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Pathways to Flourishing: The Roles of Self- and Divine Forgiveness in Mitigating the Adverse Effects of Stress and Substance Use among Adults in Trinidad and Tobago

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Abstract: The present study focused on the roles of self-forgiveness and feeling divine forgiveness in mitigating the adverse effects of stress on substance use cravings in Trinidad and Tobago. We assessed 869 individuals (62 percent of whom were women) through self-report online questionnaires. A moderation analysis using the PROCESS macro and a bootstrapping strategy (N = 5000) revealed that greater levels of self-forgiveness weakened the positive relationship between stress and substance use cravings, though the relationship remained significant. This moderating effect was evident only when individuals reported high levels of feeling divine forgiveness. The findings suggest that both forms of forgiveness lessen the impact of stress on substance use cravings, highlighting their potential as protective factors and underscoring the importance of incorporating religious and spiritual dimensions into psychological education and intervention. However, the study's cross-sectional nature makes it difficult to make causal inferences, indicating a need for longitudinal research.

Keywords: flourishing; self-forgiveness; divine forgiveness; stress; substance use; substance misuse

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1. Introduction

The concept of flourishing, which is deeply embedded in the broad field of well-being research, has garnered significant academic interest, because it encapsulates what it means to live a fulfilling and meaningful life. Flourishing transcends mere happiness, encompassing a multidimensional construct that includes physical and mental health, purpose, character and virtue, close social relationships, and financial and material stability (VanderWeele 2017a; Agenor et al. 2017; Rule et al. 2024). As such, it reflects Aristotle's notion of eudaimonia, wherein true well-being derives from living according to one's virtues and realizing one's potential (Symons and VanderWeele 2024).

Grounded in positive psychology, flourishing relates to the strengths and virtues that enable individuals and communities to thrive. Seligman's PERMA (positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment) model offers a framework for understanding flourishing (Seligman 2011). Experiencing joy, gratitude, forgiveness, and

other positive emotions regularly contributes significantly to living a flourishing life. For example, being deeply involved in activities based on one's strengths and interests leads to a state of flow, enhancing overall life satisfaction (Ho and Chan 2022). High-quality social connections offer emotional support and a sense of belonging (Holliman et al. 2021), while having a purpose and understanding one's contributions to the wider world foster fulfillment and direction (Chen et al. 2022). Finally, setting and achieving goals engender competence and pride (Dreer 2021).

Studies have shown that individuals who report high levels of flourishing experience better physical health (Keyes and Simoes 2012), less perceived stress (Abdollahi et al. 2018), greater resilience (Ekman and Simon-Thomas 2021), and more overall life satisfaction (Bakracheva 2020). Flourishing in students has been linked to improved academic performance and increased motivation (Datu et al. 2020; Chamizo-Nieto et al. 2021). In healthcare, flourishing can produce better patient outcomes and an enhanced quality of life (Cho et al. 2021; Fuller-Thomson and West 2019). Flourishing scores tend to increase with age and are also positively correlated with employment, marital status, and education levels (Weziak-Bialowolska et al. 2021; Ekşi et al. 2022). Cultural variations have been observed; for example, women in Japan report greater flourishing than men, while the opposite is true in Brazil (Crabtree et al. 2021).

Religion and spirituality play an important role in fostering flourishing and mitigating stress across diverse cultures (Johnson et al. 2023). Attending religious services and other forms of spiritual engagement provide social support, promote positive emotions, and offer meaning and purpose to one's life (VanderWeele 2017b). Participation in religious or spiritual practices can profoundly enhance physical and mental health, contributing to overall well-being and resilience (Balboni et al. 2022).

1.1. Flourishing and Stress

Flourishing can alleviate the detrimental effects of high stress levels on health (Abdollahi et al. 2018; Agenor et al. 2017; Seligman 2011). It can be nurtured within a psychosocial environment that promotes positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. Positive emotions have been shown to reduce perceived burdens and their adverse health effects (Denovan and Macaskill 2017; Folkman 2008; Folkman and Moskowitz 2000), improve coping mechanisms (Gloria et al. 2013; Waugh 2014), and enhance emotional regulation during episodes of acute stress (Ong et al. 2006; Tugade and Fredrickson 2004). Fredrickson et al. (2000) refer to the "undoing effect" of positive emotions, which leads to faster cardiovascular and cognitive recovery after negative emotional experiences. Consequently, a greater positive effect is associated with a reduced mortality risk (Okely et al. 2017; Liu et al. 2016).

Fredrickson's (2004) broaden-and-build theory posits that positive emotions facilitate the development of physical, intellectual, and social resources. Beyond positive emotions, other aspects of flourishing interact with stress. Peifer et al. (2014) found that high physiological arousal during stress negatively affects flow experiences. Commitment and control (as measures of engagement) have been shown to reduce the negative effects of stress on health (Schmitz et al. 2000). Social support correlates with a better subjective well-being and lower stress vulnerability (Inagaki and Eisenberger 2016; Ditzen and Heinrichs 2007). Finding meaning in one's life enhances coping processes and lowers perceived stress (Park 2010). Self-efficacy (as a measure of accomplishment) is also associated with lower perceived stress, burnout, and exhaustion (Prati et al. 2010; Schwarzer and Hallum 2008). Finally, interventions based on positive psychology can elevate perceived well-being and reduce the severity of depression (Bolier et al. 2013).

Researchers have shown that chronic stress significantly increases the risk of substance use disorders (Sinha 2008). High-stress environments and traumatic experiences are strongly correlated with the initiation and escalation of substance use (Dube et al. 2003). Patterson et al. (2021) observed that students experienced higher levels of distress due to disruptions to their studies, financial concerns, and uncertainty about the future during

the COVID-19 pandemic; they then resorted to using substances such as alcohol, tobacco, and cannabis as a coping mechanism. Similarly, a recent meta-analysis by Pellicane et al. (2023) found significant correlations between stress and alcohol and drug use frequency. Flourishing individuals are less likely to engage in substance use, because they possess higher levels of resilience and have healthier coping mechanisms (Keyes 2002). Positive emotions and strong social connections serve as protective factors, reducing the impact of stress and decreasing the likelihood of substance use (Fredrickson 2004). Huppert and So (2013) discovered that flourishing individuals exhibit lower levels of stress and higher levels of emotional stability. In summary, flourishing individuals experience less stress, and when stress is unavoidable, flourishing individuals can manage it more productively.

1.2. Self-Forgiveness

Self-forgiveness, a positive emotion linked to religion and spirituality, can enhance flourishing and reduce stress and substance use (Toussaint 2022). It involves acknowledging one's mistakes, feeling remorse, and letting go of self-directed negative emotions (Strelan 2017). This does not mean excusing harmful behavior, but recognizing human imperfection and fostering self-compassion. Self-forgiveness is associated with lower levels of depression and anxiety and higher levels of psychological well-being (Hall and Fincham 2005). Positive emotions are bolstered when individuals forgive themselves, reducing negative self-talk and increasing self-worth and self-acceptance (Bem et al. 2021; Bell et al. 2017; Skalski-Bednarz et al. 2024a).

Self-forgiveness removes the mental barriers caused by guilt and shame, allowing for a greater focus on and enjoyment of various pursuits (Fisher and Exline 2010). High-quality relationships benefit from self-forgiveness, because individuals who are kind to themselves are often more empathetic and understanding of others (Woodyatt and Wenzel 2013). Self-forgiveness also facilitates the quest to find meaning in life, because it makes it easier to move past mistakes and contribute positively to the world (Graham et al. 2017). An individual is more likely to achieve their goals and feel accomplished when they apply self-forgiveness, because it mitigates the fear of failure and encourages perseverance (Hall and Fincham 2008).

The positive relationship between self-forgiveness and flourishing is the result of reduced stress and better well-being (Toussaint et al. 2017). Webb and Toussaint (2018)—who expand upon Worthington's (2006) stress-and-coping theory—argue that self-forgiveness can counter the harmful effects of self-condemnation on health and well-being. Their self-condemnation–self-forgiveness–addiction/recovery model (Webb and Toussaint 2018) posits that self-condemnation, which encompasses a range of negative emotions (e.g., guilt, shame, anger, regret, disappointment, despair, resentment, and psychache), is stressful for a person. Individuals who engage in counterproductive or destructive activities often become self-condemnatory, and attempts to change these behaviors frequently result in relapse—followed by more self-loathing and higher levels of stress. Self-forgiveness can effectively address these outcomes by helping individuals to recognize and accept their mistakes while fostering self-compassion and commitment to change. These processes reduce negative emotions and make long-term recovery from addiction more likely (Webb and Toussaint 2018).

Studies have underscored the benefits of self-forgiveness in addiction recovery, where it has been associated with reduced alcohol-related problems and lower levels of substance use (Webb et al. 2006). Self-forgiveness interventions—such as Worthington's REACH (recall, empathize, altruistic, commit, and hold on) model—have demonstrated efficacy in promoting psychological well-being and decreasing addictive behaviors (Scherer et al. 2011). Webb and Jeter (2015) proposed that incorporating self-forgiveness into addiction treatment programs can enhance the effectiveness of the latter in addressing the emotional and psychological barriers that frequently impede recovery.

However, it is important to acknowledge that some studies have shown negative outcomes accompanying self-forgiveness in substance use and gambling. While the dominant

view in the literature is that self-forgiveness enhances health and well-being, some research suggests that it may not benefit those who forgive themselves for ongoing harmful behaviors. In these cases, self-forgiveness can reduce motivation to change, leading to continued harmful behavior and potentially undermining well-being in the long run (Squires et al. 2012; Wohl et al. 2017). These negative effects arise when people let themselves off the hook, also called pseudo-self-forgiveness, which is a low-responsibility or responsibility-less self-forgiveness. Woodyatt and Wenzel (2013) have extensively studied this phenomenon. Griffin's (2016) dual-process model emphasizes the need for responsibility taking in responsible self-forgiveness.

1.3. Divine Forgiveness

Incorporating religiosity into the relationship between forgiveness and flourishing holds promise, given the positive associations between spiritual engagement and well-being and the fact that the majority of people in many contemporary societies have religious beliefs (Pew Research Center 2024), despite a rise in secularism (Twenge et al. 2016). For many, religious beliefs are central to their lives and influence their behavior, such as their capacity to forgive (Skalski-Bednarz and Toussaint 2024). Studies that have addressed feeling forgiven by a religious deity (e.g., Akl and Mullet 2010; Krause 2017; McConnell and Dixon 2012; Toussaint et al. 2001) indicate that feeling divine forgiveness is associated with less death anxiety, greater self-forgiveness, and lower expectations of contrition from others (Krause and Ellison 2003). Feeling divine forgiveness has been described as feeling absolved of one's sins by a Higher Power and being set free from the associated guilt. It provides a sense of redemption, reconciliation with God, and spiritual liberation (Fincham 2022). In a study on college students, feeling divine forgiveness was correlated with less anger and suicidal behavior (Hirsch et al. 2012). Despite such findings, it is rarely the central focus of research and is often measured with just one item (Griffin et al. 2014). Neglecting the influence of feeling divine forgiveness limits our understanding of self-forgiveness and its role in flourishing. Religious beliefs play a crucial role in this process for many, and feeling divine forgiveness can significantly enhance self-forgiveness (Fincham and May 2019).

It is, therefore, reasonable to propose that feeling divine forgiveness can enhance the experience of self-forgiveness, as Hall and Fincham's (2005) theoretical framework—which outlines the mechanisms involved in self-forgiveness after wrongdoing—indicates. Studies integrating this model suggest that increased perceived forgiveness by a Higher Power is linked to greater self-forgiveness over time, suggesting that the former may indeed influence the latter (Fincham and May 2020; Hall and Fincham 2008). Similarly, albeit in a cross-sectional study, Webb et al. (2017b) found that pastoral-related care was associated with feeling forgiven by God, which, in turn, was associated with self-forgiveness. In sum, research has consistently shown a strong positive association between divine forgiveness and self-forgiveness (Bassett et al. 2016; Krause 2017; Krause and Ellison 2003; McConnell and Dixon 2012). Fincham and May (2019) argue that high levels of both types of forgiveness might confer the greatest benefits and that feeling divine forgiveness may moderate the relationship between self-forgiveness and psychological outcomes. In particular, high self-forgiveness and feeling divine forgiveness are associated with fewer depressive symptoms in young Americans.

These findings are interesting in light of earlier studies on individuals with alcohol use disorders who have sought outpatient treatment. In one longitudinal study, self-forgiveness predicted alcohol-related outcomes over six months (Webb et al. 2009). In another study (Webb et al. 2011), baseline measures for alcohol-related behavior for the previous ninety days were associated with feeling divine forgiveness; the percentage of heavy drinking days and the number of drinks per drinking day were negatively associated with feeling divine forgiveness, while the percentage of abstinent days was positively associated. It should be noted that none of these studies considered the potential interactions between self-forgiveness and feeling divine forgiveness that may underlie substance use mitigation.

1.4. Present Study

Notwithstanding multicultural projects like the Global Flourishing Study (Crabtree et al. 2021), the Caribbean is underrepresented in the literature on human flourishing. The present study addresses this lacuna by focusing on the fostering of flourishing in Trinidad and Tobago, a country challenged (though not uniquely) by high levels of crime, substance misuse, and other mental-health-related issues, each of which are exacerbated by economic disparities and cultural tensions (Sharpe and Shafe 2016). Given the prevalence of self-initiated and self-perpetuated harm, opportunities for self-forgiveness are abound, suggesting that promoting self-forgiveness might have a strong influence on the physical, mental, relational, and religious/spiritual health of the islands. Following Webb et al. (2009, 2011) and Fincham and May (2019), we tested the hypothesis—with cross-sectional data—that self-forgiveness and feeling divine forgiveness can buffer the positive link between perceived stress and substance use cravings. We expected that self-forgiveness would mitigate this association, positing that the relationship between stress and substance use cravings would be stronger when self-forgiveness was low and that self-forgiveness would have a moderating effect only when the level of feeling divine forgiveness was high (Figure 1).

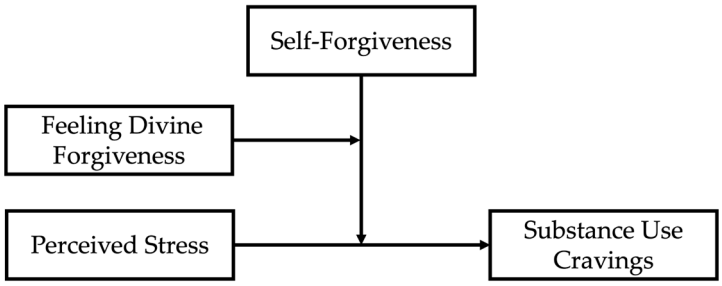

Figure 1. The self-forgiveness and divine forgiveness buffering model of stress and substance use.

2. Results

The results from Harman's single-factor test revealed that the first factor accounted for 19.21% of the variance (below the 40% threshold). Consequently, common method bias was not a significant concern. The means, standard deviations, skewness, kurtosis, and correlations among the variables are presented in Table 1. Preliminary analyses indicated that perceived stress was negatively correlated with self-forgiveness and positively correlated with substance use cravings. Self-forgiveness was negatively associated with substance use cravings and positively associated with feeling divine forgiveness. Additionally, feeling divine forgiveness was negatively correlated with substance use cravings and positively correlated with religiousness and spirituality.

Table 1. Means and correlations (N = 869).

Variable	*M* (*SD*)	Skewness	Kurtosis	1.	2.	3.	4.
1. Perceived Stress	4.54 (1.95)	−0.6	−0.93	--			
2. Self-Forgiveness	4.46 (0.89)	0.36	0.6	−0.31 ***	--		
3. Feeling Divine Forgiveness	2.62 (0.61)	−1.43	1.26	−0.02	0.2 ***	--	
4. Substance Use Cravings	2.41 (1.66)	0.97	−0.38	0.37 ***	−0.3 ***	−0.12 ***	--
Religiousness	3.31 (0.97)	−0.25	−0.2	0.04	0.05	0.31 ***	0.02
Spirituality	3.37 (0.95)	−0.16	−0.31	0.01	0.06	0.24 ***	0.04

*** $p \leq 0.001$.

2.1. Demographic Variables

In the ANOVA and Gabriel post hoc comparisons (appropriate for groups of unequal sizes), significant demographic differences were observed in perceptions of substance use cravings and forgiveness. Men exhibited higher substance use cravings scores ($p < 0.001$).

Afro-Trinidadians reported higher levels of experiencing divine forgiveness than individuals of other races ($p < 0.001$), while Chinese- and Caucasian-Trinidadians reported higher levels of substance use cravings ($p < 0.001$). Education had an impact on forgiveness: individuals with more than four years of post-secondary education reported higher self-forgiveness scores than those who did not have a high school education ($p = 0.009$) or those who possessed only a high school diploma ($p = 0.004$). Income level was positively correlated with self-forgiveness ($r = 0.16$ and $p < 0.001$) and feeling divine forgiveness ($r = 0.07$ and $p = 0.026$). Higher income levels were negatively correlated with stress ($r = -0.18$ and $p < 0.001$) and substance use cravings ($r = -0.17$ and $p < 0.001$).

2.2. Moderated Moderation

We carried out a moderated moderation analysis using model 3 in the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes 2017), including a bootstrapping strategy ($N = 5000$). Perceived stress (X) served as the focal predictor, self-forgiveness (W) as the primary moderator, feelings of divine forgiveness (Z) as the secondary moderator, and substance use cravings (Y) as the outcome variable. Gender, age, race, education, income, religiousness, and spirituality were included as covariates. The model was significant, $F_{(14, 854)} = 24.2$, $p < 0.001$, and $R^2 = 0.28$. The three-way interaction of perceived stress × self-forgiveness × feeling divine forgiveness was significantly negative, $B = -0.18$, 95% CI = [−0.26, −0.09] (Table 2). The two-way interactions of perceived stress × self-forgiveness, $B = 0.42$, 95% CI = [0.18, 0.65]; perceived stress × feeling divine forgiveness, $B = 0.9$, 95% CI = [0.53, 1.28]; and self-forgiveness × feeling divine forgiveness, $B = 0.84$, 95% CI = [0.4, 1.27] demonstrated positive effects. This suggests that feeling divine forgiveness enhanced the mitigating effect of self-forgiveness on the positive relationship between perceived stress and substance use cravings (Figure 2).

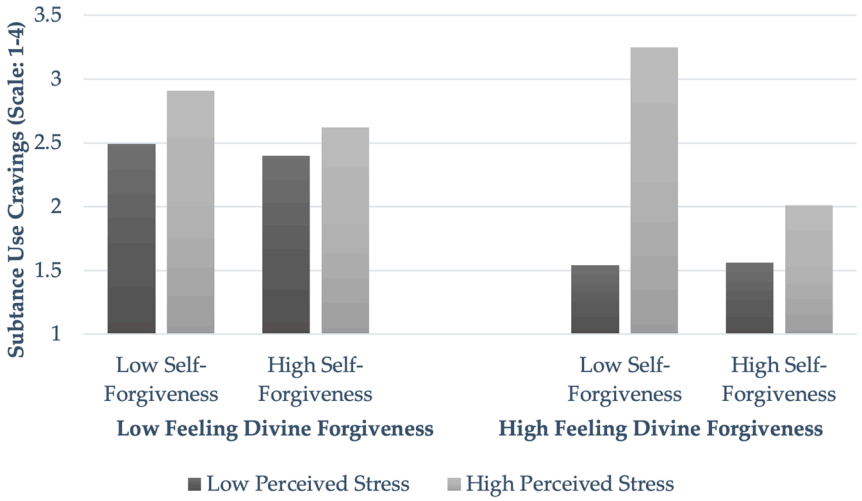

Figure 2. Interaction between perceived stress, self-forgiveness, and feeling divine forgiveness in predicting substance use cravings ($N = 869$).

The interaction between perceived stress and self-forgiveness was significant only when feeling divine forgiveness was high, $B = -0.12$, $F_{(1, 854)} = 14.8$, and $p = 0.001$. The stress × self-forgiveness interaction was not significant when feeling divine forgiveness was low, $B = 0.06$, $F_{(1, 854)} = 2.16$, and $p = 0.142$. Table 3 shows how perceived stress affected substance use cravings at different levels of self-forgiveness (low and high) and feeling divine forgiveness (low and high). The relationship between perceived stress and substance use cravings was strongest when self-forgiveness was low and feeling divine forgiveness was high, $B = 0.4$, 95% CI = [0.32, 0.49]. At the same level of feeling divine forgiveness, but when self-forgiveness was high, the effect was smaller, $B = 0.2$, 95% CI = [0.13, 0.28].

Table 2. Moderating effect of self-forgiveness on the relationship between perceived stress and substance use cravings, stratified by level of feeling divine forgiveness perception (*N* = 869).

Variable	*B*	*SE*	*t*	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	13.67 ***	2.79	4.9	8.2	19.15
Perceived Stress (X)	−1.86 ***	0.52	−3.59	−2.88	−0.84
Self-Forgiveness (W)	−2.33 ***	0.62	−3.77	−3.54	−1.11
X × W	0.42 ***	0.12	3.51	0.18	0.65
Feeling Divine Forgiveness (Z)	−4.51 ***	1.01	−4.48	−6.49	−2.54
X × Z	0.9 ***	0.19	4.71	0.53	1.28
W × Z	0.84 ***	0.22	3.79	0.4	1.27
X × W × Z	−0.18 ***	0.04	−4.14	−0.26	−0.09
Gender	−0.54 ***	0.10	−5.48	−0.74	−0.35
Age	−0.01	0.01	−0.32	−0.01	0.01
Race	0.11 **	0.04	2.99	0.04	0.18
Education	0.22 ***	0.05	4.83	0.13	0.31
Income	−0.13 ***	0.03	−4.60	−0.19	−0.08
Religiousness	−0.05	0.08	−0.70	−0.20	0.10
Spirituality	0.12	0.07	1.57	−0.03	0.26

** $p \leq 0.01$ and *** $p \leq 0.001$.

Table 3. Conditional effects of perceived stress on substance use cravings at different levels of self-forgiveness and feeling divine forgiveness (*N* = 869).

Self-Forgiveness	Feeling Divine Forgiveness	*B*	*SE*	*t*	LLCI	ULCI
Low	Low	0.16 ***	0.05	3.39	0.07	0.25
Low	High	0.4 ***	0.04	9.06	0.32	0.49
High	Low	0.26 ***	0.06	4.58	0.15	0.36
High	High	0.2 ***	0.04	5.58	0.13	0.28

*** $p \leq 0.001$.

3. Material and Methods

3.1. Participants and Procedure

The present study was conducted using the online platform Qualtrics in 2023. Participation was restricted to English-speaking individuals living in Trinidad and Tobago who identified with a religious group, but had no other specific requirements. Participants were recruited via social media channels (including Facebook and X), resulting in a diverse sample of 869 individuals ranging in age from eighteen to eighty-two, *M* = 29.25, SD = 11.49; for other sociodemographic characteristics, see Table 4. The participants filled out questionnaires on their stress perception, self-forgiveness disposition, feelings of divine forgiveness, and substance use cravings. The questionnaire took about fifteen minutes to complete.

Table 4. Demographic characteristics of the sample (*N* = 869).

Variable	Percentage (%)
Gender	
Men	36%
Women	62%
Other	2%
Race	
Afro-Trinidadian	46%
Chinese-Trinidadian	1%
Mixed	34%
Indian-Trinidadian	6%
Caucasian-Trinidadian	8%
Other	5%

Table 4. *Cont.*

Variable	Percentage (%)
Education	
Less than High School	5%
High School	41%
Two-Year Degree	12%
College/University	32%
Beyond Four Years	10%
Annual Income (USD)	
Less than USD 30,000	41%
USD 30,001 to USD 60,000	20%
USD 60,001 to USD 90,000	13%
USD 90,001 to USD 120,000	9%
USD 120,001 to USD 150,000	5%
USD 150,001 to USD 180,000	5%
More than USD 180,000	7%

3.2. Measures

3.2.1. Perceived Stress

Stress perception was evaluated using a single-item measure developed by Fredriksson-Larsson et al. (2015). The participants responded to the prompt, "Stress means a situation when a person feels tense, restless, nervous, or anxious, or is unable to sleep at night because his or her mind is troubled all the time. Do you feel that kind of stress these days?" Their responses were captured using five response options ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*).

3.2.2. Self-Forgiveness

The assessment of a disposition for self-forgiveness was conducted using the Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS) developed by Thompson et al. (2005). It comprises three 6-item subscales, but only the Forgiveness of Self subscale was employed in the present study. This measures the degree to which individuals forgive themselves for perceived moral failures. Its items include statements such as "I hold grudges against myself for negative things I've done" and "It is really hard for me to accept myself once I've messed up", rated using seven response options ranging from 1 (*almost always false of me*) to 7 (*almost always true of me*). The subscale's estimated internal consistency was demonstrated by a Cronbach's alpha (α) of 0.84 and McDonald's omega (ω) of 0.83 in the current sample. The mean values were reported for this scale and each additional measure, with higher scores indicating a lesser capacity for self-forgiveness.

3.2.3. Divine Forgiveness

The Divine Forgiveness Scale (DFS), developed by Fincham and May (2021), was used. This instrument gauges the extent to which individuals experience a sense of being forgiven by God. It includes four items, each rated using four response options, where higher scores reflect a greater sense of divine forgiveness. The DFS showed a good estimated internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha (α) of 0.82 and McDonald's omega (ω) of 0.82. The scale items include "How often have you felt that God forgives you?" and "I am certain that God forgives me when I seek his forgiveness", rated from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*many times*). These items emphasize the subjective experience of feeling forgiven by God.

3.2.4. Substance Use Cravings

Craving levels were assessed using the six-item Desires for Alcohol Questionnaire (DAQ-6), developed by Mo et al. (2013). This instrument, which evolved from more extensive DAQ versions, targets dimensions such as "strong desire and intention to use" and "negative reinforcement". The scale was modified to broadly assess desires to use

substances (i.e., alcohol or drugs), making it suitable for use in a population without substance use disorders. Responses were measured using seven response options, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The DAQ-6′s reliability has been confirmed previously, and it exhibited a strong estimated internal consistency in the present sample, with a Cronbach's alpha (α) of 0.93 and a McDonald's omega (ω) of 0.92. Sample scale items include "I want to drink/use drugs so much I can taste it" and "My desire to drink/use drugs now seems overwhelming".

3.2.5. General Religiousness and Spirituality

Two single-item queries were used to assess general religiousness and spirituality (see Fetzer Institute 1999). The participants responded to the questions ("To what extent do you consider yourself a religious person?" and "To what extent do you consider yourself a spiritual person?") on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*). The religiousness item also served as a screening tool, with eight participants being excluded based on their non-religious identification.

3.3. Statistical Analysis

Harman's single-factor test was used to address common method bias. The normality of the distributions was assessed using the Kolmogorov−Smirnov test, and Levene's test was applied to verify the homogeneity of variances. Both confirmed the appropriateness of employing parametric tests. Descriptive statistics, including means (*M*s) and standard deviations (SDs), were calculated. Pearson's correlation coefficient was computed to examine the zero-order relationships between variables. Subsequent analyses involved conducting an independent sample one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) and incorporating a Gabriel post hoc test to uncover the differences between groups. We conducted a moderation analysis using model 3 of Hayes's (Hayes 2017) PROCESS macro Version 3.6.1. All variables were standardized before analysis, which we carried out using SPSS Version 29; all tests were two-sided to ascertain significance levels.

4. Discussion

Researchers have suggested that forgiveness and religious involvement contribute to the development of flourishing (VanderWeele 2017b; Johnson et al. 2023; Balboni et al. 2022; Toussaint 2022). The present study extends their findings by exploring the roles of self-forgiveness and feeling divine forgiveness in moderating the relationship between perceived stress and substance use cravings among a sample of the population of Trinidad and Tobago. Our findings show how these forms of forgiveness can serve as protective factors against the negative consequences of alcohol and drug (mis)use.

For example, self-forgiveness and feeling divine forgiveness interact to moderate the impact of stress on substance use cravings. Higher levels of self-forgiveness weaken the positive relationship between stress and substance use cravings, though this relationship still remains significant. This moderating effect is evident only when individuals report high levels of feeling divine forgiveness. The model we employed revealed significant simple interactions between different combinations of perceived stress, self-forgiveness, and feeling divine forgiveness in predicting substance use cravings. These findings are noteworthy, because the study was conducted on a non-clinical sample, highlighting the potential to enhance resilience and promote flourishing among healthy individuals (rather than simply alleviating symptoms or disorders). This emphasizes the importance of identifying the protective factors that support health and well-being in non-clinical populations, with the potential for broader generalization to larger and more diverse groups.

The findings align with previous research highlighting the protective role of forgiveness in mental health and well-being (Abdollahi et al. 2018; Agenor et al. 2017; Skalski-Bednarz et al. 2024b). Hall and Fincham (2005) and Webb and Toussaint (2018) suggest that self-forgiveness for past transgressions can reduce negative emotions, enhance psychological resilience, and aid in overcoming addictions. Our results build upon their frameworks

by indicating that the benefits of self-forgiveness are amplified when individuals also feel divine forgiveness, reinforcing the idea that religious and spiritual beliefs play a crucial role in forgiveness (McCullough and Worthington 1999). While self-forgiveness alone can help individuals to cope with stress, feeling divine forgiveness provides an added layer of emotional support and validation, for example, in Trinidad and Tobago. Fincham and May (2019) observed that self-forgiveness interacts with feeling divine forgiveness in predicting lower psychological distress in young Americans. We extended this empirical evidence base by highlighting how these forms of forgiveness extend their beneficial effects to include a reduction in substance use cravings under stress.

However, it is also critical to note that individuals who experience high levels of divine forgiveness but low levels of self-forgiveness appear to have the highest levels of substance use cravings. This suggests a potential risk profile characterized by high divine and low self-forgiveness, indicating that feeling divine forgiveness without internalizing it into self-forgiveness can exacerbate substance use cravings. This dynamic can be seen as not forgiving oneself despite feeling divine forgiveness, akin to rejecting the forgiveness offered by one's faith. It is important to emphasize that this observation does not imply a causal effect, as the study is cross-sectional.

In two longitudinal studies (Webb et al. 2006; Webb et al. 2011), self-forgiveness (but not feeling divine forgiveness) predicted alcohol-related outcomes over six months, while feeling divine forgiveness was associated with less heavy drinking and more abstinence over ninety days (but only at baseline). Although our study is cross-sectional, the results suggest that having high levels of both self-forgiveness and feeling divine forgiveness may help to reduce substance use cravings, a moderation effect not tested in the above-cited studies. This combination of influences is also interesting in light of Webb et al.'s (2006) conclusion that self-forgiveness might be the more difficult of the two, but is essential, because its absence can hinder complete recovery and lead to relapses (see also Charzyńska et al. 2018). Belief in absolution from guilt and shame by a Higher Power may be a strong motivation for self-forgiveness (see also Webb et al. 2017b). Furthermore, to the extent that divine forgiveness—or feeling forgiven by or in harmony with one's conception of the sacred—is a precursor to self-forgiveness, one's relationship with the sacred may be a critical facilitator for recovery or addressing problems associated with substance (mis)use. The critical role of the sacred in addiction recovery is consistent with over 80 years of anecdotal evidence attested to by adherents to the twelve-step model of addiction and recovery (see Orrok 1989; Steps 1981).

Our study also contributes to the literature by addressing a critical research gap in the case of Caribbean populations, notwithstanding the multicultural nature of the Global Flourishing Study and similar projects (Huppert and So 2013; Crabtree et al. 2021). By focusing on Trinidad and Tobago, we provide insights into the unique cultural and social factors influencing the dynamics of forgiveness, stress, and substance (mis)use in this region.

Our findings reveal significant differences in substance use cravings and forgiveness perceptions across gender, race, and levels of education and income. Men reported higher levels of substance use cravings, and Afro-Trinidadians reported higher levels of feeling divine forgiveness than other racial groups. Instability in income, employment, and secure housing was significantly linked to increased substance use cravings. Globally, individuals experiencing instability in these areas (Jose et al. 2024), and men in general (White 2020), tend to consume more alcohol and be more prone to substance-related injuries and deaths than women, though this gap has been narrowing (especially among adolescents and emerging adults). Black individuals generally exhibit higher levels of religiousness and spirituality (Keyes 2009). While our study observed that Chinese- and Caucasian-Trinidadians showed higher substance use cravings compared with other races, Holt et al. (2014) found that healthier lifestyle choices among Black individuals (e.g., less alcohol and smoking) can be attributed to religious teachings that discourage unhealthy behaviors. Our findings underscore the importance of culturally sensitive interventions

that take into account diverse experiences and backgrounds when promoting flourishing and less substance (mis)use.

4.1. Practical Implications

If these findings are replicated with longitudinal data using probability samples from larger populations, they could have important practical implications. Recognizing the importance of both self-forgiveness and feeling divine forgiveness in the recovery process is crucial, as these can reduce negative emotions, enhance psychological resilience, and mitigate the risk of relapse. The twelve-step model (e.g., Orrok 1989; Steps 1981), which emphasizes resolving resentments, underscores the benefits of incorporating self-forgiveness into addiction treatment (Webb and Toussaint 2018). Given the observed interaction between self-forgiveness and feeling divine forgiveness in reducing substance use cravings, integrating spiritual and religious elements into self-forgiveness therapy might enhance treatment outcomes (as an example, see Webb 2021). This holistic approach addresses the psychological aspects of addiction while leveraging the motivational power of spiritual beliefs to foster long-term healing and flourishing. For forgiveness to be truly effective, it involves a process of acknowledging wrongdoing, experiencing genuine guilt and regret, making amends, and committing to personal improvement (see Webb et al. 2017a). These steps are essential before one can fully embrace both God's forgiveness and self-forgiveness. Additionally, since our study is based on a sample from the general population, implementing forgiveness education as a preventative measure might improve public health and overall well-being, extending its benefits beyond addiction recovery.

4.2. Limitations

The present study has several limitations. First, its cross-sectional observational nature makes it impossible to establish causality. Additionally, stress and substance use cravings may have a bi-directional relationship; future researchers might consider the interplay between these constructs over time using a longitudinal design to establish whether this is the case. Second, the study's primary focus was the interaction between self-forgiveness and feeling divine forgiveness, so the effects of potential additional psychological variables on the relationship between perceived stress and substance use cravings were not measured; this might have led to outcome bias. Future researchers might, therefore, include psychological capital components (e.g., hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism) in the moderated mechanism. The sample presents another limitation: since it was not a probability sample of the population of Trinidad and Tobago, its findings might not be generalizable. This limitation highlights the need for representative samples to ensure that results can be generalized to the broader population of Trinidad and Tobago and potentially to the Caribbean region in general. Future studies might include more diverse cross-cultural samples to address this shortcoming. Finally, since all the participants identified as believers, specific religious affiliations were not controlled for. Religious beliefs can involve distinct interpretations of divine forgiveness, influencing its meaning and effects. Given that the sample likely reflected a predominantly Christian perspective (because Trinidad and Tobago has a substantial Christian population (Forde 2024)), future researchers might include a wider range of religions and potential differences in perceptions of divine forgiveness, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of how religious context influences the interaction between self-forgiveness, feeling divine forgiveness, and substance (mis)use. By addressing these limitations, future researchers can develop more effective, culturally sensitive interventions aimed at promoting well-being and reducing substance misuse. Additionally, expanding on our findings, future research can explore not only the degree of religious commitment, including the extent of religious practices (e.g., practicing beyond Church regulations), but also the relationship between religious commitment, forgiveness, and the use of addictive substances. Specifically, investigating whether individuals who have used such substances differ in their capacity for self-forgiveness and their perception of divine forgiveness compared to those who have never used them would be particularly

interesting. Furthermore, further exploration of the reasons behind the use of psychoactive substances, along with detailed data on the types and frequency of substance use, can provide a more comprehensive understanding of these complex dynamics.

4.3. Conclusions

In conclusion, the results of the present study suggest that self- and divine forgiveness may jointly moderate the adverse effects of stress on substance use cravings. Our findings highlight the importance of incorporating religious and spiritual dimensions—including divine forgiveness—into psychological education on self-forgiveness as part of a preventative approach to addressing mental health and substance (mis)use issues. By fostering self-forgiveness and feelings of divine forgiveness, individuals can achieve greater resilience and flourishing, even in the face of significant social and psychological challenges.

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