



- [Tmail](#) |
- [Online@UT](#) |
- [A-Z Index](#)



Tough Love: UT Professor Finds Forgiveness Can Hurt Marriages

Posted on February 10, 2011 9:52 am • Categorized as [Headlines](#), [Press Releases](#)

Share:

[Email This Post](#)

KNOXVILLE – Forgiving your spouse could hurt your marriage.

New research by James McNulty, associate psychology professor at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, finds that men and women who forgive their partners often end up facing more offenses from those partners.

“Forgiveness may increase the likelihood that your misbehaving spouse will misbehave again,” said McNulty.

His findings can be found in a recent article, “Forgiveness Increases the Likelihood of Subsequent Partner Transgressions in Marriage,” published in the *Journal of Family Psychology*.

McNulty got the idea for the study in 2008 after conducting a two-year study on recently married couples and noticed that more-forgiving spouses became less satisfied over time when they were married to partners who frequently behaved negatively in the marriage.

To test his theory that forgiveness allows negative behavior to continue, McNulty recruited 135 newlywed couples and asked them to fill out a questionnaire every night for seven nights. The questionnaire asked, “Did your partner do something negative today?” If the answer was “yes,” the spouse was asked if he or she had forgiven the partner.

Of the negative behaviors reported by the husbands, 22 percent involved being argumentative; 22 percent involved being moody; 13 percent involved nagging; 5 percent involved snapping, yelling or being sarcastic. Of the negative behaviors reported by the wives, 26 percent involved neglect or otherwise being inconsiderate, and 13 percent involved criticism.

Compared to days after they had not been forgiven, partners who had been forgiven for a negative behavior the previous day were approximately six times more likely to transgress again the next day.

McNulty's findings have serious implications for interpersonal theories and interventions designed to treat and prevent relationship distress.

"This study highlights the potential costs of interventions designed to promote and encourage forgiveness," explained McNulty. "While interventions may benefit some, they may come at a greater cost of exposure to negative behavior for others."

McNulty is quick to point out that forgiveness is not likely to be costly for everyone. He said future research is necessary to determine when forgiveness will ultimately benefit a relationship and when it may ultimately harm the relationship.

—

CONTACT :

Whitney Holmes (865-974-5460, wholmes7@utk.edu)

Related Posts

[Time: Forgiveness and Marriage: Are You Ruining Your Relationship?](#) (February 1, 2011)

[Study Shows Frequent Sex Protects Marital Happiness for Neurotic Newlyweds](#) (December 9, 2010)

[UT Study Shows Couples Behave More Positively When Wife Is More Attractive Than Husband](#) (April 2, 2008)

[UT Professor Finds Economic Inequality is Self-reinforcing](#) (October 22, 2010)

[UT Knoxville Students Receive National Science Foundation Fellowship](#) (April 13, 2010)

[Rate Hike Won't Hurt Economy](#) (August 6, 1999)

[State Economy to Rebound in 2001, UT Study Finds](#) (September 29, 2000)

[News Sentinel: UT Professor Finds Energy, Inspiration in Classroom](#) (July 28, 2010)

Tagged as: **[College of Arts and Sciences](#)**

Produced by the **[Office of Communications & Marketing](#)**

The University of Tennessee • Knoxville, TN 37996 • (865) 974-2225