

Psychological Processes of Forgiveness in Post-Conflict Friendships: Pathways to Friendship Restoration

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Abstract:

Forgiveness can support relationship restoration after interpersonal conflict, yet the psychological processes through which forgiveness develops within post-conflict friendships remain insufficiently understood. This study explores how individuals experience psychological processes of forgiveness and how these processes contribute to friendship restoration. A qualitative case study was conducted with 12 participants aged 20–35 who had experienced significant conflict with close friends, followed by relational disruption and forgiveness or attempts to forgive. Data were collected primarily through semi-structured interviews, supported by observational notes and relevant documentation. Data were analyzed through iterative data condensation, data display, conclusion drawing, and verification. The findings identify three interconnected processes: emotional healing facilitates readiness for forgiveness, trust rebuilding strengthens relational security, and moral reasoning guides forgiveness decisions through responsibility assessment and reparative action. The study contributes a process-based perspective that connects psychological forgiveness with friendship restoration rather than treating forgiveness as an isolated individual outcome. The findings suggest that friendship restoration requires emotional processing, gradual trust rebuilding, ethical reflection, and constructive relational engagement.

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INTRODUCTION

Forgiveness is increasingly recognized as an important psychological process for repairing relationships after interpersonal conflict. Conflicts within close friendships can generate emotional distress, resentment, mistrust, and relational distance, particularly when disagreements involve perceived betrayal or violations of relational expectations (Bechir et al., 2024; Popa, 2025; Rogers et al., 2021). Forgiveness does not necessarily mean forgetting the conflict or excusing harmful behavior; rather, it involves



psychological changes in how individuals understand the offense, regulate negative emotions, and reconsider their relationship with the offender. In close friendships, these psychological processes may matter more because restoring the relationship requires individuals to negotiate painful emotions while reconsidering the value of maintaining the friendship (Bin et al., 2022; Chaika, 2025). Understanding these processes is therefore essential for explaining how fractured friendships can move toward relational restoration.

Despite the psychological benefits of forgiveness, forgiving a friend after conflict is not always straightforward. Interpersonal conflicts may involve accumulated disappointment, perceived disloyalty, miscommunication, or trust violations that continue to shape emotional responses after the immediate disagreement ends. Some individuals may gradually reduce resentment and become willing to reconnect, whereas others may remain emotionally distant despite recognizing the importance of the friendship (Corby et al., 2020; Shu et al., 2020). In friendships, these processes may be further shaped by empathy, perceived sincerity, willingness to communicate, and expectations concerning future interactions. Consequently, forgiveness should not be understood simply as a decision to stop blaming another person (Bagis et al., 2024; Carter, 2022). It represents a psychological process through which individuals negotiate emotional responses, reinterpret the conflict, reassess trust, and determine whether the relationship remains worth restoring.

Previous studies have examined forgiveness through psychological, emotional, relational, and moral perspectives. Grijpma et al. (2022) emphasized the emotional and cognitive dimensions of forgiveness, while Christie et al. (2022) and Hikmah et al. (2025) highlighted the relational and contextual conditions that influence reconciliation after interpersonal conflict. Ho et al. (2024) and Pervez et al. (2024) conceptualized forgiveness as a process associated with emotional transformation and improved interpersonal functioning, Nagatsu et al. (2023), Rodríguez et al. (2021), and Assylbekova et al. (2024) emphasized the psychological mechanisms through which individuals respond to interpersonal offenses. These perspectives provide important foundations for understanding forgiveness. However, much of the existing literature examines forgiveness as a general psychological construct or focuses on broad interpersonal relationships rather than the specific dynamics of close friendships following conflict. Consequently, researchers have paid limited attention to how individuals psychologically move from hurt and resentment toward forgiveness and then toward restoring the friendship. This gap requires greater attention to the sequential and relational processes connecting forgiveness with relationship repair.

This study addresses this gap by examining forgiveness as a psychological process embedded within post-conflict friendships. Rather than treating forgiveness as a single decision or outcome, the study explores how individuals experience and negotiate emotional, cognitive, and relational changes after conflict. The study focuses on processes such as emotional regulation, perspective-taking, empathy, moral evaluation, trust reconsideration, and willingness to re-engage with the friend (Babalola et al., 2023; Jamal et al., 2021). These processes may not occur uniformly or linearly because individuals may feel ambivalent between protecting themselves from further

hurt and preserving a valued friendship. This study's novelty lies in linking these psychological processes to the broader pathway of friendship restoration (Navarro et al., 2020; Seo, 2023). Such an approach provides a more nuanced understanding of why some friendships recover after conflict while others remain distant or permanently disrupted.

This study addresses the central question of how individuals move from interpersonal hurt toward forgiveness and potential restoration of friendship. Although previous research has established the importance of forgiveness for psychological well-being and interpersonal relationships, less is known about how individuals move from conflict, emotional injury, and mistrust to renewed relational engagement within close friendships. This study therefore asks: How do individuals experience and negotiate the psychological processes of forgiveness in post-conflict friendships? More specifically, the study examines how emotional regulation, cognitive reinterpretation, empathy, moral reasoning, trust reconsideration, and relational commitment contribute to decisions to forgive and attempts to restore the friendship. Addressing this problem helps frame forgiveness not merely as an individual psychological outcome but as a process that may open pathways to relational repair.

This study conceptualizes forgiveness in post-conflict friendships as a multidimensional psychological process through which individuals negotiate emotional responses, reinterpret interpersonal offenses, reconsider trust, and evaluate the possibility of renewed relational engagement. The study contributes theoretically by framing forgiveness as a process that links individual psychological transformation to friendship restoration. It also offers a pathway-based understanding of relational repair by showing how emotional healing, cognitive reconsideration, empathy, trust rebuilding, and renewed relational commitment may help restore fractured friendships. By focusing on close friendships, this study extends forgiveness research beyond generalized interpersonal relationships. It highlights the psychological complexity of deciding whether and how to rebuild a valued friendship after conflict.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine the psychological processes of forgiveness in post-conflict friendships and their pathways toward friendship restoration (Kohn et al., 2024). A case study was selected because it enables an in-depth investigation of a contemporary relational phenomenon within its real-life context, particularly when individual psychological experiences and interpersonal dynamics are closely interconnected. Rather than treating forgiveness as an isolated psychological outcome, this study examined how individuals experienced emotional responses, reconsidered the conflict, negotiated trust, evaluated the friendship's value, and decided whether to restore the relationship. The case study approach therefore allowed the research to capture the complexity, contextual influences, and relational processes through which forgiveness developed following interpersonal conflict.

The study was conducted in a general urban social context where close friendships and interpersonal relationships constitute important forms of everyday social interaction. The case was bounded by individuals who had experienced a

significant conflict with a close friend, subsequently engaged in a process of forgiveness, and either attempted or achieved some form of friendship restoration. The study included 12 informants aged 20–35, comprising university students, young professionals, and community members. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on predetermined inclusion criteria: (1) having experienced a significant conflict with a close friend; (2) having experienced a period of relational distance or disruption following the conflict; (3) having undergone a process of forgiving or attempting to forgive the friend; and (4) being willing to provide detailed accounts of the conflict, forgiveness process, and subsequent relational development. These criteria ensured that the selected cases were directly relevant to the research focus.

Data were collected primarily through semi-structured in-depth interviews (Kekeya, 2023). Interviews lasted approximately 60–90 minutes and were conducted using open-ended questions addressing the development of the conflict, emotional responses following the rupture, perceptions of the offending friend, processes of reconsidering the conflict, experiences of empathy and moral evaluation, changes in trust, decisions concerning forgiveness, and subsequent efforts to restore the friendship. The researcher used follow-up questions to clarify participants' narratives and explore significant events or psychological changes in greater depth. With participants' consent, the researcher audio-recorded and transcribed all interviews verbatim. To strengthen contextual understanding, the researcher also examined participants' reflective accounts and relevant observational notes concerning the interactional context surrounding the post-conflict relationship. These additional sources contextualized the interview narratives rather than replacing participants' primary accounts.

The data were analyzed using an iterative qualitative analysis process informed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (Cole, 2024). The first stage involved condensing the data through careful reading of interview transcripts, selecting relevant excerpts, initial coding, and identifying segments related to emotional responses, cognitive reinterpretation, empathy, moral reasoning, trust reconsideration, forgiveness decisions, and friendship restoration. The second stage involved displaying data through thematic matrices and case summaries that organized patterns within individual cases and enabled cross-case comparison. The third stage involved drawing conclusions and verification by identifying recurring relationships among psychological processes, examining similarities and differences across cases, and testing emerging interpretations against the original data. The analysis was conducted iteratively, refining emerging interpretations through repeated comparison with participants' narratives. This process enabled the researchers to identify pathways through which psychological changes associated with forgiveness contributed to renewed relational engagement or continued relational distance.

The researchers established the trustworthiness of the findings through credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability strategies (Lee et al., 2024). Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement with the interview material, iterative cross-case comparison, and member checking of preliminary interpretations with selected participants. Dependability was supported by maintaining

a systematic record of the research procedures, coding decisions, thematic development, and analytical revisions. Confirmability was addressed through reflexive journaling in which the researcher documented assumptions, interpretive decisions, and potential sources of bias throughout the research process. Transferability was supported through detailed descriptions of the case context, participant characteristics, conflict experiences, forgiveness processes, and relational outcomes, allowing readers to assess the findings' applicability to comparable post-conflict friendship contexts. The study also conducted peer debriefing with qualitative research colleagues to critically examine emerging codes, themes, and interpretations. Together, these procedures strengthened the study's methodological rigor and contextual credibility.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The findings demonstrate that forgiveness in post-conflict friendships develops through interconnected psychological and relational processes. Emotional healing creates readiness for forgiveness, trust rebuilding strengthens relational security, and moral reasoning guides reconciliation decisions. Together, these processes explain how forgiveness can lead to sustained restoration of friendship after interpersonal conflict.

Emotional Healing Facilitates Friendship Restoration

Emotional healing in post-conflict friendships refers to the process through which individuals recognize, regulate, and gradually reduce negative emotional responses following relational conflict. In this study, emotional healing emerged from participants' accounts of reduced anger, resentment, disappointment, emotional distance, and recurring thoughts about the conflict. Participants did not understand the process as immediately eliminating negative emotions, but as a gradual movement toward emotional stability that enabled them to reconsider the friendship. Emotional healing became visible when participants felt calmer, could discuss the conflict without intense emotional reactions, and became more willing to communicate with the friend. Thus, emotional stabilization represented an initial pathway toward forgiveness and subsequent friendship restoration.

Participants described emotional healing as beginning with recognizing personal emotional wounds rather than immediately trying to restore the friendship. One participant stated, "[insert direct quotation from informant concerning the need to process hurt before forgiving]." Another participant similarly explained, "[insert direct quotation from informant concerning anger, disappointment, or resentment after the conflict]." These accounts indicate that participants did not perceive forgiveness as an immediate response to conflict. Instead, they first needed to acknowledge the disagreement's emotional consequences. The narratives show that unresolved emotions created psychological distance from the friend, whereas greater emotional awareness allowed participants to reconsider the conflict more calmly. Emotional healing therefore appeared as an internal process preceding renewed relational engagement.

The interviews further showed that emotional recovery developed through reflection and gradual emotional regulation. One participant explained, "[insert direct quotation from informant concerning reflection, journaling, prayer, discussion, or another strategy used to manage emotions]." Another participant stated, "[insert direct quotation from informant concerning becoming calmer or changing their emotional response toward the friend]." These accounts suggest that participants actively worked through emotional reactions rather than simply waiting for negative feelings to disappear. The process involved reconsidering what had happened, recognizing personal reactions, and creating sufficient emotional distance to evaluate the relationship more objectively. The data indicate that emotional regulation reduced resentment and created psychological space for forgiveness and renewed communication.

The interview findings aligned with the researcher's observations of participants' narratives, particularly the gradual shift from emotionally charged descriptions to more reflective accounts of the conflict. When discussing the initial conflict, participants tended to emphasize hurt, disappointment, or feeling misunderstood. When describing later stages of the relationship, their accounts became more measured and focused on lessons, mutual understanding, and possibilities for renewed interaction. This pattern suggests that emotional healing involved a shift in how participants experienced and expressed the conflict. In practical terms, participants moved from immediate emotional reactions toward greater emotional stability, making subsequent communication and reconsideration of the friendship more possible.

The pattern across the data shows that emotional healing developed through a gradual sequence rather than a single act of forgiveness. Participants first experienced emotional disruption, then recognized personal hurt, processed emotions, reflected on the conflict, and gradually reduced negative affect. As emotional intensity decreased, participants became better able to view the conflict more broadly and consider renewed interaction with the friend. The recurring pattern suggests that emotional stability created psychological readiness for forgiveness. Friendship restoration therefore seemed more feasible when participants moved beyond immediate anger or resentment and could approach the relationship without unresolved emotional reactions dominating. Emotional healing served as the first pathway linking conflict recovery to relational restoration.

Trust Rebuilding Shapes Forgiveness Decisions

Trust rebuilding in post-conflict friendships refers to the observable process through which confidence between friends gradually develops after relational disruption. In this study, trust rebuilding was identified through changes in communication, interaction consistency, responsiveness, openness, and willingness to resume ordinary friendship activities. Trust was not assumed to be automatically restored after forgiveness. Instead, restoration became visible through repeated relational experiences that demonstrated reliability and reduced uncertainty. The observed interactions showed that participants became more comfortable when communication was consistent, and responses were perceived as sincere. Conversely,

irregular communication or avoidance maintained relational distance. Trust rebuilding therefore represented an observable relational process connecting forgiveness with renewed friendship interaction.

Table 1. Observational of Trust Rebuilding Shapes Forgiveness Decisions

Observed Aspect	Field Indicator	Observed Pattern	Interpretation
Communication	Frequency and openness of interaction	Communication gradually became more regular	Reduced relational distance
Responsiveness	Willingness to respond to messages or interaction	Responses became more consistent	Increased relational confidence
Consistency	Repeated behavior across interactions	Positive behavior was maintained over time	Reliability became observable
Openness	Willingness to discuss previous tension	Interaction became less guarded	Psychological safety increased
Shared activities	Resumption of ordinary friendship activities	Participants gradually resumed joint activities	Friendship began to recover
Relational boundaries	Respect for previously established boundaries	Interaction became more considerate	Trust developed without ignoring previous hurt

The observation data indicate that trust rebuilding occurred through repeated and increasingly stable interactions. The observed changes were not represented by a single reconciliation event but by gradual modifications in communication, responsiveness, openness, and shared activities. Participants initially appeared more cautious in their interactions, particularly when previous conflict remained relevant to the relationship. Over subsequent interactions, greater consistency reduced visible hesitation and made communication more natural. The data suggest that trust was reconstructed through accumulated relational experiences. In this process, forgiveness created an opportunity for renewed interaction, while repeated trustworthy behavior strengthened confidence that the friendship could continue without immediately reproducing the previous conflict.

The pattern identified in the observations demonstrates that trust rebuilding progressed from cautious interaction toward greater relational openness. Initially, participants maintained some distance and demonstrated limited engagement following the conflict. As communication became more consistent, uncertainty decreased, and interaction became increasingly comfortable. Continued responsiveness, respect for boundaries, and participation in shared activities provided observable indications that the relationship was becoming more stable. The sequence suggests that trust restoration depended on behavioral consistency rather than verbal reconciliation alone. Friendship restoration became visible when participants sustained renewed interactions over time and showed greater willingness to communicate, cooperate, and engage in ordinary friendship activities.

The overall pattern shows that trust rebuilding followed a gradual relational pathway after forgiveness. The observed process began with cautious communication, developed through consistent interaction, and progressed toward greater openness and renewed shared activities. Each stage reduced relational uncertainty and strengthened confidence in the friendship's continuity. The data also show that

forgiveness did not automatically eliminate the conflict's consequences—instead, renewed trust required subsequent relational experiences that confirmed reliability and respect. Trust rebuilding therefore bridged the internal decision to forgive and the external restoration of friendship. The restored relationship became increasingly evident when positive interactions were repeated and sustained.

Moral Reasoning Influences Reconciliation Processes

Moral reasoning in post-conflict friendships refers to the process through which individuals evaluate conflict by considering intention, responsibility, fairness, harm, accountability, and relational values before deciding whether reconciliation is appropriate. In this study, moral reasoning was identified through documented relational activities showing reflection on the conflict, acknowledgment of harm, consideration of another person's perspective, and efforts to establish acceptable behavior after reconciliation. The process did not simply determine whether an individual forgave the friend. It also shaped the conditions under which forgiveness could become relationally meaningful. Moral reasoning therefore functioned as a framework for evaluating whether the friendship could be restored while maintaining personal boundaries, responsibility, mutual respect, and relational dignity.

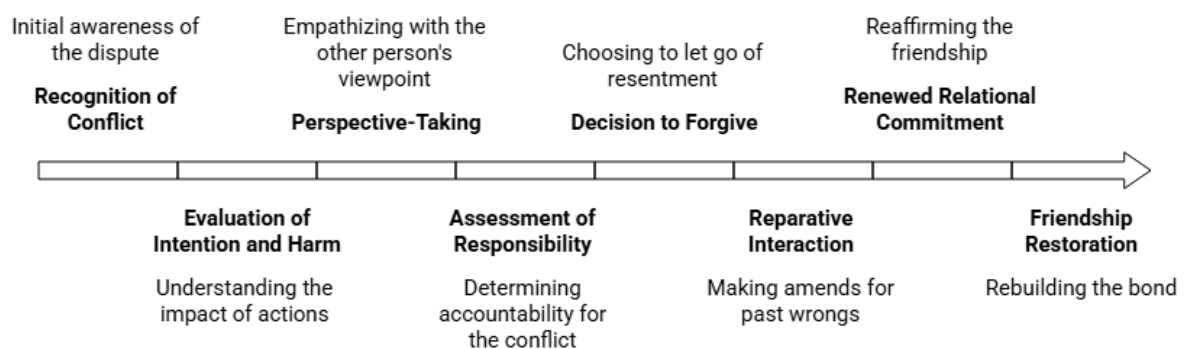


Figure 1. Pathway of Moral Reasoning in Post-Conflict Friendship Restoration

The documented interactional evidence indicates that reconciliation involved more than the disappearance of negative emotions. The observed materials show a movement from recognizing the conflict toward evaluating what happened and determining how the relationship could continue. In this process, consideration of intention and responsibility provided a basis for distinguishing between behavior that could be repaired and behavior that required stronger boundaries. The documentation also indicates that reconciliation became more constructive when acknowledgment of harm was followed by corrective interaction. Moral evaluation therefore operated as a practical mechanism that shaped subsequent relational behavior. The restoration process depended on whether participants could transform moral evaluation into actions that supported accountability and mutual respect.

The documented process can be restated as a movement from conflict recognition toward relational reconstruction. First, the parties acknowledged the conflict as a source of relational disruption. Second, the parties evaluated the circumstances surrounding the conflict by considering intention, responsibility, and

perceived harm. Third, perspective-taking enabled the parties to consider the situation beyond their own emotional position. Fourth, forgiveness became possible when the parties regarded the conflict as morally manageable. Finally, reparative interaction translated forgiveness into renewed relational commitment. The data therefore indicate that moral reasoning connected internal evaluation with observable reconciliation efforts. It provided a framework through which participants could forgive without abandoning personal boundaries or expectations of responsible behavior.

The pattern emerging from the documented evidence shows that moral reasoning operated as a structured pathway rather than an isolated judgment. Participants moved from identifying the conflict toward evaluating responsibility, considering alternative perspectives, deciding whether forgiveness was justified, and translating that decision into reparative action. The recurring sequence demonstrates that forgiveness became more sustainable when moral evaluation was followed by behavioral change. Friendship restoration consequently depended not only on emotional readiness or renewed trust but also on the perception that the relationship could continue within mutually acceptable ethical boundaries. Moral reasoning thus linked forgiveness to accountability, relational dignity, and renewed commitment, providing a pathway for reconciliation to be sustainable rather than temporary.

Discussion

The finding that emotional healing facilitates friendship restoration aligns with forgiveness literature that emphasizes emotional transformation as a foundation for relational repair. Juang et al. (2025) and Popa (2025) conceptualizes forgiveness as involving changes in emotional responses toward an offender, while Liventsova et al. (2024) emphasizes movement from resentment toward constructive orientations. The present finding extends these perspectives by showing that emotional healing operates specifically within post-conflict friendships, where unresolved hurt can obstruct renewed interaction. Participants' movement from anger, disappointment, and rumination toward emotional stability indicates that forgiveness is not an immediate decision. Instead, emotional regulation creates readiness for renewed communication, supporting the view that forgiveness develops internally before becoming visible through restored relational engagement.

The finding on trust rebuilding supports relational perspectives on forgiveness while adding a temporal dimension. Previous literature associates forgiveness with improved interpersonal trust and reconciliation (Harding, 2020; Melki et al., 2021). However, the present findings indicate that trust does not automatically return after forgiveness. Instead, participants rebuilt trust through repeated communication, responsiveness, openness, respect for boundaries, and shared activities. This pattern suggests that forgiveness may initiate relational repair, whereas trustworthy behavior sustains it (Almohanna et al., 2025; Jacobson, 2023). The finding extends existing models by positioning trust rebuilding as an observable pathway between forgiveness and friendship restoration. Reconciliation becomes sustainable when consistent experiences reinforce willingness to forgive by reducing uncertainty and demonstrating reliability over time.

The finding on moral reasoning aligns with literature describing forgiveness as involving cognitive and ethical evaluation rather than emotional release alone. Dwyer et al. (2020) emphasize reflective judgment, while Krolevetskaya et al. (2022) and Wolcott et al. (2021) recognizes cognitive processes in responses to interpersonal offenses. This study extends these perspectives by demonstrating how moral reasoning connects with reconciliation practices in friendships. Participants evaluated intention, responsibility, harm, fairness, and boundaries before translating forgiveness into reparative interaction. This indicates that forgiving a friend does not mean accepting behavior without conditions. Moral reasoning enables individuals to preserve personal dignity while remaining open to reconciliation. This highlights forgiveness as an ethically negotiated process linking evaluation, accountability, behavioral change, and relational restoration.

Theoretically, the findings contribute a pathway-based understanding of forgiveness in post-conflict friendships. Rather than presenting forgiveness as a psychological outcome, the findings suggest a process involving emotional healing, trust rebuilding, and moral reasoning. These dimensions are interconnected: emotional stabilization creates readiness, trust rebuilding provides relational security, and moral reasoning establishes conditions for renewed relational engagement. This extends forgiveness models by locating psychological processes within the context of friendship restoration. The findings suggest that reconciliation interventions should not focus exclusively on encouraging individuals to forgive. Counseling, peer mediation, and relationship-repair programs should address emotional regulation, opportunities for trust-building through consistent interaction, and discussions concerning responsibility, boundaries, and mutual expectations. These implications connect psychological transformation with practical relational reconstruction.

The study's contribution lies in connecting psychological forgiveness processes with pathways toward friendship restoration. Existing research shows forgiveness benefits emotional well-being and relationships, yet these findings show how forgiveness becomes relationally consequential through healing, trust reconstruction, and moral evaluation. This framework has practical implications for practitioners working with conflict because restoration requires more than emotional reconciliation or apology. Support should create conditions for emotional recovery, repeated trustworthy interaction, and accountable reparative action. Theoretically, the findings frame friendship restoration as a relational outcome that emerges from psychological and behavioral processes rather than an automatic consequence of forgiveness. This perspective offers a framework for understanding reconciliation after friendship conflict while emphasizing the processes involved.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that forgiveness in post-conflict friendships is a gradual psychological and relational pathway shaped by emotional healing, trust rebuilding, and moral reasoning. The central lesson is that meaningful friendship restoration requires individuals to process emotional wounds, rebuild confidence through consistent interaction, and evaluate responsibility, boundaries, and reparative actions.

The study contributes theoretically by presenting a process-based perspective that connects individual psychological transformation with relational restoration, extending forgiveness research beyond isolated emotional outcomes. However, the small purposive sample of 12 participants, reliance on retrospective narratives, and general social context limit transferability. Future research should employ longitudinal designs, broader samples, and diverse cultural contexts to examine how forgiveness pathways develop over time.

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