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Effectiveness of Forgiveness Therapy in Enhancing the Meaning in Life Among Young Adults with Depressive Symptoms

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Abstract

Depressive symptoms are prevalent among young adults and are associated with a diminished sense of meaning in life. Emerging adulthood is a transitional developmental period characterized by instability and multiple stressors that may increase vulnerability to psychological distress. However, interventions specifically addressing existential distress and a diminished sense of meaning in life remain limited. This study aimed to examine the effectiveness of forgiveness therapy in enhancing meaning in life among young adults experiencing depressive symptoms. A quasi-experimental pretest–posttest design with a control group was employed, involving young adults aged 18–25 years in Bandung, Indonesia. The experimental group received forgiveness therapy delivered in four sessions across eight meetings, while the control group received no intervention. Meaning in life was assessed using the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ), while depressive symptoms were measured using the Beck Depression Inventory–II (BDI-II). The results indicated statistically significant reductions in BDI-II scores and increases in MLQ scores in the experimental group compared with the control group. The experimental group demonstrated a greater increase in the Presence of Meaning dimension, whereas the control group exhibited higher scores on the Search for Meaning dimension. A strong negative correlation was observed between depressive symptoms and meaning in life ($r = -0.770$, $p = .025$). These findings suggested that forgiveness therapy was associated with reduced depressive symptoms and enhanced meaning in life, potentially by facilitating emotional processing, acceptance of distressing experiences, and the development of a more positive life orientation. Forgiveness therapy may therefore represent a promising psychological intervention for improving meaning in life and supporting psychological well-being among young adults experiencing depressive symptoms.

INTRODUCTION

Mental health problems have become a significant public health concern because of their effects on psychological well-being, daily functioning, and quality of life. Like physical illnesses, mental health conditions vary in severity and may interfere with individuals' ability to perform daily activities, maintain relationships, and fulfill personal responsibilities. Consequently, understanding the factors associated with psychological distress and identifying appropriate interventions have become important priorities in psychological research.

Mental health is as important as physical health, and individuals experiencing psychological difficulties require appropriate attention and psychosocial support to prevent further deterioration in their well-being (Hartini et al., 2018) Mental health problems have become a global concern, particularly because many individuals with mental disorders lack access to high-quality mental health services. Barriers to effective care include social stigma, shortages of qualified mental health professionals, and limited research capacity to support the implementation of evidence-based interventions (Suci Azzahra et al., 2021; Syahrir et al., 2022; Tong & Gao, 2023; Uddin et al., 2022; Wainberg et al., 2017). These challenges are particularly pronounced in low- and middle-income countries, where treatment gaps and inequalities in access to mental health services remain substantial (Moitra et al., 2023). Such conditions highlight the importance of strengthening mental health research and developing accessible psychological interventions.

Mental health care has historically received insufficient attention in many developing countries, particularly compared with services addressing infectious diseases. Global estimates have indicated that nearly one billion people experience mental disorders, while substance-related harms and suicide contribute substantially to preventable mortality (Ridlo, 2020). Mental and substance use disorders represent a considerable proportion of the global disease burden, with depressive and anxiety disorders among the most prevalent conditions (Moitra et al., 2023). According to World Health Organization (WHO) estimates for 2019, approximately 264 million people experienced depression, while an estimated 45 million experienced bipolar disorder, 50 million lived with dementia, and 20 million experienced schizophrenia (Yusrani, Aini, Maghfiroh, & Istanti, 2023). In Indonesia, depression has also been identified as a public health concern. Naurah (2023), citing GoodStats, reported an estimated national depression prevalence of 2.63%. Meanwhile, data from the 2007 Indonesian Basic Health Research survey (Riset Kesehatan Dasar, Riskesdas) indicated that approximately 11.6% of the population experienced emotional mental health problems, highlighting the need for continued attention to psychological well-being (Yuliatun & Megawati, 2021).

Depression is a common mental disorder that can substantially impair psychological functioning and quality of life. Early identification of depressive symptoms is important for facilitating timely assessment, appropriate intervention, and prevention of symptom progression or recurrence (Uddin et al., 2022). Population-based research has reported a prevalence of approximately 9.9% for depressive symptoms across the populations examined, although estimates vary according to assessment methods and diagnostic thresholds (Ayuso-Mateos et al., 2010). Common manifestations include persistent sadness, feelings of emptiness, irritability, diminished interest in activities, and associated cognitive and physical changes (Villarroel et al., 2019).

Depressive symptoms must be distinguished from clinically diagnosed depressive disorders. Although depressive symptoms may occur without meeting the diagnostic criteria for a depressive disorder, they can still cause significant psychological distress and functional impairment (Ayuso-Mateos et al., 2010). Clinical diagnosis requires consideration of symptom type, severity, duration, functional consequences, and relevant exclusion criteria. Under the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5), a major depressive episode generally requires at least five specified symptoms during the same two-week period, including either depressed mood or loss of interest or pleasure. In contrast, individuals experiencing subthreshold depressive symptoms may not meet the full diagnostic criteria despite experiencing meaningful psychological difficulties. Therefore, the absence of a formal depressive disorder diagnosis should not be interpreted as an absence of clinically relevant distress (Ayuso-Mateos et al., 2010).

The distinction between depressive symptoms and depressive disorders is also important for psychological assessment. Diagnosing a depressive disorder generally requires a comprehensive clinical evaluation, whereas depressive symptom severity can be assessed using standardized self-report instruments, such as the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) (Blom et al., 2012). Population data reported that depressive symptoms were particularly prevalent among individuals aged 18–29 years (21.0%), compared with those aged 30–44 years (16.8%), within the populations examined (Villarroel et al., 2019). These findings underscore the importance of investigating depressive symptoms during early adulthood and identifying psychological interventions appropriate for this developmental period.

From a developmental perspective, emerging adulthood is characterized by significant transitions involving education, employment, independent living, and interpersonal relationships. These transitions can generate uncertainty and psychological stress, potentially increasing vulnerability to mental health difficulties (Nelson, 2021; Philippi, 2021; Pilar Matud et al., 2020). Decisions made during this period may have lasting implications for subsequent adult development, making early adulthood an important stage for psychological adjustment and identity formation (Nelson, 2021). Ongoing neurodevelopment and the development of emotional regulation and decision-making capacities may also influence how young adults respond to these challenges (Hernandez et al., 2023; Hicks et al., 2012; Hochberg & Konner, 2020). Furthermore, certain patterns of social media use have been associated with increased vulnerability to depressive symptoms, although these relationships may vary according to individual characteristics and patterns of engagement (Politte-Corn et al., 2023).

Depressive symptoms during early adulthood may interfere with individuals' ability to establish and maintain healthy interpersonal relationships. Previous research has associated depressive symptoms with loneliness, family relationship difficulties, and stressful life events, including employment problems, academic setbacks, and interpersonal conflicts (Leach & Butterworth, 2020). Coping strategies, perceived social support, family relationships, and sleep quality also play important roles in psychological adjustment. Insufficient support and ineffective coping may exacerbate emotional distress and impair daily functioning (Shao et al., 2020). Consequently, depressive symptoms can negatively affect multiple dimensions of psychological well-being and contribute to reduced quality of life (Arias-de la Torre et al., 2021).

Depressive symptoms, including persistent sadness, diminished interest, low motivation, and reduced energy, have also been associated with a diminished sense of meaning in life (Zhou et al., 2023a). Individuals experiencing these symptoms may struggle to identify personal goals, recognize the significance of daily activities, or maintain a positive outlook toward the future. Conversely, a stronger sense of meaning in life has been associated with greater self-acceptance, psychological resilience, emotional well-being, and a reduced vulnerability to psychopathological symptoms (Barcaccia et al., 2023).

To explore these concerns within the local context, a preliminary study was conducted with five students in Bandung, Indonesia. Participants reported low motivation, persistent sadness, reduced enthusiasm, diminished self-confidence, feelings of worthlessness and failure, and difficulties making decisions. They associated these experiences with academic pressure, social expectations, unfavorable social comparisons, inadequate support systems, interpersonal difficulties, family relationships, parenting experiences, and unresolved adverse childhood experiences. Participants also described disruptions to their daily functioning and uncertainty regarding their life goals, personal direction, and sources of happiness. These preliminary observations suggested that depressive symptoms and difficulties identifying meaning in life were relevant concerns among the individuals interviewed, providing an initial basis for further investigation.

Meaning in life is an important dimension of psychological well-being that reflects individuals' perceptions of purpose, coherence, and significance in their experiences. A stronger sense of meaning has been associated with more adaptive responses to stressful circumstances and may serve as a protective factor against psychological distress and suicidal ideation (Arnett, 2000; Arslan & Allen, 2022). Conversely, individuals experiencing depressive symptoms may report feelings of emptiness, helplessness, and worthlessness. Previous research has suggested that meaning in life may mediate relationships involving depressive symptoms, hopelessness, and suicide risk, indicating its potential importance as a target for psychological intervention (Sun et al., 2022).

Previous studies have demonstrated that individuals experiencing depressive symptoms frequently report a diminished sense of purpose, uncertainty about the future, and difficulty recognizing the significance of everyday experiences. Higher levels of meaning in life have generally been associated with lower levels of depressive symptoms, greater life satisfaction, and more favorable psychological functioning (Connelly et al., 2013; Dewitte et al., 2022). Similarly, a study involving 279 participants, of whom 72% were women, found that meaning in life was positively associated with psychological well-being, self-esteem, life satisfaction, optimism, hope, positive social relationships, and religiosity. Participants reporting a stronger sense of meaning also tended to exhibit fewer symptoms of depression, anxiety, stress, and negative affect (Campos et al., 2020).

Given these associations, various psychological interventions have been investigated for their potential to enhance meaning in life. A review by (Maciejewski, 2020; Manco & Hamby, 2021) identified several approaches associated with improvements in meaning-related outcomes. Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) demonstrated a substantial positive effect, with a reported effect size of 1.57, while narrative interventions showed a moderate positive effect, with an effect size of 0.61. Other approaches included psychotherapy, psychoeducation, prosocial interventions, and spiritual reminiscence. These interventions

addressed meaning in life through different psychological processes, including present-moment awareness, personal reflection, emotional adjustment, social engagement, and the integration of life experiences (Manco & Hamby, 2021).

Additional approaches include logotherapy, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), and meaning-centered group psychotherapy. Logotherapy emphasizes the identification of personal meaning and purpose, whereas CBT addresses maladaptive cognitive patterns that may contribute to psychological distress. Meaning-centered group psychotherapy has also been applied in clinical settings, including among individuals experiencing cancer-related psychological difficulties (Routledge & FioRito, 2021; Serdar et al., 2021; Shao et al., 2020; Siedlecki, 2020; Sierra et al., 2013; Steger, 2022; Steger et al., 2006). Research on logotherapy has suggested that developing a more meaningful perspective on personal circumstances may promote gratitude and psychological adjustment (Syahrir et al., 2022). Furthermore, a study applying Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) in group counseling examined the relationship between irrational beliefs, self-perceptions, personal branding, and meaning in life. The findings suggested that more adaptive self-perceptions and rational thinking were associated with a stronger sense of meaning (Suci Azzahra et al., 2021).

Despite these findings, further research is needed to identify interventions that specifically address existential distress and diminished meaning in life among young adults experiencing depressive symptoms. Previous literature has emphasized the importance of examining the context, mechanisms, and outcomes of psychological interventions to understand how and under what circumstances meaningful psychological changes occur (Dian et al., 2022; Guerrero-Torrelles et al., 2017). In particular, interventions targeting meaning in life should consider the personal experiences contributing to existential distress, the psychological processes through which change occurs, and the extent to which participants develop a stronger sense of purpose, self-understanding, and continuity between past experiences and future aspirations.

Although CBT and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) have demonstrated benefits for psychological distress, their therapeutic mechanisms differ. CBT primarily addresses maladaptive thought patterns and associated behaviors, whereas ACT emphasizes psychological flexibility, acceptance, mindfulness, and values-based action (Hofmann et al., 2019). Existential approaches within positive psychology also emphasize meaning-making and the integration of positive and negative life experiences (Wong, 2020). Nevertheless, further investigation is warranted into interventions that explicitly address unresolved interpersonal hurt, resentment, and emotional distress as potential barriers to meaning-making. Forgiveness therapy represents one such approach. Previous research has examined forgiveness-based interventions in relation to depression, anxiety, interpersonal difficulties, and other psychological concerns (Enright, 2015). Forgiveness therapy seeks to facilitate the processing of painful experiences and emotions, including anger, sadness, and resentment, while supporting the development of more adaptive perspectives toward oneself and others. These processes may contribute to reductions in depressive symptoms and improvements in psychological well-being, although their specific effects on meaning in life require further empirical investigation (Enright, 2015).

This study was conducted in Bandung, West Java, Indonesia. Data from the 2023 Indonesian Health Survey indicated that West Java had a reported depression prevalence of

3.3%, highlighting the importance of mental health concerns in the province (Ministry of Health of the Republic of Indonesia, 2024). As the provincial capital and a major urban center, Bandung provided a relevant setting for examining psychological difficulties among young adults. Furthermore, data published by the Central Statistics Agency of Bandung City indicated that 58.58% of the specified population of young adults experiencing mental health problems used health insurance for treatment, emphasizing the relevance of mental health service accessibility within the local context (Central Statistics Agency of the City of Bandung, 2021). These findings, together with the preliminary observations, provided a contextual basis for investigating psychological interventions among young adults experiencing depressive symptoms in Bandung.

Taken together, previous research established an association between depressive symptoms and diminished meaning in life, while highlighting the potential benefits of psychological interventions targeting emotional distress and meaning-making. However, evidence concerning the effectiveness of forgiveness therapy in enhancing meaning in life among young adults with depressive symptoms remained limited. This gap provided the rationale for examining whether forgiveness therapy could improve meaning in life while reducing depressive symptoms in this population. Accordingly, this study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of forgiveness therapy in enhancing meaning in life among young adults experiencing depressive symptoms in Bandung, Indonesia.

METHOD

This study employed a quasi-experimental pretest–posttest control group design to examine the effectiveness of forgiveness therapy in enhancing meaning in life among young adults aged 18–25 years experiencing depressive symptoms. Both the experimental and control groups completed pretest and posttest assessments; however, only the experimental group received forgiveness therapy. This design enabled comparisons of changes in meaning in life and depressive symptoms between the two groups.

The independent variable was forgiveness therapy, administered in four sessions comprising eight meetings of approximately 60 minutes each. The intervention followed four phases: uncovering, decision, work, and deepening, which focused on identifying and processing negative emotions, developing forgiveness, and fostering more adaptive perspectives on life experiences. The primary dependent variable was meaning in life, assessed using the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ), which comprises two dimensions: Presence of Meaning and Search for Meaning. Depressive symptoms were assessed using the Beck Depression Inventory–II (BDI-II) as an additional outcome variable. Eligible participants were young adults experiencing depressive symptoms and reporting low meaning in life who agreed to complete the intervention. Individuals receiving psychiatric treatment or other psychological therapies, as well as those with severe mental disorders or serious physical conditions that could interfere with participation, were excluded.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

An Overview of the Meaning of Life in Early Adulthood with Symptoms of Depression

The descriptive analysis of the pretest and posttest scores on the BDI (Beck Depression Inventory) and MLQ (Meaning in Life Questionnaire) revealed clear changes in both variables.

BDI scores decreased following the forgiveness therapy intervention, while MLQ scores increased. This pattern indicates that forgiveness therapy not only reduces depressive symptoms but also succeeds in enhancing an individual's sense of meaning in life. This can be explained through the interrelated psychological, emotional, and existential processes described by Enright and Fitzgibbons (2015), who state that forgiveness therapy centers on the process of forgiving oneself, others, and painful life circumstances. This process plays a key role in relieving the burden of negative emotions—such as anger, guilt, resentment, and regret—which are often primary triggers of depression.

The experimental group showed an increase in meaning in life, whereas the control group showed a slight decrease. This difference is attributable to the absence of forgiveness therapy in the control group: without psychological stimuli focused on self-reflection, acceptance, and forgiveness, participants in this group did not experience a meaningful increase in life meaning, and in some cases even experienced stagnation or decline in the absence of emotional or psychoeducational support.

These findings align with the theory proposed by Nyder, Lopez, Edwards, and Marques (2021), who describe meaning in life as a dynamic psychological construct that develops through experience, self-reflection, and meaningful social interaction. According to this theory, meaning in life comprises three core dimensions—coherence, purpose, and significance—which together shape an individual's perception of meaning and direction in life.

The more pronounced increase observed in the experimental group suggests that the intervention directly stimulated all three dimensions. Through reflective activities, self-exploration, and the setting of directed life goals, participants in the experimental group were given the opportunity to better understand the order of their lives (coherence) by exploring and interpreting personal experiences in depth. This reflective process helped participants connect past experiences, present circumstances, and future hopes—precisely the process that, according to Nyder et al. (2021), forms a sense of coherence.

The intervention also fostered awareness of life goals, values, and intrinsic motivation through activities such as personal goal-setting, discussions on the meaning of success, and meaningful life planning. This corresponds to the purpose dimension described by Nyder et al. (2021), in which meaning in life increases as individuals gain a clearer sense of direction. In other words, active, reflective treatment strengthened participants' life orientation, resulting in a more significant increase in meaning compared to the control group.

Beyond cognitive and motivational aspects, the intervention also cultivated a sense of self-worth and connectedness. Collaborative activities, group support, and the sharing of life stories gave participants a sense that their existence held meaning and impact for others—corresponding to the significance dimension described by Nyder et al. (2021) as a key component strengthening one's perception that life has value. This explains why the experimental group, benefiting from social support and emotional engagement absent in the control group, showed greater improvement overall—reinforcing Nyder et al.'s (2021) claim that meaning in life can be significantly enhanced through experiences designed to build awareness of meaningful values, goals, and relationships.

The modest increase observed even in the control group, despite receiving no treatment, demonstrates that meaning in life is dynamic and adaptive, shaped by the broader context of an individual's life. As Nyder et al. (2021) explain, meaning is not formed solely through structured

programs or treatment; it can also develop through natural processes as individuals navigate experiences, environmental changes, and everyday self-reflection. Even without intervention, participants in the control group continued to have life experiences, social interactions, and value-internalization processes that could enhance their sense of meaning—consistent with Nyder et al.'s (2021) view that meaning in life results from an ongoing, lifelong search for and discovery of meaning.

The control group also remained exposed to social environments and daily activities—interactions with friends, family, and academic or work life—that can foster awareness of meaning, since, as Nyder et al. (2021) note, meaning often arises from social relationships that provide a sense of relatedness and significance. Simply being part of a study on meaning in life may itself have prompted participants to reconsider their values, goals, and life roles—a phenomenon known as the Hawthorne effect, whereby awareness of research participation makes individuals more reflective and self-motivated even without receiving direct treatment. This is consistent with the positive psychology perspective, and with Nyder et al.'s (2021) assertion that humans possess an intrinsic capacity to interpret life experiences and construct coherence even without external intervention. The increase observed in the control group can therefore be understood as the product of a naturally occurring process of psychological adaptation and growth.

In sum, the increase in meaning in life in the experimental group reflects a systematic intervention that intensively stimulated reflection, purpose, and a sense of meaning, whereas the increase in the control group emerged more naturally and adaptively, through personal reflection and everyday life experience. As Nyder, Lopez, Edwards, and Marques (2021) explain, meaning in life can grow both through natural processes and through interventions deliberately designed to strengthen the dimensions of coherence, purpose, and significance.

The Effectiveness of Forgiveness Therapy in Improving Meaning in Life

The results show that forgiveness therapy has a significant effect on increasing meaning in life among early adults in the city of Bandung. These findings indicate that the forgiveness process not only reduces the burden of negative emotion but also plays an important role in fostering the presence of meaning in life. Forgiveness therapy thus functions as an effective psychological intervention that helps individuals move from experiences of suffering toward a deeper sense of self-meaning.

These findings align with Worthington's (2006) view that forgiveness is an emotional and cognitive process in which individuals choose to release feelings of anger, resentment, and hatred toward both others and themselves, replacing these negative emotions with empathy, love, and acceptance. As individuals go through this process, they learn to see their suffering from a new perspective—not as a source of hurt, but as an experience that offers lessons and meaning—consistent with Frankl's (1963) assertion that meaning in life is often found precisely through suffering that is consciously and responsibly confronted. Forgiveness therapy therefore serves as a medium that leads individuals to extract positive value from painful experiences, thereby increasing the presence of meaning in their lives.

Beyond helping individuals find new meaning, forgiveness therapy also lowers the emotional burden that has hindered psychological growth. Negative emotions such as anger and guilt often produce what Frankl (1963) termed an "existential vacuum," a state in which individuals lose their sense of direction in life. Through the forgiveness process, individuals

release these burdens and open inner space for reflection and self-acceptance—consistent with Harris et al.'s (2006) findings that forgiveness-based interventions significantly lower depression levels while improving meaning in life.

According to Enright and Fitzgibbons (2000), forgiveness therapy is a form of reconciliation with the self that allows individuals to integrate wounded parts of themselves into a complete identity. Through this process, individuals learn to understand, accept, and reconstruct their past experiences as part of a meaningful life journey—no longer viewing themselves as victims of the past, but as individuals capable of growth and learning from experience. This strengthens the presence of meaning, since meaning in life arises from the courage to accept and integrate all aspects of the self, including painful experiences.

The forgiveness process also positively affects interpersonal and social relationships. According to McCullough (2001), individuals who are able to forgive tend to show greater empathy, build more positive relationships, and feel more connected to others—social connectedness being an important source of meaning in life, since meaning is often found through relationships and contributions to others. In line with Wong (2012), meaning in life derives not only from self-reflection but also from an individual's sense of attachment to broader spiritual and humanitarian values. Forgiveness therapy therefore cultivates not only personal meaning, but also relational and spiritual meaning among participants.

The results also reveal a psychological transition from Searching for Meaning to Presence of Meaning. Prior to the intervention, many participants showed a strong tendency toward searching for meaning, reflecting an existential need to understand life's purpose that had not yet been fulfilled. Following forgiveness therapy, the experimental group showed a significant increase in Presence of Meaning, indicating that participants began to genuinely experience and live out meaning in their daily lives—consistent with Steger and Frazier's (2005) view that the search for meaning can serve as an initial stage toward genuine meaning when supported by deep reflection and well-managed emotional processing. Forgiveness therapy thus acts as a facilitator of this transition, providing a safe space for reflection, self-acceptance, and the discovery of meaning.

Within the context of early adulthood in Bandung, these findings carry particular social and psychological relevance. Early adulthood is a transitional period marked by significant demands and uncertainty—career pressures, interpersonal relationships, and the search for self-identity. The competitive social conditions of urban life in Bandung can give rise to existential anxiety and a sense of lost direction. As Routledge and FioRito (2021) explain, individuals living in high-pressure social environments tend to experience a crisis of meaning and require interventions that guide them toward self-reflection and emotional acceptance. This study demonstrates that forgiveness therapy is able to meet this need by helping individuals rediscover life direction through the process of forgiveness and reconstruction.

Theoretically, these findings reinforce Frankl's (1963) view that meaning in life is not passively given but actively created through how individuals interpret their suffering and responsibilities in life. Forgiveness therapy represents a concrete application of Frankl's logotherapy principles, transforming suffering into valuable life lessons through the process of forgiveness. Practically, these findings suggest that forgiveness therapy can serve as an effective approach for improving psychological well-being and cultivating meaning in life, both in clinical settings and in character education for early adults. In sum, forgiveness therapy has a

significant positive effect on meaning in life: through forgiveness, individuals not only free themselves from emotional suffering but also rediscover their values, purpose, and life direction—marking an existential transformation from searching for meaning to fully living it. These findings are consistent with prior research (Worthington, 2006; Steger et al., 2008; Wong, 2012; Routledge & FioRito, 2021), affirming that forgiveness and existential reflection are key to building a meaningful and psychologically resilient life.

Changes in the Meaning of Life During Early Adulthood

Meaning in life is a critical component of psychological well-being, reflecting the extent to which individuals understand and experience purpose in their lives. In this study, meaning in life for both the control and experimental groups was measured using the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ), which comprises two dimensions: Searching for Meaning and Presence of Meaning.The results revealed differing patterns of increase between the two groups: the control group showed a more dominant increase in Searching for Meaning, while the experimental group showed a more dominant increase in Presence of Meaning.

On the Searching for Meaning dimension, the control group had a higher average score than the experimental group, indicating that control-group participants remained in an active phase of searching for meaning. This is consistent with existential development theory, which describes Searching for Meaning as an active process in which individuals attempt to find life's meaning because they feel they have not yet found it (Steger et al., 2008). A higher score in the control group thus suggests these participants continued to experience a sense of meaninglessness and remained engaged in an ongoing effort to understand the direction of their lives.

Within existential psychology, a high level of Searching for Meaning indicates awareness of the importance of meaning without yet having found a clear way to realize it—consistent with Routledge and FioRito's (2021) explanation that the search for meaning is an existential response to uncertainty and suffering, one that pushes individuals to build coherence, an understanding that life, however difficult, can still be interpreted and lived purposefully. In this sense, the search intensifies as individuals begin to view their past not as a burden but as a source of existential learning.

According to Wong (2012), forming meaning requires existential reflection—deep engagement with life experiences alongside the ability to accept and integrate emerging emotions. Without this reflective mechanism, individuals risk becoming trapped in a repetitive cycle of searching, perceiving meaning as something perpetually unattained. This is consistent with Steger and Kashdan's (2007) finding that individuals with high Searching for Meaning but low Presence of Meaning often experience existential tension, anxiety, and uncertainty about life direction—meaning that a dominant search for meaning does not indicate success in finding purpose, but rather reflects unmet psychological needs.

On the Presence of Meaning dimension, the independent t-test showed a significantly higher average score in the experimental group compared to the control group. This indicates that forgiveness therapy not only enhances the search for meaning but also strengthens participants' sense that their lives hold meaningful direction and purpose. This increase reflects that, having gone through the process of acceptance and forgiveness, participants began to experience peace, self-acceptance, and a wholeness of meaning in life. Forgiveness allowed participants to reframe their values, discover new motivations, and integrate past experiences

into a more positive life narrative. As Routledge and FioRito (2021) note, the presence of meaning correlates with psychological well-being, happiness, and a sense of self-control, while Frankl's (1963) logotherapy asserts that individuals can find meaning even in suffering, provided they interpret it constructively.

Participants in the experimental group who received forgiveness therapy tended to show decreased Searching for Meaning scores alongside dominant Presence of Meaning scores. This decrease does not indicate a loss of meaning but rather suggests that these participants had already found meaning, reducing the intensity of their search. The dominance of Presence of Meaning also suggests that participants became more actively engaged in reflecting on past experiences—particularly painful ones—and in identifying the positive value behind them. As individuals learned to forgive both themselves and others, they opened inner space to discover new meaning in experiences previously perceived as negative, guided by forgiveness therapy's focus on identifying negative emotions (such as anger, disappointment, and guilt) and releasing them through acceptance and forgiveness. This is consistent with Routledge and FioRito's (2021) observation that the search for meaning typically declines once individuals achieve clarity of meaning in life—in other words, the forgiveness process closes the search phase and opens the phase of accepting meaning.

The Effectiveness of Forgiveness Therapy in Reducing Symptoms of Depression

The results show that forgiveness therapy had a significant effect in reducing depression levels, as measured by the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI). Following participation in forgiveness therapy sessions, participants showed a consistent decrease in depression scores compared to their pre-intervention condition, indicating that the forgiveness process plays an important role in helping individuals manage negative emotions rooted in past experience and achieve a more adaptive emotional balance.

According to Beck (1967), depression arises from repeated negative thinking about oneself, the world, and the future—known as the negative cognitive triad. Individuals who experience guilt, resentment, or deep regret tend to reinforce these thought patterns, worsening depressive symptoms. Forgiveness therapy works by challenging and replacing these negative thought patterns through reflection and self-acceptance; as individuals learn to forgive themselves or others, they release destructive emotions and build a more realistic and self-compassionate view of themselves, reducing the intensity of the automatic negative thoughts that, in Beck's cognitive model, are a primary source of depression.

These findings align with Freedman and Enright's (1996) research, which found that forgiveness programs can significantly reduce depressive symptoms among individuals carrying deep emotional wounds. The forgiveness process has been shown to reduce negative emotions such as anger, resentment, and guilt—key psychological triggers of depression—allowing individuals to experience inner relief and liberation from a previously suppressive emotional burden, thereby improving psychological well-being. From a clinical psychology perspective, forgiveness therapy functions as a form of emotion-focused therapy, emphasizing emotional processing that enables individuals to regulate their affective experiences in a healthy way. As Greenberg and Pascual-Leone (2006) note, depression often stems from unresolved emotions such as deep sadness or loss; through forgiveness therapy, individuals are guided to express, understand, and ultimately release these emotions, achieving an emotional catharsis that relieves the inner tension underlying psychological distress. Following this release, individuals show

reduced symptoms such as emotional exhaustion, feelings of worthlessness, and loss of interest in life—key indicators measured by the BDI.

The forgiveness process also fosters positive feelings such as empathy, compassion, and self-acceptance. According to McCullough (2001), forgiveness shifts emotional orientation from hatred to empathy, from resentment to compassion, and from despair to acceptance—a shift that plays an important role in reducing depressive symptoms, as individuals are no longer trapped in a cycle of negative emotion that produces chronic psychological stress. Forgiveness therapy can thus be understood as a mechanism of affective restructuring, through which individuals change how they feel about and respond to painful past experiences.

The decrease in BDI scores observed in this study reflects meaningful changes across the affective, cognitive, and somatic dimensions of depression. Affectively, participants reported feeling calmer, with reduced sadness and guilt and increased inner peace. Cognitively, they began to evaluate themselves more positively, held fewer pessimistic thoughts about the future, and adopted a more realistic outlook on life. Somatically, participants reported increased energy and motivation for daily activities, signaling a restoration of psychophysiological balance. Together, these changes suggest that forgiveness therapy is capable of addressing both the cognitive and emotional core of depression.

This finding can also be explained through Viktor Frankl's (1963) logotherapy, which holds that the loss of meaning in life is a root cause of psychological suffering, including depression. In forgiveness therapy, individuals are guided to rediscover meaning by reinterpreting suffering as part of personal growth rather than as punishment or failure. Once meaning is found behind a painful experience, depression no longer dominates consciousness, because suffering has been given direction and value. This therapy therefore not only reduces depressive symptoms but also strengthens existential resilience—the capacity to remain steady and empowered in the face of suffering.

These findings are consistent with Harris et al.'s (2006) research, which found forgiveness-based interventions effective in lowering depression and improving psychological well-being among individuals with interpersonal trauma. Harris explains that forgiveness is not merely a moral act but a complex psychological process involving the reconstruction of self-identity: as individuals release anger and hatred, they rebuild a perception of themselves as strong and worthy, which raises self-esteem and, in turn, directly reduces depression.

These findings are also highly relevant to the context of early adulthood. This developmental phase is characterized by social pressure, career challenges, and intense interpersonal dynamics; failure, rejection, or emotional conflict during this period often produce feelings of guilt and disappointment toward oneself and others, which—without effective emotional management—can develop into depression. Forgiveness therapy offers an adaptive intervention for this age group, helping individuals process inner wounds, regulate emotions, and rebuild a more positive and meaningful life orientation. Conceptually, the success of forgiveness therapy in lowering BDI scores reinforces the integrative model of modern psychotherapy, which views mental health as a balance between emotional, cognitive, social, and spiritual dimensions. By releasing the emotional burdens of the past, individuals open space for psychological and spiritual growth—showing that forgiveness is not merely a strategy for symptom reduction but a means of existential recovery leading toward a more meaningful and emotionally healthy life.

In sum, forgiveness therapy has a significant effect in reducing depression as measured by the Beck Depression Inventory. The forgiveness process has proven effective in reducing negative emotion, correcting maladaptive thought patterns, and restoring psychological balance—not only lowering depressive symptoms but also strengthening individuals' capacity to accept, understand, and constructively interpret their life experiences. These findings are consistent with prior research (Beck, 1967; Freedman & Enright, 1996; Harris et al., 2006; McCullough, 2001; Frankl, 1963) affirming that forgiveness is a key mechanism in the recovery from depression and the enhancement of overall psychological well-being.

The Relationship Between Meaning in Life and Symptoms of Depression

Correlational analysis revealed a significant relationship between depression (BDI) and meaning in life (MLQ), with a correlation coefficient of $r = -0.770$ and a significance level of $p = 0.025$ (< 0.05). This strong negative relationship indicates that higher levels of depression correspond to lower perceived meaning in life, and conversely, higher meaning in life corresponds to lower levels of depression.

This finding is consistent with Viktor E. Frankl's (2006) meaning-centered therapy (logotherapy), which holds that the loss of meaning in life is a primary root of existential suffering, leading to feelings of emptiness, hopelessness, and depression. Frankl argued that humans have a fundamental need to find meaning even amid suffering; when this need goes unmet, individuals tend to experience an existential vacuum that triggers depressive symptoms and a loss of life direction.

In this study, the decrease in BDI scores alongside the increase in MLQ scores in the experimental group demonstrates that forgiveness-focused therapy helped participants come to terms with past experiences, release feelings of guilt or anger, and discover new meaning from negative experiences. Forgiveness therapy thus serves as a medium for strengthening meaning in life while reducing the emotional burden that contributes to depression.

These findings also align with the positive psychology perspectives of Seligman (2011) and Ryff (1989). Seligman argues that individuals who develop a strong sense of meaning in life achieve higher levels of well-being, while Ryff identifies purpose in life and personal growth as key indicators of psychological well-being—meaning that individuals with clear life direction tend to show greater resilience against psychological stressors such as depression, stress, and anxiety. Steger et al. (2008) similarly found that Presence of Meaning is negatively associated with depression, while Searching for Meaning without a clear direction can increase vulnerability to stress. Improving meaning in life through reflection, acceptance, and forgiveness therefore represents a key mechanism for reducing depression.

Overall, these results support the view that meaning in life plays a protective role against emotional disturbance. Individuals capable of finding meaning in their experiences—including painful ones—tend to show greater resilience and are better able to interpret suffering as part of personal growth. Conversely, the loss of meaning in life can hinder emotional adaptability, reinforce feelings of emptiness, and increase the risk of depression.

Although some literature suggests that sample sizes of 4 to 6 participants per group are acceptable for two-group studies (Serdar et al., 2021), this relatively small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings to the broader population of early adults experiencing depressive symptoms. A larger and more diverse sample would allow the results to be generalized more confidently.This study did not include an optimal post-intervention follow-up

measurement, relying instead primarily on pretest and posttest scores collected during the research period. To more fully assess the effectiveness of forgiveness therapy in improving meaning in life among early adults with depressive symptoms, future research should incorporate follow-up assessments to examine whether participants experience significant long-term changes in their daily lives after the intervention.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicated that forgiveness therapy was effective in enhancing meaning in life among young adults experiencing depressive symptoms. Statistical analyses demonstrated improvements in meaning in life following the intervention, with the reported effect size and normalized gain (N-gain) indicating a substantial treatment effect. Differences between the experimental and control groups further supported the effectiveness of forgiveness therapy in improving participants' sense of meaning and purpose in life.

The improvement in meaning in life was particularly evident in the Presence of Meaning dimension of the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ). Participants in the experimental group, who received forgiveness therapy, demonstrated increased Presence of Meaning scores following the intervention, suggesting a stronger sense of purpose and significance in their lives. In contrast, the control group did not demonstrate a statistically significant improvement in Presence of Meaning, while scores on the Search for Meaning dimension remained relatively high. These findings suggested that forgiveness therapy contributed to strengthening participants' existing sense of meaning in life, rather than merely increasing their efforts to search for meaning.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

If relevant, statements regarding the contributions of each author may be included in this section.

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