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## **Forgiveness of an ex-spouse: Do self-compassion and context matter?**

### **Abstract**

*Background: Forgiveness is one of the methods of dealing with negative emotions toward an ex-spouse. Self-compassion, in turn, can help divorced people forgive the wrongs that occurred after the breakdown of their marriage. Objectives: The aim of this paper was to analyze the relationship between self-compassion and forgiveness, as well as the moderating role of contextual factors in this relationship among divorced adults. Method: The sample consisted of 175 divorcees (118 females, 57 males) aged 23–73 (M = 40.57, SD = 9.82). The Self-Compassion Scale, the Decision to Forgive Scale, the Emotional Forgiveness Scale were used in the study. Results: The study revealed significant associations between multidimensional self-compassion and emotional, but not decisional, forgiveness. Self-compassion positively predicted reduction of negative emotions, but not presence of positive regard toward an ex-spouse. None of the contextual factors moderated the self-compassion-forgiveness link, though they were related to forgiveness. Being a man, the non-initiator status, having a new partner, longer time since divorce, receiving more apology and having a better relationship with an ex-spouse positively predicted all types of forgiveness. For less severe transgressions, self-compassion was significantly and negatively related to decisional forgiveness. Conclusions: Practicing self-compassion may help divorced individuals forgive their former partners various transgressions regardless of their context.*

**Keywords:** *forgiveness, self-compassion, transgression, divorce, ex-spouse.*

## 1. Introduction

During and after a divorce individuals need to deal not only with a stressful experience of marital dissolution (Amato, 2000, p. 1269; Strizzi *et al.*, 2021, pp. 1–2), but also with negative feelings toward an ex-spouse (Kjeld *et al.*, 2020, pp. 1–2; Rye *et al.*, 2004, p. 32). Long-lasting anger, grudge, hostility, feeling of harm or injustice toward a former partner deteriorate physical and mental health and disturb post-divorce adjustment (Hald *et al.*, 2020a, pp. 5–6; Rohde-Brown and Rudestam, 2011, p. 116; Rye, 2010, pp. 119–120; Sander *et al.*, 2020, pp. 5–7). One of the methods of dealing with these negative emotions is forgiveness (Mazor *et al.*, 1998; Rye, 2010, pp. 121–123), a psychological process of replacing negative emotions, thoughts and actions toward the harm-doer with neutral or positive ones (Karremans and Van Lange, 2008, p. 75; McCullough *et al.*, 1998, p. 1587). It serves both to recover after being hurt and to maintain the relationship with the offender following a transgression (Visser *et al.*, 2017, pp. 3055–3057). From the perspective of ‘the stress-and-coping theory of forgiveness’, transgressions committed by the former spouse are stressors, whereas forgiveness is a coping strategy (Worthington, 2019, p. 14) resulting in reduced stress symptoms. This may be done by making a decision not to harm the ex-spouse and to control one’s own behavior toward him or her (Davis *et al.*, 2015, pp. 280–282), and is referred to as decision-based or decisional forgiveness (DiBlasio, 1998, p. 78; Worthington *et al.*, 2007, pp. 291–292). Moreover, negative emotions like bitterness, anxiety, or hatred toward an ex-spouse may decrease, and positive feelings including sympathy, pity, or benevolence may be evoked as a result of emotional forgiveness (Worthington and Scherer, 2004, p. 387). Such shift in feelings involves motivation to have a relatively good relationship with a former partner.

In a sample of divorcees, forgiveness of an ex-spouse was negatively related to depression and anger, and positively to existential and spiritual well-being (Rye *et al.*, 2004, pp. 41–42). The participants of the workshop for divorced parents also reported that the higher the forgiveness of an ex-spouse, the better the mental health, namely less depression and more gratitude (Lundahl *et al.*, 2008, p. 473; Rye *et al.*, 2005, p. 885; Rye *et al.*, 2012, p. 240). A study aimed at investigating forgiveness and post-divorce subjective well-being (Yárnoz-Yaben *et al.*, 2016, pp. 1911–1913) showed that divorcees higher in positive affect, were more forgiving of their ex-spouses, which increased their life satisfaction; forgiveness and time since divorce mediated the association between positive affect and satisfaction with life. The study has also demonstrated positive relationships between forgiveness and effective post-divorce co-parenting (Bonach, 2009, pp. 46–49; Bonach and Sales, 2002, p. 17; Rye *et al.*, 2012, pp. 239–240; Yárnoz-Yaben, 2015, pp. 292–294). Visser *et*

al. (2017, p. 3061) showed, in turn, that perceived social network disapproval of the ex-partner was negatively linked to forgiveness, which in turn was related to more conflict between parents. This can make it easier for ex-spouses, although their marriage has ended, to redefine and rearrange their relationship, which is especially needed when they have children (Gordon *et al.*, 2005, p. 416; Rye, 2010, p. 120). All positive effects of forgiveness might be very helpful for former spouses when they need or want to create an amicable post-divorce relationship (Gürmen *et al.*, 2017, p. 645; Willén, 2015, pp. 362–367).

Enhancing forgiveness of an ex-spouse might be done through different interventions (Bonach, 2009, pp. 40–41; Lundahl *et al.*, 2008, pp. 470–473; Rye *et al.*, 2005, p. 883; Rye *et al.*, 2012, pp. 236–237; Schramm *et al.*, 2018, p. 4) and one of them might be related to self-compassion as it positively affects emotional recovery following marital separation (Sbarra *et al.*, 2012, pp. 264–266). In the context of forgiveness, it facilitates reducing negative emotions and understanding difficult life events from the broader perspective (Neff, 2003b, pp. 88–89; Neff and Pommier, 2013, pp. 162–163; Zhang and Chen, 2016, pp. 252–253).

## 2. Self-compassion

In recent years, offering compassion to the self has become an important concept and an increasingly researched field. It is relevant not only when the outer conditions are painful and when suffering occurs without one's fault, but also in case of distress resulting from one's own failures, mistakes, or imperfections (Neff and Pommier, 2013, pp. 160–161). Self-compassion consists of three main mutually interacting components: self-kindness (contrary to harsh self-judgment), a sense of common humanity (contrary to feelings of isolation), and mindfulness (contrary to overidentification with painful thoughts and emotions; Neff, 2003b, pp. 89–90). Being self-kind means to be caring, understanding, gentle, supportive, accepting, and self-soothing to oneself when life conditions are difficult to bear or one's behavior is problematic. Due to the sense of a common humanity, one's difficulties in life and personal flaws might be seen as a shared human experience, personal struggle or human imperfection, and as a result, a suffering individual might still feel connected to others. Being mindful allows a person to be aware of pain, take a meta-perspective and consider disliked aspects of life or oneself with greater objectivity (Neff and Pommier, 2013, p. 161).

Self-compassion defined in this manner is beneficial not only for one's psychological health, resilience (MacBeth and Gumley, 2012, pp. 548–550; Pauley and McPherson, 2010, pp. 134–136) and well-being (Neff and Germer, 2013, pp. 34–38;

Zessin *et al.*, 2015, pp. 350–352), but also for others due to greater empathy (Neff *et al.*, 2016, p. 191) and altruism (Neff and Pommier, 2013, pp. 167–169). The studies (Neff and Beretvas, 2013, pp. 87–90; Neff and Pommier, 2013, pp. 161–162) showed that self-compassion is related to kind and supportive attitudes toward people. Research conducted among couples (Neff and Beretvas, 2013, pp. 87–90) revealed that self-compassion was linked to their behavior in the relationship. More self-compassionate partners were characterized as more emotionally connected, caring, accepting and autonomy-supporting and less detached, controlling, and aggressive. Another study (Crocker and Canevello, 2008, pp. 561–564) showed that students high in self-compassion had more compassionate goals in their relationships with others, which in turn was related to more social support, both given and received from roommates, and to interpersonal trust with their partners. Greater self-compassion was also related to higher levels of compromise and relational well-being during conflict (Yarnell and Neff, 2013, pp. 150–154). Neff and Pommier (2013, pp. 167–169) who investigated self-compassion and other-focused concerns, found significant associations between both compassion for self and for humanity, empathetic concern, perspective taking, personal distress, altruism and forgiveness. They concluded that caring concern is a process referring to oneself and other people, especially that more compassion to self and to others is associated with similar neuronal activity (Longe *et al.*, 2009, p. 1855).

### 3. Self-compassion and forgiveness

Empirical studies showed that self-compassion was associated with episodic (Miyagawa and Taniguchi, 2020, pp. 6–7) and dispositional forgiveness (Neff and Pommier, 2013, pp. 167–169; Roxas *et al.* 2014, pp. 57–58; Wibowo and Naini, 2021, p. 94; Wu *et al.*, 2019, pp. 3–4; Zhang and Chen, 2016, pp. 252–254) and forgiveness toward a spouse and family (Fahimdanesh *et al.*, 2020, pp. 5–6). People more compassionate toward themselves were more likely to forgive their offenders, regardless of whether the transgressors evaluated themselves critically or compassionately after the transgressions (Allen *et al.*, 2015, pp. 11–13). Roxas *et al.* (2014, pp. 57–58) also showed that self-compassion was positively related to forgiveness of others and forgiveness of self, while compassion for other people positively predicted merely other-forgiveness. Scholars have highlighted that self-compassion helps individuals develop prosocial concern and motivation, including forgiving responses (Neff and Pommier, 2013, p. 163), and have sought mechanisms underlying these relationships (Wu *et al.*, 2019, pp. 3–4; Zhang and Chen, 2016, p. 254). Wu *et al.* (2019, p. 4) found that self-compassion and the tendency to forgive

were associated through reduced anger and rumination. Miyagawa and Taniguchi (2020, pp. 6–7) showed that people with high levels of self-compassion were less ruminating, which helped them gain greater temporal distance from past incidents and forgive particular transgressors. Zhang and Chen (2016, pp. 252–255) explored the role of acceptance of one's regret of action and inaction, and found that acceptance showed a positive correlation with forgiveness under self-compassion conditions. Previous studies, however, were conducted in the general population or in a sample of adults maltreated in childhood (Wu *et al.*, 2019, p. 2), not in divorcees, whereas the nature of the association between self-compassion and other-focused concerns depends on life experience (Neff and Pommier, 2013, pp. 169–171). Thus, the first goal of the current study is to examine the relationships between self-compassion and forgiveness of an ex-spouse, both decisional and emotional. We put forward the hypothesis that self-compassion would be positively related to decisional and emotional forgiveness of a particular transgression committed by an ex-spouse (H1).

#### 4. Moderators

Nevertheless, the magnitude of the potential positive effect of self-compassion on forgiveness might be buffered or exacerbated by some variables that have previously affected self-compassion or forgiveness related outcomes of divorcees, such as age, gender, education level, time since divorce, initiative in the divorce, support from the former spouse or romantic loneliness (Kołodziej-Zaleńska and Przybyła-Basista, 2020, pp. 373–375; Lamela *et al.*, 2018, pp. 685–687; Yárnoz-Yaben *et al.*, 2016, pp. 1911–1913; Yárnoz-Yaben, 2009, pp. 288–290, 2015, pp. 292–294; Strizzi *et al.*, 2021, pp. 8–10; Zessin *et al.*, 2015, pp. 352–355). Thus, previous studies showed men to be more forgiving than women (in a Polish sample; Charzyńska, 2015, p. 1939; Piątek, 2011, p. 319; Kaleta and Mróz, 2022, p. 2825). Time passed since divorce positively predicted forgiveness (Yárnoz-Yaben, 2009, pp. 288–290; Yárnoz-Yaben *et al.*, 2016, pp. 1911–1913) and satisfaction with life (Lamela *et al.*, 2018, pp. 683–687). Initiative in the divorce was negatively associated with forgiveness level (Yárnoz-Yaben, 2009, pp. 288–290), whereas divorce initiation by the former spouse predicted higher level of distress (Strizzi *et al.*, 2021, pp. 8–9) and divorce burnout (Hald *et al.*, 2020b, p. 462). Also, non-initiators reported higher levels of post-divorce growth (Lamela *et al.*, 2014, p. 8). Having a new partner was positively linked to levels of forgiveness (Yárnoz-Yaben, 2009, pp. 288–290) and negatively with stress levels (Strizzi *et al.*, 2021, p. 9) and divorce burnout (Hald *et al.*, 2020b, p. 462).

On the other hand, actual forgiveness has been strongly associated with situational factors of particular events, such as severity of the offense, apology, passage of time and quality of the victim-offender relationship (McCullough, 2000, p. 48; Mullet and Girard, 2000, p. 112; McCullough and Witvliet, 2002, p. 450; Koutsos *et al.*, 2008, pp. 338–345; Riek and Mania, 2012, pp. 307–308; Kaleta and Mróz, 2021, pp. 1–4; Li *et al.*, 2021, pp. 42–44). They are the most robust and the closest antecedents of actual forgiveness beyond the global tendency to forgive or relationship history (Beyens *et al.*, 2015, pp. 6–11; Forster *et al.*, 2021, pp. 6–8), as they might trigger psychological prosocial shift through reduction of dissonance (Thompson *et al.*, 2005, pp. 317–318), anger decrease (Kirchhoff *et al.*, 2012, pp. 118–119), more favourable attribution (Fincham *et al.*, 2002, pp. 32–34; Tabak *et al.*, 2012, pp. 513–514), and increase in empathy (McCullough *et al.*, 1998, pp. 1593–1599). Little is known, however, how these factors are related to forgiveness of particular transgression committed by an ex-spouse and how they moderate the relationship between self-compassion and decisional and emotional forgiveness. Divorce related variables along with situational factors might create a unique context for forgiveness and for the self-compassion–forgiveness link. Thus, the second aim of the study was to examine the moderating role of participants' gender, time since divorce, initiator status, having a new partner, offense severity, apology, time since the transgression and a relationship quality in the association between self-compassion and forgiveness. We hypothesized that contextual factors would moderate the relationships between overall self-compassion and decisional and emotional forgiveness of the event committed by an ex-spouse (H2). We assumed that for factors such as male gender, the non-initiator status, having a new partner, longer time since divorce and since offense, less severe transgression, more apology offered by an ex-spouse, and better relationship with him or her, the positive link between self-compassion and forgiveness toward a former partner would be stronger.

## 5. Method

### 5.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 175 divorced persons from Poland. The sample consisted of 67.8% females and 32.2% males aged 23–73 ( $M = 40.57$ ,  $SD = 9.82$ ). To reach potential respondents the snowball sampling was used. Two members of the research team contacted several divorced people they knew and asked them to spread the information about the study to other divorcees in their networks.

These facilitators distributed the tool sets to the individuals who agreed to take part in the study. They contacted about 200 people who declared to fill in anonymously pen-and-paper questionnaires. All respondents were informed about the aims of the study, gave their verbal consent to taking part in it, and accepted no remuneration for completing any measure. They responded to several demographics, a few questions related to divorce (e.g. time since divorce) and completed four standardized measures. A total of 182 completed research protocols were returned, 7 of which were excluded because of missing data. The final analysis involved 175 tool sets.

Among the respondents, the most numerous groups were inhabitants of cities (48.3%) and towns (35.1%). In terms of the level of education, the most represented sample included persons with higher (49.7%) and secondary education (26.6%). In the subjective assessment of the economic situation, over half of the respondents (51.7%) assessed it as average, 38.9% as good and very good, and 9.3% reported bad or very bad material situations. Majority of the respondents had children (76.6%), one (33.1%), two (31.4%) or more (12.0%), and were active in the labor market (75.3%). Duration of marriage with a formal partner ranged from 2 to 26 years ( $M = 11.50$ ,  $SD = 7.58$ ) and time since divorce ranged from 0.5 to 30 years ( $M = 3.26$ ,  $SD = 3.68$ ). Most participants were divorce initiators at the legal level (filed for the divorce – 71.4%) and remained single after divorce (73.7%).

## 5.2. Measures

*Assessment of transgression.* Respondents were requested to recall and briefly describe a particular event in which their former husband/wife hurt them. Then, they were asked to assess transgression severity, intensity of apology being offered by an ex-spouse, and quality of the relationship with him/her. Participants evaluated severity of the wrongdoing using a five-point scale from 1 (*not much hurtful*) to 5 (*extremely hurtful*). Apology was assessed on a scale from 1 (*the offender made no attempts to apologize*) to 5 (*the offender really tried to apologize*). The victim-offender relationship quality was rated on a five-point scale from 1 (*negative and conflicting*) to 5 (*positive and harmonious*).

Types of offenses the participants had experienced from their ex-spouse included infidelity (30.7%), events related to drinking episodes (24.7%), conflicts and disagreements (19.3%), physical or verbal attacks (9.6%), lack of feelings (6.6%), other issues (e.g. financial, related to having or not having children). On average, transgressions were rated as highly severe ( $M = 4.36$ ,  $SD = .82$ ), apology as low ( $M = 1.96$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ), and the relationship with the wrongdoer as slightly negative ( $M = 2.52$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ).

*Self-compassion.* Self-Compassion Scale (SCS; Neff, 2003a, pp. 226–233) in Polish adaptation (Dzwonkowska, 2011, pp. 49–66) was used to measure the characteristics of the self-compassion construct and its three components, namely self-kindness, common humanity and mindfulness. The scale consists of 26 items and six subscales: self-kindness versus self-judgment, common humanity versus isolation, and mindfulness versus over-identification. Respondents rate their experiences using a 5-point scale from 1 (*almost never*) to 5 (*almost always*). Sample items include: “*I try to be loving towards myself when I’m feeling emotional pain*”, “*When things are going badly for me I see the difficulties as part of life that everyone goes through*”, “*When something upsets me I try to keep my emotions in balance*”. In the present study, Cronbach’s alpha for the total score was .92, and for the six subscales the values were: .79 (self-kindness), .81 (self-judgement), .85 (common humanity), .84 (isolation), .86 (mindfulness), .84 over-identification.

*Decisional forgiveness.* Decisional forgiveness was measured using the Polish version (Mróz and Kaleta, 2020, pp. 1–9) of the Decision to Forgive Scale (DTFS; Davis *et al.*, 2015, pp. 282–283). The instrument allow to assess the level of decisional forgiveness of a particular interpersonal incident. The DTFS consists of five items, such as “*I made a commitment to forgive him or her*”, rated using a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). In the current study, Cronbach’s alpha for DTFS was .95.

*Emotional forgiveness.* The level of emotional forgiveness of a specific transgression was evaluated using the Polish adaptation of the Emotional Forgiveness Scale (EFS; Hook *et al.*, 2012, p. 115; Mróz and Kaleta, 2020, pp. 1–9). The EFS includes eight items and two subscales, presence of positive emotions (PP) and reduction of negative feelings toward the offender (RN). The respondents rate each item on a 5-point rating scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The higher the scores (total and on two subscales), the greater forgiveness a person achieves. Sample items: “*I care about him or her*”, “*I no longer feel upset when I think of him or her*”. For the current sample, Cronbach’s alpha coefficients for the EFS and the subscales were .76 for the full scale, .84 for the Presence of Positive Emotion subscale, and .70 for the Reduction of Negative Emotion subscale.

### 5.3. Statistical Methods

First, we conducted correlation analyses to explore the relationships between self-compassion, decisional and emotional forgiveness, and contextual factors. Next, to examine whether contextual factors (gender, time since divorce, initiator status, having a new partner, severity of transgression, apology, time since

transgression, and relationship quality) moderate the relationship between self-compassion and forgiveness, regression-based moderation analyses were performed using the Process macro for SPSS (Model 1, version 3.5, Hayes, 2018). To properly estimate interactions of self-compassion and component of context on forgiveness, mean centering and standardizing were applied. We recoded gender (females as 1, males as 2) and the initiator status (non-initiators as 1, initiators as 2). In order to calculate the direct and indirect effects, the bootstrapping procedure (samples = 5000) and bias-corrected confidence intervals (CI 95%) were used in the moderation analyses.

## 6. Results

Table 1 shows correlations between self-compassion, contextual factors, and decisional and emotional forgiveness.

As presented in Table 1, none of the dimensions of self-compassion was related to decisional forgiveness. Most of the aspects of self-compassion were related to emotional forgiveness in the absence of the negative emotions facet, but only few were associated with the presence of positive emotions. Overall self-compassion, as well as self-kindness, common humanity and mindfulness, displayed a positive correlation with reduced negative emotions, whereas self-judgement, isolation and over-identification showed an inverse correlation with this dimension of emotional forgiveness. At the same time, self-judgement was positively, while common humanity and self-kindness negatively linked to presence of positive emotions. Taking contextual variables into consideration, time since divorce was positively related to overall emotional forgiveness, severity of wrongdoing displayed a negative correlation with absence of negative emotions, relationship quality and apology showed positive associations with all aspects of forgiveness, and time since transgression was not linked to any of them.

Next, we performed moderation analyses to examine whether contextual factors moderated the relationship between self-compassion and forgiveness. Total self-compassion was posited as a predictor; gender, time since divorce, initiator status, having a new partner, severity of transgression, apology, time since transgression, and relationship quality as subsequent moderators, whereas four measures of forgiveness (decisional forgiveness, emotional forgiveness - total score, absence of negative emotions and presence of positive emotions) as outcome variables.

Table 2 contains results for significant models of the association between self-compassion and decisional forgiveness, assuming that it is moderated by

Table 1. Intercorrelations (Pearson's r) between Analyzed Variables

variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
<b>1. SCS_Self_Kindness</b>	-																	
<b>2. SCS_Self_Judgment</b>	-.320**	-																
<b>3. SCS_Common_Humanity</b>	.595**	-.143	-															
<b>4. SCS_Isolation</b>	-.109	.692**	.005	-														
<b>5. SCS_Mindfulness</b>	.665**	-.292**	.727**	-.187	-													
<b>6. SCS_Over_Identification</b>	-.305**	.796**	-.096	.802**	-.329**	-												
<b>7. SCS_I_Self_Kindness</b>	.802**	-.823**	.446**	-.494**	.582**	-.684**	-											
<b>8. SCS_II_Common_Humanity</b>	.504**	-.588**	.706**	-.705**	.648**	-.635**	.668**	-										
<b>9. SCS_III_Mindfulness</b>	.593**	-.673**	.500**	-.613**	.811**	-.820**	.778**	.788**	-									
<b>10. SCS_Total</b>	.711**	-.770**	.592**	-.654**	.743**	-.780**	.908**	.884**	.937**	-								
<b>11. Time since divorce</b>	.016	.001	-.113	-.054	.010	-.078	.011	-.043	.054	.018	-							
<b>12. Severity of transgression</b>	.037	-.042	-.103	-.047	-.096	-.070	.045	-.043	-.015	-.011	-.260*	-						
<b>13. Time since transgression</b>	-.040	-.008	.104	-.147	.048	-.134	-.018	.174*	.110	.094	.618**	-.139	-					
<b>14. Relationship quality</b>	-.148	.029	-.242**	-.130	-.149*	-.040	-.098	-.077	-.067	-.085	.010	.051	-.021	-				
<b>15. Apology</b>	-.025	.098	-.082	-.051	-.063	.001	-.071	-.024	-.041	-.054	.030	-.092	-.052	.450**	-			
<b>16. DTS</b>	-.057	.020	-.059	-.099	.027	-.071	-.057	.027	.059	-.011	.146	-.091	.022	.413**	.349**	-		
<b>17. EFS_N</b>	.228**	-.226**	.047	-.185	.092	-.319**	.284**	.165*	.249**	.263**	.140	-.278**	.110	.164	.194*			
<b>18. EFS_P</b>	-.126	.155**	-.160*	.025	-.145	.013	-.171*	-.129	-.100	-.144	.116	-.061	-.012	.416**	.433**	.624**	.267*	-
<b>19. EFS_total</b>	.054	-.032	-.075	-.093	-.038	-.180*	.058	.015	.084	.063	.158*	-.208**	.055	.374**	.404**	.640**	.772**	.818**

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$

contextual variables. Models including time since divorce ( $R^2 = .026$ ,  $F(3,164) = 1.44$ ;  $p > .05$ ), having a new partner ( $R^2 = .013$ ,  $F(3,165) = .753$ ;  $p > .05$ ), and time since transgression ( $R^2 = .015$ ,  $F(3,154) = .78$ ;  $p > .05$ ) were not significant.

Table 2. Magnitude and Statistical Significance of Effects of Self-compassion and Contextual Variables on Decisional Forgiveness

Models		B	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
$R^2 = .05$	constant	.07	.08	.82	.415	-.097	.233
$F(3,162) = 3.10$	Self-compassion (SC)	.03	.08	.35	.729	-.131	.188
$p < .05$	Gender (G)	.25	.08	2.95	.004	.082	.412
	SC x G	-.02	.08	-.36	.718	-.188	.130
$R^2 = .11$	constant	.11	.09	1.17	.244	-.073	.285
$F(3,165) = 6.684$	Self-compassion (SC)	.08	.09	.98	.331	-.086	.253
$p < .001$	Divorce initiator status (I)	-.35	.09	-3.89	.000	-.531	-.173
	SC x I	.080	.09	.93	.354	-.090	.249
$R^2 = .051$	constant	-.01	.08	-.13	.90	-.159	.140
$F(3,165) = 2.937$	Self-compassion (SC)	-.07	.08	-.93	.36	-.230	.083
$p < .05$	Severity (S)	-.10	.08	-1.34	.18	-.249	.048
	SC x S	.27	.10	2.63	.001	.068	.480
$R^2 = .13$	constant	-.01	.07	-.07	.94	-.149	.138
$F(3,164) = 8.16$	Self-compassion (SC)	.00	.07	.01	.99	-.143	.144
$p < .001$	Apology (A)	.36	.07	4.93	.000	.214	.500
	SC x A	.01	.07	.20	.84	-.123	.150
$R^2 = .20$	constant	.00	.07	.05	.96	-.135	.142
$F(3,163) = 13.87$	Self-compassion (SC)	.01	.07	.14	.89	-.129	.149
$p < .001$	Relationship quality (RQ)	.43	.07	6.23	.000	.297	.572
	SC x RQ	.13	.07	1.78	.07	-.014	.270

As shown in Table 2, overall self-compassion was not a significant predictor of decisional forgiveness when controlling for contextual variables, whereas being a man, having a non-initiator status, receiving more apology and having a better relationship with an ex-spouse predicted more decisional forgiveness. None of the contextual factors moderated the link between self-compassion and decision to forgive. We found, however, a suppression effect (Cheung and Lau, 2008, p. 299) of self-compassion and transgression severity on decisional forgiveness ( $\Delta R^2 = .04$ ,  $F(1,165) = 6.91$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Although there was no relationship between self-compassion and decisional forgiveness, for less severe wrongdoings this link emerged as significant and negative ( $B = -.40$ ,  $SE = .16$ ,  $t = -2.41$ ,  $95\%CI (-.724; -.072)$ ). Thus being more self-compassionate after experiencing less severe

transgressions from an ex-spouse hindered taking the decision to forgive him or her. In case of more painful events, self-compassion was not related to forgiveness at all.

Table 3 contains results of testing the moderating effects of contextual variables on the association between self-compassion and emotional forgiveness (only for significant models). Again, models including time since divorce ( $R^2 = .03, F(3,164) = 1.63; p > .05$ ), having a new partner ( $R^2 = .01, F(3,165) = .84; p > .05$ ), and time since transgression ( $R^2 = .01, F(3,154) = .61; p > .05$ ) were not significant. Emotional forgiveness was positively predicted by greater self-compassion (when controlling for the initiator status), male gender, the non-initiator status, less severe transgression, more apology and better relationship with the ex-spouse committing the transgression. The analysis showed no interaction effect of self-compassion and any component of context in relation to emotional forgiveness.

Table 3. Magnitude and Statistical Significance of Effects of Self-compassion and Contextual Variables on Emotional Forgiveness

Models		B	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
$R^2 = .06$	constant	.09	.08	1.09	.279	-.076	.260
$F(3,162) = 3.22$	Self-compassion (SC)	.10	.08	1.26	.208	-.058	.266
$p < .05$	Gender (G)	.25	.08	2.93	.004	.081	.417
	SC x G	-.016	.08	-.195	.846	-.178	.146
$R^2 = .13$	constant	.14	.08	1.56	.121	-.037	.316
$F(3,165) = 8.43$	Self-compassion (SC)	.17	.08	2.02	.045	.003	.337
$p < .001$	Divorce initiator status (I)	-.38	.08	-4.34	.000	-.564	-.212
	SC x I	.08	.08	.94	.349	-.087	.246
$R^2 = .05$	constant	.01	.08	.11	.91	-.132	.180
$F(3,165) = 3.59$	Self-compassion (SC)	.02	.08	.30	.76	-.230	.083
$p < .05$	Severity (S)	-.20	.08	-2.68	.008	-.350	-.053
	SC x S	.17	.10	1.63	.001	-.035	.376
$R^2 = .16$	constant	.00	.07	.03	.97	-.138	.143
$F(3,164) = 10.80$	Self-compassion (SC)	.08	.07	1.20	.23	-.056	.277
$p < .001$	Apology (Ap)	.40	.07	5.62	.000	.259	.540
	SC x Ap	.00	.07	.03	.98	-.132	.136
$R^2 = .14$	Self-compassion (SC)	.09	.07	1.29	.19	-.050	.239
$F(3,163) = 9.17$	constant	.01	.07	.08	.93	-.138	.150
$p < .001$	Relationship quality (RQ)	.37	.07	5.15	.000	.230	.516
	SC x RQ	.04	.07	.60	.55	-.103	.193

Tables 4 and 5 show results (for significant models) for testing the moderating role of contextual variables in the relationship between self-compassion and emotional forgiveness – reduction of negative emotions (Table 4) and presence of positive ones (Table 5).

Although all tested models designed for the negative dimension of emotional forgiveness were significant and accounted for 8 to 15% of the variance, indirect effects were not found (Table 4). Regression analyses showed that after controlling for contextual factors, self-compassion positively predicted reduction of negative emotions. Moreover, being a man, the non-initiator status, having a new partner, longer time since divorce, more apology and better relationship with an ex-spouse predicted more reduced negative feelings.

Table 4. Magnitude and Statistical Significance of Effects of Self-compassion and Contextual Variables on Emotional Forgiveness – Absence of Negative Emotions

Models		B	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> = .12	constant	.06	.08	.79	.433	-.098	.227
<i>F</i> (3,163) = 7.55	Self-compassion (SC)	.27	.08	3.44	.001	.117	.430
<i>p</i> < .001	Gender (G)	.22	.08	2.68	.008	.058	.382
	SC x G	-.10	.08	-1.26	.210	-.257	.057
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> = .09	constant	.00	.08	.00	.996	-.147	.148
<i>F</i> (3,165) = 5.36	Self-compassion (SC)	.26	.08	1.86	.000	.117	.413
<i>p</i> < .01	Time since divorce (tD)	.14	.08	1.86	.064	-.009	.295
	SC x tD	.05	.11	.51	.613	-.158	.266
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> = .13	constant	.07	.08	.78	.436	-.107	.247
<i>F</i> (3,166) = 8.52	Self-compassion (SC)	.32	.08	3.73	.000	.148	.484
<i>p</i> < .001	Divorce initiator status (I)	-.25	.08	-2.74	.007	-.422	-.068
	SC x I	.11	.08	1.26	.209	-.060	.274
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> = .11	constant	-.02	.08	-2.28	.782	-.169	.128
<i>F</i> (3,166) = 6.97	Self-compassion (SC)	.23	.08	3.06	.002	.082	.379
<i>p</i> < .001	Having new partner (P)	.15	.08	1.93	.055	-.003	.302
	SC x I	.12	.08	1.52	.126	-.035	.284
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> = .15	constant	.00	.07	.06	.954	-.137	.145
<i>F</i> (3,166) = 9.83	Self-compassion (SC)	.24	.07	3.16	.002	.089	.386
<i>p</i> < .001	Severity (S)	-.27	.07	-3.83	.000	-.414	-.133
	SC x S	.11	.10	1.08	.282	-.088	.302
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> = .08	constant	-.04	.08	-.55	.582	-.192	.108
<i>F</i> (3,155) = 4.74	Self-compassion (SC)	.26	.08	3.50	.000	.115	.414
<i>p</i> < .01	Time since transgression (tT)	.08	.08	1.10	.278	-.068	.234
	SC x tD	-.01	.08	-.11	.910	-.175	.156
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> = .12	constant	.00	.07	.04	.96	-.141	.148
<i>F</i> (3,165) = 7.81	Self-compassion (SC)	.28	.07	3.77	.000	.132	.423

<i>p</i> < .001	Apology (Ap)	.20	.07	2.74	.007	.056	.344
	SC x Ap	.11	.07	1.54	.125	-.030	.245
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> = .11	constant	.00	.07	.05	.962	-.144	.151
<i>F</i> (3,164) = 6.63	Self-compassion (SC)	.28	.07	3.76	.000	.133	.429
<i>p</i> < .001	Relationship quality (RQ)	.18	.07	2.44	.016	.035	.328
	SC x RQ	.07	.08	.90	.37	-.082	.221

For presence of positive emotions, models including time since divorce ( $R^2 = .03$ ,  $F(3,164) = 1.89$ ;  $p > .05$ ), having a new partner ( $R^2 = .04$ ,  $F(3,165) = 2.46$ ;  $p > .05$ ), offence severity ( $R^2 = .04$ ,  $F(3,165) = 2.24$ ;  $p > .05$ ) and time since transgression ( $R^2 = .02$ ,  $F(3,154) = 1.29$ ;  $p > .05$ ) were not significant. Self-compassion was not linked to presence of positive emotions (Table 5), whereas male gender, the non-initiator status, apology and relationship quality were positively related to positive feelings. Also, no indirect effect was found.

Table 5. Magnitude and Statistical Significance of Effects of Self-compassion and Contextual Variables on Emotional Forgiveness – Presence of Positive Emotions

Models		<i>B</i>	SE	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	LLCI	ULCI
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> = .05	constant	.08	.08	.91	.362	-.091	.247
<i>F</i> (3,162) = 2.73	Self-compassion(SC)	-.09	.08	-1.10	.273	-.255	.072
<i>p</i> < .05	Gender (G)	.18	.08	2.11	.036	.012	.350
	SC x G	.07	.08	.81	.419	-.096	.231
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> = .12	constant	.14	.09	1.61	.109	-.033	.323
<i>F</i> (3,165) = 7.74	Self-compassion (SC)	-.03	.08	-.33	.741	-.197	.140
<i>p</i> < .001	Divorce initiator status (I)	-.37	.08	-4.09	.000	-.547	-.191
	SC x I	.02	.08	.27	.788	-.145	.191
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> = .21	constant	.00	.07	-.06	.951	-.142	.133
<i>F</i> (3,164) = 14.79	Self-compassion (SC)	-.12	.07	-1.76	.081	-.261	.015
<i>p</i> < .001	Apology (Ap)	.43	.07	6.15	.000	.289	.563
	SC x Ap	-.09	.07	-1.43	.155	-.225	.036
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> = .18	constant	.00	.07	.01	.993	-.141	.142
<i>F</i> (3,163) = 12.05	Self-compassion (SC)	-.11	.07	-1.58	.116	-.255	.028
<i>p</i> < .001	Relationship quality (RQ)	.40	.07	5.64	.000	.261	.542
	SC x RQ	.00	.07	.05	.956	-.141	.149

## 7. Discussion

As many divorced individuals nurture negative feelings toward their former partner long after the divorce has been completed (Rye, 2004, p. 32), a need for self-recovery and repair of the relationship emerges. It might be satisfied through self-compassion and forgiveness, both promoting post-divorce adjustment. The current study was aimed at examining the associations between self-compassion and decisional and emotional forgiveness of an ex-spouse. We also tested moderating roles of contextual factors in the hypothesized positive relationships between self-compassion and forgiveness. As gender, time since divorce, divorce initiator status, having a new partner, severity of transgression, apology, time since wrongdoing, and relationship quality usually impact forgiveness and post-divorce adjustment (Forster *et al.*, 2021, pp. 6–8; Kołodziej-Zaleska and Przybyła-Basista, 2020, pp. 373–375; Yáronoz-Yaben, 2009, p. 288), their role in the link between self-compassion and forgiveness was examined.

Consistent with the hypotheses, the study found significant links between multidimensional self-compassion and forgiveness, but only emotional, not decisional. Moreover, self-compassion positively predicted the negative dimension of emotional forgiveness, but not the positive one. More specifically, being more self-kind and mindful, feeling more communion with humanity, being less self-judging, less self-isolating and less overidentifying with painful thoughts and feelings favors overcoming negative emotions, but is not enough in evoking positive emotions toward an ex-spouse. The results are partially consistent with the prior research showing a positive association between self-compassion and forgiveness (Allen *et al.*, 2015, pp. 11–13; Fahimdanesh *et al.*, 2020, pp. 5–6; Roxas *et al.*, 2014, pp. 57–58). Our findings demonstrating the positive association between self-compassion and reduction of negative emotions after transgression committed by an ex-spouse might be interpreted in the light of research of Wu *et al.* (2019, pp. 3–4) and Miyagawa and Taniguchi (2020, pp. 6–7). They found that more self-compassionate people were less angry and ruminating, and more likely to find temporal distance to the past. Reduction of anger and rumination and letting go of the past might be mechanisms explaining the self-compassion-forgiveness link. Moreover, since self-compassion requires recognition that no human is perfect, acceptance and understanding of the transgression and the transgressor might reduce negative emotions after an interpersonal offence (Roxas, 2014, p. 58).

At the same time, we found no positive association between self-compassion and positive forgiving emotions. Moreover, self-kindness and common humanity were negatively related to presence of positive emotions toward

an ex-spouse, and self-judgement was positively related to positive emotions, though regression analyses did not confirm it. Thus, our results show that although self-compassion might be effective in reducing negative emotions, it does not help evoke positive feelings after a transgression committed by a former spouse. Similarly, the study by Pelucchi *et al.* (2017, pp. 123–125) demonstrated that women's self-compassion reduced their negative emotions toward themselves, but was not related to the positive dimension of self-forgiveness. The findings are consistent with the notion and research showing that negative and positive dimensions of forgiveness have different antecedents and correlates (Fincham and Beach, 2002, pp. 243–247; Kaleta and Mróz, 2018, pp. 20–21; Mróz and Kaleta, 2017, pp. 147–150; Tsang *et al.*, 2006, pp. 458–464). Moreover, an increase in goodwill and desire to rebuild a positive relationship with an ex-spouse may be more complex, demanding, or time-consuming than reducing negative emotions and motivations against them (Fincham, 2000, p. 8; Fincham, 2009, p. 357). For instance, a longitudinal study (McCullough *et al.*, 2003, pp. 546–547) proved that avoidance and revenge motivation decreased in the weeks after a transgression, while the motivation for benevolence did not change. Also, transgression severity and empathy predicted long term overcoming negative motivation toward the wrongdoer, but not longitudinal prosocial changes in one's motivations (McCullough *et al.*, 2003, p. 549).

Inconsistent with our hypotheses, none of the contextual factors moderated the link between self-compassion and forgiveness. Thus, self-compassion promotes forgiveness, specifically reduction of negative emotions, regardless of respondents' gender, time since divorce, initiator status, having a new partner, offense severity, apology, passage of time since the transgression and relationship quality. Divorcees practicing self-kindness, mindfulness, and awareness of the common threads of humanity deal better with negative emotions (MacBeth and Gumley, 2012, pp. 548–550), ruminate less (Miyagawa and Taniguchi, 2020, pp. 6–7; Wu *et al.*, 2019, pp. 3–4), cognitively accept and integrate negative experiences (Neff and Pommier, 2013, p. 161), achieve greater temporal distance from interpersonal offences in the past (Miyagawa and Taniguchi, 2020, pp. 6–7), and take other people's perspective more easily (Karremans *et al.*, 2020, pp. 300–301), which simply leads to forgiveness. The effect of self-compassion on forgiveness occurred independent of any component of circumstances related to offences. The only indirect effect was found for the interaction of self-compassion and transgression severity on decisional forgiveness, and it revealed the suppression effect. Although self-compassion was not related to decisional forgiveness, more

self-compassion following less severe transgressions impeded making the decision to forgive an ex-spouse.

Taking contextual variables into consideration, regression analyses showed that being a man, not initiating the divorce, receiving more apology and having a better relationship with an ex-spouse positively predicted all types of forgiveness, decisional and emotional, including absence of negative and presence of positive emotions. Additionally, having a new partner and longer time since divorce were better predictors of reduced negative emotions related to the wrongdoing committed by a former spouse. Time since transgression was not associated with any facet of forgiveness. Our findings are consistent with previous studies that also revealed male gender (Charzyńska, 2015, p. 1939; Piątek, 2011, p. 319; Kaleta and Mróz, 2022, p. 2825), time since divorce and having a new partner (Yáñez-Yaben, 2009, pp. 288–290; Yáñez-Yaben *et al.*, 2016, pp. 1911–1913) as well as apology and good relationship with an offender as promoting forgiveness (Kaleta and Mróz, 2021, pp. 3–4; Li *et al.*, 2021, pp. 42–44; Forster *et al.*, 2021, pp. 6–8). Like Yáñez-Yaben (2009, pp. 288–290) we also found a negative link between divorce initiative and forgiveness. It might be related to the fact that divorce is more distressing for the non-initiators, whereas – according to the stress-and-coping theory – forgiveness is one of the ways of coping with interpersonal offences (Flanagan *et al.*, 2012, p. 1220; Reed and Enright, 2006, pp. 924–926; Worthington, 2019, p. 14). Non-initiators struggle with the shock of the end of the relationship, ruminating about how it would be better to stay together, and feeling lost, abandoned, rejected, and entangled (Kołodziej-Zaleska and Przybyła-Basista, 2020, pp. 373–375; Lamela *et al.*, 2014, p. 5; Sakraida, 2005, pp. 79–90; Steiner *et al.*, 2011, p. 51). Thus, non-initiators who experience more distress might be more motivated to make the decision to forgive their former partners and replace negative emotions with positive ones, in order to relieve their stress. Moreover, higher stress has been related to greater post-divorce growth (Lamela *et al.*, 2014, p. 8). As posttraumatic growth refers to the achievement of a broader view of the self and the others, a more comprehensive system of emotional and cognitive regulation, greater psychological maturity, self-esteem and well-being (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 1996, pp. 256–258; Joseph and Linley, 2005, pp. 266–276; Kaleta and Mróz, 2023, p. 2; Lamela *et al.*, 2014, pp. 8–10; Staudinger and Kunzmann, 2005, pp. 320–326), it might result in greater willingness to forgive. Previous research showed that posttraumatic growth and forgiveness have been positively related (Heintzelman *et al.*, 2014, pp. 21–23). Possibly, non-initiators' and initiators' post-divorce adjustment involves different variables and mechanisms. Kołodziej-Zaleska and Przybyła-Basista (2020, p. 373–375) demonstrated that for non-initiators ego-resiliency mediated the associa-

tion between the feeling of loss related to divorce and psychological well-being, while for initiators ego-resiliency was not significant. Similarly, forgiveness might be more important and more desired in the process of adaptation to life after divorce for non-initiators than for initiators.

Summing up, our findings suggest that practicing self-compassion may help divorced individuals forgive their former partners various transgressions regardless of their context. Clear practical implication is to apply practicing self-compassion in counselling and therapy for individuals after divorce struggling with past transgressions committed by their ex-spouse, except for the least severe wrongdoings.

## Limitations

The present study has several limitations. First, the results obtained from a convenience sample of one nation with a specific cultural, religious, and legal context that might be relevant to the findings (Kołodziej-Zaleska and Przybyła-Basista, 2020, pp. 378–379), cannot be generalized. Second, the sample used in the study was representative in terms of age, income, and marriage duration but included more women, respondents with higher educational attainment, and very few rural inhabitants when compared to the background population, preventing the results from being generalized. Further, the authors applied a cross-sectional design, which makes causal inferences impossible. The results of the current study need further exploration related to self-compassion and the divorce experience in general, and forgiveness of an ex-spouse in particular. Qualitative research and quantitative longitudinal studies would clarify current findings as well as the origins and trajectory of self-compassion, forgiveness, and post-divorce adjustment. Forth, all variables were self-reported and therefore prone to social desirability and common methods bias. Fifth, taking into account the lack of indirect relationships between self-compassion and forgiveness, future research should investigate other potential moderators and mediators, e.g. participants' dispositional forgiveness, personality, the level of post-divorce adjustment, or co-parenting quality. Moreover, it would be interesting to investigate how the relationships between variables differ across age cohorts, since forgiveness typically increases with age. Future research should also explore how changes in family structure following divorce shape forgiveness processes, as well as their broader consequences for mental health, interpersonal relationships, and access to social support. Such work would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how forgiveness functions within

post-divorce family dynamics and how it affects individuals, families, and communities.

Date of submission: 2024-11-06;

Date of positive reviews: 2025-11-22;

Date of submission for printing: 2025-12-12.

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