“You Can’t Do Recovery Without Forgiveness”: Insights from Couples Navigating Addiction Recovery

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Abstract

Forgiveness plays a crucial role in addiction recovery, particularly in relationships where one partner is in recovery from substance use disorder (SUD) and the other is not. This study explores how self-forgiveness, interpersonal forgiveness, and divine forgiveness manifest and interact within these relationships, shaping both personal and relational healing. While past research has examined these forms independently, their interconnected impact in addiction recovery remains underexplored.

Using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009), this qualitative study captures the lived experiences of individuals in recovery and their partners. Findings revealed forgiveness as a dynamic and evolving journey rather than a single event. Spirituality emerged as a foundational force, with many participants relying on faith to navigate the tension between control and surrender. Self-forgiveness proved particularly complex, often requiring years of reflection and emotional labor. Interpersonal forgiveness was described as both transformative and burdensome, with participants wrestling with the endurance required to repeatedly forgive relapses and past betrayals. Despite these challenges, forgiveness was ultimately experienced as a form of liberation—allowing individuals to release shame, rebuild trust, and move toward a future defined by resilience rather than regret.

These findings underscore the transformative role of forgiveness in reducing shame, fostering healing, and promoting long-term recovery. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of forgiveness in addiction-affected relationships and informs clinical interventions, faith-based support, and couples counseling.

Key words: forgiveness, divine forgiveness, interpersonal forgiveness, self-forgiveness, addiction, spirituality

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the concept of forgiveness and its various domains within relationships, which are the focus of this study. This chapter provides a summary of what is known about forgiveness processes in couple relationships. The specific emphasis is on couples where one partner is in recovery from addiction while the other is not. Additionally, I outline the knowledge gaps that this study aims to address. Finally, the chapter concludes with an overview of the study aims and the research questions that guided the study.

Interpersonal relationships can provide satisfaction, happiness, fulfillment, and personal growth, but they can also lead to suffering and conflict (Gismero-González et al., 2020). When people are hurt or offended within relationships, they may feel unforgiveness towards those who have crossed their boundaries. The confluence of these negative emotions has been termed "unforgiveness" (Webb, 2021). This unforgiveness can lead to further conflict and emotional distress within the relationship, affecting overall satisfaction and happiness. It can also cause individuals to harshly judge or condemn the offender—whether that person is someone else or themselves (Webb, 2021). Forgiveness can be an important aspect of human relationships, serving as a cornerstone for healing and reconciliation, and it can also be crucial for an individual's well-being and self-esteem.

Understanding the multifaceted nature of forgiveness is essential, as it can occur between individuals, within oneself, and in relationship to the divine (Fincham & May, 2020). Each type of forgiveness has interconnected implications for mental, emotional, and relational well-being. Previous research has highlighted the relationship between self-forgiveness, interpersonal forgiveness, and

perceived divine forgiveness, showing that these dimensions can mutually influence one another (Fincham & May, 2020; Fincham et al., 2020; McConnell & Dixon, 2012). Thus, forgiveness plays a critical role not only in interpersonal dynamics but also in personal and spiritual realms.

Although definitions of forgiveness vary, scholars generally agree that it involves changing one's motivation toward an offender. This change is typically marked by a decrease in the desire for revenge and avoidance, an increase in benevolence, and the ability to let go of past hurts while fostering positive emotions and attitudes (Fincham & Beach, 2007; Greenberg et al., 2010; Riek & Mania, 2012). Forgiveness can be sought or granted. Granting forgiveness involves releasing resentment and a desire for retaliation, while seeking forgiveness involves the wrongdoer taking responsibility and making amends (Witvliet, 2019).

Self-forgiveness, distinct from interpersonal forgiveness, also functions as a coping strategy by reducing negative thoughts, emotions, and behaviors toward oneself, while fostering positive self-regard (Davis et al., 2014). Perceived divine forgiveness (DF), though more complex and challenging to define, is another critical aspect, often emerging in contexts with religious or spiritual significance (Fincham, 2022). Although it varies based on individual perceptions and beliefs, DF can impact personal healing processes in both temporal and spiritual contexts, which may be particularly relevant in recovery from addiction. However, forgiveness in all its forms—whether self, interpersonal, or divine—has unique implications for individuals navigating the challenges of addiction recovery, particularly for couples working to rebuild trust and relational health.

The Role of Forgiveness in Addiction Recovery

Substance Use Disorders (SUDs) are highly prevalent, affecting 7.4% of people over the age of 12 in the US, and are associated with significant relational problems, including worsened relationship functioning, intimate partner violence, and marital dissolution (Hogue et al., 2022). For couples navigating the challenges of addiction recovery, forgiveness becomes increasingly complex. Individuals in recovery from SUD often experience higher levels of relationship distress, resentment, and shame compared to the general population (Lin et al., 2004). Such issues can heighten the risk of problematic substance use and relapse (Fals-Stewart et al., 2009). Substance abuse exacerbates marital and family problems, with addiction-related issues leading to reciprocal dissatisfaction and disparities in cognitions, attitudes, and expectations between individuals with addiction and their significant others (Hussaarts et al., 2012). Recovery involves not only overcoming individual struggles but also addressing relational wounds and rebuilding trust. Intimate relationships play a crucial role in both the development of and recovery from addictive disorders (Ariss & Fairbairn, 2020; Sherrell & Gutierrez, 2014). Historically, addiction has been treated as an individual issue, but effective treatment and recovery must include family members to prevent relapse and family separation (Esteban et al., 2023).

Forgiveness plays a critical role in addiction recovery, serving as a pathway to healing not only for individuals in recovery but also for their relationships with others. In relationships, unresolved conflicts can lead to the buildup of negative emotions such as resentment and anger, often referred to as *unforgiveness* (Webb, 2021). This state of unforgiveness can contribute to prolonged emotional distress, hindering relational harmony and complicating the process of recovery for couples affected by addiction. Forgiveness, on the other hand, offers a pathway to healing by addressing these negative

emotions, helping individuals release resentment and fostering reconciliation (Worthington & Wade, 2020). Understanding how forgiveness and unforgiveness interplay within couples is crucial, as it can significantly impact both personal well-being and relationship dynamics during the recovery journey. In the context of addiction, forgiveness is multifaceted, encompassing self-forgiveness, interpersonal forgiveness, and divine forgiveness. These domains are integral in helping individuals reconcile past mistakes, rebuild trust in relationships, and move forward in their recovery journey.

As a family systems scholar and marriage and family therapist, my professional background provides a unique lens for understanding the relational dynamics involved in forgiveness. My experience working extensively with individuals and couples navigating the complexities of addiction recovery has deepened my appreciation for how forgiveness can serve as a pivotal force in repairing damaged relationships and fostering personal growth. However, I am also aware that my background as a therapist might have shaped how I approached the study, especially in terms of the empathy and understanding I brought into the interviews. I may be inclined to perceive participants' experiences through the lens of therapeutic growth, which could unintentionally lead me to focus more on healing and relational improvement, potentially overlooking other dynamics.

As a Christian, my faith informed my understanding of forgiveness, particularly in how it aligned with concepts of grace, redemption, and healing. While this spiritual perspective provided valuable insight, I recognize that it might also lead to certain assumptions about participants' views on forgiveness, especially if they come from different cultural or faith backgrounds or do not adhere to the spiritual principles of forgiveness that are emphasized in the Twelve Steps model or Christianity. To address this potential bias, I ensured that my interview questions were open-ended and inclusive, allowing participants

to share their experiences of forgiveness in whatever terms make sense for them, whether spiritual or not. By reflecting on how my faith influences my perspective on forgiveness, I aimed to remain open to a wide range of experiences and perspectives beyond those that align with my own beliefs. To ensure these influences are managed, I accounted for them throughout the research process, as further outlined in the methods chapter.

Given that many participants in recovery adhered to the Twelve Steps model, which emphasizes spiritual growth and seeking forgiveness from others, I recognized that my shared spiritual context with some participants helped foster rapport. However, I am also aware that it might have created assumptions about shared understanding that could inadvertently shape the interview process or interpretation of the data. To mitigate this, I remained conscious of clarifying participants' own interpretations and meanings during interviews, rather than relying on assumed common ground.

By engaging with these spiritual and relational dimensions, the study aimed to explore the intricate dynamics of forgiveness within the context of addiction recovery. While most participants were part of formal recovery communities, such as Twelve-Step programs, others were not explicitly actively affiliated with such groups but were still navigating their recovery journey. I continuously reflected on how my positionality—as a therapist, a Christian, and a researcher—both contributed to and potentially shaped my study, ensuring transparency in how these influences were acknowledged and managed throughout the research process.

Within the Twelve-Step Model, forgiveness is a key mechanism of successful recovery; however, this model often assumes that only the individual with SUD needs to focus on forgiveness, potentially neglecting the needs of others involved. Understanding how forgiveness operates within these

relationships is crucial for supporting couples on their path to recovery. It is also important to understand how the various domains and experiences of forgiveness impact not only the couple but everyone in the relationship. This study aimed to explore forgiveness dynamics in couples where one partner is in addiction recovery, shedding light on the unique experiences and challenges they face in fostering forgiveness and rebuilding their relationship.

Statement of the Problem

While research on both self-forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness has gained traction, inquiry into self-forgiveness, specifically, has been much slower compared to interpersonal forgiveness. Despite this, the domain of divine forgiveness remains significantly underexplored (Fincham & May, 2022). Apart from the study by Fincham and May (2019) on the interplay between divine forgiveness, self-forgiveness, and interpersonal forgiveness in relation to depression, no other research has explored these connections. Their findings indicated that divine forgiveness moderates the relationship between self-forgiveness and depressive symptoms, suggesting that divine forgiveness can influence mental health outcomes (Fincham & May, 2019).

The significance of exploring these connections is underscored by the fact that, according to a Pew research poll (2012), 5.8 billion people in the world identify with some type of religion, highlighting the importance of studying the interactions between forgiveness domains to better understand how spiritual beliefs influence personal and relational healing processes. Furthermore, studies rarely focus on divine forgiveness specifically, often capturing data that reflects general religiosity instead. Most research uses just one measure, typically "I know that God forgives me," which is limited and doesn't fully address the emotional and behavioral aspects of divine forgiveness (Fincham & May, 2022). Therefore,

addressing challenging questions at the intersection of religion and forgiveness is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of human behavior. Moreover, given the significant influence of spiritual and religious beliefs on people's lives and behaviors, it's improbable that we can fully grasp the impact of forgiveness without considering divine forgiveness (Fincham & May, 2019).

Despite the substantial body of research on interpersonal forgiveness and the growing interest in addiction recovery and forgiveness independently, a significant gap remains in the literature regarding forgiveness experiences within couples affected by addiction. There is limited understanding of how the various domains of forgiveness—self-forgiveness, interpersonal forgiveness, and divine forgiveness—manifest within the specific dynamics of couples grappling with substance abuse. This knowledge gap poses a substantial challenge for therapists and practitioners working with these couples, as the lack of understanding hinders the development of effective, tailored interventions and support services that address their unique needs and complexities.

Addiction often leads to negative consequences and transgressions against both the self and others (Kertzman et al., 2018). As a result, couples with at least one partner struggling with addiction typically experience significant relationship difficulties, including mistrust, dissatisfaction, conflict, and other adverse outcomes (Sheldon & Antony, 2019). The reciprocal nature of unforgiveness can perpetuate further substance use and conflict within these relationships (Hogue et al., 2022). The way couples navigate forgiveness becomes a critical factor in determining relationship outcomes and their longevity. Furthermore, dysfunction within these relationships is associated with increased substance use, relapse, and relationship separation (Sherrell & Gutierrez, 2014). Therefore, addressing the gap in understanding

forgiveness within these couples is crucial for improving therapeutic outcomes and fostering long-term recovery and relationship stability.

Research has shown that involving significant others in treatment and recovery can lead to a reduction in substance use and related problems (Ariss & Fairbairn, 2020; De Civita et al., 2000). Despite this evidence, family and couple approaches remain underutilized in most treatment settings, highlighting the need for greater emphasis on incorporating significant others into the treatment and recovery process (Csiernik, 2002). Including couples in my research aimed to address this gap by gaining deeper insights into their experiences of forgiveness, ultimately contributing to a better understanding of forgiveness in the context of recovery, which can lead to important continuations and improvements in recovery strategies. Additionally, forgiveness, an often-overlooked aspect of addiction treatment, plays a crucial role in the recovery process. Resentment, identified as "the number one offender" for individuals grappling with SUD according to the Twelve-Step Model, can stem from various sources, including unresolved interpersonal conflicts, self-directed anger, and frustrations with the recovery process itself (Webb et al., 2015). This prolonged resentment can lead to stress and rumination, hindering recovery efforts. Forgiveness can be a key component in overcoming these forms of resentment, which are considered major barriers to recovery (Webb et al., 2015; Worthington & Scherer, 2004). Through the process of forgiveness, individuals can release feelings of resentment, anger, and shame, ultimately improving both interpersonal relationships and intrapersonal well-being (Krentzman et al., 2018; Webb et al., 2015).

Most formal addiction treatment programs across the United States utilize the Twelve-Step approach, with an increasing number implementing Twelve Step Facilitation (TSF), an evidence-based

modality where clients are clinically guided towards Twelve-Step work (Brown et al., 2024). Twelve-step groups are the most common and accessible recovery support due to their expansive reach and free, open nature (Brown et al., 2024). Despite the recognized importance of spirituality in recovery, there remains a gap in understanding its role. My aim was to better understand and explain how forgiveness, a spiritual principle, can be utilized in SUD intrapersonal and interpersonal recovery to assist researchers and clinicians in their work within this population. Step-work in Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) is considered a spiritual experience, often leading to radical changes attributed to the Twelve-Step recovery process, which includes a thorough process of "step-work" guided by an AA sponsor (Brown et al., 2024). This transformative experience is common for both religious and nonreligious participants and can be measured through key components of spirituality such as freedom, gratitude, humility, tolerance, forgiveness, and belonging (Brown et al., 2024).

Webb et al. (2015) propose that addressing multiple domains of forgiveness, including spiritual and religious components, is crucial for tackling issues related to substance use. Empirical studies have shown that forgiveness, particularly self-forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness, is associated with improved mental health outcomes, including reductions in anxiety, depression, and substance use (Krentzman et al., 2018; Toussaint et al., 2012). Integrating significant others into treatment and focusing on forgiveness processes beyond individual suffering can enhance social capital, creating a cumulative effect that is greater than the sum of its parts. Research indicates that involving loved ones in the forgiveness process within addiction recovery fosters stronger relational bonds and improves treatment outcomes (Worthington et al., 2007). In other words, involving loved ones and addressing broader forgiveness can significantly amplify the benefits of treatment.

The clinical and therapeutic relevance of forgiveness within both self and between others, including perceived Divine forgiveness, has been empirically supported as a key factor in sustaining recovery within the widely used Twelve-Step Model (Webb et al., 2015; Krentzman et al., 2018). As explored further in Chapter 2, research demonstrates that forgiveness can help rebuild trust, reduce emotional distress, and promote long-term relationship stability (Kelley et al., 2009; Krentzman et al., 2018). By exploring the experiences of self-forgiveness, interpersonal forgiveness, and divine forgiveness, this research aimed to increase understanding of forgiveness, enhance therapeutic outcomes, promote long-term recovery, and improve relationship stability.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the multifaceted experiences of forgiveness in couples dealing with addiction recovery. This study specifically aimed to explore how perceived divine forgiveness, self-forgiveness, and interpersonal forgiveness manifested and interacted within these couples by examining the individual perspectives of each partner. By focusing on these distinct yet interconnected domains, the study sought to deepen understanding of the factors that support or hinder the forgiveness process in the context of addiction recovery.

Furthermore, it explored how these dynamics shaped individual well-being and relationship functioning, offering insight into the emotional and psychological aspects of recovery. Understanding these dynamics is crucial, as forgiveness can play a significant role in mitigating relationship distress, fostering trust, and promoting overall relational harmony.

Ultimately, the goal was to provide valuable insights that could inform the development of more effective therapeutic interventions and support services tailored to the unique needs of couples affected by

addiction. By addressing this critical gap in the literature, the study aimed to contribute to better recovery outcomes, enhance relationship stability, and support long-term healing and reconciliation for individuals and couples navigating the challenges of addiction recovery.

Significance of the Study

This study holds significant theoretical and practical implications for the fields of psychology, counseling, couple and family therapy (CFT), and addiction recovery. By filling the gap in the literature on forgiveness in couples affected by addiction, the study contributes to our theoretical understanding of forgiveness dynamics within these complex relationships. This research offers a nuanced exploration of how perceived divine forgiveness, self-forgiveness, and interpersonal forgiveness interact and influence the recovery process for both partners. Often, a significant limitation in forgiveness research is its narrow focus on either the victim or the perpetrator, seldom both. This approach overlooks the dynamic and mutually influential effects each party has on the other when studied together. Forgiveness processes are relational and interactive, involving complex exchanges between and within individuals (Strelan, 2019). By studying both victim and perpetrator, particularly in couples affected by addiction, researchers can better understand how forgiveness impacts recovery and relationship dynamics. It is important to note that this study does not necessarily describe individuals recovering from SUD as perpetrators only; rather, it acknowledges that significant and problematic substance use can damage relationships, necessitating a nuanced exploration of the roles and experiences within these dynamics. This holistic view can lead to more effective therapeutic interventions that support healing and reconciliation within relationships.

The insights gained from this study can inform the development of targeted interventions and support services that address the specific emotional and relational challenges faced by couples in

addiction recovery. These findings can guide practitioners in designing therapeutic approaches that incorporate forgiveness as a key component, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of treatment programs. By understanding the unique forgiveness experiences of individuals and couples, counselors and therapists can better support their clients in fostering healing, reducing conflict, and building stronger, more resilient relationships.

Ultimately, this research has the potential to contribute to improving the well-being and relational satisfaction of individuals and couples navigating the challenges of addiction recovery. By addressing forgiveness as a critical element of the recovery process, this study aims to promote more holistic and effective treatment strategies that not only aid in substance use cessation but also contribute to long-term relational stability and personal growth. The findings may also inspire future research to further explore the intersections of forgiveness, spirituality, and recovery, leading to a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of these vital processes.

Research Questions

The aims of this study are twofold: Aim 1 is to explore how couples, where one person is in addiction recovery, experience the different domains of forgiveness—perceived Divine forgiveness, self-forgiveness, and interpersonal forgiveness—and to identify the relationships between these domains and their impacts on individuals and their relationships in the context of recovery from substance abuse. Aim 2 focuses on examining the differences between the experience of forgiveness for the individual in recovery from substance abuse and their partner's experience within the various domains. The research question(s) that guided this study is: *How do couples, where one person is in addiction recovery, experience the different domains of forgiveness? Specifically, how do perceived Divine forgiveness, self-*

forgiveness, and interpersonal forgiveness impact individuals and their relationships? This study aims to contribute valuable insights to the existing literature and provide direction for future empirical and theoretical developments in understanding forgiveness dynamics in couples affected by addiction.

Theoretical Frameworks

This study was informed by several theoretical perspectives that helped illuminate the complexities of forgiveness within couples affected by addiction recovery. These theories did not directly frame the participants' understanding but rather provided context for the findings during the interpretive phases of my analysis.

Key among these is Enright's Process Model of Forgiveness (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015), which outlines a series of stages individuals progressed through in the forgiveness journey. This model helped me interpret the various stages and experiences participants described, particularly when reflecting on the emotional and psychological processes involved in forgiveness. Worthington's REACH model (Worthington, 2006) also provided a framework for understanding how forgiveness unfolds by helping participants move from strong negative emotions toward compassion, which was useful for interpreting data related to emotional healing.

In addition, stress and coping theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) informed the analysis of how individuals coped with the emotional burdens of addiction and relational distress, particularly how forgiveness may serve as a coping mechanism. Interdependence theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) was utilized to explore the relational dynamics between partners, such as how forgiveness fosters trust and mutual support, which were critical for relationship recovery. These theories helped me interpret the data

regarding how partners navigated forgiveness and how their relational commitments affected their motivations for reconciliation.

While I did not use these theories to dictate the structure of interview questions, they served as interpretive lenses during analysis. For example, Relational Spirituality Theory (Davis et al., 2009) helped me examine how participants' spiritual beliefs influenced their understanding of forgiveness. Finally, Twelve-Step Facilitation Therapy (Project MATCH Research Group, 1991) and the Biopsychosocial-Spiritual Model (Engel, 1977) provided me with broader insights into how participants' experiences of forgiveness might integrate spiritual, emotional, and relational healing during addiction recovery.
By employing these theories as interpretive tools, I ensured a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences. While these frameworks provided context and a means to compare how the data aligned or diverged from existing theoretical models, my analysis was not strictly guided by them. Instead, they served as reference points to better understand the nuanced ways forgiveness was experienced within addiction recovery.

Overview of Dissertation Structure

This dissertation is structured as follows: Chapter 1 serves as the introduction, providing an overview of the study's background, purpose, research questions, and theoretical framework. Chapter 2 delves into a comprehensive literature review, synthesizing existing research on forgiveness dynamics, addiction recovery, and relationship dynamics, with a particular focus on the intersection of these domains. This is followed by a detailed description of the study's aims and objectives. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology employed in the study, including the research design, data collection procedures, and analytical approach**.** Chapter 4 presents the study's findings, detailing the themes that emerged from

participant experiences. Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the results, connecting the findings to existing literature, theoretical frameworks, and clinical implications, while also addressing limitations and directions for future research.

CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

This study examined the experiences of forgiveness in couples dealing with addiction recovery, focusing on the domains of perceived divine forgiveness, self-forgiveness, and interpersonal forgiveness. The purpose was to explore how these forms of forgiveness manifested and interacted within these relationships and to identify their impacts on individual and relational well-being. This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of previous findings, highlights the importance of studying forgiveness in the context of addiction recovery, and underscores the relevance of this research in informing therapeutic interventions and support services for couples affected by addiction.

The chapter is organized into several key sections. First, the "Theoretical Foundations," section delves into the various theories that frame the different understandings of forgiveness. Following this, the "Domains of Forgiveness" section examines perceived divine forgiveness, self-forgiveness, and interpersonal forgiveness, exploring their distinct and interconnected roles. The "Domain Intersection" segment investigates how these domains intersect and influence each other. Next, the "Addiction Recovery and Forgiveness" section discusses the significance of forgiveness within the context of addiction recovery, highlighting its role in fostering healing and reconciliation. The "Impact of Forgiveness on Individuals and Relationships" section provides insights into the broader effects of forgiveness on personal and relational well-being. "Contextual Factors that Impact Forgiveness" addresses the influence of gender, race, religion, and other contextual variables on forgiveness processes. Finally, "The Dark Side of Forgiveness" explores the potential negative consequences of forgiveness, offering a balanced view of its complexities.

By systematically reviewing the literature across these themes, this chapter aims to build a solid foundation for understanding the multifaceted nature of forgiveness in couples affected by addiction. This comprehensive review informs the subsequent research, guiding the investigation into the unique experiences and challenges these couples face in fostering forgiveness and rebuilding their relationships.

Theoretical Foundations

Similarly to the varied conceptualizations and definitions of forgiveness, there are also diverse theoretical perspectives that inform its understanding. One of the more established theories, the stress-and-coping theory, derived from Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) framework, connects four processes to explain how forgiveness relates to perceptions of justice, societal justice, reconciliation, and coping with injustice (Worthington & Wade, 2020). This theory highlights the complex relationships among forgiveness, reconciliation, and justice, noting that forgiveness is challenging due to the need to regulate emotional responses.

In this model, a transgression acts as a stressor that triggers appraisals, affecting the stress reaction, which encompasses physical, emotional, motivational, cognitive, and behavioral aspects (Worthington & Wade, 2020). In contrast, *unforgiveness* refers to the accumulation of negative emotions like resentment and anger when a person is unable or unwilling to forgive (Webb, 2021). Unforgiveness can act as a persistent stressor, further complicating emotional and relational recovery, which makes it a critical element to address.

Coping efforts aim to modify core processes or their mediators and moderators, and when these efforts fail, individuals may try other coping strategies within their repertoire. Forgiveness is one way an individual may seek to lessen the perceived sense of injustice, along with seeking revenge, observing the

offender face natural consequences, turning it over to God for divine justice, or embracing acceptance (Strelan, 2019).

This theory is relevant to my research as it frames forgiveness as a coping mechanism essential in the context of addiction recovery. This model helps explore how divine forgiveness, self-forgiveness, and interpersonal forgiveness functionally aid individuals and their relationships, particularly when one partner is in recovery. It considers forgiveness as both an interpersonal process, alleviating relationship tensions, and an intrapersonal process, reducing emotional burdens.

By examining forgiveness as a 'release' mechanism, my study can assess how letting go of negative emotions and guilt impacts recovery and relationship dynamics. This perspective provides a comprehensive framework to analyze differences in forgiveness experiences between the recovering individual and their partner, enriching the understanding of how these dynamics support or impede recovery. To explore this in my interviews, participants were asked questions such as, 'How did forgiving yourself or others impact your progress in recovery?' and 'How has forgiveness (or the lack of it) influenced your relationship with your partner?' These questions aimed to understand how the release of negative emotions, such as guilt or resentment, shaped personal recovery and relational dynamics.

Another established theory, interdependence theory, proposed by Thibaut and Kelley (1959), offers another theoretical lens to view forgiveness within interpersonal relationships. Dyadic coping provides insights into the forgiveness process by showing how both partners in a relationship respond to a transgression. Interdependence theory emphasizes the importance of mutual interaction and stress management when both see the transgression as stressful (Strelan, 2019). This theory is based on a mutual exchange of rewards and costs, balanced against each partner’s expectations. Dilemmas, such as

transgressions, present opportunities for partners to prioritize either personal benefit or the good of the relationship. Partners use these dilemmas to assess the value their partner places on the relationship.

Commitment is determined by satisfaction with the relationship, investments made, and satisfaction with alternatives. Trust develops when a partner consistently values the relationship over self-interest, leading to forgiveness (Strelan, 2019). Sacrificing for the relationship is crucial to building trust and subsequent forgiveness, resulting in mutual cyclical growth and enhancing both individual and relational development. Interdependence theory is pertinent to my research as it explains how relationship dynamics and mutual dependence affect the process of forgiveness in couples affected by addiction.

Conceptualizing forgiveness as a dyadic coping process—recognizing forgiveness as transactional and viewing a transgression as a shared problem—advances forgiveness theorizing and research, offering a new perspective on forgiveness dynamics within relationships (Strelan, 2019). This theory informs how couples balance personal grievances with the overall health and stability of their relationship, providing insights into the mechanisms that foster forgiveness and commitment.

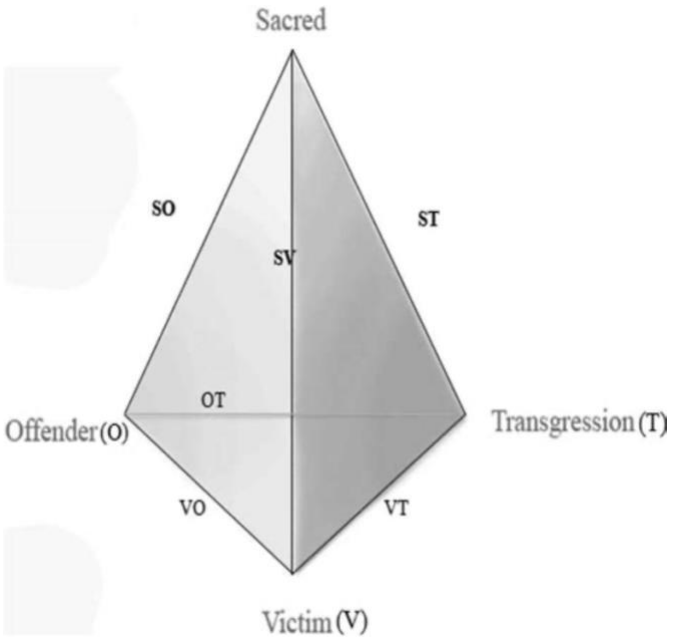
The last established theory is based on forgiveness's evolutionary roots linked to revenge and reconciliation (McCullough, 2008). Primates, with an innate sense of justice, enforce fairness to ensure survival (de Waal, 1996; Haidt, 2012). Offenders are punished, but constant retribution would harm group survival, leading to reconciliation rituals. Valuable individuals, such as kin, are more easily forgiven, while those posing risks are less forgivable. Evolutionary theory suggests in-group forgiveness is greater than out-group forgiveness (Van Tongeren et al., 2014; Burnette et al., 2012). Evolutionary theory provides a biological and social context for understanding forgiveness behaviors. By examining the innate tendencies towards revenge and reconciliation, this theory offers a broader perspective on how

forgiveness functions within the survival dynamics of close relationships, particularly in high-stress situations like addiction recovery.

Less established emerging theories relevant to my research include attribution theory (Weiner, 1995), which helps us understand forgiveness by highlighting how perceptions of responsibility and intentionality affect the willingness to forgive. Accommodation theory (Rusbult, 1980) explores how individuals respond to negative behaviors, showing that forgiveness fosters constructive responses and relational stability (Fehr, 2010). Notably, the Relational Spirituality (R/S) Theory of forgiveness, proposed by Worthington and Sandage (2016), involves a victim (V), offender (O), and transgression (T), forming a triangle. The relationships between these points—VO, VT, and OT—affect the outcomes of forgiveness. Closer relationships, like those between family members or in-group members, result in offenses that hurt more but are easier to forgive. Adding a spiritual dimension (S) transforms this model into a pyramid, with relationships between the Sacred and the victim, offender, and transgression (SV, SO, and ST). This conceptual framework is visually represented in Figure 1 below, illustrating how the addition of the Sacred (S) expands the relational dynamics of forgiveness from a triangular to a pyramidal structure (Davis et al., 2009).

Figure 1

Relational Spirituality (R/S) Theory of Forgiveness



Research has shown that factors like church attendance, dedication to the Sacred, and attachment to God influence forgiveness (Worthington & Wade, 2020). Victims are more likely to forgive offenders they perceive as spiritually similar. However, if the transgression is seen as a sacred loss or desecration, forgiveness is less likely. This theory is particularly pertinent to my study as it emphasizes the impact of spirituality on forgiveness processes, which is crucial for understanding forgiveness in the context of addiction recovery where spiritual beliefs often play a significant role. By incorporating this theory, my research aimed to explore how these spiritual dynamics interact with divine forgiveness, self-forgiveness, and interpersonal forgiveness, within couples affected by addiction. This may provide a deeper understanding of how spiritual beliefs and practices influence the forgiveness process and contribute to the overall recovery and relationship dynamics of these couples.

In addition to the theoretical foundations of understanding forgiveness, there are models designed to engage individuals in activities proven to promote forgiveness (Worthington & Wade, 2020). Although these models are not comprehensive theories, they play a crucial role in intervention efforts and provide valuable insights for researchers and clinicians into the complex processes involved in various forms of forgiveness. The Enright process model (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015) outlines 20 steps divided into four phases: (1) Uncovering, where the person understands the offense and its impact; (2) Decision, where the person learns about forgiveness and commits to it; (3) Work, where the forgiver develops empathy and reframes the offense and offender; and (4) Deepening, where the forgiver finds meaning in suffering and feels more connected to others. Worthington's REACH Forgiveness model (2006) involves five steps: (1) Recall the hurt; (2) Empathize with the transgressor; (3) Give an Altruistic gift of forgiveness; (4) Commit to the emotional forgiveness experienced; and (5) Hold on to forgiveness when doubts arise.

These models played a pivotal role in providing contextual comparisons of theoretical underpinnings, enriching my analysis of forgiveness dynamics in couples navigating addiction recovery. Although my interviews were not strictly structured around these models, they have helped me conceptualize key themes and areas to explore. The model's phases suggest important dimensions of forgiveness, such as the understanding of the offense, the decision to forgive, the development of empathy, and the finding of meaning, which are all relevant to exploring participants' experiences in depth.

One unique aspect, particularly in Worthington's REACH model, is its emphasis on forgiveness as an altruistic gift—this dimension of selflessness is less explicitly addressed in other models and offers a nuanced lens through which to examine the relational and emotional impacts of forgiveness in addiction

recovery. Additionally, the Biopsychosocial-Spiritual Model (Engel, 1977) provides a holistic view of forgiveness by integrating spiritual components, which is particularly relevant in the context of Twelve-Step recovery programs that focus on spiritual growth. This integration of spirituality into both recovery and forgiveness makes it uniquely suited to understanding couples navigating these dynamics.

In addition to the aforementioned theoretical frameworks, the Biopsychosocial-Spiritual Model (Engel, 1977) and Twelve-Step Facilitation Therapy (Project MATCH Research Group, 1991) are highly relevant to this research. These models provide a comprehensive and multifaceted understanding of the recovery process from addiction, which is essential for examining forgiveness dynamics in couples affected by addiction recovery. Although the Biopsychosocial-Spiritual Model (Engel, 1977) is not used empirically regarding forgiveness, it emphasizes that addiction and recovery are influenced by an interplay of biological, psychological, social, and spiritual factors. This model highlights the holistic nature of the healing process, acknowledging that effective treatment must address all these interconnected domains. Biological factors include genetic predispositions and neurochemical imbalances, psychological factors encompass mental health issues and cognitive processes, social factors involve relationships and societal influences, and spiritual factors pertain to an individual's beliefs and values (VanderWeele et al., 2017). By considering these diverse aspects, the BPSS model underscores the complexity of addiction and recovery, advocating for a comprehensive approach to treatment that can cater to the whole person. This model is particularly pertinent to this study as it aligns with the investigation of how forgiveness—spanning self, interpersonal, and divine dimensions—intersects with the multifaceted experiences of individuals in recovery and their partners.

Twelve-Step Facilitation Therapy (TSF) is an evidence-based approach designed to support individuals in engaging with the Twelve-Step program, a widely utilized framework for addiction recovery. TSF emphasizes the role of spiritual principles and community support in fostering recovery. It involves guiding individuals through the Twelve-Step process, which includes acknowledging powerlessness over addiction, seeking help from a higher power, making amends for past wrongs, and helping others in their recovery journey. The integration of spiritual principles is a core component of TSF, reflecting the belief that spirituality and connection to a supportive community are critical for sustained recovery. This approach not only helps individuals to overcome addiction but also encourages the development of a supportive network, fostering a sense of belonging and purpose. In the context of this study, TSF is relevant as it provides insight into how structured, spiritually oriented recovery programs influence the forgiveness process and its impact on interpersonal relationships.

By incorporating the BPSS model and TSF into the literature review, this study acknowledges the importance of a holistic and spiritually integrated approach to understanding addiction recovery. These models support the exploration of how forgiveness dynamics—across biological, psychological, social, and spiritual dimensions—affect individuals and couples navigating the recovery process. This comprehensive perspective is essential for developing more effective therapeutic interventions and support services that address the unique needs of couples affected by addiction, ultimately contributing to improved outcomes and long-term recovery success.

In shaping the theoretical foundations of this study, I have drawn on several established and emerging theories of forgiveness, each offering unique insights into the complex dynamics at play in the context of addiction recovery. Enright's (1991) process model has been particularly influential in

informing my understanding of forgiveness as a multifaceted process involving divine, self, and interpersonal dimensions. However, given the exploratory nature of this study, which employs Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to delve into the lived experiences of individuals and couples affected by addiction, these theories have only informed my understanding of this topic. I did not use the theories to dictate the interview questions I asked. This approach allowed for a flexible framework that accommodated the complexity and individuality of participants' experiences. While these theories have influenced my understanding and provided a conceptual foundation, the study remains focused on the insights and nuances that emerged directly from the data, ensuring a participant-driven and comprehensive exploration of forgiveness within the recovery journey.

Domains of Forgiveness

There is a gap in the literature as different types of forgiveness are often studied independently of each other. This is surprising given their similarities. Both interpersonal forgiveness and self-forgiveness respond to an objective wrong and involve a motivational transformation from negative to positive affect, motivations, or cognitions without excusing or minimizing the harmful behavior (Fincham & May, 2022). They both occur over time and are crucial for healing relationships after a transgression. When a victim chooses to forgive, it enables the transgressor to rebuild trust and safety in the relationship, while self-forgiveness helps the transgressor reduce distress and find ways to repair the relationship. Both are prosocial coping strategies for dealing with interpersonal transgressions (Fincham & May, 2022). Although self-forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness have been found to be empirically correlated, no attention has been given to how divine forgiveness might account for or affect the association between self-forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness, despite divine forgiveness being associated with both

(Fincham & May, 2022). Understanding the interplay between divine forgiveness, self-forgiveness, and interpersonal forgiveness is crucial for couples in addiction recovery. The Twelve-Step approach, prominent in many recovery programs, emphasizes spiritual principles, including forgiveness, making it essential to explore these aspects. Addiction often damages relationships, leading to distress, mistrust, and conflict, while individuals in recovery struggle with shame and guilt, highlighting the importance of self-forgiveness (Sherrell, & Gutierrez, 2014).

By addressing these forms of forgiveness, my dissertation aims to provide insights into how forgiveness processes facilitate healing and relational repair in couples affected by addiction. This is particularly relevant given the Twelve-Step focus on spiritual growth and reconciliation. Besides Fincham and May (2020), which investigates the interplay between the three domains among participants with depression, there are no known studies examining this interconnection; my study is the first to explore this qualitatively in the context of couples recovering from SUD.

Perceived divine forgiveness. Before delving into the concept of divine forgiveness, it is essential to first discuss the general association between forgiveness and religion/spirituality (R/S) to provide necessary context and relevance. Until the early 1990s, forgiveness was mainly studied by philosophers and theologians as a philosophical or religious concept (Choe et al., 2019). Since then, psychological research on forgiveness has expanded, linking it to various benefits for physical health, mental health, and relationships, largely through stress reduction (Choe et al., 2019). Consequently, psychologists have explored factors influencing forgiveness, with religion/spirituality (R/S) receiving significant attention (Davis et al., 2014).

Religion is defined as an organized system of shared beliefs and practices, while spirituality is a sense of connection or search for significance with the Sacred (Davis et al., 2014). Trait measures of religion/spirituality (R/S) are stable over time, such as religious commitment or attachment to God. State measures of R/S, which can change, include feelings of closeness to the Sacred and views on offenses or offenders (Choe et al., 2019). Religion and spirituality significantly influence how people forgive. Spiritual appraisals are the process by which individuals interpret and evaluate events or experiences through a spiritual or religious lens (Davis et al., 2014). Spiritual appraisals can intensify emotional reactions, with those enhancing empathy facilitating forgiveness and those increasing negative emotions hindering it. Empirical evidence shows a moderate relationship between spiritual appraisals and the tendency to forgive (Davis et al., 2014). Events or circumstances, such as addiction, that challenge one's faith can significantly amplify stress levels.

Forgiveness has been measured as both a trait and a state. Trait forgiveness is a general tendency to forgive across situations and relationships, while state forgiveness pertains to specific instances influenced by factors such as apologies, transgression severity, and relationship closeness, with personality traits also predicting forgiveness across various contexts (Riek & Mania, 2012). In their meta-analysis, Davis et al. (2014) found that R/S has a moderate correlation (average correlation of .29) with trait forgivingness, which is the general tendency to forgive across different situations and relationships. In contrast, the correlation between R/S and state forgiveness, which refers to forgiveness in specific instances, is smaller (average correlation of .15). These findings align with previous research, indicating that R/S more strongly influences overall forgivingness than specific acts of forgiveness. Research on how religion and spirituality (R/S) affect forgiveness has only just begun to explore the complex theories

within the psychology of R/S. So far, only the emphasis religion places on forgiveness and the contextual nature of R/S have been partially studied (Choe et al., 2019).

Having established the broader relationship between forgiveness and religion/spirituality (R/S), we can now delve into the specific concept of divine forgiveness. Understanding divine forgiveness is crucial, particularly in the context of addiction recovery, as it adds a unique dimension to the forgiveness process. In a religious context, divine forgiveness involves seeking forgiveness from God, which can carry significant consequences, including eschatological implications for the afterlife (Fincham & May, 2022). Unlike human forgiveness, divine forgiveness often leads to greater behavioral change, making individuals more forgiving toward others and themselves, and can be a profound, life-changing experience (Fincham & May, 2022).

While R/S generally promotes a forgiving disposition, divine forgiveness specifically involves seeking forgiveness from a higher power or perceived absolution from a higher power, which can profoundly impact an individual's journey towards healing and reconciliation (Fincham, 2022). This concept is especially relevant for individuals in recovery. Given AA and recovery's focus on a higher power, those in recovery often seek spiritual support and guidance as part of their recovery process. By exploring divine forgiveness, we can gain deeper insights into how spiritual beliefs and practices influence the dynamics of forgiveness within couples affected by addiction.

Self-forgiveness is positively associated with divine forgiveness, as people who believe they are forgiven by God tend to find it easier to forgive themselves, and vice versa (Choe et al., 2019). Feeling forgiven by God can boost self-worth and self-esteem. Individuals with high self-esteem find it easier to forgive themselves, believing in their worthiness and being motivated to protect their self-esteem (Krause,

2017). However, some individuals struggle with self-forgiveness despite believing in God's forgiveness due to feelings of undeservedness or a need for self-punishment (Exline et al., 2017). In Western Christian contexts, more religious individuals generally have more positive views of God as loving and forgiving, which enhances their sense of being forgiven by God (Escher, 2013). Personality traits also influence perceptions of divine forgiveness, with positive correlations found for agreeableness and conscientiousness, and negative correlations for neuroticism (Walker & Gorsuch, 2002). Additionally, optimism, age, gender, and ethnicity affect how individuals perceive divine forgiveness, with older adults, women, and certain ethnic groups reporting higher levels of perceived divine forgiveness (Mattis et al., 2017; Hayward & Krause, 2013; Krause, 2012).

Moreover, research suggests that perceived relationships with God can impact health-related and addictive behaviors (Choe et al., 2019). Among undergraduates, struggling with divine relationships is linked to more alcohol problems, while feeling forgiven by God is associated with fewer alcohol problems (Stauner et al., in press; Webb et al., 2013). This underscores the importance of exploring divine forgiveness in my study, as understanding its role could provide valuable insights into the mechanisms of recovery and relationship dynamics in couples affected by addiction. Moreover, forgiveness of self and others, as well as feeling forgiven by God, are linked to increased spirituality, which can positively influence recovery through spiritual mechanisms like increased meaning in life and self-acceptance, crucial in the spiritual transformation process associated with addiction recovery (Webb et al., 2012; Webb et al., 2015).

Self-forgiveness. Self-forgiveness generally involves addressing a transgression against one's own values, including failures or inaction (Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2020). It is a process where a person

experiences self-condemnation and its emotional, cognitive, and behavioral effects, and then works through these to achieve a reduced sense of self-condemnation without denying responsibility for their actions (Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2020). Self-forgiveness is linked to well-being because it reduces self-condemnation and negative emotions, thereby alleviating psychological stress (Davis et al., 2015). However, defining self-forgiveness is challenging due to the variability in its components within an individual's experience. The need for self-forgiveness can manifest differently, presenting various affective, cognitive, and behavioral forms (Cornish et al., 2018). For example, this may include lingering shame or relief (affective), reframing past mistakes with self-compassion (cognitive), or reparative actions and growth (behavioral). Despite its beneficial effects on health and well-being, self-forgiveness is particularly difficult to develop and requires significant effort and time, especially when applied to specific transgressions (Webb et al., 2017). Hall and Fincham (2005) describe self-forgiveness as involving motivational shifts: reduced avoidance of offense-related stimuli, decreased self-punishment, and increased self-kindness. They note that, similar to interpersonal forgiveness, self-forgiveness is a time-consuming process that requires acknowledging the wrongdoing and is granted despite being unearned. Importantly, self-forgiveness does not imply ignoring, forgetting, or excusing the offense.

Research has primarily explored the intrapersonal benefits of self-forgiveness, with limited understanding of its impact on interpersonal restoration. Previous studies often used cross-sectional designs and viewed self-forgiveness as an end-state. Woodyatt and Wenzel (2013) take a process-oriented approach, distinguishing between self-punitiveness, pseudo self-forgiveness, and genuine self-forgiveness. Genuine self-forgiveness benefits both intrapersonal restoration, such as improved self-esteem, and interpersonal restoration, such as increased empathy. In contrast, self-punitiveness and

pseudo self-forgiveness have negative implications, hindering both personal and relational healing. Holistic offender restoration should involve changes in the offender's attitudes toward themselves, the victim, the offense, and the community (Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2013). This comprehensive approach promotes thorough healing and restoration for everyone involved.

The literature primarily focuses on why, how, and whether offenders should forgive themselves. Offenders include those who have committed interpersonal, legal, ethical, moral, religious/spiritual, or self-inflicted wrongdoings (McConnell, 2015). Therefore, self-forgiveness applies to offenses committed against others, higher powers, and oneself. Within this, self-forgiveness has been examined in relation to many different issues, including substance abuse and use, relationships, clinical disorders, people living with illness (e.g. HIV, cancer), and those who have experienced trauma (e.g. suicide, military service) (Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2013). Self-forgiveness research has evolved through three generations of measures. Early trait-focused measures linked self-forgiveness to better mental health but found negative interpersonal outcomes (Davis et al., 2015; Zechmeister & Romero, 2002). Second-generation state measures revealed that self-forgiveness could reduce motivation to change, particularly in ongoing behaviors, and often conflated it with positive self-regard (Cornish et al., 2018; Wohl et al., 2017; Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2013). Recent third-generation approaches emphasize the process of self-forgiveness, distinguishing it from self-exoneration and self-punitiveness, and show that genuine self-forgiveness promotes well-being and amends-making, while self-exoneration is linked to less empathy and higher narcissism (Cornish et al., 2018; Griffin et al., 2018; Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2013). These new measures continue to refine understanding and application in research and practice.

Self-forgiveness has been explored through experiments and clinical studies using individual, workbook, and group-based interventions (Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2019). These approaches address cognitive and emotional aspects and have shown positive effects (Bell et al., 2017; Griffin et al., 2018; Scherer et al., 2011). Quasi-experimental studies indicate that self-forgiveness interventions can reduce guilt and negative emotions, increase perceived control, and improve physiological responses (Da Silva et al., 2017). However, more research is needed to compare these interventions with other therapies and to study their impact on specific populations and conditions. Due to the scope of my research, I primarily focus on the research concerning substance abuse and use and interpersonal transgressions.

First, by reducing self-hatred and self-contempt, and replacing these with kind self-acceptance, self-forgiveness can serve as a soothing balm for the challenging journey of addiction recovery (Krentzman et al., 2018). Addiction coincides with intense psychological pain or "psychache" that impacts recovery (Webb & Toussaint, 2017). This emotional turmoil is crucial in understanding the relationship between forgiveness and addiction recovery, as unresolved resentments and self-condemnation contribute to ongoing psychological distress and hinder recovery efforts (Webb & Toussaint, 2018; Webb et al., 2015).

Berg et al. (2024) conducted a systematic review suggesting that self-forgiveness helps protect against problem drinking by promoting healthier coping mechanisms for negative emotions that might otherwise lead to alcohol use as a means of coping. Although most of the research on self-forgiveness and substance use is cross-sectional, there is some evidence for sustained improvements. For example, Krentzman et al. (2018) in their longitudinal study of alcohol-dependent individuals found that baseline self-forgiveness and forgiveness of others were linked to fewer drinking consequences initially.

Specifically, self-forgiveness was associated with fewer drinks per day and fewer heavy drinking days, while forgiveness of others was linked to more days of abstinence.

Overall, self-forgiveness is crucial in addiction recovery as it addresses self-loathing and guilt, serving as a coping mechanism against self-condemnation (Webb & Toussaint, 2017). This process involves recognizing one's wrongs, accountability, and shifting self-relationships towards reconciliation and acceptance. In the Twelve-Step Model, self-forgiveness complements seeking forgiveness from others, promoting personal growth and recovery (Webb & Toussaint, 2017). For couples in recovery, understanding self-forgiveness alongside divine and interpersonal forgiveness is crucial for mutual healing and growth. Ongoing research provides valuable insights for developing effective therapies that support both partners in their recovery journey.

Second, in romantic relationships, self-forgiveness plays a crucial role in restoring well-being and strengthening bonds after transgressions (Pelucchi et al., 2017). It helps individuals overcome negative emotions, motivates them to seek reconciliation, and reduces self-centered tendencies (Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2013). By balancing awareness of wrongdoing with reparative actions, self-forgiveness promotes growth for both the individual and the relationship (Pelucchi et al., 2017). The role of self-forgiveness in romantic relationships is crucial for couples navigating addiction recovery. It helps individuals manage negative emotions, pursue reconciliation, and reduce self-centered behaviors, promoting both personal and relational growth. This knowledge can inform tailored therapeutic approaches that address the unique experiences of both the substance user and their partner, fostering a healthier, more supportive recovery environment.

Interpersonal forgiveness. Relationships inherently create vulnerability to a partner, offering the potential for profound well-being but also inevitable hurt due to human imperfection (Fincham, 2019). These hurts evoke strong negative emotions, such as anger and resentment, and can lead to avoidance or retaliation, threatening the relationship. Forgiveness is essential for dealing with such hurt and repairing the relationship. It involves a chosen motivational change where the desire for avoidance or revenge is overcome, reducing negativity and fostering goodwill towards the offender (Fincham, 2019).

While forgiveness provides the motivation for relationship repair, it is distinct from reconciliation, which is a mutual process. This distinction is important because it highlights that while forgiveness is an individual process essential for personal healing, reconciliation requires mutual effort to repair and rebuild the relationship. Previous research supports that forgiveness can lead to reconciliation by fostering a relational process where individuals strive to understand their partner's behavior and adopt an altruistic approach that includes empathy, compassion, and love (Worthington, 2006). This process aims to regain relationship stability, cope with relational uncertainty, and potentially rebuild mutual trust, leading to reconciliation (Merolla et al., 2017; Waldron & Kelley, 2005; Zahorcova et al., 2023).

Quantitative studies have demonstrated that forgiveness not only enhances individual well-being (Akhtar & Barlow, 2018; Wade et al., 2014) but also contributes to constructive communication within couples (Fincham & Beach, 2002), and increases relationship satisfaction (Roberts et al., 2021). Empirical studies support that forgiveness interventions contribute to improved relationship satisfaction and reduced symptoms of depression (Paleari et al., 2010). These interventions help foster empathy and relational growth, essential for couples navigating addiction recovery. Additionally, forgiveness interventions for

married couples have been shown to increase empathy and relational satisfaction, while reducing symptoms of depression and cortisol reactivity (DiBlasio & Benda, 2008; Worthington et al., 2015).

Furthermore, addressing relationship dynamics is crucial in contexts such as addiction recovery, where traditional individual-focused treatments are often less effective (Fals-Stewart et al., 2009; Sherrell & Gutierrez, 2014). Research indicates that involving family members can promote long-term abstinence and healthier relationships. Behavioral Couples Therapy (BCT) has been shown to result in more abstinence, fewer alcohol-related problems, improved relationship satisfaction, and reduced risk of marital separation compared to individual treatment alone (Fals-Stewart et al., 2009; Hogue et al., 2022; Wesley, 2016). Behavioral Couple Therapy (BCT) addresses the reciprocal relationship between substance use and relationship distress by focusing on reducing substance use, utilizing the couple relationship to support change, and improving interaction patterns to create an environment conducive to abstinence and relationship satisfaction (Wesley, 2016). Couple-based interventions, including partner-assisted, disorder-specific, and couple therapy approaches, effectively address individual substance use issues within the context of relationship dynamics (Wesley, 2016). This suggests that addressing both the individual's behavior and the family dynamics surrounding substance use is crucial for effective addiction recovery.

Various factors influence how people perceive and navigate forgiveness in their relationships, including religion, level of commitment, and severity of transgression (Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2007), as well as vulnerabilities (such as attachment and perceived relational equity) and relational satisfaction, each playing a significant role in determining how forgiveness is expressed and perceived in romantic relationships (Edwards et al., 2018). Additionally, relational history, which considers the frequency of

transgressions, how forgiveness is communicated (direct, indirect, or conditional) according to Kelley's (1998) strategies, and the type of forgiveness—emotional or decisional as outlined by Worthington et al., (2007)—are also significant considerations (Fincham, 2014). Furthermore, Riek and Mania (2012) identify additional factors that affect forgiveness, including personality traits (e.g., neuroticism, agreeableness, narcissistic entitlement) and social cognitive influences such as empathy, attributions, and rumination. Exploring each of these factors in detail is beyond the scope of this review.

To understand the broader impact of forgiveness on relationships, it is essential to consider how these various factors interplay over time. Fincham's (2014) review specifically examining forgiveness and marriage shows that longitudinal studies indicate a bidirectional causal relationship between forgiveness and marital quality. Forgiveness predicts later marital quality and vice versa (Fincham & Beach, 2007). Increased relational effort and decreased negative conflict are key mechanisms driving this association (Braithwaite et al., 2011). Intervention studies also demonstrate that forgiveness interventions can improve mental health and marital satisfaction (Paleari et al., 2009).

Furthermore, Zahorcova et al. (2023) employ a mixed-method study that explores forgiveness in dating and married relationships. Quantitative results link forgiveness to better well-being, communication, and relationship satisfaction, with interventions enhancing empathy and reducing depressive symptoms. Qualitative findings show forgiveness involves relationship repair, emotional changes, and love. Differences emerged: dating individuals use forgiveness for relationship growth, while married individuals focus on emotional well-being. Promoting factors include love and partner efforts, while barriers are pride, negative emotions, and repeated disappointments. Infidelity and violence are often unforgivable, with gender differences in forgiveness approaches (Zahorcova et al., 2023).

Understanding the complexities of interpersonal forgiveness in romantic relationships highlights the importance of tailored interventions and communication strategies. These insights can inform therapeutic approaches to enhance relationship satisfaction and well-being, emphasizing the need for mutual effort in reconciliation and recognizing the multifaceted nature of forgiveness.

Domain intersection. The intersection of divine forgiveness, self-forgiveness, and interpersonal forgiveness is crucial yet underexplored, especially in addiction recovery contexts. Both self-forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness involve transforming negative feelings into positive ones without excusing the harmful behavior, aiding relationship healing and personal distress reduction (Fincham & May, 2022). Despite their similarities, these types of forgiveness are often studied independently, with little attention to how divine forgiveness might influence their relationship (Fincham & May, 2022).

Understanding this interplay is essential for couples in addiction recovery, where forgiveness can help manage relationship distress, mistrust, and personal shame (Krentzman et al., 2018). The Twelve-Step approach in many recovery programs emphasizes spiritual principles, including forgiveness, underscoring the need to explore these aspects. Divine forgiveness can significantly impact self-worth and the ability to forgive oneself and others (Choe et al., 2019). Fincham and May (2020) found that divine forgiveness moderates the relationship between self-forgiveness and depressive symptoms, highlighting its influence on mental health. However, studies examining these forgiveness domains in couples recovering from substance use disorder are lacking. This research aims to fill this gap, providing insights into how these forgiveness processes intersect and affect individuals and relationships in addiction recovery.

Addiction Recovery and Forgiveness

Webb et al. (2015) emphasize forgiveness as a pivotal component of positive psychotherapy for addiction, offering individuals coping mechanisms for challenging circumstances and highlighting its potential in treatment (Krentzman et al., 2018). This connection is particularly evident in the context of the Twelve-Step Model of Addiction and Recovery, where forgiveness has shown significant relevance (Webb & Toussaint, 2019). Rehabilitation programs have demonstrated that forgiveness levels can increase during treatment, irrespective of relapse rates, indicating its adaptability in clinical settings (Webb et al., 2015). Forgiveness not only aids interpersonal functioning but also serves as an important coping strategy for individuals recovering from addiction, helping them manage emotional distress and fostering resilience against relapse (Worthington & Scherer, 2004). This connection is particularly evident among women in Christian-based treatment programs, where forgiveness has been linked to improvements in co-occurring mental health symptoms and attachment patterns (Kerlin, 2020).

Within alcohol studies, research frequently examines aspects of forgiveness such as self-forgiveness, forgiveness of others, and the perception of divine forgiveness (Charzynska, 2021; Davis et al., 2013). Significantly, self-forgiveness plays a crucial role in mitigating the effects of self-condemnation, especially pertinent in addiction and suicide recovery contexts (Webb et al., 2015). Recent findings by Webb et al. (2024) underscore that resentment mediates the relationship between self-forgiveness and psychological distress, as well as vulnerability to substance use, across diverse regional contexts like Southern Appalachia and West Texas. These consistent associations highlight the critical role of self-forgiveness in mitigating negative outcomes related to addiction and stress the importance of

integrating forgiveness into therapeutic interventions aimed at improving recovery outcomes (Webb et al., 2017).

In a comprehensive literature review by Webb et al. (2019), only 44 articles addressed forgiveness and addiction, revealing a significant research gap. Despite limited studies, existing research consistently demonstrates a correlation between successful recovery and forgiveness. Previous reviews (Webb & Toussaint, 2018) highlighted positive outcomes in 30 out of 33 articles focusing on forgiveness, particularly self-forgiveness, and its impact on reducing substance abuse issues and improving mental health outcomes across various populations (Braun et al., 2018; Ellingwood et al., 2019).

Engaging in forgiveness facilitates the release of emotional burdens, redirecting energy towards health-promoting behaviors like stress management and physical exercise (Webb et al., 2017), making it particularly beneficial for individuals in addiction recovery. Webb et al. (2015) elucidate the role of "existangst," a concept encompassing emotionally and philosophically driven psychological distress, in mediating the association between forgiveness and addiction recovery outcomes, underscoring its influence in these relationships. Furthermore, Webb (2018) highlights that different forms of forgiveness— divine forgiveness, self-forgiveness, and forgiveness of situations—play distinct roles in reducing suicidal behavior through pathways involving depressive symptoms and psychache. This differentiation underscores the nuanced impact of forgiveness on mental health and addiction recovery (Webb, 2019).

Over the past 25 years, research has consistently demonstrated the effectiveness of AA and Twelve-Step Facilitation (TSF) in treating substance use disorders (Kelly, 2017). Krentzman et al. (2018) found that baseline forgiveness of self and others correlates with reduced drinking consequences, while

active involvement in AA over time enhances forgiveness levels and is associated with positive spiritual changes that predict improved drinking outcomes (Robinson et al., 2011). Participants in TSF report higher abstinence rates compared to those in cognitive behavioral therapy, emphasizing the integral role of forgiveness and spirituality in promoting sustained recovery (Kelly, 2017; Brown et al., 2024). Integrating forgiveness into addiction treatment strategies can effectively reduce resentment, promote emotional healing, and strengthen resilience against substance use, supporting broader harm reduction efforts and societal impacts (Webb et al., 2024).

In a study focused on short-term outpatient treatment for alcohol dependence in southern Poland, Charzynska (2021) found that variations in spiritual coping, forgiveness, and gratitude significantly influence completion rates of addiction therapy, underscoring the critical role of positive spiritual coping and genuine self-forgiveness in successful recovery. Couples affected by addiction often face instability and heightened aggression, exacerbating substance use and relapse rates. While couples-focused treatments have shown promise in enhancing abstinence and recovery maintenance (Sherrell & Gutierrez, 2014), these approaches remain underutilized. Integrating forgiveness into addiction counseling, particularly within established frameworks like Twelve-Step Facilitation Therapy, aligns with client values and enhances treatment outcomes by addressing emotional healing and promoting relational stability (Krentzman et al., 2018; Webb et al., 2015).

This integrated approach highlights the synergistic benefits of combining forgiveness and spirituality with traditional addiction treatments, offering a promising avenue for enhancing recovery outcomes and addressing the multifaceted impacts of addiction on individuals, their relationships, and their communities.

The Impact of Forgiveness on Individuals and Relationships

The benefits of forgiveness extend beyond relational harmony, encompassing significant emotional, psychological, and physiological improvements that contribute to overall well-being. Research on the psychophysiology of forgiveness has advanced significantly in the last two decades. Initial studies linked unforgiving rumination and grudge-holding with stress responses, while empathy and forgiveness were associated with reduced anger and lower reactivity in cardiovascular and skin conductance measures (Witvliet, 2019). Recent research has expanded to include brain, cardiac, and biochemical measures, highlighting the role of self-regulation. For example, Witvliet et al. (2011) found that compassionate reappraisal increases empathy and forgiveness while reducing stress and improving heart rate variability, which are essential for emotional regulation in addiction recovery. Additionally, Larsen et al. (2012) found that angry rumination increases blood pressure, while forgiving imagery lowers it, highlighting the importance of reducing rumination to improve physical health in recovery.

Overall, higher levels of forgiveness are associated with numerous positive health outcomes, including reductions in depression, anxiety, stress, and substance use, and improvements in life satisfaction, quality of life, and mental health (Webb et al., 2017). Research indicates that forgiveness helps rebuild trust, which is essential for relational repair and long-term stability. Studies, such as those conducted by Karremans et al. (2003), demonstrate that forgiveness enhances well-being by fostering commitment, which, in turn, contributes to relationship stability. This emphasizes the importance of forgiveness in addiction recovery and overall well-being.

In addition to individual benefits, forgiveness interventions have shown profound effects on couple relationships. Worthington et al. (2015) demonstrated that couples who participated in forgiveness

and empathy-focused interventions showed reduced cortisol reactivity and improved marital problem-solving, highlighting the benefits of forgiveness interventions for relational and physiological health. Moreover, Woldarsky and Greenberg (2014) found that forgiveness positively impacts health and well-being by buffering stress, decreasing hostility and rumination, and nurturing positive emotions that calm the nervous system.

Furthermore, forgiveness has been linked to improved physical and mental health. Trait forgiveness, in particular, has a stronger association with physical health because its consistent presence helps lower long-term stress, promoting overall well-being (Toussaint et al., 2019). Research has examined all three domains of forgiveness in relation to physical health outcomes, focusing mainly on forgiveness of others, followed by self-forgiveness, and a small amount on feeling forgiven by God. Results consistently show positive associations with physical health, such as fewer symptoms and increased exercise (Toussaint et al., 2019). Despite hundreds of studies on forgiveness, only 55 have examined its relation to physical health due to challenges with studying health outcomes in college students and the long-term nature of health condition development (Toussaint et al., 2019). Despite the small number of studies, the majority consistently showed a favorable relationship between forgiveness and health, suggesting a robust connection between the two (McCullough et al., 2007; Toussaint et al., 2016; Witvliet et al., 2011; Woldarsky & Greenberg, 2014).

The largest body of evidence has been conducted around mental health and well-being, revealing that forgiveness has largely positive effects in contexts such as anger, depression, childhood abuse, marital relationships, and psychotherapy, with comprehensive reviews and empirical studies supporting these findings (Webb & Toussaint, 2019). Webb et al. (2012) conducted literature regarding associations

with well-being and mental health, consistently finding positive associations between forgiveness and mental health outcomes, such as improved quality of life, reduced posttraumatic stress symptoms, lower suicidal behavior, and increased empathy and gratitude. Similarly, Davis et al. (2015) reviewed 54 studies regarding general psychological adjustment and categorized findings that showed strong support for the link between forgiveness and better mental health, indicating that forgiving behaviors and attitudes are generally beneficial for psychological adjustment and well-being across diverse samples and dimensions of forgiveness. Kim et al. (2022) found that anger and hope both mediate the effect of forgiveness on anxiety, depression, and self-esteem, with forgiveness reducing anger and restoring hope, thereby improving psychological health by lowering anxiety and depression and increasing self-esteem.

In the last decade, there has been an unwieldy increase in studies (n=380), illustrating the growing interest in the impacts of forgiveness (Webb & Toussaint, 2019). Associations between forgiveness and general psychological adjustment are frequent, consistent, and robust. However, the current issue with forgiveness research studies is the lack of sophisticated research designs that can establish directionality and causation, making it difficult to conclusively determine that forgiveness leads to better psychological adjustment (Fincham, 2019).

Understanding the impact of forgiveness on individuals and relationships is crucial for couples in addiction recovery. Forgiveness provides significant emotional, psychological, and physiological benefits that enhance overall well-being. Research has demonstrated that forgiveness interventions reduce stress and improve emotional regulation, essential for long-term recovery and relationship stability (Witvliet et al., 2011). Trait forgiveness, in particular, is linked to lower long-term stress and better physical health (Toussaint et al., 2019). Despite challenges in establishing causation, consistent findings show a strong

connection between forgiveness and health (McCullough et al., 2007; Witvliet et al., 2011). These insights highlight the importance of including forgiveness in addiction recovery programs to improve both individual and relational health.

Contextual Factors that Impact Forgiveness

Examining the multifaceted influence of contextual factors such as gender, race, religion, and education on forgiveness processes in addiction recovery offers critical insights. While it is often thought that women are more forgiving than men, study results comparing the two genders show mixed outcomes (Kaleta & Mróz, 2022; Sarfaraz et al., 2024). A meta-analytic review by Miller et al. (2008) of 70 studies with 15,731 individuals found a small to moderate effect size showing greater willingness to forgive among females, while Fehr et al. (2010), in their meta-analyses of 53 studies with 8,366 participants, found no relationship between gender and forgiveness.

The discrepancy in findings on gender differences in forgiveness is mainly due to varying methodologies and the lack of studies specifically comparing men's and women's multidimensional experiences of forgiveness (Kaleta & Mróz, 2022). In Kaleta and Mróz's (2022) study comparing men and women on their levels of dispositional forgiveness and related emotional factors, they found that women had lower overall forgiveness, particularly self-forgiveness, compared to men, due to their interdependent self-view making them more prone to shame. Emotional control impacts forgiveness differently by gender, suggesting that women need interventions for self-forgiveness and expressing negative emotions, while men need help with emotion regulation, especially anxiety and anger.

In contrast, a study exploring gender differences among 160 participants (80 male, 80 female) in Pakistan found that females have a significantly higher disposition to forgive themselves compared to males

(Sarfaraz et al., 2024). Sarfaraz et al. (2024) also highlight the distinction between forgiveness and vengeance: forgiveness is seen as a dispositional trait, reflecting an individual's consistent propensity to forgive interpersonal transgressions, whereas vengeance involves the desire or pursuit of retribution against those perceived to have wronged the individual.

In a recent study, Ali et al. (2024) found that women are commonly perceived to exhibit greater levels of forgiveness, gratitude, and reconciliation due to personality traits such as agreeableness, empathy, and the importance they place on relationships, which often align with higher tendencies towards religiosity and maintaining a secure relationship with God. Understanding these concepts within gender-specific patterns provides valuable insights, as research suggests women are often perceived as more forgiving due to traits like agreeableness and empathy, emphasizing the importance of exploring these dynamics further to develop effective interventions and therapeutic strategies.

Neto (2007) reported that while gender's influence on forgiveness is minimal, it can moderate forgiveness-personality trait relationships. The propensity to forgive tends to increase from adolescence to old age (Fehr et al., 2010), and religious involvement is positively correlated with forgiveness and negatively correlated with seeking revenge, with studies showing a positive link between religious involvement and forgiveness. Studies have indicated that the strength of the connection between forgiveness and health grows with age, with the most significant associations observed in older adults (Bono & McCullough, 2004; McFarland et al., 2012; Toussaint et al., 2001).

Forgiveness is deeply embedded in the traditions of most major world religions (Fox & Thomas, 2008; Fincham & May, 2019; Fincham, 2022). For instance, Krause (2017) found that religious involvement significantly influences self-forgiveness through multiple pathways. Feeling forgiven by

God enhances self-worth, making it easier for individuals to forgive themselves. Black individuals, who are more involved in religious activities and receive more spiritual support, tend to forgive themselves more readily. Similarly, evangelical Christians benefit from increased spiritual support and teachings on self-forgiveness, promoting self-forgiveness. The study underscores the role of religious communities and beliefs in fostering self-forgiveness. Moreover, Balkin et al. (2024), in a study with 166 Black Americans, found that spirituality positively influences their capacity to forgive, particularly when reconciliation is perceived as beneficial. This highlights spirituality as a crucial cultural asset in navigating forgiveness and justice.

Building on this understanding of religious influence, Rye et al. (2005) found that both religious and secular interventions are equally effective for forgiveness in romantic and marital conflicts, with participants often using personal religious beliefs during treatment. This finding highlights the practical implications of religiosity in therapeutic settings. Understanding this relationship aids psychotherapists in comprehending the impact of religiosity on behavior relevant to treatment.

Furthermore, Neto (2007) found that religious involvement is positively correlated with dispositional forgiveness and negatively correlated with seeking revenge. Participants who believed in God were more willing to forgive and held fewer enduring resentments. The study also suggests that gratitude and agreeableness significantly contribute to forgiveness, indicating the complex interplay of personality traits and religiosity. Finally, Riek and Mania (2012) found that increased religiosity is associated with higher levels of forgiveness and lower tendencies towards revenge. Their meta-analysis highlighted that religion has a more substantial impact on attitudes toward forgiveness than on actual

forgiveness behavior, with religious individuals often displaying greater empathy and commitment, which in turn promote forgiveness.

Moreover, research indicates that the pressure to forgive can vary significantly between different religious groups. For example, Cohen et al. (2006) found that Jews are more likely than Protestants to view certain offenses as unforgivable, and religious commitment has a stronger negative correlation with belief in unforgivable offenses among Protestants (Cohen et al., 2006). Jews are also more inclined to cite religious reasons for nonforgiveness, which fully explain their differences in forgiveness of specific offenses like plagiarism and the Holocaust. This suggests that Jews may feel less pressure to forgive severe offenses due to their beliefs, while Protestants, particularly those with strong religious commitment, might feel more pressure to forgive, as their beliefs are less likely to include the concept of unforgivable offenses (Cohen et al., 2006). These findings underscore the significant role of cultural and religious context in shaping the perceived obligation or pressure to forgive.

Considering the social context, including factors such as race, is crucial among a broad range of contextual influences. The propensity to forgive may not be beneficial in all environments, as McCullough (2008) argues that humans are genetically equipped for both forgiveness and revenge, with the broader social context determining when each is appropriate. For example, in less affluent neighborhoods of Philadelphia, forgiveness is seen as a sign of weakness that can invite predatory behavior, making resistance more adaptive (McFarland et al., 2012). In a study by McFarland et al. (2012) examining older Blacks and Whites, forgiveness significantly benefited the health of Black individuals, especially in less deteriorated neighborhoods. The positive effects of forgiveness on self-reported health, alcohol use, and chronic conditions were more significant among Blacks, potentially due

to their reliance on extended family networks and religious communities. A study by Brooks et al. (2021) found that dispositional forgiveness reduced the depressive impact of perceived racial discrimination among Black individuals. Moreover, in a meta-analysis on self-forgiveness, Davis et al. (2015) found that samples with higher racial/ethnic diversity show a stronger relationship between self-forgiveness and psychological well-being, suggesting that diverse populations might experience greater mental health benefits from self-forgiveness. Forgiveness researchers point out that there is still a lack of comprehensive understanding regarding how religion, culture, and life situations influence people's perceptions and experiences of forgiveness (Cohen et al., 2006; McCullough, 2000). It is crucial to consider religious, cultural, and situational differences in order for scientific concepts of forgiveness to truly reflect real human experiences.

Examining the influence of contextual factors on forgiveness highlights the complex interplay between gender, race, religion, and community dynamics in addiction recovery. Mixed-gender findings call for specific interventions addressing emotional expression and regulation. The role of religious involvement in fostering forgiveness, especially self-forgiveness, emphasizes the importance of spiritual support systems. Additionally, the pressure to forgive varies across cultural and religious contexts, with forgiveness perceived differently based on sociocultural backgrounds. These insights underscore the need for nuanced therapeutic approaches that consider diverse circumstances, promoting genuine healing and behavioral change in environments of safety, accountability, and cultural sensitivity.

The Dark Side of Forgiveness

Despite the substantial evidence supporting the benefits of forgiveness, an emerging academic debate questions whether forgiveness is always the most appropriate response to certain severe betrayals

(Gordon et al., 2019). Some scholars have highlighted instances where forgiveness can lead to negative consequences, such as perpetuating wrongful behavior (Wohl & McLaughlin, 2014). For example, McNulty (2010a) found that in high-conflict relationships, forgiving spouses reported lower marital satisfaction, and their partners were twice as likely to re-offend shortly after being forgiven. Similarly, Wohl and Thompson (2011) found that self-forgiveness for smoking was associated with lower motivation to quit, as individuals who forgave themselves for smoking were less motivated to contemplate quitting.

Moreover, a problematic form of forgiveness known as pseudo-self-forgiveness occurs when an individual, despite being fully responsible for a wrongdoing, shifts some or all of the blame to external factors, thereby reducing guilt and decreasing the likelihood of behavioral change (Gordon et al., 2019; Webb et al., 2017). For example, Wohl et al. (2014) found that individuals with alcohol addiction often engage in pseudo-self-forgiveness by blaming external factors, such as social pressure or stressful situations, for their excessive drinking, which diminishes their guilt and reduces their motivation to change their behavior.

These concerns about the potential dark side of forgiveness extend to more severe issues such as infidelity, divorce, and intimate partner violence (IPV). Infidelity forgiveness depends on factors like the frequency of infidelity, reasons behind it, and the unfaithful partner's remorse (Gordon et al., 2019). Individual traits and social pressures also influence forgiveness. In IPV, forgiveness can aid psychological growth but risks continued abuse if confused with reconciliation (McNulty, 2011). Safety and distance are crucial for effective forgiveness therapy. Post-divorce, forgiveness interventions improve individual functioning and forgiveness, but the impact on co-parenting remains unclear (Rye et al., 2012). While

forgiveness promotes healing, its application must consider context, safety, and underlying issues. One of the most consistent findings across the literature is that people can forgive seemingly "unforgivable" offenses, which can be beneficial for their well-being and relationship health, including post-divorce co-parenting (Gordon et al., 2019). However, research also highlights the need for careful definitions of forgiveness, especially in IPV contexts where forgiveness can sometimes lead to continued victimization; thus, a consistent assessment and clear distinction between genuine and premature forgiveness are essential for understanding its true impact (McNulty, 2011).

In addition to these considerations, it is essential to acknowledge how social context, including race and community dynamics, influences the process and perception of forgiveness. Some scholars have argued that encouraging Black people to forgive for navigating discrimination focuses on individual coping rather than addressing systemic racism (Perez et al., 2024). This perspective aids survival in a toxic environment but doesn't address broader issues. Forgiveness is influenced by contexts of racism, power, and privilege, and is more valued in stable, privileged nations (Perez et al., 2024). Although linked to better health, its benefits are weaker in poorer neighborhoods (McFarland et al., 2012). Some reasons could be that victimized groups often feel pressured to forgive by those in power, in addition to revenge being more valued for survival (McFarland et al., 2012; Perez et al., 2024).

Understanding the complexities and potential pitfalls of forgiveness is crucial in the context of addiction recovery, as couples navigate the different domains of divine forgiveness, self-forgiveness, and interpersonal forgiveness. Pseudo-self-forgiveness could be particularly relevant for individuals in addiction recovery, where genuine self-forgiveness is critical for personal accountability and transformation. Additionally, the parallels drawn from studies on infidelity, divorce, and IPV underscore

the importance of distinguishing between true forgiveness and reconciliation, especially when dealing with severe betrayals or ongoing abuse. Considering both racial and religious pressures is also crucial among individuals and groups. These insights emphasize the need for a nuanced approach to forgiveness in addiction recovery, ensuring that it promotes genuine healing and behavioral change without enabling continued destructive behaviors or compromising relational safety. For forgiveness to truly flourish, it must be nurtured in an environment of safety and accountability (Witvliet, 2019).

Summary of Key Findings

The literature review reveals several key themes and findings related to forgiveness in the context of addiction recovery, with specific focus on divine forgiveness, self-forgiveness, and interpersonal forgiveness. Firstly, the stress-and-coping theory frames forgiveness as a coping mechanism essential for addiction recovery, highlighting its role in regulating emotional responses and alleviating relationship tensions (Worthington & Wade, 2020). Interdependence theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) emphasizes the transactional nature of forgiveness within relationships, suggesting that mutual dependence and commitment foster forgiveness and relational stability. Evolutionary theory (McCullough, 2008) provides a broader perspective, linking forgiveness to survival dynamics and suggesting a greater propensity for in-group forgiveness.

A significant gap identified is the lack of studies examining the interplay between self-forgiveness, interpersonal forgiveness, and divine forgiveness. Existing research often treats these forms of forgiveness independently, despite their interconnectedness. To address this gap, the current study explores how these domains of forgiveness manifest and interact within couples recovering from addiction. Research on the influence of religion and spirituality indicates that divine forgiveness,

involving seeking forgiveness from a higher power, plays a crucial role in promoting self-forgiveness and forgiveness of others (Fincham & May, 2022; Krause, 2017). Spiritual appraisals and perceived divine forgiveness are associated with better psychological outcomes and reduced substance use (Choe et al., 2019; Webb et al., 2013).

Self-forgiveness is highlighted as critical for mitigating self-condemnation and promoting emotional healing in addiction recovery (Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2020). However, defining and measuring self-forgiveness remains challenging due to its variability in individual experiences. Recent approaches emphasize genuine self-forgiveness over pseudo-self-forgiveness, which can hinder personal and relational healing (Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2013; Cornish et al., 2018).

Interpersonal forgiveness is essential for repairing relationships damaged by addiction. It involves overcoming negative emotions and fostering goodwill towards the offender, distinct from reconciliation, which requires mutual effort (Fincham, 2019). Forgiveness interventions have been shown to improve relationship satisfaction, communication, and mental health outcomes (Wade et al., 2014; Roberts et al., 2021).

Addiction recovery research consistently demonstrates the benefits of forgiveness, particularly self-forgiveness, in reducing substance use and improving mental health outcomes (Webb et al., 2017; Krentzman et al., 2018). However, there is a significant research gap regarding the specific mechanisms through which forgiveness influences recovery, and more sophisticated research designs are needed to establish causation (Fincham, 2019).

The literature also highlights the complex interplay of contextual factors such as gender, race, religion, and community dynamics on forgiveness processes. Gender differences in forgiveness are

inconsistent, with some studies suggesting women are more forgiving, while others find no significant differences (Kaleta & Mróz, 2022; Sarfaraz et al., 2024). Religious involvement generally fosters forgiveness, with spiritual support playing a crucial role (Balkin et al., 2024). However, the pressure to forgive can vary significantly across cultural and religious contexts, influencing perceptions and experiences of forgiveness (Cohen et al., 2006; Perez et al., 2024).

Moreover, the potential negative consequences of forgiveness, such as perpetuating wrongful behavior or enabling continued abuse, underscore the importance of distinguishing between genuine forgiveness and reconciliation, particularly in severe betrayals or ongoing abuse (McNulty, 2010a; Wohl & Thompson, 2011). Overall, the review underscores the need for a nuanced approach to forgiveness in addiction recovery, considering the multifaceted influences of gender, race, religion, and community dynamics. Addressing these contextual factors can inform more effective therapeutic interventions and support services for couples affected by addiction, promoting genuine healing and behavioral change. Areas for further exploration include:

- Investigating the interplay between different forms of forgiveness in addiction recovery.
- Developing sophisticated research designs to establish causation between forgiveness and recovery outcomes.
- Exploring the specific mechanisms through which forgiveness influences recovery and relationship dynamics.
- Examining the role of cultural and religious contexts in shaping forgiveness experiences and pressures.

These areas are critical for advancing understanding and improving support for individuals and couples navigating addiction recovery.

Conclusion

The synthesis of the literature review findings reveals a multifaceted understanding of forgiveness within the context of addiction recovery. The research underscores the importance of exploring divine forgiveness, self-forgiveness, and interpersonal forgiveness, highlighting their interconnectedness and the need for a comprehensive approach in studying these domains. Theoretical frameworks such as the stress-and-coping theory and interdependence theory provide foundational insights into the mechanisms and functions of forgiveness, suggesting that it serves both intrapersonal and interpersonal purposes essential for emotional regulation and relationship stability.

The literature identifies significant gaps, particularly the lack of studies examining the interplay between the different forms of forgiveness within couples affected by addiction. Additionally, while existing research highlights the benefits of forgiveness, there is a need for more sophisticated research designs to establish causation and understand the specific mechanisms through which forgiveness influences recovery outcomes. Contextual factors such as gender, race, religion, and community dynamics further complicate the forgiveness process, indicating the need for tailored therapeutic approaches that consider these diverse influences.

The current study aims to address these gaps by exploring how divine forgiveness, self-forgiveness, and interpersonal forgiveness manifest and interact within couples navigating addiction recovery. This exploration will provide deeper insights into the role of forgiveness in promoting emotional healing, relationship repair, and overall well-being in this context.

The research questions that guided this study are: How do couples, where one person is in addiction recovery, experience the different domains of forgiveness? Specifically, how do perceived divine forgiveness, self-forgiveness, and interpersonal forgiveness independently and collectively impact individuals and their relationships in the context of recovery from substance abuse disorder? Furthermore, what are the differences between the substance user's and their partner’s experiences of forgiveness within these domains?

CHAPTER III
METHOD

Introduction to Methodology

This chapter outlines the research design, methodology, data collection methods, and analysis procedures used to explore forgiveness dynamics in couples affected by addiction recovery. The study employs a qualitative approach, specifically Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), to capture the nuanced and subjective experiences of participants. IPA deeply examines human lived experience, aiming to express it in participants' terms, acknowledging the interpretative nature of inquiry, and focusing on detailed, context-specific analysis of each participant before making broader generalizations (Smith et al., 2022). Thus, IPA has been informed by three key areas of the philosophy of knowledge: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. These philosophical foundations guide IPA's approach to understanding and interpreting the nuances of individual experiences within their specific contexts (Smith et al., 2022). Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with each member of the couple to gather rich, detailed data on forgiveness from their personal perspectives. The analysis was shaped by my understanding of existing models, such as the Enright Process Model (Enright, 1991) and Worthington's REACH Forgiveness Model (Worthington, 2006). While these and the previously mentioned theories provide a foundational framework for guiding my interpretation, the analysis will remain flexible and primarily centered on the participants' experiences. These theories are referenced and applied during the data analysis and interpretation phases to enrich the understanding of the participants' lived experiences, while still allowing new insights to emerge organically and ensuring that the analysis is rooted in participants' own terms and experiences.

In IPA, it is important to allow the participant's experiences and perspectives to lead the analysis, so while established models can provide a helpful framework, the study prioritizes capturing the nuanced and individual meanings that participants ascribe to their experiences (Smith et al., 2022). The chapter also details the alignment of the chosen methodology with the research aims, the recruitment process, sample size considerations, and procedures for ensuring rigor and trustworthiness. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, and potential risks, are discussed, along with the study's limitations and delimitations.

Research Design

Given the primary research question and purpose of the study, I determined that Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) would be the most appropriate qualitative methodology for this study. IPA is particularly well-suited for research that seeks to understand the essence of individuals' lived experiences because it allows for a detailed examination of how people make sense of their personal and social worlds (Alase, 2017; Smith et al., 2022). My study aims to explore how couples affected by addiction recovery experience forgiveness across various domains, including perceived divine forgiveness, self-forgiveness, and interpersonal forgiveness.

By adopting IPA, I can deeply investigate the subjective experiences of both partners, focusing on their perceptions, emotions, and interpretations of forgiveness. IPA is also interpretative, acknowledging that the researcher's role is to make sense of the participants' meanings (Smith & Osborn, 2022), which is particularly important when exploring complex and sensitive topics such as forgiveness within the context of substance abuse recovery. This interpretative aspect of IPA, often referred to as the "double hermeneutic," highlights that the researcher's task is not just to gather and report participants' experiences

but to actively interpret them. The researcher is engaged in a process of trying to understand how participants make sense of their own experiences, while also bringing their own perspective and analytical lens to the data (Smith et al., 2022). This is particularly important when exploring complex topics like forgiveness in the context of substance abuse recovery, where experiences that are deeply personal and involve intricate emotional and psychological processes. The researcher's interpretation helps uncover layers of meaning that participants may not explicitly express, providing deeper insights into how individuals navigate and understand forgiveness in their relationships. This process allows the study to move beyond surface-level descriptions and explore the underlying dynamics of these experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2022). Furthermore, IPA's idiographic commitment allows for a detailed exploration of individual cases before moving to more general themes, which is crucial for understanding the unique and shared experiences of forgiveness within each individual and couple (Eatough & Smith, 2017).

Overall, IPA aligns closely with the aims of my study, offering a rich and comprehensive understanding of forgiveness within addiction recovery. This approach enables the exploration of differences in forgiveness experiences between partners, providing insights into how these experiences uniquely influence individuals and their relationships.

Participants/Sample

Following approval from the University Institutional Review Board (IRB), purposeful and convenience sampling approaches were used to obtain the study sample. Participants were recruited from various treatment centers and recovery communities in the Twin Cities area. Initial contact was made with treatment staff at Hazelden Betty Ford, The Retreat, Riverplace Counseling Center, and Minnesota Adult and Teen Challenge. Treatment staff assisted by posting information on alumni boards and sharing details

at meetings to facilitate recruitment. Additional recruitment efforts included posts on social media, flyers at local recovery meeting locations, and an announcement to a recovery community that had granted permission. All related recruitment documents, including social media posts, flyers, emails, and the announcement script, are included in the appendices.

Data were collected from couples in recovery, where one partner was recovering from substance use disorder (SUD) and the other was not. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted, recorded, transcribed, and coded according to phenomenological methodology. By interviewing both members of the couple, cross-comparisons were made between their individual experiences, allowing for a deeper understanding of relationship dynamics and forgiveness processes from both perspectives. This approach facilitated a nuanced exploration of their individual experiences while capturing relational themes across interviews. Interviews were conducted via Zoom, with each lasting approximately 45 minutes to one hour. Participants were interviewed separately to ensure privacy, allowing them to speak freely and share their experiences without concern for how their partner might perceive their responses. This setup encouraged honest and open communication, providing richer and more detailed data for analysis.

Couples were included in the study if one partner had been in recovery from SUD for at least six months after completing a month-long inpatient SUD treatment program. While the minimum recovery time ensured that participants had begun the forgiveness process; the sample included individuals at varying stages of recovery, ranging from one to over 20 years, with an average recovery time of approximately seven years. The six-month recovery period allowed sufficient time for forgiveness processes to emerge. Additionally, couples needed to have been together for at least one year to ensure

they had experience navigating both addiction and recovery. Partners were required to have been with their drug- or alcohol-dependent partner during active use to provide insight into the full spectrum of challenges associated with both addiction and recovery. This shared history was essential for understanding the evolution of forgiveness processes within the relationship, offering a comprehensive context for exploring how forgiveness develops and manifests as partners navigate these complexities together. Couples where both partners were in recovery from SUD were excluded to allow for the identification of differences between partners as aligned with the study's aims.

The final sample consisted of 20 participants—10 individuals in recovery and 10 partners not in recovery. Among the individuals in recovery, nine were male and one was female. Correspondingly, among the partners not in recovery, nine were female and one was male, partnered with the female in recovery. All participants identified as Caucasian, with one participant also identifying as Hispanic/Latino. The educational background varied, with three participants (all in recovery) holding a high school diploma, five with an associate's degree, and twelve with at least a bachelor's degree. The length of participants' relationships ranged from 5 to 45 years, with an average duration of 16 years.

Regarding religious and spiritual affiliation, 14 participants identified as Christian, 2 as Buddhist, and 4 reported no formal religious affiliation. Among those in recovery, eight described spirituality or religion as very important in their lives, and two rated it as important. Among the partners not in recovery, six rated spirituality or religion as very important, one as important, one as somewhat important, and two as not important. All 10 participants in recovery followed some form of the Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) model, with two also participating in Celebrate Recovery. Employment status among participants in recovery showed full-time employment for all 10 individuals. Among

partners not in recovery, four were employed full-time, two part-time, two were self-employed, and two were unemployed at the time of the study.

Table 1 provides an overview of the couples who participated in this study, including relationship length, substance use history, recovery status, religious/spiritual affiliation, and the recovery programs they engage with. To protect participant confidentiality, all names have been changed.

Table 1
Overview of Participating Couples

Couple	**Relationship Length**	**Substance Use & Recovery**	**Religious/Spiritual Affiliation**	**Recovery Program**
Kevin & Sarah	9 years	Kevin - 1 year (Alcohol)	Both Christian	AA
Adam & Emily	4 years	Emily - 3 years (Alcohol & Drugs)	Emily - Christian, Adam - Agnostic	AA
Andrew & Lisa	5 years	Andrew - 18 months (Alcohol)	Both Christian	AA
Matthew & JoLynn	7 years	Matthew - 5 years (Methamphetamine)	Both Buddhist, Matthew exploring Christianity	AA/NA
Mark & Rachel	28 years	Mark - 27 years (Alcohol)	Both Agnostic	AA
Ryan & Danielle	14 years	Ryan - 6 years (Methamphetamine)	Ryan - Christian, Danielle - Agnostic	AA/NA
Kyle & Amanda	45 years	Kyle - 11 years (Alcohol & Cocaine)	Both Christian	AA/NA/GA
James & Lauren	15 years	James - 6 years (Opioids)	Both Christian	Celebrate Recovery
Tyler & Megan	18 years	Tyler - 7 years (Opioids & Heroin)	Both Christian	AA/NA/Celebrate Recovery
Jason & Natalie	20 years	Jason - 8 years (Alcohol)	Jason - Agnostic, Natalie - Christian	AA

The target sample size was set at 10 couples, which is considered on the larger side for IPA studies (Smith et al., 2022; Dworkin, 2012). The sample size in IPA is intentionally small, as the

approach involves a detailed, case-by-case analysis of individual responses, which is time-intensive. This study prioritized the depth and richness of individual experiences, consistent with the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach, which does not seek thematic saturation in the traditional sense. Instead, IPA focuses on achieving a thorough, nuanced understanding of participants' lived experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Levitt et al. (2018) emphasize the importance of articulating when data collection stops, which in IPA occurs when sufficient depth and richness of interpretation has been reached. This iterative process of coding and theme development ensured a comprehensive analysis of both individual and shared experiences within the dyad. A total of 20 interviews were conducted, with each individual in the dyad being interviewed separately, allowing for a holistic exploration of their forgiveness dynamics (Smith et al., 2022).

Individuals in active use at the time of data collection and couples where any abuse was present were excluded. Excluding individuals in active use and couples where abuse was present ensured the reliability and validity of the data, as these factors could significantly alter participants' experiences and perceptions. Ethically, this also protected participants from potential harm and ensured their well-being. This focus allowed the study to accurately explore forgiveness dynamics in stable recovery contexts, maintaining a clear and specific scope aligned with the research objectives.

Before data collection, I documented my assumptions and beliefs about forgiveness in the context of recovery. Throughout the study, I recorded memos on personal reactions and evolving insights. These practices align with IPA’s emphasis on reflexivity, where the researcher reflects on—rather than sets aside—their own perspectives. Reflexivity was central to this study, as I continually examined how my experiences and assumptions shaped the process and interpretation. This reflective approach ensured

participants' voices remained central while acknowledging my role as an active interpreter. The demographically homogenous yet experientially diverse sample offered a rich foundation for exploring forgiveness in recovery and relationships.

Data Collection Methods

My primary data collection consisted of semi-structured in-depth interviews. This method facilitated the elicitation of stories, thoughts, and feelings about the target phenomenon, aligning closely with an in-depth focus on participants' experiences (Smith et al., 2022). The primary means of collecting data was through Zoom meetings in a secure private space. I prepared an interview guide in advance, allowing me to clearly outline the topics I intended to cover and anticipate any potential challenges that arose.

To ensure the effectiveness of the interview process and refine the questions, I conducted a pilot interview prior to the official data collection. This interview served to test the clarity, flow, and duration of the individual interview format. Feedback from the pilot interview was used to make necessary adjustments to the interview guide and process. The results of this pilot were not included in the final analysis but helped improve the quality of the study.

To ensure participants had a shared understanding of key concepts related to forgiveness, a list of general terms and definitions (*see Appendix H)* was provided to them prior to their interviews. This document clarified potentially complex concepts such as self-forgiveness, interpersonal forgiveness, and divine forgiveness, allowing participants to reflect more deeply on their experiences. While this helped reduce some ambiguity, many participants still found it challenging to fully articulate how these forms of

forgiveness were interconnected, highlighting the complexity of the forgiveness process. This tension itself became a meaningful aspect of the findings.

My background as a clinician was especially helpful in navigating sensitive discussions and ensuring participants felt comfortable and supported throughout the process. Potential challenges, such as emotional distress, off-topic responses, or limited depth in answers, were addressed through strategies like reflective listening, gentle probing, and maintaining a non-judgmental, supportive atmosphere (Smith & Osborn, 2022). I also used my clinical skills to manage emotional distress and ensured that participants felt safe sharing their experiences. I conducted individual interviews with each member of the couple separately. In these interviews, participants were also asked relationally oriented questions to explore how forgiveness processes impact their relationship. This approach allowed each participant to share their personal perspective on forgiveness in a private setting, fostering openness and authenticity. By comparing both partners' responses, I gained insights into how forgiveness unfolded both individually and relationally within the couple dynamic.

As the primary researcher, I audio-recorded and transcribed each interview. Following a phenomenological approach, I began analyzing each interview's data while other interviews were still ongoing. This iterative process, consistent with IPA, allowed me to identify emerging themes early and make minor adjustments, such as refining or adding questions, to explore these themes more deeply as interviews progressed (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Smith et al., 2022). Engaging in this ongoing analysis helped ensure flexibility and responsiveness to the data, enhancing the depth and richness of the findings. This responsive approach ensured that data collection remained attuned to the lived experiences of participants, ultimately leading to richer, more nuanced findings. The interview guide is displayed in

Appendix G. It is important to note that the questions evolved during the interview. In IPA, the interview is more participant-led, allowing the interviewer to follow up on topics and concerns raised by the participant that may not be in the guide but were relevant to the research question (Smith et al., 2022).

Data Analysis Procedures

For this study, I chose Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore the interpretative aspects of forgiveness within addiction recovery. IPA was well-suited for examining how individuals and couples made sense of their personal and relational experiences. The methodology allowed for a deep, nuanced understanding of how participants interpreted and attached meaning to their experiences of forgiveness (Smith & Eatough, 2012). Individual interviews employed a double hermeneutic approach, aligning with the study's focus on understanding forgiveness in the context of addiction recovery.

Although both partners in each couple participated, individual interviews were conducted separately. Each participant reflected openly on their own experiences without the immediate influence of their partner. The analysis focused on individual narratives, with relational comparisons explored during later stages of interpretation.

Following Smith, Flowers, and Larkin's (2022) idiographic approach in IPA, I progressed through multiple stages of analysis. I began by reading and re-reading each interview transcript to become deeply familiar with participants' accounts. During this immersion phase, I made exploratory notes capturing descriptive observations, linguistic patterns, and conceptual reflections that offered insight into how participants made sense of their forgiveness experiences.

Building on these initial notes, I distilled experiential statements to summarize what mattered most to each participant. These were later developed into emergent themes. To support this, I printed hard copies of all transcripts and wrote margin notes to capture immediate interpretations, reactions, and questions. In parallel, I created Excel spreadsheets for each participant to organize emergent codes and meaning units, allowing me to track the depth and evolution of individual narratives.

Once individual analysis was complete, I moved to within-group comparisons. I created one spreadsheet for participants in recovery and another for their partners not in recovery. These matrices allowed me to observe patterns within each group and note both shared experiences and divergent themes. For example, while both groups often cited spiritual surrender as pivotal, participants in recovery more frequently tied this to personal transformation, whereas partners not in recovery described it as a tool for self-preservation and boundaries.

From there, I developed an integrated master spreadsheet to support cross-group analysis. I began clustering themes based on shared language, emotion, and meaning across the full dataset. For instance, in several couples, one partner spoke of "rebuilding safety" while the other described "learning to trust again." These experiences were grouped together into a larger, evolving superordinate theme related to survival, trust, and relational repair. This iterative process reflected IPA's commitment to balancing idiographic depth with meaningful pattern recognition across participants.

Although a common IPA guideline suggests that at least half of participants should inhabit a theme, I prioritized conceptual depth and resonance over strict numerical thresholds. For example, across the sample, many participants reflected on the emotional complexity of taking ownership for harm caused, but their expressions varied widely—from feelings of profound shame to assertions of responsible

change. In developing clustered experiential patterns, I prioritized the richness and meaning of these differences rather than requiring strict frequency. Consistent with IPA's emphasis on depth rather than breadth, analysis continued until a nuanced understanding of individual and relational experiences had emerged (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

While the steps above loosely followed the IPA framework (immersion, noting, developing themes, clustering, and cross-case analysis), I allowed the process to remain flexible and participant-led. Interview questions were adapted slightly as early themes emerged, and certain coding categories evolved as new insights developed. This openness supported richer interpretations while maintaining fidelity to IPA principles. Table 2 below summarizes the key analytic stages followed in this study.

Table 2
Stages of IPA Analysis

Step	Description
Step 1 – Immersion	Read and re-read each transcript to deeply familiarize with each participant's individual experience.
Step 2 – Exploratory Noting	Created detailed notes capturing descriptive observations, linguistic patterns, and conceptual reflections for each case.
Step 3 – Developing Emergent Themes	Identified experiential statements and emergent themes within each participant's narrative.
Step 4 – Connecting Within Cases	Mapped and clustered related ideas within individual cases to preserve idiographic depth.
Step 5 – Moving Across Cases	Identified patterns of convergence and divergence across participants.
Step 6 – Refinement & Interpretation	Refined theme titles, integrated participant quotes, and interpreted meaning across levels.
Step 7 – Audit & Credibility Checks	Collaborated with research assistants and advisor to enhance analytic rigor and reflexivity.

Additional examples of the coding and theme development process are provided in *Appendix J*, and an audit trail summarizing analytic decisions and procedures is presented in *Appendix K* to further enhance transparency and rigor.

To refine and confirm the themes, I engaged in collaborative analysis with two undergraduate research assistants—one from a Family Social Science background and one from a pre-med track. Their perspectives helped triangulate interpretations and minimize potential bias. My dissertation advisor also served as an internal auditor, reviewing my coding and thematic development to ensure rigor and coherence. Through these collaborative discussions, we revised theme names, resolved discrepancies, and finalized the overarching thematic structure of the study.

In reporting the findings, I organized results around six major themes, each illustrated with rich participant quotes and interpretative commentary. As suggested by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2022), I maintained a balance between descriptive (participant-centered) and interpretative (researcher-centered) narrative. Reflexive notes and analytic memos were used throughout the research process to track evolving insights; examples are included in *Appendix I*.

In the final analytic phase, I synthesized the findings into a narrative, supplementing major themes with examples and quotations that demonstrated both convergence and uniqueness. This approach provided a comprehensive, grounded portrayal of forgiveness as it is experienced in relationships impacted by addiction recovery—one shaped by faith, emotion, rupture, and repair.

Ensuring Reflexivity, Trustworthiness, and Quality

Researcher reflexivity and trustworthiness were essential aspects of qualitative research methodology (D'Aniello & Fife, 2017; Levitt et al., 2018). As a trained family systems scholar and

marriage and family therapist, my background shaped my perspectives on forgiveness across different domains, and I held a deep appreciation for its significance in relationships. My professional experience with individuals and couples in recovery and those contemplating divorce informed my belief in the interconnectedness of various domains of forgiveness.

To ensure fidelity to participants' experiences and enhance the trustworthiness of the study findings, I employed reflexive bracketing throughout the research process. This involved continuous self-reflection to identify and document my preconceptions and biases related to forgiveness and addiction recovery (Levitt et al., 2018). By maintaining a research journal, I recorded my reflections and potential influences on the research. This approach aligned with the interpretative nature of IPA, allowing for a nuanced understanding of participants' lived experiences while being mindful of the researcher's influence.

To ensure trustworthiness, I followed Guba and Lincoln's (1994) framework and focused on credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability, as outlined by Anfara et al. (2002). Strategies such as member checks, frequent debriefings, and maintaining a reflective log contributed to establishing credibility. As part of the member check process, a summary of the results was shared with participants, and no concerns or corrections were raised, indicating that the findings resonated with their lived experiences. Transferability was supported through rich, thick description, enabling readers to assess the applicability of findings to other contexts. Confirmability was addressed through ongoing reflexivity and by recognizing and managing potential researcher biases. Dependability was ensured through a code-recode strategy and consultation with qualitative scholars for feedback on both the analysis and interpretation of the data.

Furthermore, Smith et al. (2022), along with Nizza et al. (2021), outlined several markers for ensuring high-quality IPA research. An acceptable IPA study must remain committed to phenomenology, emphasizing participants' lived experiences, and employ interpretative analysis that goes beyond surface-level descriptions to provide deeper insights into the phenomenon. By maintaining an idiographic focus, I highlighted individual cases in depth before moving to broader group-level analyses. Transparency throughout the data collection and analysis process was critical, ensuring that each step of analysis was clearly documented. Good IPA practice also requires coherence, plausibility, and interest in the final analysis, with themes supported by evidence from the data (Nizza et al.; Smith et al., 2022).

To enhance the quality of my analysis, I followed these seven key recommendations: focusing on depth rather than breadth, ensuring high-quality data through refined interview techniques, demonstrating rigor in analysis, exploring both convergence and divergence in participants' experiences, and offering deep interpretative insights. Finally, crafting a compelling narrative and utilizing an independent audit ensured the research remained trustworthy and valid. These strategies, combined with reflexive practices, allowed my study to adhere to the highest standards of IPA research.

Ethical Considerations

In conducting this dissertation study, several ethical considerations specific to the population and methodology were meticulously addressed. Given the vulnerability of individuals and couples grappling with addiction recovery, utmost respect for their autonomy, confidentiality, and emotional well-being was maintained throughout the research process. Informed consent was ensured, emphasizing confidentiality and the voluntary nature of participation. Special attention was given to minimizing any potential harm

associated with discussing sensitive topics related to addiction and forgiveness, with provisions in place for adequate support and debriefing.

Additionally, concerns regarding safety within relationships were carefully considered, particularly during the individual interviews, where sensitive topics could arise. To address this, screening procedures were implemented to identify and exclude any potentially abusive relationships. While procedures were in place to identify and exclude potentially abusive relationships, no participants met these exclusion criteria. As a precaution, resources and referrals were available, but no participants required them during the study.

Moreover, during individual interviews, differing perspectives emerged, which I navigated with care to ensure that participants felt comfortable expressing themselves fully. Transparent communication, informed consent procedures, and cultural sensitivity were upheld to foster an environment of trust and respect among participants from diverse backgrounds. Continuous monitoring and reflection on ethical dilemmas and researcher biases were integral to maintaining the integrity and ethical rigor of the study. Ultimately, the ethical conduct of this research prioritized the well-being and rights of the participants, aligning with the highest standards of ethical practice in qualitative research.

Limitations

Several potential limitations affected the findings and generalizability of this study. Firstly, constraints on sample size limited the diversity and representation of participants, impacting the breadth of experiences captured. Additionally, relying on convenience sampling methods introduced selection bias, as participants recruited from addiction recovery communities and treatment centers may not have fully represented the broader population. Furthermore, my background as a family systems scholar and

marriage and family therapist may have introduced biases in data collection, analysis, and interpretation, potentially influencing the study's outcomes. Methodological limitations, such as using semi-structured interviews, also restricted the depth of exploration into forgiveness experiences.

A limitation of this study was the complexity involved in analyzing individual perspectives, as it was challenging to maintain consistency when interpreting personal narratives across both members of the couple. Although not frequent, there were instances where each partner's account diverged in how they perceived and interpreted shared experiences, making it difficult to construct a coherent cross-comparison between partners. This divergence was particularly relevant when addressing emotionally charged topics like forgiveness and addiction recovery, where individual memory and subjective interpretations played a large role (Eisikovits & Koren, 2010). Additionally, recall bias may have influenced participants' accuracy when reflecting on past experiences of forgiveness and recovery, as memory distortion or selective recollection may have shaped their narratives (Smith & Osborn, 2022). Despite the use of reflexive bracketing, the interpretative nature of IPA presented the risk of subjectivity in analysis, as my own perspectives and experiences could have subtly influenced the interpretation of participants' narratives (Smith et al., 2022).

Potential discrepancies between individual interviews introduced complexities in data analysis and interpretation, particularly when comparing partners' differing perspectives on shared experiences. These differences affected the consistency and coherence of the findings, as each partner's personal narratives diverged from how the other perceived the same events. Additional limitations, such as recall bias and subjectivity in interpretation, further impact the study. However, these challenges are common in qualitative research and can be managed through careful methodological design. By employing strategies

such as rigorous data analysis and continuous reflection on potential biases, I aimed to minimize their effects. Despite these limitations, the study holds significant value in exploring the nuanced dynamics of forgiveness within addiction recovery, offering meaningful insights for both clinical practice and future research.

Conclusion

In summary, this chapter outlined the methodology for exploring forgiveness dynamics in couples affected by addiction recovery. We discussed the phenomenological research design, participant recruitment, and data collection methods. Ethical considerations, limitations, and delimitations were also addressed. Despite potential constraints, rigorous methodologies were employed to ensure valid and reliable findings. The forthcoming analysis aims to provide valuable insights into forgiveness in recovery, with implications for clinical practice and future research.

CHAPTER IV
FINDINGS

Overview

The participants in this study, all part of couples where one partner is in addiction recovery, shared their unique experiences of forgiveness, recovery, and relational repair. Whether individuals in recovery from substance use disorder (SUD) or their partners, they described forgiveness as an essential and deeply interwoven part of the recovery process. Each partner was interviewed separately to capture their individual perspectives, revealing the complexities of navigating forgiveness in the context of addiction recovery. Across all interviews, participants expressed that divine forgiveness, self-forgiveness, and interpersonal forgiveness were connected. Even when they struggled to articulate exactly how, they consistently described their interdependence.

At the time of the interviews, most participants were still actively engaging in the process of forgiveness. Some had many years of recovery behind them, while others were in the early and more emotionally raw stages. However, all continued to navigate forgiveness as an ongoing journey. Participants described how forgiveness was not a singular event but a continuous process intertwined with healing, trust, and personal growth. While some in recovery experienced a pivotal moment of self-forgiveness, most found that forgiveness—whether self, interpersonal, or divine—unfolded over time, requiring repeated efforts, reflection, spiritual growth, and relational repair rather than occurring in a single transformative moment.

Participants reflected on the challenges and emotional weight of forgiveness, often describing it as both necessary and difficult. For many, forgiveness served as the foundation for trust, healing, and the ability to move forward. Some viewed it as a survival mechanism that allowed them to endure the

challenges of addiction and its impact on their relationships. Others spoke of the weight of shame and guilt as barriers that had to be overcome in order to fully engage in the forgiveness process. Across experiences, participants emphasized that forgiveness—whether of themselves, their partner, or others—was not automatic or easy but required intentional effort, time, and often, spiritual grounding.

For many, spirituality played a significant role in their ability to engage with forgiveness—both in receiving it and in granting it to others. Some leaned on their faith as an anchor, finding strength in divine grace as well as in the process of forgiving and being forgiven in their relationships. Others wrestled with the tension between letting go and holding onto pain, navigating the complexities of accountability, trust, and the emotional realities of their experiences. The role of divine forgiveness emerged as a guiding framework, influencing how participants approached both self- and interpersonal forgiveness.

At the time of the interviews, participants were in different places in their journey with forgiveness. For some, forgiveness had been extended, but they realized there was still work to do in healing the wounds left behind. Others continued to process the emotional weight of past harms, finding that forgiveness was not a single decision but something they had to recommit to over time. Many described forgiveness as a process that ebbed and flowed, revisited in different ways as new challenges arose. Despite its complexities, forgiveness was often seen as a path to growth, resilience, and ultimately, a way to reclaim agency over one's own healing.

As I engaged in the interpretative process, I remained aware that my understanding of these themes was shaped not only by the participants' experiences, but also by my own evolving lens as a researcher and clinician. In Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, the researcher is not a neutral

observer but an analytic instrument—a sense-maker working to interpret how participants themselves make meaning of their experiences. As Smith et al. (2009) explain, "IPA is a dynamic process… where the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them" (p. 3). This double hermeneutic means that the findings are co-constructed, emerging through my careful attention to the emotional, spiritual, and relational content of each narrative. While participants' words remain unchanged in transcription, their meaning continues to unfold through interpretation—requiring reflexivity, empathy, and a deep commitment to honoring their lived experience.

The complexity of these experiences is reflected in six overarching themes that emerged from the interviews, highlighting the different ways participants engaged with forgiveness in the context of addiction recovery: (1) Can't Do Recovery Without Forgiveness, (2) A Web of Forgiveness—Where Self, Other, and the Divine Intertwine, (3) The Role of Forgiveness in Navigating Shame, Guilt, and Responsibility, (4) The Role of Spirituality in Forgiveness and Recovery, (5) Forgiveness as a Journey, and (6) Fruits of Forgiveness. These themes are each presented below, along with various levels of supporting themes (see Table 3) and exemplar participant quotes.

Table 3
Summary of Study Findings

Theme 1: Can't Do Recovery Without Forgiveness
Forgiveness as the Foundation for Survival, Trust, and Repair
Forgiveness, Healing, and Recovery as Interwoven Processes
Theme 2: A Web of Forgiveness—Where Self, Other, and the Divine Intertwine
Self-Forgiveness as a Foundation for Moving Forward
Divine Forgiveness as a Framework and Gateway for Forgiveness
Spirituality as the Bridge Between Forms of Forgiveness
Theme 3: The Role of Forgiveness in Navigating Shame, Guilt, and Responsibility
Partner in Recovery

Addiction-Fueled Shame: The Ongoing Battle with Identity and Guilt Balancing Accountability and Emotional Burden *Partner Not in Recovery* Internalized Blame, Self-Forgiveness, and Coping Navigating Boundaries in Forgiveness
Theme 4: The Role of Spirituality in Forgiveness and Recovery Spirituality as a Foundation for Forgiveness The Struggle Between Control and Surrender in Forgiveness Forgiveness as a Spiritual Practice
Theme 5: Forgiveness as a Journey The Nonlinear Journey of Forgiveness Forgiveness as a Choice The Burden of Persistent Forgiveness
Theme 6: Fruits of Forgiveness Transformation and Growth Through Forgiveness Grieving What Was Lost While Hoping for the Future Forgiveness Leads to Liberation

Superordinate Theme 1: Can't Do Recovery Without Forgiveness

Forgiveness was a fundamental pillar in both individual healing and relational survival. Across narratives, participants consistently described it as a necessity rather than an option—without it, many believed their recovery, and in some cases, their relationships, would not have endured. It was not a luxury or an afterthought but a survival mechanism, a prerequisite for relational repair, and a foundation for trust. This superordinate theme is supported by subthemes that illustrate the multifaceted ways participants experienced forgiveness as essential for both emotional and relational restoration. Many saw it as the only path forward in rebuilding connection and healing from past wounds, recognizing that without forgiveness, moving forward—both individually and as a couple—would not have been possible. Regardless of how they defined it, participants overwhelmingly agreed that forgiveness was inseparable from their journey of recovery, shaping their ability to heal, reconnect, and ultimately sustain both recovery and their relationships.

Forgiveness as the Foundation for Survival, Trust, and Repair. Participants consistently described forgiveness as the determining factor in whether their relationship could withstand the challenges of addiction and recovery. More than just moving past harm, forgiveness created the conditions necessary for rebuilding trust and emotional security. However, it was not given unconditionally—it required demonstrated change from the partner in recovery and a willingness from the other partner to release resentment. Beyond relationship repair, forgiveness was often what made long-term personal recovery possible.

Many in recovery described it as the reason they were still here—both in their relationships and in their sobriety. Without it, reconciling the past and moving forward would not have been possible. Sarah, whose partner, Kevin, is a year sober after a two-decade struggle with alcohol addiction, echoed this sentiment, stating, *"Well, I think you cannot move forward without it."* Together for eight years, she witnessed firsthand how forgiveness became essential not only for Kevin's recovery but for the survival of their relationship. Her words reflect a common reality among participants—forgiveness was not just an emotional step, but an essential requirement for healing, growth, and the ability to rebuild trust.

Lisa similarly recognized that forgiveness was not simply about moving past betrayal, but about actively creating a relationship where trust could be rebuilt. She reflected on how this realization shaped her approach to healing:

> This has been hard at first, but I knew that if I loved him and wanted this to work, I'd have to forgive him, and he'd have to forgive himself. It's how we got to where we are now. We wouldn't be this strong if I had put up walls saying, 'I'm not going to forgive.' We could still be living together in this relationship, but if I refused to trust or forgive him, it would feel like walking on eggshells all the time. In the beginning, I felt like I couldn't leave, and I didn't want to live in that state of constant fear. I wanted to trust that he was doing what he needed to do so that I could move forward and forgive him. Otherwise, we would have been stuck at a standstill. Thankfully,

> he has been doing what he needs to do, and because of that, I feel like I can trust him, I have forgiven him, and we can move forward in our relationship.

Lisa's words illustrate how forgiveness served as the foundation for rebuilding trust and ensuring the survival of their relationship. Without it, she recognizes that they would have remained in a state of emotional distance and uncertainty, unable to fully move forward. Her reflection emphasizes how forgiveness and trust-building go hand in hand; she did not blindly forgive but saw forgiveness as a path toward mutual effort and relational repair—one that required her partner to demonstrate consistent change over time.

Lisa and her partner, Andrew, have been together for five years, marrying during his sobriety after meeting in recovery. His later relapse challenged their relationship and forced them to confront forgiveness as the foundation for trust and survival. Now 18 months sober, Andrew reflected, *"Every day I'm still earning trust... trust is earned."* While he believes Lisa has forgiven him, he described forgiveness as something that must be demonstrated daily through consistent action: *"It's not just about saying sorry—it's showing up every day."* He emphasized that without his commitment to rebuilding trust, their relationship would not have endured: *"I don't think we'd be together. I think she would have left."* For Andrew, forgiveness became the glue that bound their healing process, fostering awareness and offering a path toward repair. He acknowledged, *"Trust is earned, and it takes seconds to eradicate it,"* capturing the fragile nature of restoration after betrayal. Their story reflects a common theme—without forgiveness, relationships remained stuck in the pain of the past.

While Lisa and Andrew's journey demonstrates how forgiveness is essential for rebuilding trust in a relationship, others viewed forgiveness as inseparable from the recovery process itself—extending beyond personal relationships to shape their entire outlook on healing. Matthew, a former pharmacist who

lost his license due to his methamphetamine addiction, described forgiveness as not only fundamental to his personal healing but to the recovery process at large:

> I wouldn't be in this house without forgiveness. It happens to be an integral part—I do not know if recovery from any sort of ailment is possible without forgiveness… that also needs to extend not only to those the individual hurt knowingly and unknowingly, but the circle that that individual surrounds themselves with.

Now a Licensed Alcohol and Drug Counselor (LADC), Matthew sees forgiveness as a principle that must be embodied and expressed within the recovery community. Without it, individuals risk remaining stuck—burdened by unresolved guilt and fractured relationships. His reflections show how forgiveness became a catalyst for transformation, not only enabling him to move beyond his past but also equipping him to walk with others through their own journeys of healing.

Jolynn, Matthew's wife, reflected on what forgiveness looked like in the day-to-day restoration of their marriage. For her, it wasn't about a formal apology but rather witnessing meaningful change unfold over time:

> He started showing up for me more in our house, helping to take care of things. He was being nicer to me, being more appreciative, and just earning that trust, earning my heart back through actions. It was slowly over several years that I could start to rely on him and see him as an equal partner in life.

Jolynn's parents, however, needed something different—explicit acknowledgment of wrongdoing and tangible proof of sustained change. Jolynn explained that they required both an apology and time to see that Matthew was treating her well before they could begin to move forward. Their experience underscores a shared theme among many participants: forgiveness was rarely immediate, nor was it isolated between partners. While Jolynn, who had lived through the struggles with her husband, could extend grace more readily, her family—removed from that proximity—needed distance, time, and

evidence. The degree of closeness to the pain often shaped how forgiveness unfolded. In all cases, however, sustained action—not just words—was seen as the foundation for trust, survival, and repair.

Beyond repairing relationships, many in recovery described forgiveness as an internal battle—one that, if avoided, could weigh them down emotionally and spiritually. Emily, in recovery for three years from alcohol and drug use, explained:

> If you don't forgive other people for what happened to you, you're gonna just hang on to that. Without forgiveness, you'll drown because resentment is gonna pull you under, and it's gonna pull you back.

Her words capture how unforgiveness becomes a burden that keeps people stuck in emotional pain. For Emily, letting go wasn't about excusing harm—it was about freeing herself from the weight of the past so she could move forward in recovery. Tyler, sober from opioids and heroin for seven years, shared a similar perspective. For him, forgiveness was the starting point for healing: *"Forgiveness is the driving force. I couldn't have done any of it—none of this would be happening. Somebody has to forgive somebody, somewhere, for the doors of healing to happen."* Tyler's insight reinforces the idea that forgiveness is not just emotional—it's a decisive, relational act that opens the door to healing. Without it, many participants felt trapped in cycles of guilt, resentment, and disconnection.

Danielle and Ryan echoed this theme. Together for 14 years, they endured the devastation of Ryan's methamphetamine addiction—losing their home, facing incarceration, and surviving a separation. Danielle even served divorce papers at one point. Reflecting on their reconciliation, she said, *"I think it takes a lot to forgive, but forgiveness is necessary to move on. It played a big role in our relationship—without it, things wouldn't have worked."* Ryan, now six years into recovery, recognized how crucial that forgiveness was in allowing them to move forward. For him, it wasn't just about receiving forgiveness—

it was about proving that he was no longer the person who had caused so much pain. Reflecting on that time, he shared:

> I was my old self again—not the addict. The forgiveness piece has been incredible. I brought her through complete hell and devastation. I understood that I'd turned her whole life upside down. Forgiveness was a big reason why we're in such a good place now—being able to go through that darkest place and come out stronger. It built a strong foundation for us.

Their experience highlights a truth echoed across the study: forgiveness wasn't passive or instantaneous. It required ongoing action—demonstrating change, showing up, and choosing to rebuild trust.

Amanda shared a similar sentiment. She and her husband, Kyle, were married for decades, divorced during his addiction, and later chose to remarry during his recovery. Looking back, she stated simply: *"I'm sure we wouldn't be here if we were holding on to resentments. We wouldn't be here together."* Amanda and Kyle, the longest-standing couple in the study, exemplified how forgiveness can become the foundation of enduring commitment—even after separation and addiction coming between them.

For those in recovery, forgiveness was more than a relational repair tool—it was the driving force behind their ability to stay sober and rebuild meaningful lives. Mark, who has been sober for 27 years, faced the unimaginable consequence of causing a fatal accident while driving under the influence. The weight of that reality could have crushed him, but forgiveness—especially from others—became the cornerstone of his recovery:

> I don't think I'd be sober if it wasn't for forgiveness. And believe me, the people living in my life, loving me, forgiving me—loving me before I could even love myself—if they were not existent, I don't think it would happen.

Others echoed this. Kyle, 11 years into recovery from alcohol and cocaine, emphasized that forgiveness was essential to staying clean: *"I think forgiveness is the reason I'm able to sit here right now in front of*

you today and say that I haven't used for almost 11 years." His reflection captures what many described—without forgiveness, sustained recovery would not have been possible.

For many, self-forgiveness was the most difficult—and essential—piece. Emily, who lost custody of her child during active addiction, shared: *"I knew that I can never drink or use again because it will kill me. So, I'm just trying to forgive myself."* Although she has since regained custody and worked to rebuild trust, the internal struggle remains. Her story shows how unresolved self-blame can threaten sobriety, making forgiveness not just healing—but critical for survival. Kevin, also in recovery, captured this truth simply: *"Had I not been able to forgive myself, things right now—we wouldn't be having this conversation."* These narratives point to a shared reality: forgiveness was not just about releasing the past, but about reclaiming life and identity. It was the difference between rebuilding or being torn apart by addiction.

Across the stories, forgiveness emerged as an active, ongoing commitment. It required mutual effort: those in recovery had to demonstrate lasting change, and their partners had to take the risk of trusting again. Without this reciprocal process, many relationships remained stuck in cycles of fear, emotional distance, and betrayal. For most, trust was the first casualty of addiction—and forgiveness was the only path to restoring it.

Forgiveness, Healing, and Recovery as Interwoven Processes. Forgiveness, healing, and recovery were not experienced as separate events; instead, participants described them as deeply intertwined, each influencing and shaping the others. Many found that when they were still carrying unprocessed pain, forgiveness felt nearly impossible. However, as they engaged in emotional, relational, and spiritual healing, their capacity to forgive began to expand. Likewise, witnessing their partner's

commitment to recovery gradually helped rebuild trust, making forgiveness more attainable. When partners also created space to process pain without defensiveness, it deepened the possibility of genuine repair. This subtheme highlights the cyclical and reciprocal nature of these processes—the growth in one area often unlocked the movement in another, forming an interdependent system of change.

Sarah and Kevin have been together for nine years. Kevin, who struggled with alcohol addiction for two decades, has been in recovery for just one year—the shortest duration among participants. Their healing journey is still unfolding. Sarah described how Kevin's commitment to sobriety helped reestablish their connection and made forgiveness possible: *"Well, when he was drinking, I never felt like it was really him... Now, I feel like I've got the sober Kevin that listens, communicates, and is a partner again."* However, before she could begin to forgive, Sarah needed to recognize the toll addiction had taken on her. She recalled a turning point during a Family Day at Kevin's treatment center, when a presentation on the impact of addiction on families hit her unexpectedly:

> It hit me like a ton of bricks. I realized in that moment how much it had impacted my happiness and our relationship. I cried through the entire meeting and nearly feel like crying now just thinking about it…That day, I finally admitted to myself that this was just as hard on me as it was on him.

This moment of self-awareness marked the beginning of her own healing. As she began prioritizing her own well-being, forgiveness was more accessible: *"Once I started to take care of myself and realized how deeply I'd been affected…that's when I really started to work on myself and was able to just kind of forgive."* Sarah emphasized that forgiveness was not a one-time decision, but a continuous process shaped by self-work, faith, and witnessing Kevin's growth: *"I think it's a combination of all three things —us as people, prayer, and him getting the help to turn his life around—turn both our lives around."* Her story illustrates how healing, recovery, and forgiveness were deeply interconnected. For Sarah, forgiveness

became possible not only through her own efforts, but by seeing real change in her partner and grounding herself spiritually through faith.

As Sarah's experience illustrates, forgiveness is often shaped by a combination of personal reflection, relational healing, and external support. While her journey emphasized the role of faith and self-care, others, like Natalie, viewed forgiveness as a shared responsibility requiring mutual commitment. Natalie, who has been with her husband Jason for 20 years and supported him through eight years of recovery from alcohol, emphasized the importance of partnership in the process:

> If you're not willing to be supportive and give your all, you can't expect your significant other to want to give their all. So it's a team effort. If you can't work together as a team, then I don't see how you could move on and forgive and get past. It definitely has to be a team effort.

This emphasis on teamwork reflects a common theme—when both partners actively engage in healing, forgiveness becomes more accessible. As relational understanding deepens, so does the capacity to forgive. Sarah expressed this shift clearly: *"I think it's just like I'm able to let those things in the past go... Whereas when the issue was still happening, I really wasn't able to move on."* Similarly, Kyle, who has been in recovery from alcohol and cocaine for over a decade, described how his wife Amanda's willingness to learn about addiction helped foster forgiveness in their marriage**:**

> Four or five months into my recovery is when I think we got to that point where it's not only do I enjoy being around you, but I understand what you've gone through, because she learned more about the whole addictive process. And I think that's what made it easier for her to forgive me.

Kyle's reflection highlights how education, time, and demonstrated change contributed to Amanda's ability to forgive. Her understanding allowed her to release blame and see his journey with compassion, reinforcing how forgiveness, healing, and recovery often unfold in tandem.

For others, like Emily, self-forgiveness was a necessary foundation before reconciliation could occur. In recovery from alcohol for three years, Emily shared how forgiving herself was crucial to rebuilding the relationship with her daughter. She wanted her daughter to know that her absence during active addiction wasn't due to a lack of love, but a personal struggle:

> I think for me, it was important that my older daughter understood forgiveness—that I wasn't purposely leaving her. It was something I was dealing with internally... Just that she knew that Mom loved her, and Mom was trying to do all the things she needed to do to get herself better.

Emily's story illustrates that healing relationships often begins with healing oneself. By working through self-forgiveness, she was able to step into a healthier role as a parent and rebuild trust. Across these stories, participants revealed how forgiveness and healing were not linear or isolated—rather, they were interdependent processes that grew together.

For many participants, healing extended beyond self-forgiveness and into their relationships, shaping how they reconnected with loved ones. Jolynn reflected on how both she and her husband, Matthew, needed to pursue personal healing before they could build something stronger together:

> The hard times for us were at the beginning of our relationship, setting the stage for healing. We were both healing—individually and together—from our own traumas and struggles. That process created the foundation for a really healthy relationship, and I think it probably started with forgiveness.

Their shared commitment to healing laid the groundwork for deeper connection and trust. Similarly, Danielle emphasized how forgiveness in her relationship with Ryan was made possible by witnessing real change over time:

> But in my heart, I wanted to forgive him. I saw how much progress he had made, and I think taking the year to date again helped a lot because he proved over and over again how genuine he is.

Danielle's words reflect a common thread across many couples: forgiveness often became possible only after observing consistent growth and transformation. For these participants, healing and forgiveness were not one-time events, but ongoing processes that unfolded in parallel—strengthening their relationships as they each did the work of recovery.

Lauren and James have been together for 15 years, but James' battle with addiction—rooted, in part, in unresolved childhood trauma—has shaped much of their relationship. A U.S. Army veteran in recovery from opioids for six years, James shared how his upbringing with a mother diagnosed with borderline personality disorder significantly influenced both his substance use and his struggle with self-forgiveness. Despite years of sobriety, lingering guilt continued to impact his connection with Lauren. For Lauren, forgiveness was not just a choice, but the necessary starting point for healing and reconnection:

> Forgiveness is, I said it before, the starting point. You have to be ready to say, 'Okay, I'm ready to forgive you,' because everything flows from that. Connection happens when you're willing to say, 'I forgive you, I'm ready to do this with you, let's go get this.' Until then, you're just going to stay living in hurt and anger.

Her words highlight how the decision to forgive created space for reconnection, but also how trust had to be rebuilt gradually. Forgiveness initiated the healing process, but it couldn't stand alone—transparency and emotional safety were also essential. Lauren emphasized:

> This journey is about total transparency and communication. For me, when James was finally able to start doing that, everything changed. Before that, if he was still hiding any part of himself or not forgiving, we just couldn't move forward... When he was ready, he became that safe person, and we were able to put everything out there and work through it together.

Though Lauren had extended forgiveness, James admitted that his own struggle with self-forgiveness made it difficult to fully embrace their healing:

> She has forgiven me, and I know she has, but her forgiveness is still very important to me... That doesn't mean she isn't still hurt. We are still processing and working through things, and I think the biggest reason for that is because I haven't fully forgiven myself.

Lauren confirmed that this unresolved guilt often created distance:

> I feel like he struggles more with self-forgiveness, and I definitely see how that hinders us... He holds a lot of weight on whether I'm having hard feelings, thinking that maybe I don't forgive him. I'm trying to help him see... I can have hard feelings and still forgive him.

As James began to release some of that guilt, he became more emotionally present: *"I can have a conversation with my wife about feelings and not sink into my own shame and guilt. Instead, I can just be there for her."* This shift marked a turning point in their relationship—self-forgiveness created space for mutual healing and deeper connection. Lauren reflected on how their healing became possible when James reached that same readiness:

> Forgiveness is the starting point in healing, but I don't think it's everything. I think you can forgive someone, and things never change, you know? Luckily, when he got to that point in the Twelve-Step program, it set him up to forgive himself for what he did... Him reaching that place, and me forgiving him, and being open to start healing, allowed us to come together... He was ready to deal with the hard conversations and the hard emotions, and we really did that together.

Lauren's reflection illustrates the reciprocal nature of healing—forgiveness opened the door, but transformation occurred when both partners were emotionally ready to engage in the work.

Without self-forgiveness, James remained emotionally distant. But as he came to terms with his past and accepted responsibility, he became more available to Lauren, allowing them to rebuild their relationship on a stronger foundation. Similarly, Mark, who has been in long-term recovery for 27 years, reflected on how healing in recovery is not a destination, but a continuous process that requires intentional self-work beyond mere sobriety:

> I was not drinking, and yes, I was showing up, but I wasn't growing. And I want to keep that always in mind, because I don't think we ever arrive. I think you always have to try to better

> yourself. And what do they say? Good versus evil—it's a continuous process. And, you know, I was stagnant for a long time in sobriety.

Mark's words capture the essence of sustained recovery—remaining sober is only one piece of the journey. Growth, healing, and forgiveness must continue to be nurtured over time. His insight echoes a key theme among participants: just as forgiveness is not a one-time decision, neither is recovery. Both require consistent engagement and emotional investment to foster long-term change. Andrew echoed this connection, emphasizing that without forgiveness, healing cannot take place—either personally or relationally: *"Without that forgiveness I really, truly... I'm just hurting myself. I'm hurting others."* His reflection reinforces that unforgiveness stalls progress. Whether directed inward or outward, withholding forgiveness keeps individuals stuck in cycles of shame, resentment, and disconnection. For both Mark and Andrew, healing and recovery were not linear paths, but deeply intertwined with the active, ongoing work of forgiveness.

For many, healing and forgiveness were deeply spiritual processes. James described how his relationship with God became a vital source of strength in his journey toward forgiveness: "*The thing that really helped me the most was my connection with God, my divine connection. That's where I found forgiveness the most and the clearest, and I was able to forgive myself and operate in forgiveness in everything."* Andrew echoed this connection, highlighting how the intentional practice of forgiveness helped him prevent the kind of emotional buildup that had once sabotaged his relationships:

> Yes, it's all correlated. I don't want to stew on things. I realize we can't let things build up. We can't let that brick stack up, because then the next one's right behind it. So I'm much quicker to talk about it, to get through it. Am I perfect on it? No, but that always is like a reminder to me... It's learned behavior. It's learned from experiences.

Together, these reflections illustrate how forgiveness, healing, and recovery function in an ongoing, reciprocal cycle. Spiritual grounding, emotional growth, and relational repair were not isolated efforts but interconnected processes that sustained each other. Participants emphasized that healing could not take root without forgiveness—and that forgiveness, in turn, was continually deepened through recovery and spiritual transformation. It was not a final milestone, but a way of life.

Superordinate Theme 2: A Web of Forgiveness—Where Self, Other, and the Divine Intertwine

This study explored the relationship between self-forgiveness, interpersonal forgiveness, and divine forgiveness, revealing how these dimensions interact in the context of recovery. Every participant acknowledged that these forms of forgiveness were not isolated—they were interconnected, shaping and reinforcing one another throughout their healing journeys.

For some, self-forgiveness was described as the foundation: without it, they felt unable to fully forgive others or receive forgiveness from a higher power. Others found that understanding and experiencing divine forgiveness served as a guiding force, helping them extend grace both to themselves and to their partners. Concepts of mercy, redemption, and being forgiven by God helped participants reframe their narratives and pursue healing across multiple domains.

While many participants recognized the connection between these types of forgiveness, some had not deeply reflected on how they intersected before the interview. Others found it difficult to define what divine forgiveness meant to them—especially when their relationship with God or a higher power was still developing. For a few, the struggle was not about believing in divine forgiveness but about accepting it for themselves.

Whether experienced as a moral compass, a source of strength, or a work in progress, the three types of forgiveness explored in this study were essential to participants' recovery processes. They influenced how individuals navigated personal growth, repaired relationships, and engaged in spiritual transformation—together forming a web of healing that extended far beyond the self.

Self-Forgiveness as a Foundation for Moving Forward. Self-forgiveness often emerged as the foundation for healing, enabling individuals to move beyond self-condemnation and engage more fully in other forms of forgiveness. For many participants, it was not only central to their personal recovery but also necessary for rebuilding trust in their relationships. Some described self-forgiveness as an essential first step—something that had to happen before they could receive or extend forgiveness to others. Others experienced it as an ongoing process that unfolded gradually throughout recovery.

Regardless of the path, self-forgiveness was often the most challenging form to attain. Without it, shame became a persistent barrier—fueling self-sabotage, emotional withdrawal, and difficulty accepting love or grace from others. Participants shared how unresolved shame kept them stuck in cycles of relational distance and feelings of unworthiness, making it hard to believe they deserved forgiveness or the chance to repair what had been broken. But for many, reaching a place of self-forgiveness became a turning point. Once they could release that internal weight, they found themselves more open to healing, connection, and sustained sobriety.

Emily, who has been in recovery for three years, described self-forgiveness as an ongoing, evolving process. Despite experiencing moments of grace, she found that extending compassion to herself was closely tied to being in community with others who shared similar struggles:

> Maybe that's where it comes back into grace. Maybe helping others, or even just listening to other people, helps me forgive myself. I'm not the only one—other people have been where I've been, are where I am, are where I was, and want to get to where I am. It's the program of 'we.'

Her words illustrate how self-forgiveness can take root in community. For Emily, offering grace to others helped her internalize it for herself. Being surrounded by people who had walked similar paths reminded her that she was not alone—and that she, too, was worthy of healing. This communal aspect of recovery played a key role in softening her inner critic, making space for compassion. Her experience also reflects a common tension: the gap between intellectually understanding the need for self-forgiveness and actually feeling it. Until that gap closed, many struggled to fully embrace love, connection, and grace—remaining emotionally guarded even as others offered support.

Mark, now 27 years sober, also spoke to the slow journey of self-forgiveness. He recalled: *"For a long time I was not able to forgive myself. And I think I could say today, yeah, I wish things were absolutely different, but it doesn't hold me in that place. I move forward."* For Mark, self-forgiveness wasn't about denying the past, but refusing to let it define him. He explained that it was only after releasing the burden of shame that he became able to receive love from others and connect with his spiritual beliefs:

> I think my own forgiveness had to come first—before I could even think that someone else, whether it was a higher power, Rachel, or a friend, could forgive me. It had to come from within. Once I was able to forgive myself, I could finally feel more of a connection with people…. Before that, I don't think I was even able to feel love through other people, which was unfair to them. They were loving me—whether it was my children, my wife, my in-laws, or my own parents—but until I started loving myself, I wasn't able to feel it from them.

Mark's reflections reinforce the idea that self-forgiveness is more than an internal act—it reshapes our capacity to love and be loved. For him, it unlocked connection not just with others, but with the divine.

His story illustrates how self-forgiveness becomes the gateway to relational repair, spiritual renewal, and the possibility of moving forward with integrity.

Kevin, newer to recovery with one year of sobriety after two decades of addiction and multiple failed attempts, also wrestled with the concept of self-forgiveness. At first, he resisted the idea: *"Everyone said, 'You gotta forgive yourself,' and I'm like, really? And they're like, 'Oh, yes.'"* Despite his years in and out of sobriety, Kevin had never fully considered self-forgiveness as a necessary part of recovery. But as he began to heal, he realized it was foundational—not only for himself, but for forgiving his past, his family, and even God:

> Forgiving myself led to forgiving my past, my family for some of their transgressions too, you know, forgiving God for not maybe doing what I wanted him to do, what I thought he should do. So yes, they are definitely all tied together. Had there not been [self-forgiveness] happening, the other two probably wouldn't.

His experience highlights how self-forgiveness was deeply connected to other domains of forgiveness. Letting go of internalized pain allowed him to engage more fully in both his recovery and his relationships. Still, Kevin emphasized that self-forgiveness was not something he could force—it was something he received: *"It [unforgiveness] was taken away by something other than myself."* He continued:

> Yeah, it [self-forgiveness] came from somewhere else that was able to pull that out of me and let me look at it and say, here, here's all the shit you've done. Here's what you hate about yourself. This is gonna leave now.

For Kevin, self-forgiveness wasn't just a cognitive choice—it was a spiritual and emotional breakthrough. It allowed him to release the shame and self-loathing that had kept him stuck, opening the door to freedom, relational repair, and lasting recovery. Like Kevin, other participants recognized self-

forgiveness as a vital step in moving forward—not just for themselves, but for the health of their relationships. Lauren, James's wife, emphasized its central role:

> I think the biggest thing I've learned is that being totally open and honest with each other and with God is foundational—even if it's hard. If you can't forgive yourself, you can't move forward. You'll always be stuck in the past and shame cycle.

For many, self-forgiveness was not only a key to healing but a prerequisite for giving and receiving love. Andrew, now eighteen months sober, described how forgiveness from others felt incomplete until he could extend it to himself: *"While others were forgiving me, and maybe I felt that it really wasn't cemented, or I don't think it's complete until I learn to forgive myself first. Like I can't love others until I love myself."* Similarly, Ryan, who reached his lowest point in a prison cell, reflected on how self-forgiveness became the first step toward healing:

> I was at a point where I couldn't even love or forgive myself. But that step allowed me to move forward and continue on my path. Forgiving myself first and foremost opened the door to working through the process of forgiving others, letting go of resentments, and truly healing.

While most participants described self-forgiveness as the starting point, Matthew's experience offered a different perspective. Still exploring his spiritual beliefs through both Christianity and Buddhism, he shared:

> A lot of the conventional recovery talk is very individualistic. It says, 'Hey, you need to love yourself. If you forgive yourself, others will love and accept you.' I was never there... That's what I read in books, blogs, websites. But I experienced it in the reverse.

Instead of beginning with self-compassion, Matthew found that receiving forgiveness from others—and possibly the divine—enabled him to start extending grace to himself. His experience underscores that forgiveness does not always follow a linear path; for some, relational and spiritual healing may pave the way for internal acceptance.

James, too, described the disconnect between knowing he was forgiven by God and struggling to believe it for himself:

> I didn't feel like I was worthy of forgiveness. Even as a Christian, I know I'm forgiven through Christ—past, present, and future. I could have shouted that out all day long, but inside I didn't forgive myself.

These reflections reveal that while self-forgiveness was often the most difficult form to achieve, it was also the most transformative. Without it, participants remained stuck in cycles of guilt and shame, unable to fully move forward in recovery or repair relationships. But once they could release self-condemnation, healing in other areas—relational, emotional, and spiritual—became possible. For many, self-forgiveness was the key that unlocked connection, restoration, and lasting change.

Divine Forgiveness as a Framework and Gateway for Forgiveness. For many participants, divine forgiveness provided the emotional and spiritual foundation for both self- and interpersonal forgiveness. Concepts such as grace, redemption, and being forgiven by a higher power made it possible to extend that same compassion to themselves and their partners. Divine forgiveness often served as a guiding principle, shaping participants' moral frameworks and helping them see forgiveness not just as possible—but necessary—in their recovery.

Andrew, 18 months into recovery from alcohol, described the crucial role that faith played in his healing process: *"I truly think with where we are in our life, with our position of faith, that if we didn't have that and we weren't yoked going towards God, we really wouldn't understand the importance of forgiveness."* His words reflect how spirituality offered more than comfort—it gave him a lens through which to understand and practice forgiveness. Andrew emphasized that their shared commitment to God and His Word became the foundation of their approach to relational healing: *"Because we are yoked*

equally to God, and we go by the Word of God... I think that's the only way that we found forgiveness."

For Andrew, divine forgiveness was not just a theological idea but a lived experience that redefined how he saw himself. He continued:

> I think it started with me understanding who I was in God. It started to understand that I am of this world, but not of this world, and that separating those was a challenge, right? But by understanding the Word of God and what He says about me, I started to look at myself differently.

This divine perspective helped Andrew see his worth as rooted not in his past mistakes, but in his identity in Christ. Forgiveness was no longer something to earn—it was something already extended to him. That shift allowed him to begin forgiving himself and others, showing how divine forgiveness served as a gateway to deeper healing.

For many participants, divine forgiveness was both a foundation and a catalyst—offering not only relief from guilt but also a blueprint for extending forgiveness to themselves and their loved ones. Some described a shift in perspective: forgiveness wasn't something to be earned, but something always available—waiting to be received. Matthew reflected on this realization, sharing how his understanding evolved from doing conventional forgiveness work to embracing a deeper, more spiritual truth:

> I had done the conventional self-forgiveness of doing the packets, doing the readings…only to understand that there was divine forgiveness always at play. There is a cosmic order to things, and it just took my needing to step outside of that humanity into more of a divine realm to realize that forgiveness was there. It's birthed through love, and you're a part of that love.

His words illustrate how divine forgiveness shifted his understanding from a task-based process to an experiential and spiritual reality.

Many participants echoed this idea, describing divine forgiveness as the framework that made both self- and interpersonal forgiveness possible. James reflected on the interdependence of these three dimensions:

> Forgiveness of self, forgiveness from the divine, and forgiveness of others—I think forgiveness is forgiveness. It comes from a divine place, from the Holy Spirit, and I believe they are all connected. I can't forgive myself unless I feel forgiveness from Jesus, and I can't forgive others if I haven't forgiven myself. Likewise, I can't truly forgive others without first receiving forgiveness from Jesus.

For James, forgiveness was not a set of isolated experiences but a spiritually interconnected process. Feeling forgiven by God gave him the emotional and moral permission to extend grace to himself and others. Without divine forgiveness, the process remained incomplete. Matthew echoed a similar insight, describing how his partner's faith may have made relational forgiveness possible even before it was verbalized:

> I think she [Jolynn] forgave me divinely before she forgave me, if that makes any sense. We haven't really—we are just so close, and it just feels like... you know, like you meet your soulmate, you find your little spirit partner in this world. We've had such closeness that we see each other's heart. We see each other's spirit.

His words reveal how a shared spiritual bond can foster deep empathy, enabling forgiveness to emerge not just through words or actions, but through soul-level understanding. While Matthew's experience highlighted how divine forgiveness could transform interpersonal healing, others emphasized its role as a moral compass—shaping how they approached forgiveness in everyday life. For many, divine forgiveness wasn't just a moment of relief—it became a principle that sustained their recovery, informed their relationships, and offered a new way of seeing themselves and others.

For Danielle, divine forgiveness shaped her belief in grace and second chances, deeply influencing how she approached forgiveness in relationships. Rather than seeing forgiveness as

conditional, she viewed it as an extension of love and redemption—a principle that encouraged growth rather than punishment:

> I think it's more about values. I just believe everyone deserves a second, third, or even fourth chance. You can't define a person solely by their past actions—they can always change. It's important not to hold grudges, and if you can move past something, you should, because you don't want to carry hate in your heart. I love people, and I think everyone should get along, so forgiveness feels easier, especially when someone is willing to try.

Her words illustrate how divine forgiveness grounded her in compassion, allowing her to see others through the lens of grace and possibility. Just as she believed in God's mercy, she felt called to embody it, using forgiveness as a way to foster connection and healing. While Danielle emphasized extending grace to others, some participants reflected more on how divine forgiveness helped them extend grace inward. Kyle, who developed an addiction later in life, shared how the idea of Christ's sacrifice reshaped his relationship with himself:

> Jesus died on the cross and forgave my sins already. So, it would be hypocritical of me to believe that if He can forgive me, I can't forgive myself. It wasn't something I could do overnight, but over time, I realized—He's the one who died, and God forgave me. So then, I could forgive myself too.

For Kyle, divine forgiveness wasn't abstract—it was deeply personal. Knowing he had already been forgiven helped him release self-condemnation and begin to heal. Amanda, Kyle's wife, echoed this idea, emphasizing how her faith anchored her capacity to forgive—both herself and others: *"Yes, because I believe it's because of God that we even think about forgiving somebody or ourselves. Because of God, we know how precious we are and how precious someone else's life is."* Her words highlight the spiritual foundation underlying many participants' capacity for forgiveness. Even in moments of anger or doubt, returning to her faith helped her reconnect with the belief that forgiveness was possible, necessary, and rooted in divine love.

Like Kyle and Amanda, many participants saw divine forgiveness as both an anchor and a guide in how they approached forgiveness in their relationships. Tyler, in recovery from opioids, described how his faith gave him both the framework and permission to receive and offer forgiveness:

> Christ forgave us, so we are supposed to forgive others, and others are supposed to forgive us. I think forgiveness is normal, and it should be given freely—it should be something everybody practices both ways. That's part of why I can accept forgiveness, because of my faith and what Jesus did for us. I can accept Jennifer forgiving me because I know she believes that."

His words reflect a sense of spiritual responsibility—not as a burden, but as a calling. Forgiveness was not optional; it was a core tenet of his faith, one that empowered him to receive grace and offer it in return.

Together, these reflections demonstrate how divine forgiveness was more than a theological concept—it was a lived experience that shaped how participants made sense of themselves, their relationships, and their pasts. For many, it became the foundation for releasing shame, rebuilding trust, and practicing compassion. Divine forgiveness not only provided comfort but offered a moral and emotional compass that directed how they engaged in the work of healing.

Spirituality as the Bridge Between Forms of Forgiveness. While each form of forgiveness—self, interpersonal, and divine—held unique significance, participants emphasized how spirituality served as the bridge that connected them. Spirituality was more than a belief system—it was a lived experience that made forgiveness feel tangible, necessary, and integrated into daily life. Whether grounded in organized religion or a more fluid spiritual worldview, participants described how faith communities, prayer, and personal spiritual practices offered emotional grounding and an existential framework for healing. Through spirituality, many found the strength to release resentment, extend grace, and move toward reconciliation—internally and relationally.

Andrew described how his relationship with God helped integrate all three dimensions of forgiveness into a cohesive healing process:

> The divine was always there. I knew He loved me, but I think to bring it all in full circle, it started with me. Learning to love myself first, and then forgiving myself. Once I did that, I could accept forgiveness from others and start to reciprocate it. I really believe you can't give away what you don't have.

For Andrew, spirituality was more than a foundation—it was the connecting thread that made each type of forgiveness possible. His faith helped him move beyond shame and toward a place of mutual healing, where he could give and receive forgiveness more freely.

Jolynn echoed this theme, emphasizing how spiritual connection helped her release resentment and view her pain through a more expansive lens. She explained that without a connection to something greater, it was easy to remain stuck in self-focused thinking:

> If you're not connected to anything beyond yourself, you're attached only to your own feelings—what did this person do to me? How did they hurt me? Those attachments can be hard to break. From a spiritual perspective… there's a broader outlook on how we are all connected.

Her reflection illustrates how spirituality provided the perspective needed to move beyond personal pain and extend grace—not just to others, but to herself. Through her healing process, Jolynn learned to treat herself with the same kindness and patience she offered others, underscoring how deeply spirituality shaped both her self-forgiveness and interpersonal growth. These reflections suggest that spirituality was not just a passive comfort—it was an active bridge that helped participants transcend shame, find meaning in their suffering, and experience a more integrated form of forgiveness across all levels of their recovery.

While Jolynn emphasized how spirituality offered a broader lens through which to release resentment and extend grace, Rachel described divine forgiveness as the necessary starting point in her journey—one that led her toward self-acceptance and, ultimately, the ability to forgive her partner:

> I would not have been able to forgive Mark for a few different things if it wasn't for my own idea of what a higher power is, and actually looking at my own fault...So I think it would probably start with like my higher power, and then forgiving myself, and then being able to forgive someone else.

For Rachel, forgiveness followed a spiritual sequence—beginning with divine forgiveness, then moving inward toward self-forgiveness, and finally outward toward her partner. By surrendering to something greater than herself, she was able to find the humility and self-awareness needed to release blame and offer grace. Her experience echoes that of others who found that faith helped reframe personal pain within a larger, redemptive narrative rather than viewing it solely as a source of shame or failure.

Kyle also described how spirituality provided a framework for forgiveness, shaping how he moved through his recovery: *"I think it goes from God to me, forgiving myself, to forgiving others, and then back from God to the others, learning to forgive me."* His words capture the cyclical nature of forgiveness as a spiritual flow—originating from God, moving through the self, extending to others, and returning again through divine grace. He also acknowledged the reality that forgiveness is not always mutual or immediate: *"I learned to forgive those that felt they couldn't forgive me."* For Kyle, spirituality offered the perspective and patience needed to navigate these complex emotional dynamics with acceptance rather than resentment.

For some participants, divine forgiveness was not only a source of comfort but the first hurdle in the forgiveness process—requiring them to wrestle with their faith before they could extend grace to themselves or others. Lauren questioned God's role in her prolonged suffering, asking: *"Why would you [God] let this happen in my marriage for so long?"* Her struggle with divine forgiveness shaped the way she processed pain and moved toward healing. As she worked through these spiritual questions, she also recognized how her husband's inability to forgive himself continued to impact their relationship: "*Right*

now, he's [James] struggling to forgive himself for the porn videos, and that's totally impacting us." For Lauren, divine forgiveness was not a distant theological idea—it was a spiritual framework that helped her work through anger, rebuild trust, and guide her toward both relational and personal grace. Her journey illustrates how divine forgiveness often initiates a cascading effect—softening the heart, reframing suffering, and creating the conditions for deeper connection.

Lisa also saw forgiveness as a spiritually connected process, describing it as a three-part system anchored by God:

> God's gonna forgive you—if you come out and ask for forgiveness, He's gonna forgive you. So you need to forgive yourself for what you've done. I feel like they're all connected—Andrew forgiving himself, me forgiving him, and God as the top of the triangle.

She continued by emphasizing how these dimensions must work in tandem for healing to occur: *"If he doesn't forgive himself, then I feel like I couldn't forgive him, because without self-forgiveness, there's no personal growth. If I don't forgive him, or myself, we can't move forward."* Lisa's metaphor of the forgiveness triangle—with God at the top and self- and interpersonal forgiveness at the base—captured the holistic way many participants experienced healing. For her and others, spirituality didn't just offer a moral compass; it provided a structural map for navigating the layered complexities of recovery and reconciliation.

Like others, Megan recognized that divine forgiveness was not separate from self- and relational forgiveness but the foundation upon which both rested. Her faith offered both reassurance and a framework for engaging forgiveness on all levels. Megan, who has been with her husband Tyler for 18 years, faced profound betrayal after discovering his secret heroin addiction, hidden for over five years. Her journey of forgiveness was deeply rooted in her spirituality, which helped her reconcile the pain of

deception with the hope of healing. She reflected on how these three forms of forgiveness were intertwined:

> Yes, they all play a part. Forgiveness with God is essential—He cleanses us and purifies us. Then there's forgiveness between each other, as scripture says—if you have anything between one another, go and reconcile. Finally, forgiving ourselves is crucial. If we don't, it can taint how we treat and see others. Holding onto unforgiveness toward ourselves distorts our view of everything else.

For Megan, spirituality was not merely belief—it was an embodied practice that shaped how she saw herself, others, and the path toward healing. Through her faith, she came to see that forgiving oneself was just as vital as forgiving others, with all three dimensions reinforcing one another in the recovery journey. Together, these reflections underscore how spirituality acted as more than a source of comfort—it was a dynamic force that wove together self-, interpersonal, and divine forgiveness. Whether rooted in religious tradition or personal belief, participants described spirituality as the bridge that made forgiveness feel possible, necessary, and transformative. Through their faith, many found the strength to release shame, embrace grace, and pursue healing—reshaping their relationships, recovery, and sense of self.

Superordinate Theme 3: The Role of Forgiveness in Navigating Shame, Guilt, and Responsibility

Shame, guilt, and questions of responsibility emerged as powerful emotional undercurrents in the forgiveness process. These experiences shaped how both the partner in recovery and the partner not in recovery understood themselves, related to one another, and moved through the work of healing. For those in recovery, shame was often deeply tied to identity and past behaviors, creating a complex emotional barrier that made self-forgiveness particularly difficult. Many wrestled with the weight of addiction-fueled guilt, while others found that receiving forgiveness from their partner allowed them to begin seeing themselves beyond their mistakes.

For the partner not in recovery, guilt and shame often took a different form—internalized blame, self-judgment, and the challenge of reconciling their own role in the relationship dynamic. Some questioned their decisions to stay, doubted their ability to set boundaries, or struggled to forgive themselves for not recognizing the signs of addiction earlier. Coping strategies varied: while some separated their partner from the addiction, others minimized or denied the severity of the harm in hopes that things would get better.

Across both perspectives, forgiveness intersected with the concept of responsibility. Many participants—particularly partners—grappled with the tension between offering grace and protecting themselves. They recognized that forgiveness did not require excusing continued harm, and that setting boundaries was not an act of rejection, but a necessary form of self-respect. Learning to forgive while still holding accountability—both for themselves and their partners—proved essential to emotional repair and relational growth. This theme explores how forgiveness helped participants navigate the emotional weight of shame, guilt, and responsibility, offering a path toward self-acceptance, healing, and more balanced relationships.

Addiction-Fueled Shame: The Ongoing Battle with Identity. Participants in recovery described shame as a central emotional barrier that shaped how they saw themselves and approached forgiveness. For many, the shame attached to their addiction went beyond regret over harmful actions—it became fused with their identity. They didn't just feel bad about what they had done; they believed they were bad. Even in long-term recovery, shame lingered, often resurfacing around milestones or moments of relational tension, making self-forgiveness an ongoing challenge.

James, in recovery from opioids for six years, described shame as a spiritual and emotional weight that kept him trapped in a cycle of self-condemnation:

> I truly believe there is a spiritual warfare on earth where my soul is under attack, and I think that the enemy uses these things like shame and guilt to separate me from Christ. It feels like a chain. That's where I feel stuck.

For James, shame was not just a personal emotion—it was a force that worked against his healing, disconnecting him from his faith and reinforcing feelings of unworthiness. In this context, forgiveness—particularly divine and self-forgiveness—was not simply comforting but necessary for spiritual and emotional restoration.

Kevin, newer in recovery after a two-decade-long alcohol addiction, echoed this struggle. He described how shame distorted his self-image and fueled years of self-hatred: *"I had a hard time forgiving myself. There were many years when I didn't like the face I saw in the mirror... I would look at myself and just hate who I was."* This self-loathing kept Kevin in a cycle of destruction, where change felt out of reach. However, through treatment and self-reflection, he experienced a shift: *"Yeah, I can stand looking at myself in the mirror. Say, you know what? You're a pretty good guy. You're gonna do okay."* Kevin's journey illustrates how understanding addiction as an illness—not a moral failure—allowed him to reframe his identity. As he separated himself from the behaviors of his addiction, he found room for compassion and began to rebuild a sense of self-worth. For both James and Kevin, forgiveness was not a moment of release but a process of reclaiming identity from the grip of shame.

Others described self-forgiveness as a conscious decision to stay grounded in the present rather than consumed by regret. Emily explained: *"Forgiving myself means not living in past moments and trying to live now."* Her words capture a common tension in recovery—acknowledging the past without

letting it dominate the future. For Emily, self-forgiveness wasn't about forgetting what happened, but about refusing to be emotionally imprisoned by it.

Faith also played a powerful role in helping some participants reframe their identity and move beyond shame. Andrew, 18 months into recovery, described how learning about spiritually redemptive figures in the Bible helped shift his view of himself from "damaged goods" to someone still capable of being used for good:

> When Sean, the counselor at the time, started teaching me more about the Bible... about Paul and some of the most influential people in the Bible and how they were used by God... That was a big moment that did shift the way I looked at it from a spirituality standpoint.

For Andrew, recognizing his worth through a spiritual lens was a turning point that allowed him to move toward self-forgiveness and healing.

Others, like Matthew, described how deeply entrenched shame made forgiveness feel almost impossible. He recalled the cruel internal dialogue that dominated his life during active addiction: *"You are a bad boy, Matthew. You are undeserving, you are unworthy, you shameful, pitiful, little ant rat. There is nothing in this world you will be able to do to rectify this."* A turning point came when he learned that his father had distinguished between *Matthew* and *Matthew in addiction* during treatment. That acknowledgment—of addiction as a separable force—made it possible for Matthew to believe in his own capacity to change and begin forgiving himself.

Kyle similarly described how his past manipulative behaviors—especially involving his children—contributed to profound shame. Looking back, he recognized how those choices deepened his self-condemnation and made self-forgiveness difficult. However, as with others, recovery, accountability, and self-compassion helped him move toward healing. For Kyle and many others, forgiveness became

more accessible over time—not as something easily achieved, but as a process that unfolded gradually with growth and grace.

James, married to Lauren and in recovery from opioids for six years, also reflected on how shame continued to shape his self-perception: *"I feel unworthy of love and forgiveness...I carry a lot of guilt and shame."* This internal narrative not only challenged his ability to forgive himself but also reinforced emotional distance in his relationship, illustrating how shame can continue to disrupt intimacy and connection even in long-term recovery. Yet for others, like Ryan, forgiveness—when it did come—offered deep relief: *"It feels like a weight being lifted off. It feels safe and comfortable. It doesn't feel scary anymore."*

Letting go of shame was not a singular event but a continuous journey—one that required personal accountability, self-compassion, and often, a spiritual or relational anchor. Although shame initially kept many participants trapped in self-condemnation, forgiveness emerged as a powerful counterforce. It allowed them to begin rewriting their narratives—no longer defined by addiction but by growth, responsibility, and the possibility of healing.

Balancing Accountability and Emotional Burden. Even as they worked toward self-forgiveness, many participants grappled with the complex task of taking ownership of the harm they had caused. This tension between guilt, accountability, and the desire for emotional freedom created a delicate balancing act. Participants described the challenge of distinguishing between guilt that fostered accountability and guilt that became paralyzing—guilt that propelled growth versus guilt that stalled it. Forgiveness, both from themselves and others, often depended on their ability to redefine responsibility in a healthier way: acknowledging harm without remaining imprisoned by it.

Several participants shared how receiving their partner's pain was a necessary but emotionally difficult part of healing. At the same time, they recognized that forgiveness did not erase the past or guarantee immediate reconciliation. Kevin, one year into recovery after a decades-long struggle with alcohol, reflected on the deep remorse he felt for the toll his addiction had taken on his ex-wife: "*It stole my wife's happiness for all those years when I was drinking."* Coming to terms with this truth required him to accept responsibility for pain he hadn't fully grasped at the time. He also acknowledged how addiction distorted his self-awareness, making it difficult to understand the extent of the harm as it was happening. His experience illustrates the complexity of owning one's past while recognizing the role addiction played in clouding judgment.

Other participants described how being forgiven could itself stir up guilt. Tyler, in recovery from opioid use for seven years, reflected on the emotional ambivalence he felt when his wife extended forgiveness:

> It felt good, but it didn't feel good, you know. Of course, you want to know you've been forgiven, but then when you are forgiven, you feel guilty about it because then it's over, and you're kind of moving on, and you've been forgiven, and you're like, man, look what I did.

Tyler's words capture the weight that can accompany grace. While forgiveness brought relief, it also forced him to confront the reality of his past harm more deeply. His experience highlights how forgiveness, even when received, can reactivate shame—making the process of healing an ongoing negotiation between accountability and self-acceptance.

For some participants, taking responsibility required a shift away from blame and resentment toward a deeper sense of personal accountability. Mark, in long-term recovery for over two decades, reflected on how his view of responsibility changed over time:

> Sometimes it's just easier to hold on to resentments and blame another person… But taking responsibility has helped me a ton. There was a time I always felt like I was wrong—like the black sheep. As I started growing and realizing my intentions were aligning with my behavior, I no longer had to take on what someone else was going through that day.

Mark's reflection highlights how accountability and self-worth can coexist. Letting go of misplaced guilt while aligning with personal values helped him move forward with greater confidence.

For others, taking responsibility meant actively making amends. Ryan described how, while in prison, he acknowledged harm through writing:

> I wrote letters to over 25 people, apologizing and expressing my willingness to make things right. The biggest moment of forgiveness for me wasn't just sending the letters—it was realizing that I am a new creation, moving forward as a new man through God.

Making amends was both an act of accountability and a declaration of change—one that helped Ryan step into a new identity grounded in purpose rather than past mistakes.

Kyle, whose addiction developed later in life, emphasized that while he could take ownership of his actions, he could not control others' readiness to forgive: "I made amends to some people who just couldn't accept them. I get it—I did a lot of crummy things. I can explain why I did what I did, but I can't make you forgive me." While some reconciliations came quickly, others—like with his son—took years. Kyle reflected on the pain and growth in that process:

> For some, forgiveness was almost instantaneous… But for my son, it took three and a half years. That was hard. I wanted to shake him and tell him what to do. But I was also proud of him for standing his ground. He told me, 'I checked my morals and integrity at the door. Everything you taught me, you threw in the wash.'

Kyle's experience underscores that accountability does not guarantee immediate restoration. True responsibility means honoring others' pain and timelines, even when reconciliation is uncertain or delayed.

For some, guilt was tied to a sense of needing to "earn" redemption. Tyler described how his feelings of indebtedness shaped his approach to recovery:

> I tend to tie things to earning…like you have to earn everything. That's how I look at—I've done these things, so now I have to do some good things to offset it. I'm behind, so I need to get to work.

This belief—that redemption must be earned—was something Tyler wrestled with throughout his recovery. While taking action and making amends were important, he also had to confront the deeper issue of self-worth. His experience illustrates a common tension: balancing personal accountability with the belief that forgiveness is possible, even if not "deserved." For some in recovery, guilt creates a sense of debt, making forgiveness feel conditional rather than freely given—shaping how they see themselves and their worth.

Navigating guilt and responsibility also meant facing shifting dynamics within relationships. Jason, in recovery from alcohol for eight years, shared how guilt continued to influence his role in the family:

> In the beginning, [my wife] was just relieved that I was going to treatment, but it took a long time to rebuild trust. It also took time for me to have a say in family decisions again, as there was a power struggle. I had been so hands-off that I left all the decision-making to her, no longer taking an active role.

Jason's reflection underscores how the effects of addiction extend beyond the individual. Even after getting sober, the process of rebuilding trust required patience, consistency, and emotional humility. Guilt over past inaction often delayed re-engagement in family roles, and reestablishing shared responsibility was a gradual, ongoing effort.

Together, these experiences highlight the complex relationship between guilt, responsibility, and forgiveness. While accountability was essential to healing, many participants struggled with how to carry

that responsibility without becoming consumed by it. Making amends helped some move forward, but others had to learn to accept that forgiveness—especially from loved ones—might take time or may never come. Ultimately, the process of self-forgiveness involved shifting perspective: recognizing that while they could not change the past, they could take ownership of their future, allowing space for growth, repair, and healing.

Internalized Blame, Self-Forgiveness, and Coping. Many partners of those in recovery struggled with self-blame, questioning whether they should have recognized warning signs earlier, left the relationship sooner, or handled conflicts differently. Others wrestled with forgiving themselves for their emotional responses—whether lashing out, withdrawing for self-protection, or enabling unhealthy patterns. Forgiveness extended beyond their partner's recovery; it also involved releasing the burden of self-judgment and reprocessing the ways they had tried to survive the chaos of addiction.

Partners coped in various ways—some found solace in separating the person from their substance use, while others minimized the problem or held onto hope that things would resolve on their own. Some unconsciously mirrored their partner's behaviors, adapting to dysfunction or using substances themselves to maintain a sense of connection.

For some, denial served as a form of emotional self-protection—a buffer against a painful truth they weren't ready to face. Amanda, who has been married to Kyle for 45 years, reflected on her early awareness that something was wrong, even as she avoided confronting it directly. The weight of their shared history—raising children, building a life together, enduring challenges—made it harder to admit that their world was unraveling:

> There are probably things that I wish I would have handled better myself. Like, I think my instincts early on—kind of wondering—and I was a little more on top of what was going on than

> I probably admitted or even realized at the time, because I didn't want to. I thought if I don't think about it, and if I don't say it out loud, it's not true.

For Amanda, self-forgiveness began with recognizing that denial wasn't weakness—it was how she protected herself from an overwhelming reality. Acknowledging Kyle's addiction meant facing the possibility of losing the life they had built. Her reflection underscores the emotional toll addiction takes on partners—not only in living through the pain, but in coming to terms with how they coped with it.

For some partners, coping with a loved one's addiction meant unconsciously adjusting their own behaviors to manage the emotional toll. Rather than confronting the issue directly, they developed ways to tolerate or avoid the discomfort. Natalie, married to Jason, noticed the escalating nature of his drinking, especially in social settings. In response, she began modifying her own behavior—both to distance herself from his excessive consumption and to dull her emotional discomfort:

> But then I started noticing when we would go out and be in situations where there was open drinking—when everyone was drinking and partying—he would take it to the next level, like too far. He'd have twice as many drinks as everybody else and would start to get really sloppy and messy. I began to feel like this wasn't fun anymore, and I didn't even want to go out...I would drink more than I should have, just so I could more easily, I guess, kind of ignore him.

For Natalie, drinking became a way to numb the discomfort and avoid fully confronting the reality of her partner's addiction. Her experience reflects how some partners internalize the problem, adapting their own behavior in ways that ultimately deepen their distress.

While Natalie's response reflected avoidance, others sought control—attempting to manage their partner's addiction in ways that left them emotionally drained. Whether through detachment or over-functioning, many partners found themselves grappling with guilt over how they responded. For them, forgiveness required turning inward: acknowledging their own pain, examining the toll of their coping

mechanisms, and finding a path to healing that wasn't defined by blame—either toward themselves or their loved one.

For others, avoidance became a means of self-protection, as fully acknowledging their loved one's addiction often meant confronting painful truths or making difficult decisions. Danielle described how her partner's meth addiction filled their home with chaos, leaving her emotionally overwhelmed. To cope, she often retreated into the bedroom and locked the door to create a sense of emotional separation. She shared, *"I knew he was addicted to something, but I didn't really know what it was. I thought I knew, but I didn't want to believe it, so I just didn't think about it."*

As the reality of his addiction became harder to ignore, Danielle began wrestling with guilt over what she could have done differently. She reflected on decisions she didn't make—like leaving sooner or telling her grandparents, especially since they owned the home where the chaos unfolded:

> There are things I probably should have done that I didn't, like leaving sooner or telling my grandparents what was happening. There were a lot of police calls that my grandpa later found out about, and it would've been better if I had told him. I guess I should forgive myself, but I try not to think about it—when I do, it just makes me sad. So maybe I haven't forgiven myself yet… I haven't done any counseling since then. I probably should.

Danielle's story illustrates how avoidance can shield partners from immediate emotional pain, yet often delays the process of healing. Like many others, she remained caught between the need to move forward and the unresolved guilt that lingered just beneath the surface. For partners, self-forgiveness was often less about a single decision and more about slowly allowing themselves to acknowledge the emotional toll they endured—and recognizing that their choices were shaped by survival, not failure.

While Danielle wrestled with what she could have done differently, Lauren, married to James, who had concealed his addiction for years, described how she initially blamed herself for the emotional

disconnection in their marriage: *"If he loved me, he would be connecting with me."* When she learned the truth, she was shocked and overwhelmed with self-doubt: *"How could I be so dumb that I didn't see it?"* She wrestled with feelings of guilt, questioning how she could have missed the signs and whether her husband's addiction reflected something lacking in her: *"I had a hard time at first not taking all of this personally—feeling like it was something that I was doing, like, why would you want to escape your life?"* Over time, however, Lauren began to reframe her narrative, recognizing that his behavior was not about her. *"Understanding that this is just him and his broken space helped me,"* she explained. She also became more aware of how her own emotional responses—particularly cycles of pursuit and frustration—contributed to their relational patterns. *"I just felt angry all the time,"* she admitted. *"Even if I felt more justified, I knew I needed to take accountability for my role in the cycle. I had to start getting myself to a better place."* This shift—from internalized blame to shared accountability—marked an important step in Lauren's process of self-forgiveness. By separating her worth from her husband's addiction and acknowledging the pain that drove her own reactivity, she was able to extend both compassion and forgiveness—not just to him, but to herself.

Jolynn, who entered a relationship with her now-husband Matthew during a period when he was actively using meth, described her early doubts and the internal conflict she experienced. Initially, she wrestled with self-doubt and regret, wondering if she had made a mistake by staying. Over time, however, she found strength in her journey:

> I didn't feel like I stood up for myself back then. I was anxious and depressed and didn't always stand my ground. Looking back now, I would never tolerate half of that. So, in a sense, there's self-forgiveness in wondering why I let someone put me down for so long.

She also described the tension of remaining in the relationship despite concern from others:

> Everybody in my life was telling me to leave him, questioning what I was doing. They saw me in pharmacy school while being with someone deep in addiction, seemingly not doing anything with his life. But I knew him, and I was more afraid of missing out on the sober Matthew and our future than I was of going through the hard stuff. During that time, I was in counseling myself, which really helped. I talked a lot with my counselor about what was going on, and I think that helped me stay afloat, but it was really hard.

Like many partners, Jolynn had to separate her partner from his addiction and hold on to hope for what was possible. Her experience reflects how partners often question whether staying meant enabling—and how self-forgiveness often emerged through recognizing their own growth, boundaries, and resilience along the way.

While some, like Jolynn, processed their experiences through therapy, others—like Lisa, whose husband Andrew relapsed after the birth of their first child, leaving her to raise their baby alone for a year—found healing by redefining their sense of self-worth apart from their partner's struggles. Lisa initially carried the weight of guilt, believing that the pressures of family life had contributed to Andrew's relapse. Over time, however, she began to realize that his addiction was not a reflection of her value:

> For me, it was different. While I haven't struggled with addiction, I had to work on self-love and recognize that his addictions and mistakes weren't because of me. I didn't cause them, and it's not because I'm not enough. It took time to understand that after having our daughter. His relapses and struggles with porn weren't a reflection of my worth or his love for our family. It took time to fully realize that.

By recognizing that her partner's struggles were not hers to fix, Lisa was able to shift away from self-blame and begin to reclaim her own healing. Other partners shared similar realizations—acknowledging that while they couldn't control their loved one's behavior, they could take ownership of their own emotional well-being.

Similarly, Rachel's journey toward self-forgiveness required her to challenge the expectations she placed on herself and the role she assumed in the relationship. Although her husband, Mark, got sober just

a year into their marriage and has now been in recovery for over two decades, their dynamic remained volatile. Rachel came to see that her suffering stemmed not only from Mark's actions but also from the identity she built in response to them:

> [Referring to expectations] All of the above—resentments, fear, selfishness.
> How am I going to be a martyr? How could I go to my friends and tell them what an asshole husband I have and get that sympathy if, in reality, it's pretty apparent that he's okay? I lived on being the martyr. I lived on being the victim. I lived on that, you know.

Eventually, she recognized that part of her healing meant forgiving herself for reinforcing those dynamics: *"I had to forgive myself for the way I set him up—I set him up a lot, trying to prove his failure or just to show how wrong he was and how right I was."* Like Rachel, Lisa also carried misplaced responsibility, initially believing her partner's relapse reflected on her worth. Over time, she recognized that his struggles were not hers to fix. As both partners redefined their roles, they found that forgiving themselves allowed for emotional clarity and relational healing.

Many partners described struggling to reconcile their loved one's addiction with the person they knew before substance use took hold. Viewing addiction as a disease helped some partners separate the addiction from the individual, making forgiveness and endurance feel more possible. For Sarah, this tension was particularly painful, as her husband's drinking often meant broken promises and emotional absence in critical moments. When her mother was on a ventilator during COVID, she pleaded with him not to drink because she needed his support—but he refused. Reflecting on how she coped with this reality, she said:

> I feel like I kind of always tried to think of this addiction as a disease. So, you know, I would try to think, okay, this is not him. He's sick. I've gotta kind of stick with it until we can get this figured out, you know, until it got so bad that I could hardly take it anymore.

Holding on to the belief that her partner was still present beneath the addiction allowed Sarah to maintain hope: *"On the times where he wasn't drinking, he was still the person that I loved. So I knew that down in there he was still in there somewhere."*

For others, the emotional toll of addiction manifested in moments of frustration, guilt, and self-blame. Natalie described how, despite her best efforts, the weight of past experiences would sometimes build to a breaking point:

> There have definitely been moments where you lash out, and everything just builds up. You sit and think of all the things, and it hits you. You hold it in for a while, and then suddenly, you just lash out, sometimes not even knowing why.

These emotional surges, though difficult, revealed the layered nature of healing—not just for the person in recovery, but for their partner as well. Natalie recognized that while her reactions were imperfect, they were human:

> You have to forgive yourself and remember that you've been through a lot… While you may not like how you behaved, you have to offer yourself grace. Recovery is hard on both sides—the person recovering and the one supporting them.

Her words underscore the importance of self-compassion in the recovery journey. For many partners, healing wasn't just about forgiving their loved one, but also about extending that same grace inward.

Megan, who comes from a strong faith background, shared a different experience. While she had to navigate her emotional responses, she did not internalize blame for her partner's addiction. Her faith helped anchor her self-worth and offered clarity about what was hers to carry:

> I didn't take it personally; I knew his addiction wasn't my problem. I didn't believe he used because of me or that I wasn't good enough. I understood it was his choice, and I always knew I was enough, despite his decisions.

Even so, Megan wrestled with self-forgiveness in more subtle ways—particularly in how she handled stress and conflict:

> I've had to forgive myself, like how I reacted or responded at times… or even in my thoughts, you know? Like those times when my heart wasn't right, and I was kind of faking it till I make it.

Her words reflect the tension between grace and accountability, especially within the lens of faith. For Megan, forgiveness extended to her inner world—not just her actions, but the unspoken thoughts and postures she held during the struggle.

For some, self-forgiveness wasn't just about staying in the relationship—it was about confronting their own emotional wounds. Rachel described this inner conflict, acknowledging that it would have been easier to walk away and never look back:

> Certainly, and it probably would have been easier to walk away and then forgive him for everything. Because then I don't have to look at anything. I don't have to look at my part. I can just walk away, have my own narrative, and be, you know, that's fine. This is who he is.

But staying meant doing the internal work. A turning point for Rachel was when she stopped viewing her husband's addiction as a personal betrayal and began understanding it as a disease:

> I felt like he was waking up every day with the intent to mess with me, and I couldn't understand how someone could be that mean. But I eventually realized it wasn't about being mean—he's just a person with struggles and flaws, like anyone else.

Her insight speaks to the deep shift that self-forgiveness often requires: not only releasing the need to control or fix the other person but also letting go of the idea that their pain was caused by personal inadequacy. Through this process, Rachel was able to reclaim a more grounded sense of self and extend both compassion and forgiveness—not just to her partner, but to herself.

For many partners, self-forgiveness required a fundamental shift—releasing misplaced blame, acknowledging emotional responses with compassion, and finding peace in the choices they made. Sarah

described how she came to terms with her decision to stay, even as she wrestled with doubts about whether she had enabled her partner's addiction:

> I also have to forgive myself. Sometimes I wonder why I stayed, or if I enabled him by not pushing for treatment sooner. But I've come to realize this wasn't my fault—I did what I thought was right and followed my heart.

Sarah's reflection highlights the complexity of self-forgiveness—not only in recognizing that her partner's addiction was not her responsibility, but in finding peace with the decisions she made along the way.

For many, reframing their story—seeing their actions as rooted in love and endurance rather than weakness—helped them let go of regret. Forgiveness was not just about their partner; it became a process of reclaiming identity, honoring their resilience, and embracing healing without shame.

Navigating Boundaries in Forgiveness. Partners not in recovery often wrestled with the tension between forgiveness, accountability, and self-protection—questioning when to extend grace and when to draw the line. Similarly, those in recovery recognized that maintaining boundaries was essential—not only for their relationships but for their sobriety. While some found healing through staying and working through forgiveness, others found it through setting firm boundaries or choosing to leave. Regardless of the path, the key realization was that forgiveness is not the same as allowing continued harm. It must be accompanied by discernment, self-respect, and a commitment to emotional well-being.

For many, forgiveness required confronting past patterns of enabling, codependency, or sacrificing their own needs. Some partners described staying in harmful dynamics for years, hoping love and patience would inspire change. They forgave repeatedly but were met with deception, manipulation, or broken promises. Over time, they realized that forgiveness did not require tolerating continued harm.

Setting boundaries and requiring accountability were essential—not only for their well-being but for their partner's growth as well.

True healing involved learning to say no, drawing firm lines, and allowing their partner to take responsibility for their actions rather than continually offering second chances. Sarah reflected on how much of her energy had been spent prioritizing others over herself and how she came to understand the importance of shifting that pattern:

> In my life, I've definitely been a caregiver and have often put other people's needs ahead of mine. So it's probably a good thing for me to realize I need to think of myself first—because if I'm not healthy, nobody else around me will be either.

This insight marked a turning point for Sarah. She began to see that caring for herself wasn't selfish—it was necessary for creating and sustaining healthy relationships. By setting boundaries, she shifted from feeling responsible for others' choices to understanding that true support doesn't require self-sacrifice.

Forgiveness was not always immediate, nor was it unconditional. Some partners, like Amanda, reached a breaking point where they could no longer endure the chaos of addiction. After nearly three decades of marriage and years of turmoil, Amanda made the difficult decision to file for divorce. She recalled: *"When I went and filed the divorce papers, I said, 'You have turned my life upside down. Everything that I cherished and believed in, you have thrown it away.'"* Amanda's story reflected a common experience among partners—navigating cycles of hope and disappointment until they recognized that love alone could not create change. For many, the line between forgiveness and enabling became clearer only with time. While some initially excused harmful behavior in the hope that things would improve, they eventually came to understand that forgiveness must also include protecting their peace.

Similarly, Sarah reached a moment where she realized she could no longer continue absorbing the financial and emotional burden of her partner's addiction. While she didn't immediately leave the relationship, she recognized that maintaining the status quo would only enable the behavior further. She recalled:

> Finally, before he went into treatment we had a talk. I was paying all the bills, and I said, "I can't do this anymore. You either have to get a job or stop drinking." He agreed, but that same morning I saw a receipt—he had gone to the liquor store right after we talked. I called him and asked, "Where have you been?" He said, "Nowhere." When I confronted him, he said, "There's just something in my brain that tells me I need to have that drink. I love you, but I can't help it." And I said, "That's fine. Then this is the end. I'm not paying for anything more. I'm out..

Sarah's story illustrates the moment where compassion gives way to self-protection. Her partner's admission—*"this is more powerful over me than you are"*—underscored the painful truth that love alone could not stop his drinking. By choosing to stop financially supporting the addiction, Sarah was not abandoning her partner, but breaking a cycle that harmed them both. This marked a critical turning point in reclaiming her own needs and limits.

For many partners, these boundary-setting moments were essential to reclaiming emotional well-being. While some, like Amanda, had to step away entirely, others, like Sarah, realized that limits within the relationship were necessary to avoid reinforcing destructive behaviors. Natalie's approach shows how forgiveness can coexist with accountability and self-protection. She wanted her children to have a relationship with their father but had to take firm action after he drove drunk with them: "*I want my kids to be involved with their dad. But I set guidelines. If I notice anything off, I'll buy you a breathalyzer and you'll take it before getting in the car with my children*." Her boundary was clear and protective—not punitive. Forgiveness did not mean blind trust. Instead, it meant setting expectations to ensure that

compassion did not slip into enabling. Natalie described another pivotal moment when her partner, several months into sobriety, told her he was considering drinking again:

> He said, "I want to try one drink and see if I can handle it." I told him, "You're free to decide, but if you do, I'll leave. I won't be part of that." He thought about it and said, "Nope, I don't want to do that." That was huge for me—it showed he wanted to make this work.

Natalie's calm, non-reactive response reflected the emotional clarity she had gained. She didn't try to control his decision, but she made her own boundary known. This moment demonstrated the strength of forgiveness with boundaries—it allowed for autonomy while preserving self-respect and clarity. It also showed how accountability and growth, when mutual, could deepen relational trust rather than erode it.

Many partners of those in recovery struggle with the tension between offering support and maintaining their own well-being. In some cases, love and commitment overshadowed personal boundaries, leaving them emotionally vulnerable. One partner described: *"It was pretty terrible. I was going through anxiety and depression. I kind of let him walk all over me, but I didn't want to abandon him. I was already fully committed."* Her words highlight the difficulty of setting boundaries—where care for a partner often conflicts with self-preservation. These moments revealed that forgiveness isn't just about letting go of resentment—it's about preventing future harm and reclaiming emotional balance.

Jolynn reflected on how she was able to extend compassion without excusing harmful behavior: *"I didn't need a formal apology because I was in the thick of it with him. I saw the pain he was in, and I didn't just see chaos—I saw the real Matthew, even through it all."* By holding both his suffering and humanity in view, Jolynn approached forgiveness with empathy—but not at the expense of accountability. She clarified early on that she wouldn't take responsibility for his recovery:

"We sought counseling when he was fresh into treatment and established that I wasn't going to be the one to hold him accountable." This boundary allowed their trust to develop organically, without secrecy or enabling—a key insight for many partners navigating similar dynamics.

In contrast, Rachel wrestled with the fear that forgiving too quickly might invite further harm: "I felt like a chump—like the idiot who keeps going back. I was afraid to forgive him and move on, because then what? How many more times does this have to happen?" Her internal battle captures the fear that forgiveness might signal passivity. For Rachel, the real question wasn't whether she could forgive—but whether it would cost her emotional safety. Danielle echoed this tension, recalling how much she wanted to help—but ultimately realized that recovery had to be her partner's decision: "I asked him so many times to go to treatment, but you can't make someone go—or else it won't work." This understanding shifted her perspective. Forgiveness, she learned, didn't mean controlling his choices or sacrificing her peace. It meant stepping back, supporting from a distance, and releasing herself from the illusion of control.

While most partners described the challenge of navigating forgiveness from the outside of addiction, some individuals in recovery also reflected on the importance of boundaries—both for protecting their loved ones and staying accountable in their healing. For them, forgiveness was not a free pass; it came with the responsibility to change harmful patterns and respect the limits their partners began to set. Kyle, who had manipulated his wife Amanda during active addiction, noticed how her growth and increased awareness created a shift in their dynamic:

> She would be easy to bring back in just by being nice, but she got smarter from the people she started hanging with. She understood I was capable of lying… she would monitor what I was saying and keep track if my stories didn't line up

Kyle's reflection illustrates how forgiveness was not about blind trust. Amanda maintained care for him, but she no longer accepted his words at face value. Strengthening her support system helped her set boundaries that protected her while still allowing her to remain present in his recovery.

Adam, the only male partner not in recovery, brought a different perspective. Having grown up with addiction in his immediate family, he developed a deep understanding of forgiveness—but also of the risk of enabling. While supporting his wife Emily's recovery, he wrestled with when grace was helpful and when it undermined accountability: *"Sometimes forgiveness seems more harmful than helpful. Like, 'Hey, this isn't my fault—you should be the one fixing this.' I'm not trying to boss people, but sometimes being too easy just lets the cycle continue.'"* Adam's experience shows that even those who are naturally compassionate must learn when to set firmer limits. His journey emphasizes that forgiveness should not come at the cost of personal responsibility. Instead, healing required a balance—offering support without absorbing blame or excusing continued harm.

Like Adam, James struggled with navigating forgiveness in a complex family dynamic. His journey with his mother highlights the tension between seeking reconciliation and maintaining self-protection. Even outside of romantic relationships, forgiveness often required setting firm boundaries—especially when longstanding patterns contributed to stress and unhealthy coping:

> I was sober for about a year and a half, two years, and my relationship with my wife [Lauren] was really good. My mom and I hadn't talked for almost two years—she had threatened suicide and blamed it on me. She eventually got help, but I hadn't really dealt with my feelings toward her. While in recovery, I tried talking to her again, but it was stressful—I was addressing things while also avoiding them. That stress led me to turn to pornography as a way to escape, which brought back feelings of guilt and shame. Eventually, I forgave her, but we're not speaking now. Over the past year, I've found my voice, set boundaries, and stood up for myself. We had a conversation where I set a boundary for the first time and she didn't like it. Later, I tried to reconnect, but when I expressed how I felt, she chose to stop talking to me.

James's story reflects the emotional complexity of forgiving someone while recognizing that reconciliation isn't always possible. For him, forgiveness involved honoring his boundaries, managing guilt without falling back into old coping strategies, and learning that healing doesn't always require restoring contact.

For many, forgiveness required a fundamental shift—releasing misplaced blame, acknowledging emotional responses with compassion, and accepting the decisions they made along the way. It was not simply about extending grace but about protecting themselves from further harm. By reframing forgiveness as a form of self-respect and healing rather than reconciliation alone, partners were able to let go of guilt, embrace boundaries, and move forward with greater peace. In this way, forgiveness became an act of empowerment—grounded in clarity, strength, and self-worth.

Superordinate Theme 4: The Role of Spirituality in Forgiveness and Recovery

For many participants, spirituality was the foundation that made forgiveness possible—whether forgiving themselves, their partner, or others. It provided the strength to release resentment, the perspective to surrender what they could not control, and the reassurance that healing was part of a greater plan. Some found solace in prayer, scripture, or their faith community, while others described forgiveness as a spiritual discipline, requiring continuous effort and renewal. Across experiences, faith was not only a source of comfort but a guiding force in the difficult, often painful, process of letting go and moving forward.

Spirituality as the Foundation for Forgiveness. All participants spoke about the importance of their spirituality, whether through a relationship with God, engagement in prayer or scripture, or belief in a higher power. While not every quote directly names forgiveness, spirituality consistently served as the

foundation from which forgiveness was made possible—whether it was forgiving themselves, their partner, or others. As the interpreter, I understood their spirituality as the emotional anchor that made forgiveness accessible. It was the source that helped them surrender control, manage painful emotions, and hold on to hope in the face of betrayal, relapse, or heartbreak. For many, forgiveness could not be separated from faith—it was through their spiritual lens that they made meaning of suffering, released resentment, and found a path forward.

Kevin, who is one year into recovery after two decades of alcohol dependence, described how his spirituality shifted from distant belief to a deeply personal relationship with God. He recalled praying every night and inviting God into his thoughts throughout the day—not just as a ritual, but as a search for emotional stability and direction: *"I'm looking for more guidance from God than I ever used to... I think about God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit, more as in the learn me something... how do I get closer?"*

Although he always believed in God, Kevin admitted he hadn't truly *felt* God's presence until he quit drinking and began his recovery journey. He shared*: "I've always believed in God, but haven't really felt God in me like I have since I've quit drinking and since being in treatment."* This shift marked the beginning of a deeper sense of spiritual grounding—one that helped him process pain, surrender control, and stay on the path of recovery. Looking back, he interpreted past moments of survival as divine protection—signs that he was being preserved for a greater purpose. This gave him renewed motivation to live differently.

He also shared how his faith was strengthened through his connection to the church community he and his partner began attending together—another space that supported his spiritual growth and capacity for forgiveness. For Kevin, spirituality became the emotional and moral compass guiding his

recovery. It helped him reframe suffering, trust in a higher purpose, and extend compassion toward himself and others. His evolving relationship with God was not just part of his healing—it was the foundation that made it possible.

Like Kevin, others in recovery also found that their spiritual growth paralleled their healing process. For Matthew, recovery not only led to sobriety but also deepened his connection with God. He described this transformation simply but powerfully. *"Recovery gave me a spiritual life."* This shift offered him a new lens through which to understand grace, redemption, and self-forgiveness. His experience reflects how spirituality became a stabilizing force, helping him navigate the complexities of healing and forgiveness. For many in recovery, faith reshaped their view of themselves and others—offering a path toward reconciliation rooted in spiritual renewal.

While some, like Matthew, found clarity in their beliefs, others experienced a more evolving or uncertain relationship with spirituality. Natalie described how faith helped her avoid becoming consumed by anger, especially in the midst of betrayal and heartbreak:

> I think that if you don't have any sense of faith or a higher power, you can very easily go down a rabbit hole of being mad and upset, thinking, 'This is horrible and stupid.' … But with faith, you can better understand that things happen for a reason, and it helps you get through it without falling into all that anger.

For Natalie, faith acted as a filter—helping her reframe painful experiences rather than becoming stuck in resentment. This spiritual perspective made forgiveness more accessible, even when circumstances didn't make sense. Although she admitted to struggling with defining her higher power, she still found peace in reaching out during moments of emotional distress: *"I definitely do struggle with who or what is the higher power, but knowing that there is someone or something… where you're laying in bed just to get*

your thoughts out." In her lowest points, prayer offered a way to release emotional weight and reconnect with hope:

> When I'm in a really big low, I will definitely reach out, pray, and just lay in bed… You kind of have to remind yourself that, even though horrible things happen, sometimes they happen for a reason.

Natalie's experience illustrates that even an imperfect or evolving faith can ground someone in resilience. Though she didn't pray regularly, her spirituality still served as a refuge—a way to access grace, manage emotional overwhelm, and make sense of suffering. Through that lens, forgiveness became less about having all the answers and more about trusting in something greater than herself.

Like Natalie, Lisa also turned to faith in moments of doubt—but for her, prayer became a way of discerning whether to continue investing in the relationship. Rather than receiving a direct or immediate answer, she described experiencing a quiet but steady sense of peace through spiritual reflection:

> I have been like praying about it. What do I do here? … there wasn't a moment where it's like God saying, 'Yes, you should stay,' but it's just kind of like through a lot of prayer and a lot of writing things down and figuring out, you know, like am I where I need to be? Just that overall sense of yes, I should be here… Without a doubt. I am where I need to be.

For Lisa, prayer wasn't transactional—it was a process of listening, reflecting, and slowly gaining confidence in her decision to forgive and move forward. Her faith offered emotional clarity when circumstances felt confusing or overwhelming, allowing her to re-engage the relationship with a sense of groundedness. Similarly, Sarah described turning to prayer during moments of relational strain. When things felt uncertain or painful, her spiritual practice gave her a sense of reassurance and hope:

> It wasn't going well, and every night before bed, the only thing that would make me feel better was praying and saying, 'I know that You're gonna get us through this, and things will be all right.' And it really worked for me. It made me feel better… if I ask God to help bring us through this, I believe He will.

Prayer provided her with a way to cope—not by controlling the outcome, but by trusting that she wasn't navigating the pain alone. Her spiritual practice helped her release fear and lean into the process of forgiveness with hope rather than despair.

For Amanda, the darkest moments were not just about emotional pain—they were about a deep sense of isolation. Yet over time, she came to realize that she hadn't been alone, even in her most vulnerable moments:

> I would sit up at night with all the lights out, just crying and crying because I was so lonely. But I didn't realize that I was never truly alone—I had my family, my friends, and God watching over me.

This realization helped Amanda reframe her experience—not as abandonment, but as one of quiet spiritual support. That awareness allowed her to shift from despair toward healing, as her faith reminded her that even when human connection felt absent, she was still being held by something greater.

For many participants, spirituality played a crucial role in extending forgiveness—not only to their partners but also to themselves. Mark described how his faith was the driving force behind his transformation: *"And I truly owe it all to—I mean—a power greater than myself."* This connection to a higher power helped him release shame, accept forgiveness, and move forward with purpose. For others, like Matthew, spirituality was less about a single moment of transformation and more about a return to self through divine love. He described how addiction had separated him from his spirit—but the love of his family created space for spiritual renewal:

> I was taught that at some times when the human afflicts himself either with substances and drugs and trauma, that he can scare the spirit out of him, and that spirit beckons to come back. It wants to come back. It just needs a safe ground. And I believe that it was Jessica's love for me, my parents' love for me, and my brother's love for me that made it okay for the spirit to come back to me. And when it did, it replaced everything that I once was. I would say that my entire recovery is just a spiritual path.

Matthew's words illustrate how forgiveness and spiritual restoration were deeply intertwined. As he recovered, his reconnection with faith reshaped his identity and fueled his path toward healing.

For others, spirituality was not tied to a specific religion or doctrine, but instead took on a broader, more abstract form. Jason expressed a sense of awe and connection, even in the absence of traditional belief:

> The mystery is cool, you know. I don't need to define it—I just believe in the spirit of the universe, energy, and that something created all of this. I don't know what it is, and I'm probably never going to know, but it gives me peace. I also feel like we're all connected in some way.

For Jason, spirituality wasn't about certainty—it was about meaning. His connection to something greater provided peace and perspective, allowing him to navigate recovery with a sense of grounding. His experience reflects how many in recovery draw strength from spirituality not as a set of rules, but as a quiet assurance that they are not alone—and that healing, growth, and forgiveness are part of a larger, interconnected journey.

Megan's faith provided the foundation that helped her navigate the challenges of her partner's addiction without internalizing blame or questioning her self-worth. While many partners struggled with guilt and confusion, she leaned on her spiritual beliefs to anchor her perspective—allowing her to extend forgiveness without assuming responsibility for his choices. She reflected:

> I think that sometimes I'm too logical, so forgiveness, in a sense, came somewhat—not easy, but when he started getting on the right track, it felt more natural. I never really felt endangered, nor did I feel my kids were, which made the process smoother. Yes, there was the betrayal—like he chose drugs over me—that was frustrating, but overall, forgiveness came easier for me, largely due to my walk with God. I didn't take it personally; I knew his addiction wasn't my problem. I didn't believe he used because of me or that I wasn't good enough. I understood it was his choice, and I always knew I was enough, despite his decisions.

Her ability to frame forgiveness through her spiritual lens helped her remain grounded, even in the face of betrayal. Rather than becoming consumed by resentment or self-doubt, Megan found reassurance in her faith, which reinforced her emotional clarity and stability. Her trust in God also gave her a greater sense of purpose—believing that their hardship was part of a larger redemptive story. She shared:

> Somewhere in the midst of him going to Teen Challenge, I knew that our story would help others and that God would get the glory. So even though it was tough, and he had relapses after that, I just knew I had to hold on and trust God through it—that it wasn't for myself.

For Megan, forgiveness and endurance were not merely acts of emotional resilience, but responses to a divine calling. Her faith allowed her to believe that their journey—though painful—would ultimately serve a greater purpose.

While Megan leaned deeply into her faith for comfort, others, like Adam, approached spirituality in a more practical and grounded way. For Adam, spirituality did not require devotion to religious practices; instead, it served as a tool for perspective and resilience. He explained:

> I'd rather get along and figure things out than hold on to unforgiveness. As for spiritual stuff—do I believe in God? Yes. Do I go to church? No. Some nights, I pray, asking God to make things easier, but I've realized that things that come easy never last. The things that are hard, you appreciate more, even if they aren't always easier for me.

Adam's reflection illustrates a common theme among participants: spirituality does not eliminate pain or make forgiveness effortless, but it adds meaning to suffering. Whether through deep faith or a more flexible belief system, spirituality helped participants move forward—not by escaping struggle, but by enduring it with purpose.

Many participants described moments where they tangibly felt the presence of God or a higher power—experiences that offered reassurance, peace, and perspective in their journey toward healing and forgiveness. Emily recalled a powerful moment while journaling outside and reading the Big Book:

> A butterfly came and landed right in front of me... I just took that as a sign that I was in the right place at the right time, doing what I was supposed to be doing. It was a sense of calm in the middle of a storm. I felt so alone—missing my daughter, separated from Adam—and then this moment just gave me peace. I don't know if it was a guardian angel, or my higher power, but I said thank you. I try to hold on to those moments as an act of love.

This "otherworldly" sense of peace offered Emily reassurance in the midst of heartbreak. While the quote doesn't name forgiveness directly, it speaks to how moments of spiritual presence helped her stay grounded and hopeful rather than consumed by despair. For many, such experiences created space to soften their hearts and embrace healing.

For others, spirituality played a more defined role in facilitating self-forgiveness. Mark described how his belief in a higher power allowed him to accept himself, despite past mistakes: *"I like to think that... if I've kind of walked this journey and been able to forgive myself, then maybe that means something. My higher power knows me inside and out."* His trust in divine understanding helped him internalize grace, allowing forgiveness to move from concept to personal transformation. Instead of being haunted by regret, he found reassurance in knowing he was seen, known, and still worthy of healing.

Tyler described using a "God box" as a symbolic way to release guilt and shame, connecting the act of surrender to emotional freedom:

> I'd write things I was worried about or felt guilty about and put them in the box. That practice kept those things from sucking me away. Otherwise, you're losing double time—you already lost time to addiction, and you keep losing it if you sit in guilt.

Through this spiritual ritual, Tyler was able to set down the emotional weight of his past. His experience underscores how faith-based practices helped participants move from guilt to growth—actively supporting the process of self-forgiveness. Rachel similarly found peace through surrendering to her faith:

"I can choose to believe that God's going to tell me what I need. And if He doesn't, I know it will all work out. Letting go is the biggest part for me." Her words reflect how trust in divine timing enabled her to release control, quiet resentment, and embrace emotional peace—a crucial step in forgiveness, both of herself and her partner. Lauren echoed this sentiment, describing how spirituality helped her find compassion when forgiveness felt hard: *"Relying on God and really surrendering... giving everything to Him helped me navigate it and find grace for this broken person in front of me."* Her connection to God became the source from which she could offer grace—making forgiveness not a burden, but an act of spiritual alignment and trust.

Across participants' stories, spirituality emerged as the emotional anchor in moments of doubt, suffering, and relational strain. Whether through prayer, symbolic rituals, divine signs, or quiet surrender, faith made it possible to release bitterness and extend forgiveness—not as a one-time decision, but as a lived, ongoing practice. Ultimately, spirituality was not just a support—it was the foundation that made forgiveness possible. It helped participants reframe pain, surrender control, and embrace grace for themselves and others.

The Struggle Between Control and Surrender in Forgiveness. Balancing agency with spiritual surrender was a central struggle for many participants as they navigated the complexities of forgiveness. Letting go of the need for control—whether over their circumstances, their loved ones, or their own emotional responses—often marked a turning point in their healing. Many spoke of the moment they realized they could not force change or dictate outcomes—especially when it came to receiving or extending forgiveness—leading them to "give it to God" and trust in a higher plan. This surrender was not

about giving up, but about releasing the resentment, expectations, and burdens they had carried alone for too long.

Rachel reflected on how acknowledging she was not responsible for fixing or changing others ultimately freed her from cycles of blame and opened the door to forgiveness:

Rachel reflected on how recognizing that they were not responsible for fixing or changing others ultimately freed them from blame—both toward themselves and their loved ones:

> It has to start with a Higher Power—recognizing that something else is in charge of a lot of things. I am not my own higher power, and I am certainly not Mark's or my kids' higher power. That was a huge lesson. I can't control them, just as I can't control everything in life. If I can't blame myself for everything, I also can't blame others. That means I have to forgive them.

By surrendering the illusion of control, Rachel found clarity—not only in releasing others from blame but in extending herself grace. Her insight reflects a spiritual principle echoed by many participants: forgiveness was not a passive act but a conscious decision to trust that growth and healing could happen beyond their control.

Similarly, Andrew described forgiveness as a humbling process that challenged his pride—something he identified as deeply connected to his self-worth and success: *"I'm so guilty of the pride and the pride and the pride and the pride.*" As someone who had long been a high achiever and carried the pressure of family expectations, acknowledging his faults and learning to forgive challenged his identity. While forgiveness didn't come easily at first, he shared that it became more natural the more he practiced it. Over time, he began to view forgiveness as a spiritual act that softened his heart and deepened his connection to something greater than himself. This shift not only softened his heart but opened him up to receiving forgiveness—from others and from himself—without needing to earn it through performance or perfection.

Amanda had always believed in God, but before Kyle's addiction, her faith was more habitual than deeply personal. They would go to church on holidays and participate in services without feeling truly connected. When addiction disrupted her life, Amanda initially resisted God, feeling He had taken away the family and future she cherished. In an attempt to regain control, she withdrew from her faith—only to later realize that deeper reliance on God was exactly what she needed:

> Without God, there'd be nothing. It'd be like we were when we stopped going to church, because I couldn't believe that God had ruined my perfect little life and family. So I just quit going, not realizing till later that that was what I really needed—God.

Her words capture a common theme among participants: the internal conflict between resisting surrender and ultimately finding peace through it. Letting go of the belief that they alone could fix their circumstances opened the door to healing, forgiveness, and a reconnected faith.

Amanda initially attended support meetings believing she would learn how to fix her husband's addiction. Like many partners, she sought tools to regain control over the chaos. But over time, she realized the true purpose of the meetings—working on herself:

> I started going to the meetings, mostly because I thought they were going to tell me how to fix him. Then I found out that's why most people go—they think they're going to learn how to fix their loved one. But you have to keep going before you figure out, 'No, I'm here to fix me.

This shift in perspective was pivotal. Releasing control over her husband's recovery allowed Amanda to focus on her own emotional and spiritual growth. She came to recognize how her need to control often showed up in emotional distress and the inability to let go:

> Usually, if I'm being all choked up and snotty about something, it's because I'm not sitting back and listening. I'm taking my own thoughts and running with it, and I'm going to fix this or not. Something happens in the day, and I can't let it go... I'm not giving it up to God, I'm not letting Him control the situation.

Amanda's journey reflects the deep struggle between control and surrender that many participants faced. Clinging to control often intensified pain and resentment, while surrender—though difficult—created space for peace and forgiveness. Looking back, she wished she had trusted God's plan sooner:

> I wish that I had been stronger to sit back and say, 'Okay, you must have a plan here. I don't know what it is, I don't understand, and I don't like it, but I trust you.

Her story shows how surrendering control became a spiritual turning point, opening the door to healing.

Lauren, like many others, initially tried to take responsibility for her husband's healing, believing that if she just tried harder, things would improve. Over time, she came to see that surrender—rather than control—was the key to healing and forgiveness:

> I knew in the years leading up to it, I was trying to do it myself. We were always believers, but around that time, I had gotten to a place where I knew I couldn't do it alone anymore. I needed to start surrendering to God. I think that's when I really started doing it—surrendering and praying more, saying, 'Okay, God, this isn't working. What I'm doing isn't working. I'm trying to do it myself.' In our opinion, God is the ultimate Redeemer and healer, so I prayed, 'Come into our marriage and help.' It was really about that surrender and knowing God can help and heal anyone, especially when we're ready to fully surrender. For me, it was everything—letting go of control and realizing God created James and knows what to do with him. I needed to stop trying to be the one to fix him.

Lauren's experience reflects how forgiveness, especially in relationships impacted by addiction, required letting go of the belief that healing was solely within her power. Her surrender to God's authority became a turning point—allowing her to release resentment and trust in something greater.

For many, surrendering control was an ongoing internal process. Matthew described the tension between holding on and letting go, recognizing that control is ultimately a choice: *"Matthew, you absolutely can be depressed your whole life, and cynical, and absolutely, you want to be a tyrant in everyone else's life with control. You can do that. You don't have to, though."* His words illustrate the cognitive shift required to embrace surrender—the realization that letting go opens the door to

transformation. Like others, he found that forgiveness was not a passive act, but an intentional choice to release control and trust in the process of recovery. Kevin echoed this theme as he reflected on his breaking point: *"I finally just basically said that I'm done. God, there's no way I can do this on my own... I leave it to you [God], which I'd never done before."* He described how earlier prayers were filled with pride and frustration:

> We'd had our conversations in the past, where I was screaming and yelling at Him, asking, 'Why? Why? I'm asking for your help, give me help!' But during those times, I still had too much pride—I hadn't given it all up yet.

It wasn't until Kevin completely surrendered that he began to feel the shift within: *"I was beaten. There was no way I had anything left to fight against the alcoholism. I had nothing left in me. That's what it took. At this point, I had nothing. So it was, 'It's up to you.'"* Kevin's surrender to God was not an act of defeat—it was a turning point in his healing and capacity for self-forgiveness. He could no longer control the addiction or manipulate the outcome, so he let go and entrusted the process to a higher power. James echoed this struggle: *"My ego is dying. I'm trying to grab onto control, and I need to accept that I'm not in control."* His reflection reveals the internal battle that many faced—where surrender and forgiveness both required humility and the acceptance that healing cannot be forced.

Tyler initially believed he had conquered addiction through personal effort, only to later realize he had never truly surrendered:

> I thought I had won because everything went so well in treatment. But after I left, I didn't realize I was only sober because I was in that bubble. I thought I had it all figured out, that I did so well and even overperformed. I checked it off my list—completed a year in treatment, sold my company—so I thought, 'Boom! I beat addiction.' I really believed it was me, that I had done it on my own. But then I fell. And this time, I know—it's not me. It can't be.

As someone who had remained high-functioning through addiction—working in executive roles and launching businesses—Tyler's success reinforced his belief that he could outsmart addiction through willpower. He recalled, *"I just didn't want to stop. I still thought that I could outsmart it."*

Even in treatment, Tyler believed he had surrendered, but his relapse revealed that he had only gone through the motions. The turning point came when he finally confessed to his wife that he had been using again. Her firm response—telling him to pack his things and leave—shook him. In that moment, Tyler realized he had reached the end of himself. It was no longer about proving anything or performing well in recovery; it was about completely letting go. That moment, he said, was when he *"finally decided to do everything they were telling me to do" and "completely surrendered."* In fully surrendering, Tyler was able to release the shame that had blocked self-forgiveness and begin repairing the emotional damage caused by his hidden relapse.

Jason echoed a similar journey. He had spent years striving to meet expectations, believing that self-reliance and success were the path to worthiness. But in recovery, he realized that this mindset was keeping him stuck. Reflecting on a pivotal conversation with his father before entering treatment, Jason shared:

> That's all I knew about AA. Before I got there, I talked to my dad, and he said, "Alright. I know how you feel about God, religion, and all that. All I ask is that you understand these people know something about recovery and how to get help. Just be open to the idea of God and realize it's not you.

Jason took the advice seriously:

> I went to the Retreat and took his advice. Once we started talking about God and a Higher Power, and how it can be your own concept—as stated in the Big Book—it started to click. I realized what he meant: I was playing God, trying to control everything.

This insight—that he had been "playing God"—allowed Jason to begin releasing the burden of control. For him, surrender was not about adopting someone else's beliefs, but about accepting that he didn't have to carry everything alone. This shift opened the door to forgiveness—of himself and others—by embracing humility and trust in something beyond himself.

Rachel shared how letting go of the need to control others brought her peace: *"I have no control over anybody. Which was very, very difficult for me to understand quite honestly... I really thought I had to control everybody and everything."* Over time, she realized that releasing control not only freed her from frustration but opened the door to more authentic forgiveness:

> I would say it's actually quite freeing because I think it's connected to the whole expectation. If I can truly forgive somebody for not doing what I think they should do, it frees up a lot of space in my head. I don't have to keep trying to find a new way to say it, a new way to do it, or a new way to show them—I can just let them figure it out on their own, and I don't have to carry it.

Rachel's experience captures the emotional relief that comes with surrender. Like many participants, she discovered that forgiveness was not about forcing others to change but about freeing herself from the exhausting cycle of control.

Ultimately, forgiveness was not about forgetting the past or excusing harm—it was about releasing the illusion of control that often blocked healing, connection, and grace. Whether through faith, self-reflection, or personal surrender, participants found that holding on only deepened their suffering. By trusting in something greater—God, the recovery process, or the possibility of growth—they found peace, healing, and a renewed sense of freedom both in their relationships and within themselves.

Forgiveness as a Spiritual Practice. Forgiveness was not viewed by participants as a one-time decision but rather as a spiritual discipline—an ongoing practice requiring intentionality, humility, and daily recommitment. Many described forgiveness as something they had to actively cultivate through

faith, self-awareness, or structured spiritual reflection. Rather than treating it as a momentary act, they saw it as a continual process of releasing resentment, aligning with grace, and approaching relationships with a renewed heart. This process, often rooted in their spirituality, reflected how forgiveness became a part of their lived faith—an embodied expression of healing, not just a reaction to past harm.

James reflected on how fully embracing forgiveness could reshape not just his romantic relationship but all his interactions moving forward:

> I think once I get to a point where I can operate fully in forgiveness and fully like understanding this codependency thing. Then I think it'll change a lot of things for me with anybody that I come in contact with and have a relationship with.

For James, forgiveness was deeply intertwined with his growth in recovery and his desire to heal from codependency. He recognized that integrating forgiveness as a practice would influence how he engaged in all future relationships. His perspective underscores that forgiveness is not just about reconciling the past but about shifting the posture of one's heart and learning to live differently. Andrew also saw forgiveness as deeply connected to spiritual maturity and personal growth. He reflected on the interdependence of love, faith, and forgiveness, naming it as a sacred practice that reflects one's connection to God:

> To me, everything is about love—what else are we on this earth for? I just want to be about love. I'm not perfect, but within that, there's this component of forgiveness, right? How can we truly love someone without forgiveness? I think when you've really embraced it—if that's even the right word—or when you've developed that divine connection, you can find peace in all circumstances. You can forgive in all circumstances. It doesn't mean you forget, but you can hold a heart posture of forgiveness, even in the most painful, personal situations. That, to me, is powerful. I don't think I'm there yet, but I want to be.

Andrew's words reveal forgiveness as a deeply spiritual practice—an act of love that grows through divine connection. While he admits he hasn't fully arrived, he names it as a path he is committed to

walking. Like many others, Andrew described forgiveness not as a one-time choice but as a process of spiritual formation—one that calls him to become more open-hearted, grounded in grace, and connected to something greater than himself.

For Ryan, forgiveness became an integral part of his identity—something he actively chose, not a one-time event. He discovered his faith while in prison and began reading the Bible, which laid the foundation for his transformation:

> I mean, it is who I am today, and compared to who I used to be, it's a night and day difference. Because holding on to resentments—obviously, that's the number one offender and stuff that is just gonna continue to pile up and explode eventually.

Rather than viewing forgiveness as a reactive response, Ryan described it as a daily discipline—one that prevented resentment from taking root. His words reflect the belief that forgiveness is a way of maintaining spiritual and emotional health, not just mending what is broken. Matthew echoed this sentiment, describing how his connection with God reframed forgiveness not merely as a task, but as a way of being:

> In my recovery, I found that spiritual striving and my personal connection to God, to spirit, became much more fulfilling. And that is forgiveness in whole—communing with that as more than just something that you can do and having that be something that you are.

This deeper embodiment of forgiveness—viewing it as part of one's identity rather than just an act—was a recurring theme. For Matthew, forgiveness flowed from spiritual intimacy, becoming something he *lives*, rather than something he *offers* occasionally.

Andrew emphasized how structured spiritual frameworks like AA supported this practice. He described forgiveness as an everyday commitment tied to humility and accountability:

> When you start practicing forgiveness, like through AA—like, not *if* I'm wrong, it's *when* I'm wrong, right? Because I'm human. I'm going to mess up. But we clean our side of the street, right? And that way we don't harbor anything in.

His words reflect how forgiveness becomes sustainable through routine spiritual and emotional maintenance. The "daily cleaning" of one's inner life was not just about staying sober—it was about preserving clarity, peace, and a posture of grace. Matthew added to this idea by describing how forgiveness had become the lens through which he viewed his entire life:

> My experience has allowed me to take forgiveness and enact it in my life—to show forgiveness, to see the world through a lens of forgiveness. It's embedded into my psyche. It's the lens that I look through life with… It's not just words—it's lived out.

For him, forgiveness was no longer a singular gesture—it was a way of seeing, responding, and existing in the world. This shift from forgiveness as a statement to forgiveness as *embodied spirituality* was reflected across multiple participants' narratives**.** Ryan further illustrated this integration of faith and forgiveness by describing it as a divine calling that required daily renewal:

> Well, for me, it starts with Jesus—that connection is the first step. Then, I feel called to walk that out. To me, it's automatic from Jesus because he knows my heart, and my heart is his. From there, it's a decision to continue walking that out in my everyday life.

His gestures as he spoke—reaching upward, then moving his hands back and forth—visually embodied his understanding of forgiveness as a flow between the divine and the self. For Ryan, forgiveness wasn't a feeling to chase; it was a spiritual rhythm, practiced again and again in response to grace.

Ryan's perspective was echoed by many participants who viewed forgiveness not just as a personal effort but as a spiritual calling—one that required continual renewal. Beyond individual healing, forgiveness often played a foundational role in their most intimate relationships. Jolynn, for example, described how forgiveness shaped the way she and her partner approached conflict and healing:

> Forgiveness plays a big role in our relationship. When we go through hard times, we revert back to that understanding, reminding ourselves to meditate, look inward, and slow down to recognize what's happening. We also work on letting go of attachments—wants, desires, and expectations—allowing things to simply be. That mindset has made us both more patient and kind with each other.

For Jolynn and her partner, forgiveness was not a one-time event but a shared commitment—a practice rooted in reflection, emotional regulation, and spiritual awareness. By regularly returning to this practice, they created space for grace, growth, and deeper connection.

Ultimately, forgiveness emerged as more than an emotional release—it was a guiding principle that shaped participants' spirituality, relationships, and recovery. For many, it demanded intentional, daily effort—releasing expectations, extending grace, and humbly realigning with their values and faith. It was not about forgetting or excusing harm, but about choosing love, humility, and healing again and again. Whether practiced through prayer, structured recovery work, or mindful communication, forgiveness was not a singular act—it was a spiritual rhythm that sustained their growth and transformation.

Superordinate Theme 5: Forgiveness as a Journey

Forgiveness emerged not as a one-time event, but as a dynamic and often difficult journey—one that required emotional endurance, conscious choice, and, at times, protective boundaries. For most participants, it was a nonlinear process shaped by relational shifts, personal growth, and the unpredictable nature of addiction and recovery. Progress was rarely straightforward; moments of clarity were often followed by doubt, renewed pain, or the need to forgive again. Some described forgiveness as a daily decision—an act of grace they had to recommit to over time—while others wrestled with the emotional toll of forgiving repeatedly, especially in the face of relapse or betrayal. Whether it brought peace or weariness, forgiveness was not simply something they granted once, but something they continually

navigated—an evolving practice woven into their efforts to heal, rebuild trust, and protect their own well-being.

The Nonlinear Journey of Forgiveness. Forgiveness was not described by participants as a single decision or endpoint, but as a nonlinear, evolving process—one that often required revisiting pain, recommitting to healing, and navigating moments of clarity, confusion, and growth. Especially in the context of addiction and relational harm, forgiveness tended to unfold slowly over time. Participants described it as a layered journey marked by emotional setbacks, spiritual growth, and a deepening understanding of themselves and their relationships. While nearly all experienced forgiveness as a gradual process, one participant described a sudden shift that catalyzed their healing—an exception that lived alongside the broader theme.

James' experience illustrates the unfolding nature of self-forgiveness. Though he had been sober for six years, he described how the journey was far from linear. A previous slip—watching pornography during a stressful time—had triggered deep shame and disconnection:

> I did find forgiveness in that. And then, I made another mistake when it came to watching pornography after another stressful situation... and they just got thrown out the window at that point because I didn't feel connected.

This setback highlighted the emotional fragility that can persist in recovery, even years in. But it also set the stage for a deeper reckoning. Reflecting on his current growth, James shared that only recently had he reached a place where he could truly extend grace to himself: *"Just until recently, I've been sober for six years, and I probably would say I didn't even forgive myself up until about three weeks ago."* His words reveal how healing can lag behind behavioral change—and how forgiveness sometimes emerges only

after working through shame, disconnection, and personal insight. He also spoke about a more recent realization—his struggle with codependency—which added complexity to his healing:

> Reading [the workbook] was eye-opening—I saw myself reflected in its pages... I'm not sure if I have fully forgiven myself yet, as I still feel a lot of shame about it. But I think I am beginning to move toward self-forgiveness.

James' story reflects how forgiveness must be revisited and redefined in light of evolving self-awareness. Even years into recovery, the process remained ongoing—shaped not just by sobriety milestones, but by emotional insight and self-compassion.

Like James, others in recovery shared how self-forgiveness remained a tender, ongoing practice—one that resurfaced in moments of reflection or regret. Emily described how, even after sustaining her sobriety, she still wrestled with guilt tied to her past relapse:

> Even when I say I'm 3 years clean now, I had a year before… and then I relapsed. So just thinking like, 'Oh, I should have 4 years, but it's only 3 years'—like, I forgive myself for that slip.

Emily's words reinforce the idea that self-forgiveness is not a single decision, but a daily act of grace—especially in recovery, where progress can be marked by both milestones and moments of doubt.

This gentle, day-by-day approach to self-forgiveness was echoed by others as well. Kevin reflected on how, over time, recovery itself helped soften his relationship with the past and made forgiveness—both of himself and others—more accessible:

> *I think everything is a little easier in recovery than it was before recovery. And so I think forgiveness is part of that. At least for me, I'm able to not hold that against him or myself anymore. Learn from what we've been through, and probably it's just easier to forgive.*

His words reflect how healing unfolds gradually—not as a singular breakthrough, but as a series of choices to release resentment, accept the past, and keep moving forward.

This nonlinear process extended to partners as well. Natalie, Jason's wife, described how her emotional response to betrayal evolved over time. Initially overwhelmed by shock, it wasn't until later that anger surfaced:

> At first, you're just hurt. You're shocked. It's just kind of like trying to absorb it all, you know. Then, maybe about a week or so after, everything starts adding up… I feel like the anger came once I had time to really sit down and realize what had been going on.

She also described how intrusive thoughts and fears of relapse could suddenly reawaken old wounds, even after she had chosen to forgive:

> There are days when you're terrified, thinking, 'Oh my gosh, any day he could decide, just kidding, I want to have a drink again.' You have random nightmares where he's drinking, and they feel so real. It scares you all over again, reminding you this could really happen.

Her journey illustrates how forgiveness is not only about releasing the past, but also about managing the emotional fallout of the present. As she put it simply, *"It's an everyday process, and that's one of the biggest things with recovery—taking it day by day. It really is a day-by-day journey."*

Rachel echoed this long-term view, saying simply: *"I think that's a continuous journey, honestly… I remember being super resentful and also holding on to that resentment for several years."* In her relationship, navigating two decades of sobriety with her partner required not just forgiveness, but emotional safety and trust built slowly over time. For Rachel, forgiveness was not about forgetting or instantly moving on—it was about restoring connection and cultivating emotional security, one conversation at a time.

That slow, deliberate process resonated with others as well. Lisa described it plainly: *"Forgiveness has been a journey, and it's been hard."* Her words reflect how forgiveness can feel like an emotional grind—challenging not just in moments of crisis, but in the quiet, daily decision to stay, re-

engage, and keep hoping for change. Lisa's experience underscores that forgiveness is not a singular act of release, but a long, often exhausting journey marked by fatigue, doubt, and the quiet strength required to keep choosing forward movement.

Like many others, Amanda shared that forgiveness wasn't something she and her partner achieved all at once. Instead, it unfolded in stages over more than a decade: *"We still, 11 years later, bring up a situation or something. So, we kind of, I think, have done it in pieces."* Her reflection highlights how forgiveness often unfolds gradually, piece by piece, as both partners continue to grow and process past pain over time.

Lauren echoed this idea, emphasizing that forgiveness required facing pain head-on: *"I think the hardest part is stepping into those really hard conversations, processing through them, and creating space to be able to do that."* Forgiveness, for her, was less about a clean release of anger and more about returning to the pain with openness and a willingness to repair.

Megan, too, described how forgiveness unfolded not in a single moment of clarity, but through on going, consistent acts of support: *"I feel like I was always doing things that brought him step by step, but I don't ever feel like it was necessarily something I said right then that led him to it immediately."* Her words emphasize that forgiveness and healing often grow slowly—through steady engagement rather than dramatic breakthroughs. Choosing to forgive meant continuing the work, even when the impact of her efforts wasn't immediately visible.

She also reflected on how unresolved pain, when not addressed, can accumulate into something more damaging: *"I think harboring unforgiveness turns into resentment… and that's still a process I'm working through right now."* This insight underscores that forgiveness is not only emotional but

protective—an ongoing act that prevents deeper bitterness from taking root. The weight of that process was not only emotional—it became physical: *"I would lay down and literally feel my body eating at itself from the stress… so tense and stressed. It felt like the stress was causing my body to break down."* Megan's experience demonstrates how the journey of forgiveness can take a toll on both body and mind. Even when grace has been extended, its work continues to surface over time—requiring release, recommitment, and resilience.

Forgiveness rarely follows a straight line. For many participants, the journey mirrored the ups and downs of recovery itself—marked by progress, setbacks, and the need to re-engage over and over again. Andrew reflected on how his cycles of sobriety paralleled the emotional work of forgiveness: *"I just did that perpetual cycle... get sober, do well, stop doing what got me sober, and then I go back... I needed more accountability."* His story illustrates how both recovery and forgiveness require structure, discipline, and repeated recommitment to sustain growth. He, along with others like Mark, emphasized that forgiveness rarely stemmed from a singular event. Instead, it took root through slow, subtle shifts:

> I don't think there was any like road to Damascus moment or anything like that. I think it was just small little things... it's been a gradual thing over time. There was no just one defining moment of divine intervention as far as forgiveness, but it was just little things that, you know, planted a seed and then grew.

These "small things" gradually built toward healing.

In contrast to the slower, layered paths most participants described, Ryan shared a rare and immediate shift—a spiritual turning point that stood apart from the rest: *"A light switch just kind of flipped… I'm just not that person. And I really have had the same perspective ever since. I was blessed to have a spiritual awakening really quick."* Though his experience stood apart from others, it lived

alongside the broader theme—reminding us that forgiveness can sometimes emerge in a moment but still requires long-term maintenance and integration.

For most, emotional pain persisted long after sobriety was established. Mark described the lingering impact of fear and depression, even years into recovery: *"A few years away from my last drink, there was just a lot of fear. And a lot of depression, you know—a lot of ebbs and flows."* His words capture how the emotional aftermath of addiction does not disappear with abstinence. Like recovery itself, forgiveness requires patience, persistence, and a willingness to return to the work when old pain resurfaces.

Others spoke to how forgiveness wasn't always accessible right away. Tyler reflected on his own resistance and the insight he gained in hindsight: *"By the last time, it [forgiveness] was evident that this was definitely a useful area to explore and reconcile. I wish I had done it on the front end."* His words underscore how forgiveness is not always embraced at the beginning. Even when its value becomes clear, the emotional readiness to engage with it may take time. For many, the journey is winding—marked by avoidance, reconsideration, and eventual re-engagement.

Sometimes, forgiveness did not lead to restored relationships. After Danielle's grandparents helped her and Ryan purchase their dream home, the devastation caused by Ryan's addiction strained the family. Her grandfather's struggle to forgive left a lasting impact on their once-close bond: *"My grandpa hadn't forgiven him for a couple of years, and before that, we were super close. But my grandpa is also controlling, so our relationship isn't the same now."* Her story highlights how, even when grace is extended, relational dynamics don't always return to what they were. Some wounds leave lasting imprints that time and change cannot fully erase. Danielle also wrestled with whether forgiveness should be a one-

time act or something that must be continually revisited: *"Does it continue, or do you just forgive once and not continue forgiving?"* Her question captures a common tension participants voiced—between the desire for finality and the reality that unresolved pain often resurfaces, requiring renewed engagement.

Across all experiences, forgiveness was not about achieving closure in a single moment. It was about choosing grace amid setbacks, navigating uncertainty, and finding meaning in the messiness of the process. Whether delayed, resisted, reawakened, or redefined, forgiveness rarely followed a linear path. Participants portrayed it not as a clean break from the past, but as an evolving practice—shaped by reflection, relationship, and readiness. For most, forgiveness was not an endpoint but an ever-returning process—sometimes quiet, sometimes agonizing—that wove itself into the fabric of recovery, healing, and growth.

Forgiveness as a Choice. Forgiveness was described not as a passive emotional release but as a conscious, deliberate choice—one that participants had to revisit repeatedly, especially in the context of addiction and relational harm. While healing often unfolded slowly, many emphasized that it began with an intentional decision to let go of resentment, extend grace, and pursue reconciliation. For these individuals, forgiveness was not a one-time act—it was a courageous decision made again and again, even when trust was still fragile and emotions were raw.

For many, forgiveness was a repeated choice, especially in relationships where past betrayals or addiction had caused deep wounds. Partners of those in recovery wrestled with questions about their future, their ability to release resentment, and whether the relationship could truly heal. Natalie, even after six years of her husband's sobriety, reflected on how forgiveness remains a daily commitment:

> You have to push those thoughts aside because when you choose to forgive someone, you can't sit there being angry and resentful—you've made the choice to move forward. You can easily get

> in your head, start thinking negative thoughts, and feel angry, but you have to remind yourself, "Nope, I forgave. We're moving on.

Natalie's words highlight how forgiveness is a conscious practice—requiring individuals to resist bitterness and continually recommit to healing. Before reaching this point, she had to deeply consider what forgiveness would mean for her future and her family:

> Yes, it's hard. I mean, again, it's like when something like this happens in your life—especially with kids involved—you really have to sit back and think about, 'Is this worth it to me? Is this what I want? Can I continue to grow with this person? Am I going to be resentful for the rest of my life?'

She recognized that the years they had shared gave her reason to stay—but staying still meant actively choosing forgiveness. Without that choice, she reflected, she would have remained emotionally stuck:

> You'd keep replaying situations and moments, getting angry with yourself, and feeling stuck... Without that positive outlook, you'd just exist, holding yourself back and not really living life to the fullest.

Lauren also emphasized forgiveness as a decision she had to make before her husband's behavior had changed. She described reaching a point where she made the difficult choice to forgive, even while still feeling betrayed: *"I was ready to forgive him, but the behavior patterns were still there... I had to take my anger and frustration and put it aside, which is probably the hardest thing I've ever done."* That conscious choice became a turning point: *"It wasn't until that moment—when I chose to forgive him and commit to being in it with him—that I was able to put those things aside. To me, forgiveness is the necessary starting point of healing."* Lauren made it clear that forgiveness didn't mean forgetting—or skipping over difficult conversations. It meant staying present in the pain, and still choosing to move forward:

> I do think forgiveness is a choice, not a feeling, right? And so every day I have to choose—like, no, I forgave you for that. Now I don't... it's just kind of our story and his testimony. But I do feel

> it's like a choice every day in the beginning… I'm choosing to forgive you… and at the same time, like, we still need to bring healing, and I still need to talk about things.

Her husband, James, echoed this understanding from the other side of the relationship: *"I think that forgiveness is a choice. I can't make anybody forgive me."* His words highlight that while he could not control when or how forgiveness was offered, he understood its importance—and the personal responsibility tied to it.

Other participants shared similar reflections. Jolynn shared a similar perspective, describing forgiveness as an intentional act of emotional release: *"Forgiveness means that you've accepted that whatever's happened has happened, and that you're gonna work towards letting that hurt go away. Forgiveness opens the door to try and move on from things."* Lisa offered a powerful visual metaphor—describing forgiveness as the center of a wheel with many spokes:

> I'm visualizing the word *forgiveness* in a circle... and then you put things off of it like forgiving resentment, forgiving relapses, forgiving the weight of the house on my shoulders, forgiving just feeling lonely…

Each spoke represented a new area where she had to choose to forgive—not once, but again and again.

Amanda reflected on how forgiveness could exist even when trust hadn't yet returned: *"He would ask, and it was kind of like, 'Well, of course, I forgive you. I don't necessarily trust you, but I forgive you.'"* This distinction—between choosing to forgive and fully reconciling—was a theme echoed by many participants. Forgiveness, they recognized, didn't guarantee the full restoration of the relationship. But it still offered emotional and spiritual freedom. Megan shared that her choice to forgive was influenced by the strength of her support system—grateful for people who never pressured her to walk away:

> Even with everything I went through, I had good people surrounding me and parents who never once said, 'Shouldn't you be filing for divorce?'I feel so grateful for that support because I think most people would probably experience the opposite.

Lisa also reflected on this choice, remembering that she could have left—but instead, she chose to stay and try again: *"I could have thrown in the towel and been done. But no, I wanted this family... Am I willing to put that work in? Are you willing to put that work in?"* For her, forgiveness wasn't just about making peace with the past—it was about building a future. A future rooted in commitment, grace, and renewed trust.

Across these narratives, forgiveness emerged as an intentional and often difficult decision. Participants described it as an act of courage and will—not something that happened naturally, but something they chose despite the pain. Whether navigating relapse, rebuilding trust, or deciding to stay in the relationship, forgiveness was the first step toward healing. Not because it erased the past—but because it freed them to imagine something better.

The Burden of Persistent Forgiveness. For many participants, the repeated need to forgive carried a deep emotional cost. When addiction and relapse resurfaced, so too did old wounds—making forgiveness feel less like a moment of healing and more like an ongoing emotional toll. Partners, in particular, described the exhaustion, doubt, and self-questioning that came with extending grace again and again, even when change was uncertain.

Lisa captured this tension as she reflected on whether her continued forgiveness was compassionate or self-destructive:

> Sometimes it feels like forgiveness can be harmful to myself, especially if we keep repeating the same cycle. If I keep forgiving him and nothing changes, am I only hurting myself?

Her words illustrate the precarious line many partners walked between grace and self-protection. While she acknowledged that forgiveness felt healthy during times of progress—"since we have been on a good path for a year and a half, I don't feel like forgiveness is harmful"—that hadn't always been the case. Each relapse forced her to weigh whether continuing to forgive was a sign of hope or a pattern of enabling. The burden came not only from the act of forgiveness itself, but from the emotional calculus it required: Is this still safe for me? Is it worth it to keep forgiving? *"Every time there's a setback, I ask myself if I want to keep trying. I do, but I also don't want to keep experiencing setbacks—of course, nobody does."* Lisa's words underscore how forgiveness, when repeated too many times, can begin to feel like an emotional trap—one that forces the forgiver to constantly reevaluate their limits. For Lisa, the demand to keep forgiving eventually became a weight of its own. *"There were times when I just wanted to pick up and say, 'Nope, I'm done… I don't want to go through it again, and I don't want my kids to go through it either'."* Her reflection illustrates the emotional exhaustion that can accompany long-term forgiveness, especially when harm is repeated and healing is slow. It wasn't just about forgiving the past—it was about bracing for whether she could survive the future.

Sarah's experience echoed this strain. For her, forgiveness became something she felt compelled to give—until she no longer could.

> You feel like you forgive, and then it happens all over again. And so you start to think, *why do I keep doing this to myself?* Why do I forgive him? And then he just does it again the next day.

Her words reflect the emotional weight of being caught in a cycle of hope and heartbreak. Each relapse reopened old wounds, and each act of forgiveness came with deeper questions about her own well-being and boundaries: *"Somehow I forgave him for these five times where he really hurt me… I don't know how long I would have been able to keep doing it…I did give him a lot of chances. Really, a lot of chances."*

Sarah recalled specific betrayals that intensified the burden—like when he refused to stop drinking while her mother was on a ventilator from COVID-19, or when he reconnected with an ex. These moments compounded the emotional cost of forgiving, leaving her to question whether she had anything left to give. The weight was not only in the past hurt, but in the *effort* of continuing to stay open to trust and repair.

Danielle described the broader exhaustion that came with maintaining a relationship shaped by both active addiction and recovery: *"I just feel it takes a lot to deal with someone who is in active addiction and then recovery, and then to stay."* Her words, simple but profound, reflect the strain many partners expressed—not just about forgiving past actions, but about *sustaining* emotional connection in a context of unpredictability. It wasn't one decision to forgive, but a *daily* negotiation between love, hope, and the need to preserve oneself.

Across their stories, participants revealed how forgiveness—when revisited over and over—can become its own emotional burden. It demanded endurance, emotional labor, and at times, spiritual reckoning. The hardest part, for many, wasn't letting go of past mistakes. It was the *weight of staying soft* in the face of new pain. It was trying again, hoping again, trusting again—even when they didn't know if they could withstand another fall.

Superordinate Theme 6: Fruits of Forgiveness

Despite the challenges, participants described personal and relational growth as a direct result of forgiveness. While it did not erase past pain, it fostered healing, resilience, and deeper self-awareness. Many found that forgiveness allowed them to reclaim agency, redefine relationships, and move forward with renewed hope. For some, forgiveness became a catalyst for transformation, helping them shed

shame-based identities and embrace self-worth. Those in recovery spoke of self-forgiveness as necessary to move beyond past mistakes, while partners found strength in extending forgiveness—whether to their loved one or themselves—establishing healthier boundaries in the process. At the same time, forgiveness required grieving the trust, time, and security that addiction had taken. Those in recovery carried the weight of harm caused, while their partners mourned lost stability. Yet, through this grief, many found that forgiveness created space for both acceptance and hope, allowing them to rebuild rather than remain stuck in the past.

For many, forgiveness also became a form of liberation—a release from resentment, guilt, and pain. Those in recovery described how self-forgiveness helped them fully step into their journey, while partners saw it as emotional freedom, reclaiming their energy and peace. Across experiences, forgiveness was not about erasing the past but about refusing to be defined by it, making way for renewal and growth.

Transformation and Growth Through Forgiveness. For many participants, forgiveness served as a powerful catalyst for transformation—fostering emotional growth, deepened self-awareness, and stronger, more authentic relationships. Individuals in recovery described self-forgiveness as essential to shedding shame and rebuilding their sense of worth. Partners, in turn, found that forgiving—whether their loved one or themselves—brought clarity and resilience, enabling them to establish healthier boundaries and reconnect with their own strength. Rather than remaining trapped in resentment, participants leaned into healing, allowing painful experiences to become pathways for renewal.

For most, this transformation was gradual. Rachel described how forgiveness, practiced consistently, helped rebuild emotional safety and deepen her relationship:

> …if we couldn't forgive ourselves and each other, it would be kind of pointless to be together. I think it's a slow burn—steady—and I feel more solid than I have in the past with him… I feel

> safe. That's always been a big thing—not just physically safe, but safe with my feelings, able to say what I need to say.

For Rachel, forgiveness was foundational—not only for staying together, but for creating the kind of emotional security that allowed the relationship to thrive.

Others described how forgiveness allowed for deep personal and spiritual change. Ryan reflected on how it strengthened his relationships and redefined who he was: *"It's strengthened relationships…allowed me and relationships to get stronger and to grow instead of holding resentments and keeping people at a distance*." He went on to describe the spiritual shift that accompanied his transformation: *"I'm a new creation… that's not who I am anymore."* His words reveal how forgiveness and recovery worked together—not just repairing connections with others, but reshaping identity and opening a new path forward.

While Ryan described this spiritual renewal, Kevin spoke about the emotional clarity that emerged as recovery lifted the "blinders" that once kept him self-focused: *"I had alcohol blinders on, all I could see was my little world. I couldn't comprehend or understand what was going on outside of that."* As he began to recognize how his behavior had affected his partner, he also witnessed the fruits of healing in their relationship: *"She's much less stressed out… more patience. She feels better physically, spiritually, and emotionally because of the strain I was putting on her."* Kevin's reflections reveal how forgiveness often begins with new awareness—making it possible to relate with greater empathy, responsibility, and care.

While Kevin observed the external ripple effects, others like Mark described a more internal shift. For Mark, self-forgiveness helped restore his emotional well-being*: "My self-respect has heightened. My, you know, I guess that goes along with self-esteem. My anxiety is lessened. Depression is mostly non-*

existent." His words highlight how forgiveness can ease long-held emotional burdens and make space for stability, confidence, and peace.

Jolynn echoed this connection between forgiveness and growth, emphasizing how it allowed for a deeper bond within her relationship:

> Had I not forgiven Matthew and just said, 'I'm done, I don't forgive you, I hate you, you did this to me…I would have missed out on so much beautiful life with him. It has allowed for many beautiful things by moving past the hard times. It's worth going through that, doing the work, and making time to rebuild the relationship. It brings a lot of closeness.

Rather than staying anchored in hurt, Jolynn leaned into the discomfort of healing, which ultimately transformed their relationship. As she put it: *"We were both healing—individually and together—from our own traumas and struggles. That process created the foundation for a healthy relationship, and it started with forgiveness."*

Danielle shared a similar realization. While the pain of addiction was undeniable, she acknowledged that the forgiveness it required helped shape a more grounded and communicative relationship:

> Now, we have a really nice life, and even though I wouldn't have wanted him to go through active addiction, we both recognize that we wouldn't be where we are today without it... Forgiveness feels necessary, and it makes you feel lighter.

She recognized that growth was mutual—both had to forgive, and both changed. This shared growth also transformed their communication:

> We talk more and are more open with each other. If we get into an argument, it's not like a screaming match like before—we just talk it out... even if there are small disagreements, we don't yell at each other.

Danielle's story reflects how forgiveness not only rebuilt trust, but created space for more peaceful, respectful conflict resolution—something that had previously felt out of reach.

Like Danielle, Amanda found that the struggles of addiction ultimately strengthened her marriage in unexpected ways. Though addiction led to their divorce, time apart gave them space to grow individually. They eventually remarried, this time with a deeper connection and renewed commitment. Looking back, Amanda said:

> I remember telling him for the first time that I was grateful for his addiction, and he was like, 'You've got to be kidding.' Both of us kind of hit rock bottom, and we worked our way up. Now, things are so much better. Life seems a whole lot more precious now. We are so much stronger.

Forgiveness not only helped them heal relational wounds—it also awakened a new sense of presence, appreciation, and purpose.

Through this journey, Amanda also discovered something unexpected: herself. Reflecting on the personal growth that came with forgiveness, she shared:

> I think that I've had a chance to see just how strong of a person I really was and am. I always relied on him for everything, and yes, I still do, but I found a strength in myself that I didn't know was there.

Her story demonstrates how forgiveness can reveal layers of resilience and self-reliance that had long been buried under dependency and pain. Emily described a similar takeaway, recognizing that the adversity she faced—including the work of forgiveness—shaped her for the better**:** "I'm learning slowly now that I've had to go through everything I've gone through to make me the person that I am." Her words reflect the theme that transformation, though often painful and nonlinear, is possible when forgiveness is embraced as a spiritual and emotional process.

For some, this transformation included a renewed connection to faith. Sarah described how forgiveness and recovery deepened both her and her partner's spiritual life:

> I think our faith is deeper, and I think that has a lot to do with going to these meetings and being surrounded by other people of the same faith... It definitely has gotten stronger through this recovery.

In her story, faith was not just a backdrop but a source of renewal—woven into the healing work of forgiveness.

Across these stories, forgiveness was more than a release of past harm—it was a catalyst for lasting change. Participants reclaimed a sense of purpose, redefined their relationships, and discovered strength they hadn't known they possessed. Whether through spiritual deepening, relational rebirth, or personal growth, forgiveness became a turning point—shaping a future grounded not in pain, but in connection, resilience, and hope.

Grieving What Was Lost While Hoping for the Future. For many participants, forgiveness was both an act of release and a choice to believe in something better. It required them to grieve what addiction had taken—time, trust, emotional safety—while still making space for hope. Rather than pretending the pain hadn't happened, forgiveness allowed them to carry it differently. In doing so, participants often discovered a surprising strength: the ability to move forward with clarity, purpose, and renewed connection.

Sarah reflected on how forgiveness helped her shift her perspective toward something lighter: *"I've been able to let the past go and move on, and not think about the bad times, but think about the good times and the good times ahead."* Her words highlight a common turning point—when grief was no longer the only lens. Through forgiveness, participants like Sarah began to reimagine what was possible, choosing to dwell not only on what had been lost, but also on what could still be built.

For some, however, hope came only after sitting fully in the weight of their losses. Ryan described reaching a point of emotional collapse before any healing could begin:

> I was at the complete end of my rope, and I couldn't even love myself in that moment. I had been running—from the law, from everything—for the last year... and then, you know, that light came in—the first hope, like, 'You can do this.' It was a spiritual awakening.

Looking back, Ryan saw how even his darkest moments had served a purpose: *"It was a very bad situation. But I don't regret any of it—I'm very grateful for how it all worked out because I would have never found God if it hadn't happened exactly the way it did."* His story illustrates how grief and hope can exist side by side—how the pain of the past can lead to the presence of something redemptive.

Partners also shared how forgiveness helped them move through grief into something more sustainable. Natalie described the mental discipline required to stay focused on growth rather than resentment:

> You start to get these thoughts in your head and begin to feel upset, but you have to remind yourself of the good things, the effort he's made, and what he does do. It's like flipping a switch in your mind, telling yourself, 'Nope, let's not go down that hole.'

Her reflection shows how forgiveness can act as a daily choice to stay grounded in hope, even when old wounds threaten to resurface. Choosing to forgive did not mean forgetting the past—it meant believing in the future.

Lisa reflected on the emotional complexity of forgiveness, describing how it was intertwined with grief and longing for what could have been:

> There's a lot of emotions that go into forgiveness. You're happy that your relationship is going to be okay, but at the same time, you're sad. It feels like mourning—I feel like I mourn that newborn stage, wishing he had been there with me to help out. It's like he wasn't really there for the first year of her life, even though he was physically present. Forgiveness is a mix of emotions—you're happy, but you're also sad, mourning what could have been while still being hopeful for what can be. It's just a lot of emotions.

Forgiveness required both release and renewed trust in what could still be. It required them to grieve what addiction had taken—time, trust, emotional safety—while still making space for hope. Rather than pretending the pain hadn't happened, forgiveness allowed them to carry it differently. In doing so, participants often discovered a surprising strength: the ability to move forward with clarity, purpose, and renewed connection.

Amanda, too, described holding hope and grief at the same time. In the midst of their separation, small moments of connection reminded her of what once was—and what still might be possible:

> Every time he went to treatment, I saw a little bit of hope. Or if we went out to dinner and had a nice meal together, I saw hope. I think that helped me heal, too, because I would see a part of what I fell in love with—not all the time, but he was still there. I could see that he was still there.

Yet that flicker of hope was bittersweet. It kept her tethered to the relationship but also deepened the hurt when change felt out of reach. Over time, however, Amanda's hope proved to be more than wishful thinking—their relationship was eventually restored in a significant way. Forgiveness didn't erase the longing; it allowed her to hold the pain while remaining open to restoration.

Across these stories, forgiveness was not about forgetting what had been lost, but about learning to live with it differently. It gave participants a way to mourn while still choosing hope—to acknowledge what addiction took without letting it define the entire story. The pain was real, but so was the belief that something new could still grow.

While grief remained part of the journey, forgiveness made it bearable. It allowed participants to loosen the grip of regret and embrace the future with quiet courage. The fruit of forgiveness, in this case, was restored perspective: not erasing the past, but seeing beyond it. Forgiveness opened the door to resilience, renewed relationships, and a future still worth believing in.

Forgiveness as Liberation. Participants described forgiveness as a profound source of emotional and psychological freedom. Letting go of past burdens—whether through self-forgiveness, forgiveness of others, or divine forgiveness—allowed them to release the weight of shame, secrecy, and guilt that had kept them trapped in old patterns. Many described this liberation as a pivotal moment in their healing, unlocking a deeper sense of self-acceptance, authenticity, and peace.

Jason, who has been in recovery for eight years from alcohol, experienced how forgiveness could lift the emotional weight he had carried for much of his 20-year relationship with his wife. Though he maintained a high-functioning appearance, the guilt and secrecy surrounding his addiction had burdened him deeply. During his Fifth Step, Jason described how finally laying everything bare offered not only relief but renewal:

> It was incredible to lay everything out to another person and go through all the terrible things I had done… It felt like a huge confession, just putting everything out there. But knowing I was laying it all out and that things were going to be different allowed me to forgive myself.

In that moment, Jason began to believe he wouldn't fall back into old patterns—and that belief allowed him to step into a new level of self-compassion and integrity: *"It just feels so good not to have to hide anything*." Forgiveness also changed how he related to others*: "I can actually feel the weight lifting off my shoulders when I forgive somebody. Now, it's almost immediate With that, they no longer take up space in my head—I don't have room for that."*

For many, forgiveness was not only an act of grace toward others but a way to reclaim their emotional and mental space. Letting go no longer meant excusing harm—it meant refusing to carry it. Kevin echoed this deep sense of freedom: *"Very relieving... another weight, another burden lifted, another chain broken."* This release was not only emotional—it was spiritual. Forgiveness allowed Kevin

to move into a place of peace and presence: *"My spirit felt cleansed and relieved."* Mark also reflected on the emotional weight forgiveness helped him release, particularly in relation to his family: *"That was a big one—forgiving [my parents]. It takes up a lot less space, and having forgiven them, I feel lighter."*His words emphasized how forgiveness created internal spaciousness—releasing emotional clutter to make room for healing.

Sarah described a similar shift as forgiveness helped her and her partner build a stronger foundation: *"It feels lighter, like I'm no longer carrying a heavy burden. There's a happiness to life that was once being strangled."* For Sarah, forgiveness wasn't just relief—it was restoration. A new sense of joy and connection emerged, unburdened by the past.

Later, Mark returned to the internal impact forgiveness and recovery had made: *"I think one of the biggest parts—or blessings or gifts—of recovery has been the change in my thinking over the course of time. I don't know if it's established new pathways, but it's a blessing, because it's a ton of relief."* His reflection underscores that liberation is not only emotional or spiritual—it is also cognitive. For many, healing involved breaking free from entrenched thought patterns and self-condemnation, making room for peace and new ways of being.

Across these stories, forgiveness was not the end of healing, but the beginning of freedom. Whether through self-forgiveness, spiritual release, or extending grace to others, participants found they could finally put down what had weighed them down for years. The result wasn't just restored relationships—it was restored inner peace. They no longer lived under the shadow of what had been; instead, they stepped into a future marked by lightness, authenticity, and renewed strength.

Summary of Findings

Forgiveness is not merely a decision or event but an ongoing process of emotional, relational, and spiritual transformation. Within the context of addiction recovery, this process is complex, deeply personal, and intertwined with multiple dimensions of healing. This study explored how individuals in recovery and their partners experience forgiveness across three interwoven domains—divine forgiveness, self-forgiveness, and interpersonal forgiveness—and how these dimensions shape their healing journey. Through participants' narratives, it became evident that forgiveness is not a singular moment but a dynamic, evolving process that influences personal growth, relational stability, and emotional resilience. The themes that emerged from the data provide insight into how individuals navigate forgiveness, the challenges they encounter, and the transformative power it holds in their lives.

The first theme, **Can't Do Recovery Without Forgiveness**, highlights that forgiveness is essential for both personal healing and relational repair in addiction recovery. Participants repeatedly emphasized that forgiveness was not optional—it was the foundation for survival, trust, and reconciliation. Without it, relationships often remained strained, and emotional wounds lingered. Some described forgiveness as a necessary act of grace that enabled them to rebuild connection with their partners and sustain their long-term recovery efforts.

The second theme, **A Web of Forgiveness—Where Self, Other, and the Divine Intertwine**, reveals the deeply interconnected nature of forgiveness. Participants described self-forgiveness as the most difficult yet most essential step, as lingering shame and guilt often blocked their ability to heal. Many also framed divine forgiveness as both a guiding framework and a gateway to self-

acceptance and relational healing. Spirituality acted as a bridge between these forms of forgiveness, helping participants make sense of their pain and move toward emotional peace.

The third theme, **The Role of Forgiveness in Navigating Shame, Guilt, and Responsibility**, highlights the emotional toll of addiction and the internal struggles participants faced in owning their past. Individuals in recovery often described carrying deep shame and regret for the harm they caused, viewing forgiveness as a release from these burdens. Partners, too, struggled with their own internal conflicts—grappling with guilt for enabling behaviors or for staying in painful relationships. Forgiveness in this context was not only about letting go of others' wrongs, but also about reclaiming personal responsibility while learning to extend compassion inward.

The fourth theme, **The Role of Spirituality in Forgiveness and Recovery**, illustrates how faith served as an emotional and psychological anchor in the forgiveness process. Many participants leaned on prayer, scripture, or faith communities to support their journey toward self-forgiveness and relational repair. However, some wrestled with the tension between control and surrender, recognizing that letting go of resentment often required trusting in a greater plan beyond their own understanding. Others described forgiveness as a spiritual practice, one that had to be actively cultivated rather than simply granted in a single moment.

The fifth theme, **Forgiveness as a Journey**, reinforces that forgiveness is not a one-time decision but an ongoing, nonlinear process requiring emotional resilience and intentional healing. Participants described a winding path marked by emotional setbacks, reflection, and recommitment. Progress often emerged through slow, layered growth rather than sudden breakthroughs. While some experienced moments of renewed connection, others faced the burden of persistent forgiveness—repeatedly extending

grace after relapses or broken trust. This created a tension between compassion and self-preservation, prompting participants to regularly assess whether continuing to offer forgiveness was emotionally sustainable. The process demanded endurance, emotional strength, and an evolving understanding of what it meant to stay connected without compromising one's own well-being.

The final theme, **Fruits of Forgiveness**, illustrates the transformative power of forgiveness. Participants described self-forgiveness as a release from shame that allowed them to reclaim their self-worth and purpose. Relational forgiveness helped rebuild emotional security and set healthier boundaries, making way for deeper connection. However, forgiveness did not erase the past—it helped participants move forward without being defined by it. Many found themselves grieving what was lost while still holding onto hope for the future. Ultimately, forgiveness was described as a form of liberation, freeing participants from the weight of resentment, regret, and secrecy, and allowing them to embrace personal and relational renewal.

These findings illuminate the intricate role of forgiveness in addiction recovery, showing how individuals navigate self-forgiveness, divine forgiveness, and interpersonal forgiveness across different stages of healing. Forgiveness is not a single act but an evolving, relational process that requires a balance of grace, boundaries, and self-awareness. Its cyclical nature means it is often revisited, particularly in the face of relapse and relational strain. Understanding forgiveness as an ongoing journey rather than a final resolution fosters a more compassionate and realistic perspective on healing. The next chapter will explore how these themes connect to existing literature, situating them within broader theoretical and clinical frameworks.

CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION

Chapter Overview

In this chapter, I offer an interpretative analysis of how individuals in recovery and their partners made sense of divine, self, and interpersonal forgiveness. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009), I explore how forgiveness emerged not as a single act, but as an ongoing process shaped by relational, spiritual, and emotional experiences. IPA emphasizes the double hermeneutic process, in which participants make sense of their experiences and the researcher, in turn, interprets that meaning-making. This chapter expands on the thematic findings by exploring the deeper dynamics that give forgiveness its meaning within addiction recovery.

Ultimately, this study revealed that **Can't Do Recovery Without Forgiveness** is more than a powerful title—it reflects the lived reality of many participants. Forgiveness was a lifeline, described as essential to both personal recovery and relationship repair. It was not a one-time event, but a sustaining force that made trust, survival, and emotional safety possible. Forgiveness helped participants withstand the instability of addiction and begin to build a new life.

Participants also described forgiveness as a deeply layered and interdependent process, as captured in the theme **A Web of Forgiveness—Where Self, Other, and the Divine Intertwine**. These dimensions of forgiveness—self, interpersonal, and divine—were rarely experienced in isolation. Instead, they shaped and reinforced each other, often creating a dynamic cycle of spiritual insight, relational healing, and emotional growth. Some participants reported experiencing divine forgiveness before they could forgive themselves. Others relied on relational validation or partner support to believe they were

worthy of grace. This interplay highlighted the relational and spiritual reciprocity embedded in the forgiveness process.

The emotional weight of forgiveness was most clearly seen in **The Role of Forgiveness in Navigating Shame, Guilt, and Responsibility**. Individuals in recovery described wrestling with intense shame over the harm they had caused, while partners struggled with guilt for staying, enabling, or feeling angry. Forgiveness was described not only as a release but as a confrontation with one's own humanity. In this space, participants sought to hold both accountability and compassion—toward themselves and one another.

Faith and spirituality played a critical role in making this possible, as shown in **The Role of Spirituality in Forgiveness and Recovery**. For many, spiritual practices such as prayer, scripture reading, and church involvement provided strength when personal willpower fell short. Forgiveness was framed as a sacred act—sometimes intuitive and reassuring, other times demanding and filled with doubt. Participants described God as both a source of grace and a mirror for personal growth, offering hope as well as challenge.

The process, however, was rarely clean or linear. Across stories, participants emphasized **Forgiveness as a Journey**—a winding, non-linear path marked by emotional setbacks, reflection, and recommitment. Participants forgave, then struggled with recurring pain, forgave again, and still felt unsure. This recursive process did not indicate failure, but rather, highlighted the depth of emotional resilience required to reach a more forgiven state. Many described learning to forgive without needing to forget and to stay open without dismissing harm.

Despite these challenges, the **Fruits of Forgiveness** were profound. Participants described a renewed sense of peace, strength, and connection. Forgiveness became a gateway to personal transformation and relational healing. Some even described physical sensations of relief—feeling lighter, less burdened, more free. Still, this liberation was often accompanied by grief. Participants mourned what had been lost—time, trust, and stability—yet chose to live beyond those losses by embracing the future with hope.

These themes are explored in greater depth through three integrative sections that reflect the emotional, relational, and spiritual dimensions of forgiveness— synthesizing the findings into broader interpretive categories: foundational, interconnected, and emotionally complex.

This discussion now turns to how these findings connect with existing literature, offering theoretical and clinical insights into forgiveness as a process that is not only cognitive and emotional, but also relational, embodied, and spiritual. I also explore the implications for therapy and recovery-focused interventions, particularly within couple-based and faith-integrated care. Finally, I reflect on limitations and future directions, while considering how the dynamic interplay of forgiveness, addiction, and relationship repair continues to evolve.

Foundational and Evolving: Forgiveness in Recovery and Relational Repair

In this section, I synthesize two key themes from Chapter IV—*Can't Do Recovery Without Forgiveness* and *Forgiveness as a Journey* (Original Themes 1 and 5 in Chapter IV). Together, these themes illustrate how forgiveness functions not only as a foundational element of recovery but also as a dynamic, evolving process. Grounded in Stress and Coping Theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and forgiveness process models (e.g., Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Worthington, 2006), this section explores

how participants engaged forgiveness not as a one-time decision, but as a sustained and intentional commitment. It required emotional labor, relational accountability, and psychological resilience—particularly in the face of relapse and relational rupture.

Forgiveness emerged as a stabilizing force for both individual recovery and relationship survival. While forgiveness may seem like a given in recovery discourse, participants described it not as a lofty ideal but as a relational and emotional necessity. It functioned less as a moral imperative and more as a maintenance tool—a stabilizer in the face of emotional chaos, spiritual crisis, and relational rupture. This framing positions forgiveness as essential for survival and continuity, especially when other coping mechanisms fell short. Rather than treating forgiveness as a moment of release, participants described it as an ongoing relational process—often revisited and redefined in response to cycles of progress and setback. Many participants described needing to "keep choosing" forgiveness before they ever felt its full emotional impact. This aligns with Stress-and-Coping Theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Worthington & Wade, 2020), which conceptualizes forgiveness as an emotion-focused coping strategy that helps individuals regulate distress, maintain connection, and find meaning amidst relational harm. Forgiveness can reduce the emotional load of unresolved conflict and serve as a buffer against the psychological toll of chronic stress—both of which are prevalent in couples impacted by addiction (Worthington, 2006; Worthington & Wade, 2020).

From this perspective, forgiveness functioned as a resource participants drew upon to manage the emotional weight of addiction-related pain they could not immediately resolve or change. It helped individuals preserve emotional stability and hope, even in the face of repeated disappointments. Importantly, participants' experiences reflect not only emotion regulation but also cognitive reappraisal,

another central mechanism of coping. Reappraisal involves reframing stressful events in more constructive ways (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), and was evident in the way some partners interpreted their loved one's harmful behaviors not as personal attacks but as manifestations of addiction. This shift allowed some to feel empathy rather than resentment—supporting emotion regulation, relational repair, and psychological flexibility (Gross & John, 2003; Worthington & Wade, 2020). In some cases, this reappraisal was supported by participants' spiritual frameworks, as they drew on faith to find meaning in suffering and engage in what Lazarus and Folkman (2006) described as *meaning-based coping*—a process that fosters hope and resilience when stressors cannot be fully resolved.

Beyond these intrapersonal benefits, forgiveness also operated as a dyadic coping strategy, promoting reengagement and reducing emotional withdrawal. Research suggests that in close relationships, forgiveness fosters empathy, facilitates conflict resolution, and strengthens relational bonds during periods of stress (Fincham & Beach, 2002; Finkel et al., 2002). In line with these findings, several participants described how their decision to forgive acted as a relational lifeline, allowing them to remain emotionally connected despite instability or relapse. In this way, forgiveness was not only self-soothing but also relationship-preserving, facilitating continued dialogue and emotional containment (Lannin et al., 2013).

Yet, the capacity to cope through forgiveness had limits. While many participants viewed forgiveness as essential, they also recognized the emotional toll of offering it repeatedly without corresponding behavioral change. Several described feeling stuck or trapped between extending grace and needing to safeguard themselves from further harm. This mirrors a core caution embedded in Stress-and-Coping Theory: When emotion-focused coping is not balanced with problem-focused coping—such as

setting boundaries, negotiating expectations, or seeking solutions—it can lead to emotional depletion or self-abandonment (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Worthington, 2006). This dynamic also reflects McNulty's (2010a) warning that forgiveness, while potentially healing, may reduce the motivation for change when extended prematurely or without accountability.

Some participants appeared to shift from emotion-focused strategies to more problem-focused adaptations over time—setting clearer relational boundaries, renegotiating trust, and requiring consistency from their partner as a condition of sustained forgiveness. These behavioral shifts reflect what Lazarus and Folkman (1984) refer to as coping flexibility, or the capacity to alternate between strategies based on the stressor's demands and the relational context. For couples navigating the nonlinear, unpredictable nature of addiction recovery, this flexibility was not only helpful—it was vital for maintaining both emotional wellbeing and relational integrity (Compas et al., 2001; Worthington & Wade, 2020).

Forgiveness was not experienced as a clean or linear process, but as a cycle of recommitment, rupture, and repair. Many participants spoke of revisiting forgiveness—sometimes daily—as they contended with resurfaced pain, broken trust, or the unpredictability of recovery. Over time, some began to view boundary setting as part of the forgiveness process itself, rather than as something separate.

This is reflected in Worthington's REACH model (2006), particularly in the elements of *recalling the hurt*, *empathizing with the offender*, *committing to forgiveness*, and *holding onto forgiveness* when old wounds re-emerge. Participants recalled betrayals in vivid detail—yet instead of avoiding the pain, they often engaged it directly, naming what happened and how it impacted them. Several participants described developing empathy for their partner's struggle with addiction, especially when they could

reframe it as an illness rather than a moral failure. This shift supported a more compassionate posture, reducing emotional reactivity and creating space for healing.

Still, not all participants experienced forgiveness as empowering. Many described feeling conflicted and questioned whether continuing to forgive in the absence of change was a form of grace or a form of harm. These internal negotiations are consistent with Enright and Fitzgibbons' (2000) process model of forgiveness, which frames forgiveness as a multi-phase journey involving uncovering anger and pain, making a conscious decision to forgive, working toward understanding and compassion, and ultimately releasing resentment while setting healthy boundaries. Several participants appeared to be moving back and forth between these phases—revisiting pain after a relapse, recommitting to forgiveness in moments of clarity, and struggling with whether empathy could coexist with self-respect. Even when forgiveness felt incomplete or uncertain, participants found meaning in their efforts to remain open-hearted without losing themselves. This illustrates the delicate emotional calculus many had to do—balancing grace with self-preservation, and love with discernment—while navigating the instability of recovery.

Several participants also described moments where they believed they had forgiven, only to later realize that unresolved pain or avoidance remained. These instances of pseudo-forgiveness were not failures, but developmental checkpoints—signaling that deeper emotional or spiritual work was still needed. In this way, premature forgiveness may serve as a temporary refuge, allowing individuals to move forward until they're ready to revisit the pain with greater honesty and clarity.

In this way, the forgiveness journey was not linear or final but recursive and relational, shaped by ongoing attempts to make peace without abandoning accountability. This recursive and evolving nature of

forgiveness also highlights the value of an interpretative phenomenological approach, as it allowed for a deeper exploration of how participants made meaning of forgiveness over time—often revising their understanding in response to relational and emotional shifts.

Both Worthington's REACH model and Enright and Fitzgibbons' process model frame forgiveness as an intentional, multi-step journey—one that includes confronting pain, cultivating empathy, and ultimately releasing resentment. However, where REACH emphasizes commitment and maintenance (e.g., "holding onto forgiveness" over time), Enright's model more explicitly maps the inner work of emotional processing and moral discernment, including the tension between empathy and boundary-setting. Participant experiences reflected both pathways: some described intentional practices of empathy and recommitment that mirror REACH, while others grappled with deeper emotional reckonings more consistent with Enright's phases. Together, these models offer complementary lenses for understanding how forgiveness unfolded in addiction recovery—not as a singular act, but as a sustained, psychologically and relationally complex process.

Ultimately, participants described forgiveness as a deeply relational process—one that required vulnerability, courage, and constant recalibration. It was not a passive event but an active form of resilience, one that had to be revisited, redefined, and recommitted to over time. As couples moved through relapse, rupture, and repair, forgiveness evolved alongside them—grounding their capacity to heal, stay connected, and hold hope in the face of uncertainty.

The Interconnected Nature of Forgiveness and Spirituality—Self, Other, and the Divine

In this section, I integrate findings from the theme *A Web of Forgiveness—Where Self, Other, and the Divine Intertwine* and *The Role of Spirituality in Forgiveness and Recovery* (Original Themes 2 and 4

in Chapter IV). Participants described forgiveness as multidimensional, with self-forgiveness, interpersonal forgiveness, and divine forgiveness deeply connected in both their emotional experiences and healing journeys. For many, spirituality was the thread that wove these dimensions together—shaping meaning, offering strength, and, at times, presenting spiritual struggle. This section explores how these three forms of forgiveness were experienced as fluid, reciprocal, and deeply embedded in participants' relationships with self, others, and God.

It's worth clarifying how this theme (Theme 2) differs from the subsequent theme on spirituality (Theme 4). While both involve faith, the emphasis here is on interplay—how self-, interpersonal-, and divine forgiveness act as a feedback loop, with struggles in one domain often blocking growth in another. In contrast, Theme 4 centers spirituality itself as the foundation—the stabilizing ground that allowed forgiveness to take root. If this theme (Theme 2) is the map of the forgiveness web, then spirituality (Theme 4) is the soil it grows in.

In many cases, divine forgiveness opened the door to self-forgiveness, which then facilitated both giving and receiving forgiveness in relationships. However, for others, the inability to forgive themselves created a barrier to accepting their partner's forgiveness, leaving them caught in cycles of shame and emotional disconnection. Rather than a linear sequence, these forgiveness domains shifted in response to personal struggles, relational ruptures, and moments of spiritual clarity. Spirituality functioned as both a meaning-making framework and a stabilizing force, helping participants process the guilt and shame across all three forgiveness dimensions. For many participants, spirituality was not just a coping tool—it was the interpretive lens through which they made sense of betrayal, surrender, and grace. Forgiveness, then, was less about resolution and more about reorientation—a re-alignment of the self with something

larger than the pain. In this way, spirituality became the container for emotional and relational transformation.

This dynamic aligns with Relational Spirituality Theory which conceptualizes spirituality as inherently relational and centered on an individual's connection with the sacred, with the self, and with others (Worthington et al., 2021). These three domains are not independent; rather, disruption or healing in one reverberates throughout the others (Worthington et al., 2021). In this study, many participants described how their relationship with the sacred—whether God, a higher power, or a spiritual framework—provided a foundation for navigating forgiveness. When participants experienced a secure sense of divine forgiveness, they often reported greater self-acceptance and emotional availability in their intimate relationships. In contrast, participants who struggled with shame or spiritual guilt frequently experienced a breakdown across domains; difficulty accepting divine grace was accompanied by self-condemnation and emotional distance from their partners. These patterns mirror what Augustyn et al. (2017) describe as spiritually integrated relational repair, in which spiritual transformation promotes emotional and interpersonal healing.

RST also emphasizes that attachment to the sacred may mirror or influence other attachment relationships (Hall, 2007; Sandage & Jankowski, 2010). In this study, spiritual connection often served as a corrective emotional experience, offering participants the unconditional regard they may not have received from others—or offered themselves. For some, trusting in divine forgiveness helped reframe their internal narratives, challenging feelings of unworthiness and facilitating self-forgiveness. Others described how relational validation from a partner helped them internalize the idea that divine grace was possible or deserved. These reciprocal movements across the spiritual, intrapersonal, and interpersonal

domains reinforce RST's emphasis on interdependence, spiritual maturity, and meaning-making as essential to the forgiveness process (Worthington et al., 2021).

Rather than viewing forgiveness as a singular moral decision, RST frames it as a developmental and relational movement toward healing—a process in which spiritual growth, emotional regulation, and relational repair are intertwined (Augustyn et al., 2017). The findings of this study highlight that for many individuals in recovery, forgiveness unfolded not in isolation, but through spiritually and relationally embedded practices. Healing in one domain often enabled healing in another—demonstrating not only the interconnectedness of forgiveness, but also the potential for spiritual transformation to ripple across relational systems.

These findings also align with Fincham and May (2022), who demonstrated that divine forgiveness is positively correlated with self-forgiveness and serves as a protective factor against psychological distress. In this study, those who believed they had received divine forgiveness often reported feeling less burdened by shame, which in turn allowed for greater emotional availability in their relationships. On the other hand, participants who struggled with self-forgiveness frequently remained guarded or disengaged, uncertain about their worthiness or their partner's sincerity—consistent with Choe et al. (2019), who found that perceived unworthiness can limit the healing impact of divine forgiveness. While divine forgiveness was often a turning point, it did not eliminate the need for emotional and cognitive work. In many cases, divine grace served as a *catalyst* for healing, but self-forgiveness required additional reinforcement—often through relational validation, recovery milestones, or spiritual practice. Rather than moving through forgiveness in discrete stages, participants described an ongoing, reciprocal process in which healing in one domain supported growth in the others.

Self-forgiveness was described as fraught with tension—especially around the fear that forgiving oneself might excuse or minimize past harm. This reflects Woodyatt and Wenzel's (2013) argument that self-forgiveness must be authentic and accompanied by accountability to avoid moral disengagement. Participants who were able to reconcile self-compassion with responsibility often experienced deeper emotional relief and re-engagement in their relationships. This is supported by Webb and Toussaint (2018), who found that self-forgiveness promotes emotional regulation and reduces internalized shame—particularly when paired with efforts to make amends.

Forgiveness between partners was often complicated by ongoing ambivalence. While many participants desired relational restoration, some struggled to fully trust or feel secure, even after extending forgiveness. These findings are consistent with Merolla et al. (2017), who note that while forgiveness can reduce resentment, it does not automatically rebuild trust—especially in the aftermath of addiction-related betrayals. In this study, forgiveness often alleviated emotional pain, but rebuilding trust required consistency, transparency, and time.

The study also highlights the bidirectional relationship between self- and interpersonal forgiveness. For some, extending forgiveness to their partner came more easily than forgiving themselves. For others, self-condemnation made it difficult to trust or accept their partner's forgiveness. These patterns echo Fincham and May's (2022) findings that difficulty with self-forgiveness often undermines one's capacity for relational reconciliation. Rather than viewing these forgiveness types in isolation, the data suggest that they are best understood as interwoven processes that require attention to the whole person—emotionally, relationally, and spiritually.

Notably, this study also complicates the assumption that self-forgiveness must precede interpersonal or divine forgiveness. Several participants described external affirmation—through divine grace, partner support, or communal healing—as the entry point for self-forgiveness. This further supports the relational premise of R/S Theory, which frames forgiveness not solely as an individual moral decision but as a relational and spiritual movement shaped by context, connection, and meaning. While many participants found comfort in divine forgiveness, others wrestled with spiritual guilt, doubt, or a sense of unworthiness. These spiritual struggles sometimes deepened emotional distress rather than relieving it, consistent with Exline et al. (2017), who found that unresolved spiritual conflict can act as a barrier to psychological healing. In this study, spiritual struggle was not uncommon—raising important questions about how grace is internalized and how faith communities can support or complicate the process. Choe (2021) further emphasizes that religious pressure to forgive can lead to performative or premature forgiveness, preventing individuals from progressing from decisional to emotional forgiveness and deepening internal conflict.

These findings are also consistent with Lazarus and Folkman's (2006) expansion of Stress and Coping Theory, particularly the concept of *meaning-based coping*. Several participants reframed their pain and perceived failures through a spiritual lens, finding purpose or growth in suffering. This capacity for meaning-making through faith often supported emotional resilience and re-engagement with the forgiveness process.

This also aligns with the Biopsychosocial-Spiritual Model (Engel, 1977), which recognizes that trauma recovery and emotional healing often unfold across physiological, psychological, relational, and spiritual systems. Within the context of this study, forgiveness was not experienced solely as a cognitive

or moral shift—it also manifested as a physical unburdening, a relational reconnection, and a spiritually grounded practice. Research supports this holistic overlap: forgiveness has been shown to reduce physiological stress markers and enhance immune functioning (Toussaint et al., 2012), offering insight into why participants described forgiveness as both necessary and healing. For many, it created a sense of release that supported not only emotional and spiritual integration, but also relational resilience across the interconnected domains of self, other, and the divine.

Psychologically, forgiveness was tied to cognitive reappraisal and emotional regulation. Participants described reframing their self-narratives through a spiritual lens, often moving from condemnation to compassion, and from guilt to grace. This shift in self-understanding supported self-forgiveness and created emotional space for relational repair (Worthington & Scherer, 2004). Socially, the process of forgiveness was reinforced through relational and communal dynamics. Connection with a partner, feedback from a sponsor, or support from a faith-based recovery group all helped participants feel seen, understood, and safe enough to forgive. These social interactions often acted as mirrors, affirming participants' worthiness of forgiveness and helping them internalize grace received from others or from God (Fincham et al., 2007).

Spiritually, forgiveness was not simply a value but a lived practice—rooted in prayer, surrender, and a belief in redemptive transformation. Participants described turning to God as a source of strength when forgiveness felt emotionally out of reach. For many, divine forgiveness was the catalyst that made self-forgiveness and interpersonal repair possible. In this way, spirituality served as both a bridge and a container—linking the different dimensions of forgiveness and grounding them in a sense of sacred purpose (Pargament et al., 2010; Worthington et al., 2021).

Taken together, these findings suggest that forgiveness—particularly when it spanned self, other, and the divine—was most powerful when supported across multiple domains of healing. While themes of shame, responsibility, and the fruits of forgiveness are explored further in the next section, the integration of forgiveness and spirituality here reveals a process that was not only emotional or relational, but biopsychosocial-spiritual in its reach. This supports a view of forgiveness as a dynamic, embodied, and spiritually grounded journey—especially within the context of addiction recovery.

Between Guilt and Growth: The Emotional Labor and Healing Power of Forgiveness

In this section, I integrate findings from the theme *The Role of Forgiveness in Navigating Shame, Guilt, and Responsibility* and *Fruits of Forgiveness* (Original Themes 3 and 6 in Chapter IV). While many participants experienced forgiveness as transformative—describing renewed relationships, spiritual insight, and inner peace—this section focuses on the emotional labor that made those outcomes possible. Participants wrestled with shame, guilt, and self-condemnation, often while trying to balance compassion with accountability. For both individuals in recovery and their partners, forgiveness was not about forgetting the past but learning how to manage it with courage, grace, and boundaries.

The emotional and psychological burden of forgiveness emerged as a central challenge. Individuals in recovery frequently described deeply internalized shame that served as both a barrier to healing and a risk factor for relapse. This aligns with research by Tangney et al. (2005), which shows a strong correlation between shame and addiction severity. Shame fueled cycles of avoidance and self-punishment, often derailing recovery efforts. Guilt, by contrast, was more likely to prompt efforts toward accountability and repair. Hall and Fincham (2005) suggest that self-forgiveness requires motivational shifts—from avoidance toward greater self-compassion—which supports long-term emotional and

behavioral change. Similarly, Webb and Toussaint (2018) found that self-forgiveness improves emotional regulation and reduces internalized distress, particularly when paired with responsibility and a willingness to make amends. However, as Woodyatt and Wenzel (2013) caution, self-forgiveness must remain authentic to avoid sliding into self-exoneration or denial. For participants in this study, the work of self-forgiveness was often fragile and nonlinear and relapses into shame and self-condemnation were common, especially in moments of emotional vulnerability or relational rupture.

Partners, meanwhile, expressed exhaustion from extending forgiveness amid repeated betrayals, broken trust, and emotional harm. Many described a tension between their desire to forgive and the emotional safety needed to protect themselves from further pain. This aligns with McNulty's (2010b) caution against premature or unchecked forgiveness, which may reduce accountability and enable further harm. When forgiveness occurred without behavioral change, it often deepened mistrust and emotional distance. Several participants described eventually learning to separate forgiveness from reconciliation—choosing to release resentment without excusing or forgetting harmful behavior. This shift allowed for clearer boundary-setting and greater emotional clarity, even in the absence of restored connection.

Beyond immediate emotional impacts, forgiveness also required navigating persistent ambiguity, particularly related to relapse. For partners, the threat of relapse created an emotional limbo where safety, trust, and clarity often felt out of reach. Pauline Boss's (2007) concept of ambiguous loss is useful here, emphasizing how emotional uncertainty—rather than physical absence—can produce chronic stress. Boss (2010) further elaborates on how this emotional ambiguity can complicate the grieving process, contributing to unresolved trauma and prolonged distress. Partners in this study described learning to tolerate this ambiguity rather than resolve it, focusing instead on building emotional resilience in the face

of ongoing uncertainty. This framework also applied to individuals in recovery, many of whom described forgiveness as cyclical rather than complete.

This emotional resilience is also connected to what Boss (2022) describes as adaptive mastery—the process of adjusting one's expectations of control in the face of ongoing ambiguity. Rather than striving for resolution or definitive answers, participants in this study described learning to live with uncertainty: not knowing if their partner would relapse, if forgiveness would be lasting, or if trust could fully return. Boss (2022) emphasizes that this kind of flexible mastery is critical to coping with ambiguous loss. It shifts the goal from controlling outcomes to managing perceptions, tolerating paradox, and reclaiming agency in uncertainty. In this context, forgiveness became a practice of emotional adaptability—anchored not in certainty, but in the willingness to move forward without full closure. This echoes Boss's (2007) assertion that increasing tolerance for ambiguity and redefining mastery are essential steps toward resilience and relational survival in chronically uncertain circumstances, as well as Boss and Carnes' (2012) reminder that closure is often a myth—particularly in the aftermath of complex emotional loss**.** This adaptive mastery also reflects Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) concept of coping flexibility—adjusting strategies based on the demands of the situation. Together, these perspectives emphasize that sustainable forgiveness requires not only emotional regulation but also the willingness to revise expectations, tolerate ambiguity, and retain agency in shifting relational terrain.

Forgiveness had to be revisited—sometimes daily—as new triggers, regrets, or setbacks emerged. This mirrors research by Cornish et al. (2018) and Webb et al. (2017), which frames forgiveness as an adaptive process rather than a static achievement. Enright and Fitzgibbons (2000) similarly describe

forgiveness as a multi-phase journey that evolves alongside one's emotional, cognitive, and behavioral growth.

Partners not in recovery also grappled with their own guilt and self-blame. Many questioned whether their actions—or inaction—had contributed to the harm: staying in the relationship too long, enabling addictive behavior, or failing to enforce boundaries. Some found it easier to forgive their partner than to forgive themselves. This underscores the interconnected nature of self-forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness. As partners processed their own roles in the relationship, many began to release unrealistic expectations and adopt a more compassionate, yet honest, posture toward themselves and their loved ones.

Despite these burdens, forgiveness also became a gateway to transformation. Participants described developing deeper emotional capacity, empathy, and relational insight as a result of their forgiveness work. This aligns with Tedeschi and Calhoun's (2004) theory of post-traumatic growth, which suggests that growth often emerges from intentional efforts to process and reframe adversity. In this study, forgiveness helped participants make meaning of their pain—transforming narratives of harm into stories of survival, restoration, and strength. Haroosh and Freedman (2017) similarly emphasize that addiction recovery can foster increased self-awareness and spiritual meaning-making, especially when supported by connection and accountability. Participants' growth was often described not only as emotional or spiritual, but embodied. Several reported physiological sensations of release—feeling lighter, freer, and less burdened after fully engaging in forgiveness.

For many, these embodied experiences of forgiveness—described as lightness, unclenching, or even the ability to breathe freely—signaled more than just emotional relief. They reflected a physical

release of stored tension and shame, marking a shift from survival to healing. Within the Biopsychosocial-Spiritual Model (Engel, 1977) , such somatic responses might be understood as signs of full-system transformation, where emotional and spiritual reconciliation manifest physically. In this way, forgiveness became not only an internal shift, but a felt sense of liberation, lived through the body.

These mind-body effects are supported by Toussaint et al. (2012), who found that forgiveness reduces physiological stress markers and improves immune function. As previously discussed, the Biopsychosocial-Spiritual Model (Engel, 1977) helps situate these outcomes within a broader framework, reminding us that healing is not limited to cognitive insight alone but involves emotional, physical, relational, and spiritual transformation. This mind-body-spirit integration also echoes Relational Spirituality Theory which frames healing as unfolding across sacred, intrapersonal, and interpersonal domains—each reinforcing the other in moments of growth (Worthington et al., 2021). Forgiveness was experienced by participants as something physical, emotional, relational, and spiritual. For those in recovery and their partners, it became a holistic process—a dynamic and often difficult path of letting go, holding accountable, and staying open to transformation. This multidimensional experience underscores the need for therapeutic models that support forgiveness not as a one-time act, but as an ongoing, integrated process rooted in compassion, boundaries, and hope.

These three interpretive sections—*Foundational and Evolving*, *Interconnected Nature of Forgiveness and Spirituality*, and *Between Guilt and Growth*—reframe the six original themes into a cohesive understanding of forgiveness as a relational, spiritual, and emotional process. Together, they highlight forgiveness as both a coping strategy and a transformative journey shaped by relational

dynamics, spiritual meaning-making, and emotional resilience. This synthesis provides a foundation for the clinical, theoretical, and future directions that follow.

Clinical and Theoretical Implications

Clinical. The findings highlight the complex and transformative role of forgiveness in addiction recovery, offering several key implications for clinical practice. Therapists, addiction counselors, and faith-based recovery programs can benefit from understanding how forgiveness functions at multiple levels—including self-forgiveness, interpersonal forgiveness, and divine forgiveness—and how these processes influence individual well-being and relational repair.

Therapists working with individuals in recovery should intentionally incorporate forgiveness into treatment, recognizing its role in reducing shame and promoting emotional healing. Self-forgiveness can improve emotional regulation and prevent relapse by alleviating self-condemnation and fostering resilience (Webb & Toussaint, 2017). However, it is critical to balance self-forgiveness with accountability to prevent enabling behaviors or self-exoneration that perpetuate destructive patterns (Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2013).

To operationalize forgiveness clinically, practitioners can draw upon evidence-based interventions such as Worthington's REACH Model and Enright's Process Model. Worthington's REACH Model (2006) guides clients through five key steps: *Recall the hurt*, *Empathize with the offender*, *Altruistically offer forgiveness*, *Commit to forgive*, and *Hold on to forgiveness*. These steps promote emotional processing, cognitive reappraisal, and behavioral reinforcement of forgiveness over time. Enright's Process Model (2000) emphasizes the emotional depth of forgiveness work through four sequential phases: *Uncovering* anger and pain, *Deciding* to forgive, *Working* toward understanding and

compassion, and *Deepening* the release of resentment while rebuilding self-worth. Therapists can incorporate these models through structured interventions such as forgiveness letters, journaling, role play, or guided imagery—tools that allow clients to reflect on their experiences with self-, interpersonal, and divine forgiveness. Reading these reflections aloud in session can lead to moments of catharsis, empathy, and relational repair (Romero, 2008). These techniques are supported by research showing the effectiveness of structured self-forgiveness interventions in counseling settings (Cornish & Wade, 2015), which promote emotional regulation, reduce self-condemnation, and enhance well-being.

Because forgiveness was deeply intertwined with both relational and spiritual processes, clinicians working with couples should assess and integrate clients' spiritual frameworks where appropriate. Divine forgiveness often served as a gateway to self- and interpersonal forgiveness, echoing Fincham and May's (2022) findings that perceived divine forgiveness is positively associated with emotional availability and relational healing. However, spiritual shame and guilt also posed barriers, reinforcing the need for clinicians to approach spirituality with nuance and cultural humility (Worthington et al., 2021). Faith-based recovery communities may reinforce these connections, offering collective rituals and language that support meaning-making, grace, and emotional integration beyond the therapy room.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that not all individuals in recovery identify with a faith tradition or spiritual worldview. For agnostic or atheist clients, forgiveness may still hold therapeutic value when framed in psychological or relational terms—such as emotional regulation, boundary-setting, and meaning-making—rather than as a spiritual imperative. This aligns with findings from Wade et al. (2014), who demonstrated that forgiveness interventions are effective across both

spiritual and secular populations when tailored to individual worldviews. Clinicians should adapt forgiveness-based interventions to align with each client's belief system, ensuring that practices like self-compassion, empathy, and release of resentment are accessible regardless of spiritual orientation. Future research could further explore how forgiveness is conceptualized and experienced in secular recovery contexts to broaden its clinical relevance.

In addition to worldview differences, forgiveness is also a culturally mediated process. In some cultural frameworks, forgiveness may not be emphasized—or may even be discouraged—as a path to healing. For others, holding on to anger or hurt may be associated with justice, dignity, or strength. Clinicians must approach forgiveness with cultural humility, asking clients not simply "are you willing to forgive?" but "what does healing look like for you in your context?"

For partners, forgiveness was complicated by repeated betrayals and relapses, creating internal conflict between compassion and self-protection. Clinicians must clearly distinguish between forgiveness and reconciliation, ensuring that trust is rebuilt through behavioral consistency rather than emotional pressure (McNulty, 2010b; Merolla et al., 2017). Therapy should validate complex emotions like resentment, grief, and compassion fatigue while guiding partners toward forgiveness practices that do not undermine their own boundaries. In this context, forgiveness is not a demand but an option rooted in personal agency. Therapists can empower partners to cultivate empathy for themselves and their loved ones while maintaining emotional safety and accountability.

Clinicians should also help couples redefine mastery in recovery, especially when working within frameworks of ambiguous loss (Boss, 2022). Rather than emphasizing control through rigid markers like logged days of sobriety, therapy can promote adaptive mastery—the ability to tolerate uncertainty,

regulate expectations, and maintain connection despite instability. Drawing on Boss's (2022) framework, this involves managing perception rather than outcomes, accepting ambivalence, and building emotional resilience. These skills are especially relevant in addiction recovery, where unpredictability is often unavoidable and progress rarely follows a linear path.

Therapists should normalize setbacks and frame forgiveness as an evolving journey, not a singular achievement (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Wade et al., 2014). This perspective helps reduce all-or-nothing thinking and supports clients in recommitting to relational repair after disruptions. Recovery communities can further reinforce this by fostering collective narratives that affirm growth over perfection, and by de-shaming the nonlinear process of healing.

This study also underscores the potential benefits of couple-based interventions. Evidence-based programs such as Behavioral Couples Therapy (BCT) for substance use disorders have been shown to simultaneously improve relationship functioning and individual recovery outcomes (O'Farrell & Clements, 2012). Integrating forgiveness work into BCT and similar models can deepen emotional processing, address lingering wounds from addiction-related betrayals, and strengthen the couple's capacity for mutual support. Structured forgiveness dialogues, boundary-setting sessions, and rituals of repair can be woven into the couple's treatment journey to enhance both safety and connection.

Ultimately, these findings call for a multidimensional clinical approach, where forgiveness is not treated as a passive virtue but as an active, recursive, and emotionally layered process. Therapists play a crucial role in helping individuals and couples move through pain with courage, hold space for paradox, and foster growth grounded in both compassion and accountability. When approached with intention and care, forgiveness becomes not only possible—but profoundly transformative.

Theoretical. This study contributes to existing forgiveness theories by demonstrating the deep interconnection between divine, self, and interpersonal forgiveness, particularly in addiction recovery. While much prior research examined these domains separately, these findings suggest they function as an interdependent system, where struggles in one area create barriers in another. Participants who struggled with self-forgiveness often found relational repair difficult, and those feeling unworthy of divine forgiveness experienced prolonged shame, complicating forgiveness toward themselves or partners. These findings align with Relational Spirituality Theory (Worthington et al., 2021), emphasizing spirituality's influence on forgiveness and relational healing. This study expands this framework by illustrating how divine forgiveness can facilitate self- and interpersonal forgiveness, while also highlighting how spiritual guilt can hinder this process.

At the same time, the strong spiritual orientation of participants raises important theoretical questions about how forgiveness operates for those who do not adhere to a faith tradition. Emerging research suggests that individuals without spiritual or religious beliefs may still experience the psychological and relational benefits of forgiveness when it is framed through secular lenses—such as emotional regulation, boundary-setting, or humanistic values (Wade et al., 2014). Future theoretical models should therefore consider pathways to forgiveness that are not contingent upon divine belief, expanding the applicability of forgiveness frameworks to more diverse populations.

Additionally, this study reinforces the cyclical and evolving nature of forgiveness, challenging traditional models that frame forgiveness as linear or one-time resolution. Instead, findings support a dynamic, non-linear model where individuals navigate ongoing tensions among accountability, grace, and uncertainty. Participants described forgiveness disrupted by relapse, renewed betrayal, or unresolved

emotional wounds, requiring re-engagement in forgiveness as a continual process. This aligns with Cornish et al. (2018) and Webb et al. (2017), who argue forgiveness is not static but an ongoing negotiation between past harm and future hope. Findings suggest forgiveness interventions should normalize this non-linear trajectory, helping clients recognize setbacks as reflective of the complexity inherent in long-term healing.

Psychological theories such as Worthington's REACH model (2006) emphasize emotional regulation and empathy in forgiveness. This study provides qualitative support for this framework; participants described transitioning from resentment to empathy gradually and effortfully. Spiritual practices often supported this transition—serving as mechanisms for emotional regulation and meaning-making through prayer, reflection, and engagement with faith communities. These insights suggest spirituality should be more explicitly integrated into psychological forgiveness models, particularly in addiction contexts where it is central.

This study also builds upon several existing forgiveness and relational theories. Stress-and-Coping Theory (Worthington & Wade, 2020) identifies forgiveness as crucial for reducing emotional distress and relational tension, strongly reflected in participants' narratives. Many described forgiveness as necessary for relationship sustainability despite betrayals, aligning with Interdependence Theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), emphasizing relationship stability through mutual trust and commitment. In addiction recovery, forgiveness was highly interdependent, requiring both partners' active engagement. However, findings support the notion that forgiveness without accountability risks perpetuating harm rather than resolving it (McNulty, 2010b).

Another significant contribution is expanding Enright's Process Model of Forgiveness (2000), conceptualizing forgiveness as a multi-stage journey (uncovering pain, decision, work, deepening change). Findings support this model but suggest an additional phase—re-engagement with forgiveness after rupture. Participants revisited forgiveness multiple times due to relapse, renewed pain, or emerging doubts. Forgiveness models should account for this iterative nature in addiction-affected relationships, where betrayal and repair cycles are ongoing.

These findings also align with interpersonal neurobiology, as participants described forgiveness as a felt, embodied experience—reflected in breath, muscle tension, or sensations of lightness. Their movement from reactivity to spiritual surrender echoes Bowenian differentiation, particularly the shift from emotional fusion to self-regulated responsiveness. Forgiveness also emerged after trauma, consistent with resilience theory, suggesting it was often an outcome of inner growth rather than a catalyst. Future forgiveness models should account for these embodied, relational, and resilience-based dimensions—especially in the context of addiction recovery.

Participants' experiences reflect Boss's (1999, 2006) ambiguous loss theory, as the persistent fear of relapse created ongoing uncertainty, complicating forgiveness. Even after forgiveness, emotional security was never fully restored, suggesting forgiveness in addiction recovery should be framed within ongoing uncertainty and unpredictability. Shifting from mastery-oriented models—where forgiveness is a final resolution—to adaptability-oriented models—where forgiveness is evolving—may better represent how individuals and couples navigate addiction's long-term effects.

Strengths and Limitations

Strengths. This study has several notable strengths. First, it offers a nuanced, qualitative understanding of forgiveness by capturing rich, lived experiences through qualitative methods, complementing the predominantly quantitative forgiveness literature (Smith et al., 2009). By deeply exploring participant narratives, this study illuminates subtle emotional and relational complexities that are often overlooked in quantitative designs.

Another major strength is the study's design involving both members of a couple. Although interviews were conducted individually—not as dyadic interviews—capturing the perspectives of both partners allowed for richer comparison and contrast. Interviewing partners separately gave participants the freedom to express themselves more openly and authentically, free from the influence of their partner's immediate presence. This approach provided insight into the unique experiences of each partner while allowing the analysis to explore relational dynamics, areas of alignment, and divergence between partners. While this was not a dyadic study in the formal methodological sense, having data from both partners offered a valuable relational lens into how forgiveness processes operate between individuals rather than solely within them (Eisikovits & Koren, 2010).

An important original contribution is the integration of divine, self, and interpersonal forgiveness into a unified framework. While prior research typically examines these dimensions in isolation (Worthington & Scherer, 2004), the present study clearly illustrates their interdependence. Many participants described divine forgiveness as facilitating self-forgiveness, which subsequently enabled interpersonal forgiveness, highlighting the interconnected role of spirituality and relational dynamics in addiction recovery (Worthington et al., 2021).

Additionally, this study makes an important contribution by explicitly highlighting the experiences of partners not in recovery. Much existing forgiveness research focuses on individuals directly experiencing substance use disorders. In contrast, this study centers the emotional labor, spiritual struggles, and unique forgiveness journeys of non-recovering partners, who must undertake their own complex healing process.

Finally, this study advances forgiveness theory by framing forgiveness explicitly within relational contexts. Whereas previous forgiveness research has often emphasized individual experiences, this study demonstrates that forgiveness unfolds relationally, shaped by both partners' emotional and spiritual journeys. By examining forgiveness through a relational and recovery-focused lens—while still using individually collected interviews—this study offers important theoretical depth and contributes a novel perspective to existing forgiveness frameworks.

Limitations. While this study offers valuable insights, several limitations should be noted. First, participants were predominantly Caucasian and involved in faith-based recovery programs, which limits generalizability to more racially, culturally, and spiritually diverse contexts (Toussaint et al., 2012). The strong presence of spiritual frameworks also likely shaped how participants made sense of forgiveness and healing, which may differ in secular or non-religious recovery environments. This raises an important question about whether and how individuals without spiritual beliefs engage with forgiveness processes when divine forgiveness is not part of their framework. Additionally, the relatively small sample size, inherent to qualitative Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), limits broad generalizability. However, IPA's strength lies in its ability to generate rich, contextualized understanding of lived experience rather than statistical representativeness (Smith et al., 2009). Participants recruited from

structured recovery communities may also differ systematically from those not engaged in such settings, potentially influencing their forgiveness experiences.

Another limitation concerns the use of self-reported narratives, which introduces potential for social desirability or recall bias, particularly given the sensitive nature of addiction-related experiences (Podsakoff et al., 2012). Some participants reflected on experiences several years into recovery, and their accounts may have been shaped by evolving interpretations or emotional distance from the events themselves.

This study also captures forgiveness at a single point in time, limiting insight into how forgiveness processes unfold or shift over the course of long-term recovery. Longitudinal research could offer a deeper understanding of how forgiveness is affected by relapse, reconnection, or prolonged emotional strain (McConnell & Dixon, 2012). Additionally, this study focused solely on couples where one partner is in recovery, omitting the unique dynamics of relationships where both partners are recovering or where addiction is ongoing (Krentzman et al., 2018).

Despite these limitations, the study significantly enhances understanding of forgiveness within addiction recovery contexts, offering important contributions to clinical practice and laying a foundation for future research.

Future Research Directions

Building on this study's findings and limitations, several avenues warrant further exploration. First, longitudinal research could provide critical insight into how forgiveness evolves throughout the course of addiction recovery. Tracking couples over time would clarify how early experiences with self-forgiveness influence later interpersonal forgiveness, how forgiveness processes shift in response to

relapse or renewed betrayal, and whether forgiveness ultimately supports long-term sobriety and relational repair (Krentzman et al., 2018). A dynamic, process-oriented view would allow for a richer understanding of forgiveness as a relational and developmental experience, rather than a fixed outcome.

Another essential direction is expanding research to include greater racial, cultural, and secular diversity. Participants in this study were predominantly White and engaged in faith-based recovery, which limits generalizability. Future studies should explore how forgiveness processes are shaped by different cultural norms, religious or secular worldviews, and community-based recovery models (Toussaint et al., 2012). Given the central role of spirituality in participants' narratives, future research should further examine how spiritual beliefs and practices support or complicate forgiveness. While many described divine forgiveness as a catalyst for healing, others experienced spiritual guilt and doubt that hindered progress. Continued exploration of how spirituality intersects with emotional resilience and relational repair could enhance spiritually integrated interventions. At the same time, it is important to include individuals who do not identify with a faith tradition; exploring how agnostic or atheist clients conceptualize forgiveness—perhaps through psychological, ethical, or relational frameworks—would help ensure that future models remain inclusive and adaptable.

Intervention-based research is also needed to translate these findings into practical tools for clinical settings. Future studies could develop and evaluate forgiveness-centered interventions that address multiple dimensions of forgiveness—self, interpersonal, and divine—within addiction treatment. Examining models such as Worthington's REACH (2006) and Enright's Process Model (2000) in recovery contexts would help assess their clinical utility and adaptation for individuals and couples navigating substance use, relapse, and emotional repair.

In addition, future research should further differentiate between the processes of forgiveness and reconciliation, particularly within addiction recovery. Findings from this study showed that many participants were able to forgive without fully restoring trust or relational closeness. At times, forgiveness seemed contingent upon meaningful behavioral change, with participants expressing a desire to see effort, consistency, or accountability before offering forgiveness fully. This overlap between forgiveness and reconciliation suggests that the two are often intertwined yet remain distinct processes. Future studies should explore what factors influence whether forgiveness leads to reconciliation, boundary-setting, or disengagement—and how individuals and couples make sense of these choices over time.

Future research should also focus more explicitly on the experiences of partners not in recovery. Many described emotional exhaustion, guilt, and compassion fatigue, yet their pathways to healing and forgiveness remain underexplored. Investigating how self-forgiveness affects their emotional well-being, relationship satisfaction, and coping strategies could help inform partner-focused support models. Additionally, research that includes same-sex couples or relationships where both individuals are in recovery would offer further depth and inclusivity to the existing literature.

Finally, broader relational and social contexts warrant more attention. Forgiveness processes are not limited to romantic relationships—participants often referenced family dynamics, community support, and spiritual relationships as shaping their forgiveness journeys. Future research could examine how forgiveness unfolds in family systems (between parents and children or between siblings), recovery groups, or faith communities, offering insight into the communal and systemic dimensions of healing. Exploring how divine, self, and interpersonal forgiveness operate within these broader networks would enhance theoretical clarity and provide more comprehensive guidance for recovery-oriented care. Taken

together, these directions can expand and refine our understanding of forgiveness as a complex, evolving, and relationally embedded process. By integrating longitudinal, culturally responsive, and intervention-based designs, future work can continue to bridge theory, clinical application, and the lived realities of those navigating addiction and healing.

Conclusion

This study offers a nuanced understanding of forgiveness within couples navigating addiction recovery, emphasizing its relational, spiritual, and non-linear nature. Forgiveness emerged not as a single event, but as a multidimensional process shaped by self-perception, relational dynamics, and spiritual frameworks. Divine, self, and interpersonal forgiveness functioned as interwoven experiences, influencing each other throughout the recovery journey.

A key contribution of this research is the framing of forgiveness as a relational process. By including both individuals in recovery and their partners, the study reveals how forgiveness unfolds through accountability, behavioral change, and the rebuilding of trust. Partners not in recovery brought additional depth, sharing the emotional labor and spiritual struggles involved in their healing journey.

Findings also underscore forgiveness's transformative potential. Divine forgiveness often catalyzed self-forgiveness, which then enabled interpersonal repair. However, setbacks, ambivalence, and boundary-setting were common, reinforcing the need to balance grace with accountability to prevent emotional harm.

Beyond theoretical contributions, this study offers practical implications for clinicians, researchers, and spiritual leaders. Conceptualizing forgiveness as both psychological and relational can

support more holistic recovery practices. Future research should include more diverse populations and use longitudinal designs to capture forgiveness's evolution over time.

Ultimately, forgiveness in addiction recovery is not a fixed point, but an unfolding journey. This study affirms that forgiveness is not a static milestone but a recursive process—cyclical, relational, and evolving. It must be revisited, reinterpreted, and re-engaged across time, often in response to spiritual awakening, relational rupture, or emotional readiness. This recursive quality challenges traditional stage-based models and instead positions forgiveness as a dynamic act of ongoing alignment—with self, with others, and for many, with God. It demands courage, boundaries, and compassion—both for self and others. By understanding forgiveness as an ongoing, relational act, this study provides a foundation for healing relationships fractured by addiction—and for reframing how we approach both recovery and repair.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Dear [Treatment Center Staff],
My name is Shauna Fenske, and I am a Doctoral Candidate in the Department of Family Social Science at the University of Minnesota. I am conducting a qualitative research study to explore the experiences of couples in addiction recovery, with a particular focus on the processes of forgiveness within these relationships.

I am reaching out to ask for your assistance in identifying potential participants for this study. Specifically, I am seeking to interview individuals who are at least six months post-inpatient treatment for Substance Use Disorder (SUD) and who have been in a relationship with their partner for at least one year, during which time their partner was involved in their recovery journey.

The inclusion criteria for this study are:

1. One partner in the relationship must have been in recovery from SUD for at least six months post-inpatient treatment.
2. The couple must have been together for at least one year, with the partner involved during both active use and recovery.
3. Both partners must be willing to participate in individual and couple interviews.

Exclusion criteria include:

1. Individuals currently in active use.
2. Couples where any form of abuse is present.
3. Couples where both partners are in recovery from SUD.

The individual interviews will be conducted via Zoom and will take approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour. All involvement in this study is confidential. Each participant will receive a $35 Amazon Gift Card as a token of appreciation for their time upon completion of both their own interviews and the couple interview.

If you know of any couples who meet these criteria and may be interested in participating, I kindly ask that you forward this email to them. Their participation could significantly contribute to the understanding of forgiveness dynamics in the context of addiction recovery and help inform the development of more effective therapeutic interventions and support services tailored to the unique needs of couples affected by addiction.

To participate, interested individuals can reach out to me directly at fensk049@umn.edu or follow the link below to complete a brief prescreening questionnaire and sign the informed consent form. We will then follow up to schedule the interviews.

https://forms.gle/Hsz1SEhVYRLMo3yUA

Your privacy and that of the participants is of utmost importance. All responses will be stored securely and will not be linked back to any participants. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and individuals can choose to withdraw at any time.

This study has been approved by the University of Minnesota's Institutional Review Board for research with human subjects. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at fensk049@umn.edu or my advisor, Dr. Steven Harris, at smharris@umn.edu.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Your support in forwarding this invitation to eligible participants is greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

Shauna Fenske, Ph.D. (Candidate), LMFT

Doctoral Student - Family Social Science

University of Minnesota

Steven M. Harris, Ph.D., LMFT

Professor - Family Social Science

University of Minnesota

APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT ANNOUNCEMENT TO RECOVERY COMMUNITY

Hello everyone,

My name is Shauna Fenske, and I'm a Doctoral Candidate in the Department of Family Social Science at the University of Minnesota. I'm conducting a research study on the experiences of couples in addiction recovery, specifically focusing on the role of forgiveness within these relationships.

I'm looking to connect with individuals who have been in recovery from Substance Use Disorder for at least six months and who are currently in a relationship with a partner who has been with them throughout their active addiction as well as recovery journey. If you and your partner have been together for at least a year, I would love to hear from you.

To maintain the integrity of the study, it's important that I don't personally know or have any previous affiliation with those who choose to participate. This ensures that your responses remain unbiased and confidential.

This study involves participating in interviews that will be conducted online, and everything shared will be kept completely confidential. As a thank you for your time, each participant will receive a $35 Amazon Gift Card after both the individual interview as well as the couple interview is completed.

If you're interested or want more information, please feel free to come talk to me after the meeting, or you can reach out to me directly. Your experiences can really help us better understand the dynamics of forgiveness in recovery and contribute to helping others in similar situations.
Thank you so much for considering being a part of this important study. Your insights are incredibly valuable, and I appreciate your time.

APPENDIX C: SOCIAL MEDIA AND FLYER RECRUITMENT MATERIALS

Social Media Post for Professional Page

Calling All Couples!

Are you in a relationship where one partner is in recovery from Substance Use Disorder (SUD)? I'm a Doctoral Candidate at the University of Minnesota conducting a study on forgiveness in couples navigating recovery. Your story could provide valuable insights into how forgiveness—whether it's self-forgiveness, Divine forgiveness, or forgiving each other—plays a role in the recovery journey.

Who Can Participate?

- One partner in recovery from SUD for at least six months post-inpatient treatment
- Couples together for at least one year, with the partner involved during active use and recovery

What's Involved?

- Individual and couple interviews via Zoom (45-60 minutes each)
- $35 Amazon Gift Card upon completion of both individual and the couple interview

Your experiences could help shape future support services for couples like you!
Interested? Comment below, send me a direct message or email me at fensk049@umn.edu to learn more.

Thank you for considering this opportunity to contribute to important research in the field of addiction recovery! #AddictionRecovery #CouplesInRecovery #ForgivenessStudy #ResearchParticipantsNeeded

Flyers for Distribution at Local Recovery Meetings

Seeking Couples for Research Study on Forgiveness in Recovery

Participants Needed!
Are you in a relationship where one partner is in recovery from Substance Use Disorder (SUD)?
I am a Doctoral Candidate at the University of Minnesota, and I'm conducting a study to explore how forgiveness—self-forgiveness, Divine forgiveness, and forgiving each other—impacts couples navigating the recovery process.

Eligibility Criteria:

1. One partner must be at least six months into recovery following inpatient treatment
2. Couples must have been together for at least one year, including during active use and recovery
3. Both partners must be willing to participate in individual interviews

What's Involved:

- Individual and couple interviews conducted via Zoom (45-60 minutes each)
- A $35 Amazon Gift Card as a thank you for completing the interviews

Interested in Participating? Please contact Shauna Fenske at fensk049@umn.edu for more information.

Your story can make a difference and help others in the recovery community!

APPENDIX D: PRE-INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE AND INFORMED CONSENT FOR

PARTNER IN RECOVERY

Study Background

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of couples in addiction recovery, focusing on the various types of forgiveness within these relationships. This questionnaire is designed to gather basic background information, provide demographics for the study, and secure informed consent. Please answer the following questions based on your individual experience.

Prescreen Questions

1. Have you been in recovery from Substance Use Disorder (SUD) for at least six months post-inpatient treatment?
    - Yes
    - No
2. Were you in a relationship with your partner during your active substance use?
    - Yes
    - No
3. Have you completed an inpatient treatment program for Substance Use Disorder (SUD)?
    - Yes
    - No
4. Are you currently in active use of substances?
    - Yes
    - No
5. Have you been in a relationship with your partner for at least one year, during which time you were involved in the recovery journey?
    - Yes
    - No
6. Are you currently experiencing any form of abuse within the relationship?
    - Yes
    - No
7. Are you willing to participate in individual and couple interviews?
    - Yes
    - No

Participant Demographic Questions

1. What gender do you identify with?
    - Male
    - Female

   - Non-Binary
   - Other
   - Prefer not to say
2. What race do you identify with? (Check all that apply)
   - White/Caucasian
   - African American
   - Asian or Pacific Islander
   - American Indian
   - Hispanic/Latino
   - Other: _____
3. What is your highest degree earned?
   - High School Diploma
   - Associate's Degree
   - Bachelor's Degree
   - Master's Degree
   - PhD
   - Other: _____
4. What is your current employment status?
   - Employed Full-Time
   - Employed Part-Time
   - Unemployed
   - Retired
   - Other: _____
5. How long have you been in your current relationship? _____ years.
6. What religion or spiritual tradition do you identify with?
   - Christianity
   - Islam
   - Judaism
   - Hinduism
   - Buddhism
   - Other (please specify) _____
   - None
7. How important is spirituality or religion in your life?
   - Not important
   - Somewhat important
   - Important
   - Very important
8. Which recovery program or approach do you primarily follow?
   - Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)
   - Narcotics Anonymous (NA)
   - SMART Recovery
   - Celebrate Recovery

- Secular Organizations for Sobriety (SOS)
- Other (please specify) _____
- None

PRE-INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE AND INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARTNER NOT IN RECOVERY

Study Background

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of couples in addiction recovery, focusing on the various types of forgiveness within these relationships. This questionnaire is designed to gather basic background information, provide demographics for the study, and secure informed consent. Please answer the following questions based on your individual experience.

Prescreen Questions

1. Has your partner been in recovery from Substance Use Disorder (SUD) for at least six months post-inpatient treatment?
    - Yes
    - No
2. Were you in a relationship with your partner during their active substance use?
    - Yes
    - No
3. Has your partner completed an inpatient treatment program for Substance Use Disorder (SUD)?
    - Yes
    - No
4. Is your partner currently in active use of substances?
    - Yes
    - No
5. Have you been in a relationship with your partner for at least one year, during which time they were involved in the recovery journey?
    - Yes
    - No
6. Are you currently experiencing any form of abuse within the relationship?
    - Yes
    - No
7. Are you willing to participate in individual and couple interviews?
    - Yes
    - No

Participant Demographic Questions

1. What gender do you identify with?
    a. Male
    b. Female
    c. Non-Binary
    d. Other
    e. Prefer not to say
2. What race do you identify with? (Check all that apply)

   a. White/Caucasian
   b. African American
   c. Asian or Pacific Islander
   d. American Indian
   e. Hispanic/Latino
   f. Other: _____
3. What is your highest degree earned?
   a. High School Diploma
   b. Associate's Degree
   c. Bachelor's Degree
   d. Master's Degree
   e. PhD
   f. Other: _____
4. What is your current employment status?
   a. Employed Full-Time
   b. Employed Part-Time
   c. Unemployed
   d. Retired
   e. Other: _____
5. How long have you been in your current relationship? _____ years.
6. What religion or spiritual tradition do you identify with?
   a. Christianity
   b. Islam
   c. Judaism
   d. Hinduism
   e. Buddhism
   f. Other (please specify) _____
   g. None
7. How important is spirituality or religion in your life?
   a. Not important
   b. Somewhat important
   c. Important
   d. Very important
8. Which recovery program or approach do you primarily follow?
   a. Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)
   b. Narcotics Anonymous (NA)
   c. SMART Recovery
   d. Celebrate Recovery
   e. Secular Organizations for Sobriety (SOS)
   f. Other (please specify) _____
   g. None

INFORMED CONSENT

Exploring Forgiveness in Couples Dealing with Addiction Recovery

Key Information About This Research Study
The following is a summary to help you decide if you would like to be a part of this research study.

Why is this research being done?
The purpose of the study is to investigate the experiences and perspectives of individuals and couples where one partner is in recovery from Substance Use Disorder (SUD) and the other is not. We are particularly interested in how forgiveness—Divine forgiveness, self-forgiveness, and interpersonal forgiveness—manifests and impacts the relationship and recovery process. Your participation will contribute to a better understanding of these dynamics, which may help improve support and therapeutic interventions for couples navigating similar challenges.

How long will the research last?
We expect your involvement to include individual interviews of approximately 45 minutes to an hour each and a couple interview lasting approximately 30 to 45 minutes. From there, we will be coding and analyzing the transcripts we get from doing interviews. Participants will also have the opportunity to review our final coding and synopsis of the interviews we conduct and provide any clarification.

What will I need to do to participate?
You will participate in individual and couple interviews where you will be asked about your experiences related to forgiveness and recovery. The interviews will be conducted via Zoom and recorded for transcription and analysis. You will be asked a series of questions in an interview that will take approximately 45 minutes. More detailed information about the study procedures can be found under "What happens if I say yes, I want to be in this research?"

Is there any way that being in this study could be bad for me?
Discussing personal experiences related to addiction and forgiveness may evoke emotional responses. While these feelings are not expected to exceed what you might typically experience in such discussions,

we will handle all conversations with sensitivity. You may stop the interview at any time if you feel uncomfortable. Additionally, if you experience any distress during or after the interview, we can provide you with a list of resources, including counseling services, to support your well-being. Please remember that all information shared during this study is confidential and will not be linked to your identity in any way.

Will being in this study help me in any way?
While there are no direct benefits to you, your participation could contribute to a better understanding of how forgiveness plays a role in addiction recovery. The insights gained from this study may inform future therapeutic and intervention practices, potentially benefiting others who are navigating similar challenges in their relationships and recovery journeys. Additionally, you may find value in reflecting on and discussing your experiences in recovery, which can offer personal insights and foster a deeper understanding of your own journey.

What happens if I do not want to be in this research?
Participation is entirely voluntary. You may decline to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.

Detailed Information About This Research Study

How many people will be studied?

We plan to interview approximately 10 couples.

What happens if I say “Yes, I want to be in this research”?

If you would like to participate in this study, the primary researcher, Shauna Fenske, will contact you to schedule times for both the individual interview and the couple interview, which will be conducted over Zoom. You will receive an email with a Zoom link to join at the scheduled times of the interviews. During the individual interview, Shauna Fenske will ask you questions about your personal experiences related to addiction recovery and forgiveness. The couple interview will focus on how these experiences have impacted your relationship.
The Zoom meetings will be recorded to accurately transcribe the interviews for the research study. Each interview will last approximately 45 minutes to an hour. After the interviews, any identifiable information in the transcriptions will be removed, and the recordings and transcriptions will be securely stored in the University of Minnesota’s online storage system, accessible only to the research team.

What happens if I say “Yes” but I change my mind later?

You can leave the research study at any time and no one will be upset by your decision.
Choosing not to be in this study or to stop being in this study will not result in any penalty to you or loss. If you decide to leave the research study, contact the investigator so that the investigator

can remove any information about your involvement.

Will it cost me anything to participate in this research study?

There will be no cost to you for any of the study activities or procedures.

What happens to the information collected for the research?

Efforts will be made to limit the use and disclosure of your personal information for those involved in the research process. We cannot promise complete confidentiality. Organizations that may inspect and copy your information include the Institutional Review Board (IRB), the committee that provides ethical and regulatory oversight of research, and other representatives of this institution, including those that have responsibilities for monitoring or ensuring compliance. We may publish the results of this research. However, we will keep your name and other identifying information confidential. You will have access to the final report/summary of the qualitative data. Additional sharing of your information for mandatory reporting. If we learn about any of the following, we may be required or permitted by law or policy to report this information to authorities: Current or ongoing child or vulnerable adult abuse or neglect; Communicable, infectious, or other diseases required to be reported under Minnesota's Reportable Disease Rule; Certain wounds or conditions required to be reported under other state or federal law; or Excessive use of alcohol or use of controlled substances for non-medical reasons during pregnancy.

What will be done with my data when this study is over?

We may use or share data for future research on a related topic. Data may be shared with researchers/institutions outside of the University of Minnesota if one of the original research team members is involved. We will not ask for your consent before using or sharing them. The data will be de-identified so there is no traceable data back to any participant. If you leave the study, you can ask to have the data collected about you removed.

Whom do I contact if I have questions, concerns, or feedback about my experience?

This research has been reviewed and approved by an Institutional Review Board within the Human Research Protections Program (HRPP) at the University of Minnesota. To share feedback privately with the HRPP about your research experience, call the Research Participants' Advocate Line at 612-625-1650 (Toll-Free: 1-888-224-8636) or go to z.umn.edu/participants. You are encouraged to contact the HRPP if:
- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.
- You want to talk to someone besides the research team.
- You have questions about your rights as a research participant.
- You want to get information or provide input about this research.

Will I have a chance to provide feedback after the study is over?

The HRPP may ask you to complete an optional survey about your experience. If you do choose to complete the survey, your responses will be anonymous. If you are not asked to complete a survey but would like to share feedback, please contact the study team or the HRPP. See the "Investigator Contact Information" of this form for study team contact information and "Whom do I contact if I have questions, concerns, or feedback about my experience?" of this form for HRPP contact information.

Can I be removed from the research?

You can self-withdraw from the research study at any time.

Will I be compensated for my participation?

Each individual will receive a $35 Amazon Gift Card after completing both their separate individual interviews and the couple interview.

Investigator Contact Information

Principal Investigator/Faculty Advisor: Dr. Steven M. Harris
Email Address: smharris@umn.edu

Student Investigator: Shauna Fenske
Email Address: fensk049@umn.edu

The investigator may audio or video record me to aid with data analysis. The investigator will not share these recordings with anyone outside of the immediate study team.

- I agree
- I disagree

The investigator may use my de-identified data for future research beyond this study.

- I agree
- I disagree

Full Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX E: EMAIL RESPONSE TO ELIGIBLE AND INELIGIBLE PARTICIPANTS

Email to Eligible Participants

Subject: Scheduling Your Interviews for the Forgiveness in Addiction Recovery Study

Dear [Participant's Name],

Thank you for taking the time to complete the pre-interview questionnaire and informed consent for this research study. Please let me know if you have any questions about the materials provided. We would like to schedule times for both your individual interview and the couple interview via Zoom.

Below are some available time slots—please let us know if any of these work for you.
[List dates/times of open slots]

Thank you again for your participation in this study. We look forward to speaking with you and greatly appreciate your contributions to this important research.

Best regards,
Shauna Fenske

Email to Ineligible Participants

Subject: Update on Your Participation in the Forgiveness in Addiction Recovery Study

Dear [Participant's Name],

Thank you for taking the time to complete the pre-interview questionnaire and informed consent. Unfortunately, you do not meet the criteria necessary to be eligible for the study. We appreciate the effort you have made so far, but we will not be proceeding with an interview at this time.
Please feel free to reach out if you have any questions.

Best regards,
Shauna Fenske

APPENDIX F: THANK YOU EMAIL TO PARTICIPANTS

Dear _____,

Thank you for participating in the recent interview as part of my dissertation research on forgiveness in couples where one partner is in recovery from substance use disorder. I wanted to let you know that the study is currently closed. I deeply appreciate the time and insights you've shared to help complete this study.

As a token of appreciation for your participation, you will receive an electronic $35 Amazon gift card after the completion of both your individual interview as well as the couple interview. Your gift card will be delivered by the end of this week to the email address you provided.

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact me at fensk049@umn.edu or my advisor, Dr. Steven Harris, at smharris@umn.edu.

Thank you once again for your valuable contribution to this research.

Shauna Fenske, Ph.D. (Candidate), LMFT

Doctoral Student - Family Social Science

University of Minnesota

Steven M. Harris, Ph.D., LMFT

Professor - Family Social Science

University of Minnesota

APPENDIX G: INTERVIEW GUIDES

Individual Interviews for the Partner in Recovery

Date:_____
Zoom Meeting ID:_____
Interviewer:_____
Interview Number: _____
E-File Name:_____

Introduction

Hi [Participant's Name],

Thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me today. I'm really grateful for your willingness to share your story and experiences. Before we dive in, I just want to confirm that you've had the chance to review the questionnaire and informed consent.

Do you have any questions about the study or the process before we get started?

To give you a quick recap, this study is about exploring how forgiveness—whether it's forgiving yourself, others, or experiencing Divine forgiveness—shapes your recovery journey and your relationship. I'm here to hear your perspective and learn from your experiences, so this is really about your story.

Our conversation should take about 45 minutes to an hour, and I'll ask some questions to guide us. But more than anything, I'd love for this to feel like an open dialogue, so please feel free to share anything that feels important to you, even if I don't specifically ask about it.

Warm-Up and Background
To start, I'd love to hear a little about you.

- Can you tell me a bit about your recovery journey?
    - What stands out to you when you reflect on how it started and where you are now?
- What has your relationship with your partner looked like over time?
    - How have the two of you grown or changed together during your recovery?

Exploring Forgiveness
Forgiveness is such a big topic, and it can show up in so many ways. Let's start by talking about what forgiveness has looked like in your recovery.

- Can you tell me about a time when forgiveness felt important in your journey?
    - Was it about forgiving yourself, someone else, or something bigger?
- How has forgiving yourself shown up in your experience?
    - Has that been easy or challenging for you?
    - How has it changed over time?
- Have you experienced Divine forgiveness or spiritual connection in your recovery?
    - How has that influenced your journey?
- What about interpersonal forgiveness—whether forgiving others or being forgiven?
    - How has that impacted your relationship with your partner?

Interactions Between Types of Forgiveness
Sometimes, different types of forgiveness—like forgiving yourself, others, or seeking spiritual forgiveness—can overlap or even feel in conflict
.

- Do you see these different forms of forgiveness as connected in your journey?
    - Are there times when one kind of forgiveness has helped another?
    - Or times when they've felt at odds?
- Can you share a moment when these types of forgiveness came together—or didn't?

Reflections
As you think back on your journey, I'd love to hear your reflections on forgiveness overall.

- Looking back, what role has forgiveness played in your recovery?
    - If you had to sum it up, what would you say?
- What has been the most significant moment or aspect of forgiveness for you?
- Is there anything we haven't talked about that feels important to your story?

Wrap-Up

Thank you so much for sharing your experiences with me today. It's been a privilege to hear your story. I'll send your $35 Amazon gift card after the couple interview, but if you have any questions or thoughts before then, please don't hesitate to reach out.

Is email the best way to contact you? And if I have any follow-up questions, would it be okay to reach out that way?

Individual Interviews for the Partner Not in Recovery

Hi [Participant's Name],

Thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me today. I'm really grateful for your willingness to share your story and experiences. Before we dive in, I just want to confirm that you've had the chance to review the questionnaire and informed consent.

Do you have any questions about the study or the process before we get started?

To give you a quick recap, this study is about exploring how forgiveness—whether it's forgiving yourself, others, or experiencing Divine forgiveness—shapes your recovery journey and your relationship. I'm here to hear your perspective and learn from your experiences, so this is really about your story.

Our conversation should take about 45 minutes to an hour, and I'll ask some questions to guide us. But more than anything, I'd love for this to feel like an open dialogue, so please feel free to share anything that feels important to you, even if I don't specifically ask about it.

Date:_____
Zoom Meeting ID:_____
Interviewer:_____
Interview Number: _____
E-File Name:_____

Warm-Up and Background
I'd love to start by hearing a bit about you and your relationship with your partner.

- Can you share a little about your relationship history and your experience supporting your partner through recovery?
    - What stands out most when you think about that journey?
    - How has your relationship changed or grown through this process?
- How have you supported yourself during your partner's recovery?
    - What's helped you the most in maintaining your own well-being?

Exploring Forgiveness
Forgiveness is such a complex topic and can show up in so many ways.

I'm curious—what has forgiveness looked like for you as you've supported your partner through their recovery?

- Can you tell me about a moment when forgiveness felt especially important in this journey?
    - Was it about forgiving your partner, forgiving yourself, or something else?
    - How did that experience impact you and your relationship?

- How has your understanding of forgiveness changed as your partner has gone through recovery?
    - Can you share a moment when you felt your perspective on forgiveness shift?
    - Has there been a time when forgiveness was challenging for you?

Types of Forgiveness
Forgiveness can take many forms—self-forgiveness, forgiveness between you and your partner, or even forgiveness in a spiritual sense.

- How has self-forgiveness shown up for you?
    - Has there been anything you've felt you needed to forgive yourself for during this process?
- Have spiritual beliefs or Divine forgiveness played a role in your experience?
    - How has your faith or sense of spirituality shaped your understanding of forgiveness?
- What about forgiveness within your relationship?
    - Can you tell me about a time when forgiving your partner, or being forgiven by them, influenced your relationship?
    - Has there been a time when your partner needed to forgive you? How did that affect you both?

Interconnections Between Types of Forgiveness
Sometimes, different types of forgiveness—like self-forgiveness, interpersonal forgiveness, and spiritual forgiveness—can feel connected or even in conflict with each other.

- Do you see these different forms of forgiveness working together in your experience, or do they feel separate?
    - Can you share a time when they felt connected or when they didn't?
    - How has this affected your relationship or your own personal growth?

Reflections
Looking back on your journey, I'd love to hear your reflections on forgiveness as a whole.

- How would you describe the overall role of forgiveness in your relationship and in supporting your partner through recovery?
    - If you had to summarize, what stands out most about the impact of forgiveness?
- What has been the most significant or memorable moment of forgiveness for you?
- Is there anything we haven't talked about that feels important to share?

Wrap-Up
Thank you so much for taking the time to share your experiences with me today. I'll send your $35 Amazon gift card after the couple interview, but if you have any questions or thoughts before then, please don't hesitate to reach out.

Is this email the best way to contact you? And if I have any follow-up questions, would it be okay to reach out that way?

Thank you again for your time and openness—it means a lot!

APPENDIX H: TERMS AND DEFINITIONS SENT TO PARTICIPANTS PRIOR TO INTERVIEWS

General Terms and Definitions
This document provides definitions of key terms that may come up during your interview. These concepts are important for understanding the questions we will discuss about forgiveness, relationships, and recovery.

Key Terms:

1. **Forgiveness:** Forgiveness refers to letting go of negative feelings like anger or resentment toward someone who has caused harm. It involves a decision to move forward without necessarily forgetting or excusing the past.

2. **Self-Forgiveness:** Self-forgiveness is about releasing negative feelings toward oneself for past actions or mistakes, aiming to foster personal healing.

3. **Interpersonal Forgiveness:** Interpersonal forgiveness occurs between people. It involves resolving feelings of hurt or anger toward another person and can affect the nature of the relationship.

4. **Divine Forgiveness:** Divine forgiveness refers to the belief that a higher power offers forgiveness for wrongdoing. It may play a role in how individuals experience forgiveness within their personal beliefs.

Purpose of Definitions:

These terms will help guide our conversations during the interviews. Please feel free to ask any questions if you need further clarification on these concepts. Understanding these definitions will help you reflect on your experiences with forgiveness and recovery.

APPENDIX I: EXAMPLES OF REFLEXIVE NOTES AND MEMOS

1. The Interconnection of Divine, Self, and Interpersonal Forgiveness

- *"His journey highlights the interconnectedness of self-forgiveness, divine forgiveness, and interpersonal forgiveness, each building on the other. It made me question how often we, as researchers or helpers, underestimate the relational aspect of forgiveness—how critical it is for repairing trust and building a foundation of humility and grace."*
- *"Michael's journey challenges the linear notion that self-forgiveness must come first before receiving or extending forgiveness. Instead, he describes a profound reversal—the love and forgiveness of others paved the way for his own self-acceptance. His experience suggests that interpersonal forgiveness can serve as a mirror for self-worth—an external validation that helps internal healing."*
- *"For him, forgiveness was not just about reconciling with the past, but about completely shedding an old identity and stepping into a new one in Christ."*

2. The Gendered and Societal Dynamics of Forgiveness in Recovery

- *"This man's story illuminated the profound role that forgiveness—both divine and self—plays in recovery, especially for men conditioned by societal messages like 'pull yourself up by your bootstraps.' His vulnerability in describing his journey from self-loathing to self-forgiveness moved me deeply, as it underscored how shame can paralyze but forgiveness can liberate."*
- *"Listening to this woman's story deeply resonated with me, highlighting the immense emotional weight carried by those in recovery, especially women. Her struggle with self-forgiveness struck a chord—her words about needing to show grace to herself reminded me of how difficult it can be to let go of past mistakes."*

3. Forgiveness, Identity, and the Transformation of Self

- *"Listening to this interview reinforced the deeply personal and often ambiguous nature of forgiveness. The participant's journey highlighted how self-forgiveness is not an immediate experience but an ongoing process intertwined with self-acceptance, trust-building, and personal growth."*
- *"His perspective on forgiveness as something embodied rather than just an event or a spoken phrase aligns with other participants who describe becoming a 'forgiving person' rather than just offering isolated acts of forgiveness."*
- *"Her shifting relationship with faith also stands out—going from anger at God to realizing that He was what she needed all along. It makes me consider how spirituality serves as both an anchor and a pathway to healing for many in these journeys."*

4. The Emotional Weight of Relational Betrayal and the Fear of Relapse

- *"The most powerful moment of the interview came when he shared his struggle with guilt over his brother's death and the relief he found in the realization that he had done everything he could. That moment of self-forgiveness—when he could finally release himself from what-ifs—felt profoundly significant."*
- *"Even after forgiveness, emotional security was never fully restored, suggesting forgiveness in addiction recovery should be framed within ongoing uncertainty and unpredictability."*

- *"Her comment about not knowing if she has fully forgiven herself also stayed with me. It makes me wonder how often people suppress their own pain in the process of forgiving others, and if that unresolved grief can resurface in different ways."*

APPENDIX J: EXAMPLE OF CODE-TO-THEME PROGRESSION

The following table illustrates an example of how raw codes from interviews were developed into emergent themes and later organized into final superordinate themes. This process reflects the idiographic and iterative nature of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

Raw Data / Codes	Emergent Themes	Final Superordinate Theme
" I wanted to trust that he was doing what he needed to do so that I could move forward and forgive him. Otherwise, we would have been stuck at a standstill." " Please don't tell me you're sorry. I don't care. I want you to change."	Rebuilding Safety and Trust Forgiveness Wasn't Blind Living Amends	Forgiveness as the Foundation for Survival, Trust, and Repair
"God, I there's no way I can do this on my own...I leave it to you [God], which I'd never done before." "I can just let them figure it out on their own, and I don't have to carry it." " Recovery gave me a spiritual life." And I truly owe it all to—I mean—a power greater than myself	Surrender and Spiritual Surrender to a Higher Power as a Turning Point in Recovery Release of Control to Higher Power Spirituality as a Pathway to Forgiveness Spiritual Awakening	The Role of Spirituality in Forgiveness and Recovery
"There have been a lot of years where I did not like the face that I've seen in the mirror." "I think that's something that we have to practice every day just to forgive ourselves and not be so hard because I do deal with a lot of like guilt and shame."	Self-Loathing as a Hurdle to Forgiveness Struggle with Self-Forgiveness Self-Acceptance as a Turning Point	Self-Forgiveness as a Foundation for Moving Forward

APPENDIX K: AUDIT TRAIL OVERVIEW

This appendix provides a summary of the steps taken throughout data collection, analysis, and theme development to enhance transparency, trustworthiness, and rigor. The audit trail documents the decisions made at each stage of the research process.

Research Phase	Actions and Decisions
Research Design	Selected Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore subjective experiences of forgiveness in addiction recovery. Developed semi-structured interview guide informed by theory and pilot-tested it.
Recruitment	Recruited couples with one partner in recovery and one not, across treatment centers and recovery communities. Ensured informed consent and clear explanation of individual interview format.
Data Collection	Conducted 20 semi-structured, individual interviews via Zoom. Created margin notes during and after each interview to capture emerging insights.
Data Management	Transcribed all interviews verbatim. Created printed versions and Excel spreadsheets to organize codes and meaning units per participant.
Within-Case Analysis	Engaged in deep immersion, exploratory noting, and emergent theme development per participant. Maintained participant-centered lens.
Across-Case Analysis	Created separate matrices for participants in recovery and partners not in recovery. Developed integrated master spreadsheet for cross-group comparisons.
Theme Development	Clustered experiential statements into preliminary themes. Iteratively refined themes

	through collaborative analysis sessions with research assistants and advisor feedback.
Credibility Checks	Engaged two undergraduate research assistants for transcript checking and coding discussions. Advisor served as internal auditor. Recorded reflexive memos documenting evolving insights (*Appendix I*).
Final Interpretation	Synthesized findings into a narrative grounded in participant quotes and interpretative commentary. Developed six superordinate themes representing forgiveness processes across individual and relational levels.