.3. Breaking points in friendships

Friendships, despite their emotional depth, emotional connection, trustworthy qualities, and powerful memories, are not immune to conflicts that may arise due to any inconvenience. These conflicts can be misunderstandings caused by a third party, miscommunication between two friends, breach of trust, betrayal, manipulation, and repeated disappointments. The sub-themes emerged here are as follows.

4.3.1. Betrayal

One of the profound breaking points in the participants' friendship was betrayal. The findings revealed that betrayal in friendships is not always a direct conflict, but can be manifested through subtle ways such as breaking trust, breaking confidentiality, exclusion, or abandoning the friend. P1, P2, & P6 revealed that their friends had exposed their secrets, shared in times of extreme vulnerability, to others around them. The pain of having their secrets revealed led to feelings of humiliation and disappointment, particularly when learned from a third party. Betrayal was also manifested through hurtful or demeaning actions. P3 & P4 shared that their friends had suddenly cut off all connections, leaving them with unresolved conflicted emotions. The feelings of being abandoned by a close friend were profound in the participants' stories, implying the one-sided conclusion of the friendships.

4.3.2. Bullying

Friendships are a source of support and comfort, but they can turn into bullying where one friend's act of dominance harms the relationship. The act of bullying was done in the form of both verbal and physical aggression. P1 and P5 shared that their friends beat them up in a show of physical aggression in front of their peers, which turned out to be extremely humiliating for them. P2 revealed how brutal the verbal bullying was for her and how it affected her sense of self-esteem. Constant cracking of jokes in gatherings about her appearance was another source of humiliation and bullying, leaving her uncomfortable in social settings.

4.3.3. Hurt expectations

Just like every relationship, friendships also have certain expectations. If those expectations are left unattended, it can cause a great rift between two friends. The findings revealed that expectations were hurt in the form of feeling neglected by the friend, a sense of abandonment, and being used for the sake of convenience. P3, P4 and P5 revealed that they always felt as if they were just a friend of convenience, and in turn, were left hurt. They felt as if they were the only ones putting in efforts to save their friendships. Another aspect of hurt expectations revealed by P1 was the decision to trust a third person over a close friend, which ended up destroying her long-lasting bond.

4.3.4. Manipulation

Another breaking point in friendships was manipulation from one party to showcase dominance or authority over another. It was done through the act of guilt tripping or victim blaming. P3 revealed that her friend always tried to overpower her by making new acquaintances, but did not accept the same behavior in return. P2 and P6 revealed that their friends always made them believe that anything going astray in their friendship was their fault. They were always blamed for ruining their friendships and overreacting when they confronted their overpowering friends. Their emotions were always dismissed, and the blame was shifted onto them, making them feel guilty.

4.3.5. Toll on self-esteem

Self-esteem played an important part in participants' lives both during and after a friendship breakup. The participants revealed that their friendships turned toxic, making them feel suffocated to the point that they did not want to have any contact with that person anymore. P1 and P2 suffered dire effects on their self-esteem because of the bullying, humiliation, and neglect caused by their friends. They experienced severe anxiety attacks in the aftermath of their friendship breakups and even during their friendships due to the toxic environment caused by their friends. P3 revealed that her friend drained her energy every time they were together, and she no longer felt comfortable socialising with others because of that. P3 and P4 shared that they felt extremely conscious of themselves after the breakup and did not know how to face others around them due to the humiliation. P1 and P2 even admitted to causing self-harm to evade self-doubt.

4.4. Barriers to forgiveness

Forgiveness in friendships is not an easy process, as it comes with many obstacles like conflicted emotions, anger, sadness, pain, reminiscing memories, or fear of repetition of the offense, making it feel like a battlefield to the participants.

4.4.1. Conflicted emotions

Once the meaningful friendship ends, it is bound to leave behind conflicted emotions such as confusion, anger, sadness, and pain. Anger was profound in all participants' shared stories. They expressed that they felt anger and a sense of resentment towards their friends right after their friendship ended because they had no idea what they had done wrong, which caused this rift. P2, P3 and P4 expressed the desire to take revenge on their friends because of how hurt and resentful they felt after being abandoned by their friends. P2, P5 and P6 revealed that they not only felt anger at their friends but towards themselves too, as they were hurt by the same person again and again. All these emotions made it hard for them to move on with their lives.

4.4.2. Fear of recurrence

Another barrier to forgiveness was the fear of recurrence that they would be hurt again if they tried to reconcile with their friends. They did not want to forget the hurt done to them to protect themselves from future harm, thereby holding onto the toxic memories. This made them extremely conscious of others around them, consequently making them develop trust issues. All the participants shared that they could not trust others around them anymore, because in the back of their mind, they still thought they would be hurt by new friends. P1, P2, P5 and P6 revealed that they no longer share any personal information with anyone for fear of being stabbed in the back again. They have guilty feelings if they end up oversharing.

4.4.3. Unresolved confrontation

Unresolved or dismissed conflicts, in the form of unanswered queries and suppressed feelings, cause emotional strain, making it hard to forgive others. Lack of closure was profound among the participants' shared expressions. P1, P3 and P4 revealed that they still do not know what went wrong in their friendships, that they had to grow apart. This state of confusion was one of the prominent factors why they could not forget or forgive their friends easily. They revealed that they had never realised they were in a toxic friendship until it ended, and they were forced to reflect on it. The continuous remuneration of those emotions made it challenging for the participants to let go.

4.4.4. Societal influence

A person's approach towards forgiveness can be shaped by societal norms, cultural values, and peer interactions. The findings revealed that participants were highly influenced by people around them in both positive and negative ways. Sometimes friends or society make it hard for people to let go of resentment by constantly highlighting the hurt, causing the victims to question their progress. P3, P5 and P6 revealed that peer influence greatly impacted their decision to forgive, because they were reminded of how grave the offense was or how they should not easily forgive their past friends for hurting them. P2 revealed another struggle with societal pressure that peers did not let her process her emotions properly, making her bottle up those negative feelings for years, which made it hard for her to forget.

4.5. Coping strategies

The emotional scars left after the betrayal and friendship breakup are hard to let go of. For which the individuals adopt various coping strategies in order to get rid of this hurtful phase. These coping strategies can be both positive and negative, depending on what works for the individuals going through forgiveness. The coping strategies used by participants are as follows.

4.5.1. Religious coping

The findings revealed that all participants found utmost peace and comfort in their religious teachings, which led them towards extending forgiveness. All the participants revealed that Islam taught them how to forgive and move on by choosing peace and letting go of their grudges and resentment. They shared that by following the teachings of the Holy Quran, by offering their obligatory prayers, and by asking Almighty for help, they were able to find salvation and peace within themselves and were finally able to forgive their transgressors.

4.5.2. Social Support

Social support plays a vital role in extending resilience and emotional healing to individuals who are struggling with forgiving someone. The participants expressed that the people around them assisted immensely in letting go of the negative emotions they had been harbouring in their hearts against their transgressors. Participants revealed that by talking to their siblings, parents, or friends, they were able to gain clarity and make sense of their emotions. The positive support from others helped them in validating their emotions, eventually making them feel at ease with their circumstances.

4.5.3. Distraction techniques

The participants expressed that engaging themselves in different kinds of activities helped them a lot as they were able to distract themselves from their negative and confusing emotions. Distraction tactics proved to be an effective strategy to deal with overwhelming thoughts and feelings when experiencing emotional distress. P1 shared that she started busying herself with activities like baking, painting, and focusing on herself. These techniques proved very fruitful to her. P3 revealed that she immersed herself in reading and found comfort in her books to get rid of her conflicting feelings regarding forgiving her friend. P5 & P6 revealed that they started journaling and penning down their thoughts instead of finding someone else to share them with. Journaling helped them in reflecting upon what was happening to them and how they could get out of this situation. All the techniques proved helpful to the participants when they were struggling with the idea of forgiving their friends.

4.5.4. Avoidance

Avoidance is a common coping mechanism where individuals tend to distance themselves from the source of hurt rather than confronting it. The findings revealed that some of the participants preferred avoiding their emotional pain, and people who caused them that pain to protect themselves and to survive. P1, P2 and P3 shared that they never intended to confront their friends with the fear that they might be blamed again, so they ended up bottling the negative emotions. P4 revealed that she avoided her friend to such an extent that she didn't even look in her direction ever again.

4.5.5. Future provisions

The findings exhibited that after betrayal and being abandoned by their friends, participants decided to guard themselves with future boundaries for further friendships. All of the participants expressed that setting clear boundaries is very important for them now in their future friendships because they do not want to have their expectations hurt anymore. This again manifests the fear of recurrence, due to which participants came up with these boundaries as a source of a coping mechanism. The boundaries could be related to not oversharing with anyone, trying to confront upfront rather than bottling emotions, and setting clear expectations so neither party is hurt.

4.6. Healing through forgiveness

The findings highlighted the importance of forgiving someone for those who extend it towards others in the form of peace, comfort, and freedom from negativity haunting all future endeavors. The benefits of forgiveness experienced by participants are as follows.

4.6.1. Closure

The participants expressed that they were finally able to get closure by forgiving their friends. They experienced closure once they were content with the history they had with their friends and stopped looking for justifications or approvals. P1, P2 and P5 revealed that after forgiving their friends, they finally felt as if they had ended a painful chapter. P3 shared that the decision to forgive someone did not simply mean you have to say the words, but the need to accept it in the heart that you are ready to move on.

4.6.2. Personal Growth

The participants shared that forgiveness helped with their personal growth by prompting healing and resilience. P3 and P4 shared that forgiveness made them realise they were holding onto something toxic, which was hindering them from even recognising their true potential. By extending forgiveness, they were able to embark on their endeavors in the form of socialisation and trying new things. P2 expressed that by forgiving her friend, she was finally able to create

more meaningful memories in her other friendships by being more open. P5 shared that it made her realise that she was human again, devoid of any resentment towards anyone.

4.6.3. Inner peace

The participants expressed that forgiving their transgressors granted them inner peace and freedom. They expressed that when they were holding onto the negative emotions, it made them mentally exhausted, and they could not go on with their lives. Forgiveness provided them with the opportunity to experience peace and tranquility. P1 revealed that as soon as she forgave her friends, she felt as if she were a free bird released from a cage. P2 shared that forgiving her friend helped her leave behind all the negativity and toxicity that she was holding onto. P3 shared that after forgiving my friend, the negative memories stopped bugging her, and she could finally move on. P5 shared that by forgiving her friend, she realised that she was no longer exhausting herself by harbouring negative emotions.

4.6.4. Transformation in self-esteem

The participants expressed that forgiveness transformed their sense of self-esteem in a more positive manner. P1 and P4 felt more open to explore new friendships and new adventures after finally letting go of their negativity and by forgiving their friend. When people are trapped in past hurtful experiences, they are unable to find the courage in themselves to get out of their comfort zones. P3 started making new friends because of the realization that they were capable of doing so, unlike what others had made them believe. P2, P3 & P5 revealed that they were able to communicate openly in their future friendships as a result of a positive change in their self-esteem, which resulted in healthier friendships.

5. Discussion

Forgiveness in friendships is a complex interpersonal phenomenon, influenced by psychological, emotional, and relational factors (Worthington & Scherer, 2004). The findings of the study remain consistent with the work of Worthington and Scherer (2004) in which two forms of forgiveness were suggested, i.e, decisional forgiveness and emotional forgiveness. Decisional forgiveness was evident in circumstances where participants decided to forgive their friends and not seek revenge. On the other hand, emotional forgiveness was conspicuous where they replaced their negative emotions associated with their transgressors with positive ones, including compassion, empathy, and genuine forgiveness. It is also aligned with the concept of emotional decay, in which the intensity of negative emotions lessens with time, leading to a state of subconscious forgiveness (McCullough, 2001). According to a study done by Akhtar, Dolan and Barlow (2017), individuals feel emotionally powerful, satisfied, and let go of resentment against their transgressors once they go through the process of forgiveness. The current study also seconds this claim, where participants shared their healing process after extending forgiveness to their friends who had hurt them. Furthermore, Singh, Tiwari and Rai (2022) claimed that harbouring grudges against offenders makes people feel powerless and it drains their energy, which is strongly backed by the findings of the current study.

Research indicates that shared history is a strong determinant in female friendships, suggesting that prolonged interactions contribute to a deeper emotional foundation (Rawlins, 2009). According to the study participants, even in the face of disagreement, memories and prior emotional ties frequently kept them from completely cutting off their friendships. This is also in coherence with research conducted by Hall (2019), which discovered that people are willing to put up with certain friendship betrayals if there is a prolonged emotional history between the two parties. People who tend to be forgiving towards their offenders after experiencing any transgression from their close ones are said to be more spiritual, agreeable, and emotionally stable as compared to those who are not forgiving at all and are more inclined towards harbouring grudges against their offenders for a lifetime (Berry et al., 2001; McCullough, 2001). This viewpoint is consistent with the current study, suggesting that they were able to find forgiveness in their hearts when they embraced religiosity, empathy, and compassion for their transgressors in place of the animosity that had once been present in their hearts against their friends. Those who hold onto forgiveness tend to experience lower stress levels, reduced depression, and overall well-being (Toussaint, Owen, & Cheadle, 2012). Participants claimed that by forgiving their offenders, they felt as if they were free from those negative and toxic emotions that were holding them back.

As claimed by a study, prolonged anger and continuous remembrance of hurtful events

lead towards reinforcing the emotional pain of victims, consequently encouraging them to keep on reliving the hurt, which in turn intensifies the reluctance to forgiving attitude (Barber, Maltby, & Macaskill, 2005). This was also backed by the findings of the study, in which participants claimed that reliving the negative events made it hard for them to find forgiveness in their hearts. Ysseldyk, Matheson and Anisman (2007) suggested that deep-rooted emotions of hatred and resentment can sometimes become a part of an individual's identity, making it a psychological challenge to let go of grudges against the transgressors, as doing so can feel like betraying oneself. It can also be seen in the findings of the current study, in which participants felt hesitant towards the idea of forgiveness, thinking that it would make their pain and suffering meaningless, if they forgave and forgot their hurtful experiences so easily. Furthermore, the REACH model of Worthington and Scherer (2004) was not fully supported by the participants when it came to granting forgiveness as "an altruistic gift to the transgressors". Most of the participants did not forgive because of their offenders, rather they extended forgiveness for their emotional well-being and to strengthen their moral virtue as a good and practicing muslim.

Exline et al. (2008) argued that individuals who perceive themselves as "good people" but still have that unforgiving behavior towards others tend to go through increased levels of distress, guilty feelings, as well as self-esteem issues. This cognitive imbalance demands that individuals reframe their thinking patterns, which align with their attitudes. The current study identified four different coping strategies employed by participants, which align with the research done by Tremolada, Bonichini and Taverna (2016). Distraction and avoidance coping used by participants come under passive coping approaches that might be useful for a short period. These approaches turn maladaptive if they are overused, inhibiting emotional processing and prolonging distress (Aldwin, 2009; Tremolada, Bonichini, & Taverna, 2016). On the other hand, coping strategies such as religious guidance and social support are termed positive that foster meaning making and effective emotional resilience (Brandão, 2025; Tremolada, Bonichini, & Taverna, 2016). Therefore, it is important to consider the long-term impact of the discussed coping strategies on an individual's well-being. People with low self-esteem tend to ruminate about the past more and struggle with forgiveness, because their experience increases their sense of victimization and the belief that they are not worthy enough (Toussaint, Owen, & Cheadle, 2012). This is in line with the research done by Strelan (2007), who claimed that self-worth is a key predictor of forgiveness. People with higher self-esteem are more forgiving. This is consistent with the findings of the study that after restoring their self-esteem, participants were more prone to forgive their offenders.

6. Conclusion

The study revealed the complex and deep personal narratives of females navigating forgiveness within the context of friendships. It provides a unique contribution by accentuating forgiveness in female friendships, an underexplored area in comparison to familial and romantic relationships. The findings illuminated the intricate dynamic of forgiveness, barriers that hinder the path to this journey, coping strategies that facilitate the process, and the transformative effects of forgiveness. Participants encountered profound emotional barriers that hindered their ability to forgive; they were eventually able to let go by employing different coping strategies. The findings emphasise that forgiveness is a subtle, context dependent process instead of an altruistic gift offered to the transgressors, which challenges the forgiveness models. Significantly, the act of forgiveness not only proved to be a pivotal milestone to mend fractured bonds but also served to be of great importance in terms of self-transformation. These insights broaden the existing forgiveness theories, offering insightful implications in counselling practices, by suggesting the need for interventions acknowledging spiritual motivations in the forgiveness process.

6.1. Limitations

One limitation of the study is the lack of diversity in participants' friendship dynamics. While the study gathered powerful narratives, it may not have been able to capture how forgiveness unfolds among individuals with varying personality traits and emotional responses.

6.2. Implications

The study highlights the emotional complexity of unresolved conflicts of friendships, serving as a need for therapeutic interventions specifically addressing relational forgiveness

and self-esteem rebuilding within females at school or university levels, with the help of peer counseling and support groups. It is highly relevant in today's society, where interpersonal relationships and emotional complexities require healing, which is only possible through forgiveness. Future research can also explore the role of personality types in forgiveness within friendships. The current study employed a cross-sectional framework; however, future studies could explore a longitudinal framework instead of a cross-sectional one to gain insights into how forgiveness evolves.

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