

The Science of Prayer

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Everyone who is in any kind of serious relationship—with a partner, a child, a close friend—has been guilty of transgression as one time or another. That's because we're not perfect. We all commit hurtful acts, violate trust, and hope for forgiveness.

That's simply a fact, and here's another one: Nine out of 10 Americans say that they pray—at least on occasion. Florida State University psychologist Nathaniel Lambert put these two facts together and came up with an idea: Why not take all that prayer and direct it at the people who have wronged us? Is it possible that directed prayer might spark forgiveness in those doing the praying—and in the process preserve relationships?

This is obviously not a new idea. Indeed it's ancient, but Lambert and his colleagues decided to test it scientifically in two simple experiments. In the first, they had a group of men and women pray for their romantic partner. It was just a single prayer for their partner's well-being, spoken privately in a quiet room. Others—the experimental controls—also went into a quiet room, where they simply described their partner, speaking into a tape recorder.

Then they measured forgiveness. When someone hurts you, it's human nature to want to strike back, retaliate—or to withdraw from the relationship. The scientists defined forgiveness as the diminishing of these initial negative feelings, and when they analyzed all the data, the results were clear: Those who had prayed for their partner harbored fewer vengeful thoughts and emotions: They were more ready to forgive and move on.

This is remarkable, when you think that a single prayer made the difference. The researchers decided to run another test to double-check the findings. In this study, they had a group of men and women pray for a close friend every day for four weeks. Others simply reflected on the relationship, thinking positive thoughts but not praying for their friend's well-being. They also added another dimension. They used a scale to measure selfless concern for others—not any particular person but other people generally. They speculated that prayer would increase selfless concern, which in turn would boost forgiveness.

And that's just what they found. But why? How does this common spiritual practice exert its healing effects? The psychologists have an idea, which they described recently in the journal *Psychological Science*: Most of the time, couples profess and believe in shared goals, but when they hit a rough patch, they often switch to adversarial goals like retribution and resentment. These adversarial goals shift cognitive focus to the self, and it can be tough to shake that self-focus. Prayer appears to shift attention from the self back to others, which allows the resentments to fade.

For more insights into the quirks of human nature, visit the [“Full Frontal Psychology”](#) blog at True/Slant. Excerpts from “We're Only Human” also appear regularly in the magazine *Scientific*

American Mind. Wray Herbert's book, *On Second Thought: Outsmarting Your Mind's Hard-Wired Habits*, will be published by Crown in September.