

Ranking Pathways to Forgiveness in Families After Abuse Disclosure

Lilit. Martirosyan¹, Asma. Trabelsi^{2*}

¹ Department of Social Psychology, Armenian State Pedagogical University, Yerevan, Armenia

² Department of Psychology and Consulting, University of Sfax, Sfax, Tunisia

* Corresponding author email address: Asma.trabelsi@usf.tn

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to identify and rank the primary psychological, moral, and relational pathways to forgiveness in families following the disclosure of abuse, integrating qualitative and quantitative methods to construct a hierarchical model of post-trauma forgiveness.

Methods and Materials: The study employed a sequential exploratory mixed-methods design. In the first phase, a systematic qualitative content analysis was conducted using NVivo 14 based on an extensive literature review until theoretical saturation was reached. Seven major pathways to forgiveness were identified from conceptual and empirical sources. In the second phase, a quantitative ranking survey was administered to 223 participants in Tunisia, including family members, counselors, and social workers. Data were analyzed using SPSS 26, applying Friedman's ranking test and Kendall's W coefficient to determine the relative importance and consensus across the identified forgiveness pathways.

Findings: The inferential results indicated significant differences in the prioritization of forgiveness pathways ($\chi^2 = 108.72$, $p < 0.001$, Kendall's $W = 0.67$). Emotional acknowledgment and validation ranked highest (mean rank = 6.42), followed by accountability and responsibility (6.21) and relational reconnection and reconciliation (5.97), underscoring their foundational role in the forgiveness process. Cognitive reframing and meaning reconstruction (5.56) and social and therapeutic support structures (5.08) occupied mid-level ranks, while spiritual and cultural coping resources (4.77) and resilience and growth outcomes (4.35) were ranked lower, indicating their function as supplementary or long-term components. These results reveal a structured and process-oriented model of forgiveness emerging through emotional, moral, cognitive, and relational stages.

Conclusion: Forgiveness in families following abuse disclosure is a multidimensional and sequential process rooted in emotional recognition, moral accountability, and relational reconstruction, leading to eventual resilience and personal growth. The findings provide an empirical basis for developing culturally sensitive therapeutic interventions that prioritize safety, empathy, and justice in the post-abuse recovery process.

Keywords: Forgiveness pathways; abuse disclosure; family systems; emotional acknowledgment; accountability; resilience; trauma recovery

1. Introduction

Forgiveness is one of the most complex and transformative psychological processes in the aftermath of interpersonal harm. Within families, particularly those affected by abuse disclosure, the act of forgiving carries deep moral, emotional, and relational consequences. It entails not only the release of resentment but also the reconstruction of trust, empathy, and meaning in disrupted relationships. Recent interdisciplinary research suggests that forgiveness operates as a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing emotional acknowledgment, accountability, cognitive reframing, and relational reconciliation (Akhtar & Barlow, 2016; Edwards et al., 2024). In family systems, forgiveness becomes both a psychological necessity for survivors and a relational challenge that tests the integrity of familial bonds and cultural expectations. Thus, understanding how families navigate pathways to forgiveness after abuse disclosure provides insight into broader mechanisms of trauma recovery, resilience, and emotional transformation.

The landscape of family trauma and abuse disclosure has evolved significantly in recent years, revealing a growing awareness of the psychological and social complexities surrounding post-abuse forgiveness. For example, Ayaya et al. (Ayaya et al., 2023) demonstrated that children and adolescents exposed to chronic abuse within institutional and family settings often experience compounded emotional neglect and attachment disruption, which impede their ability to trust or engage in forgiveness. Such findings highlight that forgiveness cannot emerge in a vacuum; it must be supported by safety, empathy, and acknowledgment of harm. Similar results were observed by Petersson and Plantin (Petersson & Plantin, 2023), who examined male survivors of childhood sexual abuse and found that achieving intimacy and forgiveness in adulthood required a deliberate process of self-reconstruction and relational reorientation. In this light, forgiveness is not a singular act but a gradual process intertwined with healing, empowerment, and redefined selfhood.

From a psychological perspective, forgiveness therapy and related interventions have received growing empirical support as mechanisms for enhancing mental well-being and reducing residual emotional distress after trauma. A systematic review by Akhtar and Barlow (Akhtar & Barlow, 2016) demonstrated that structured forgiveness-based interventions significantly improved outcomes related to anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress across various

populations. These findings underscore forgiveness as both a therapeutic and existential process that promotes mental equilibrium and interpersonal peace. Likewise, Ha et al. (Ha et al., 2019) showed that forgiveness writing therapy fostered post-traumatic growth among survivors of sexual abuse, as participants reconstructed narratives of meaning and identity. The therapeutic process of forgiveness thereby transcends cognitive insight, encompassing emotional liberation and moral restoration—especially relevant in family contexts where abuse ruptures the moral fabric of care and safety.

However, forgiveness following abuse disclosure is neither linear nor universally achievable. Families often struggle to balance justice, accountability, and empathy, creating tension between moral responsibility and emotional survival. Spearman et al. (Spearman et al., 2023) emphasize that post-separation and post-disclosure environments often perpetuate cycles of coercion, emotional manipulation, and secondary victimization. In such contexts, calls for forgiveness may be misused as instruments of control or moral pressure, especially when the perpetrator remains embedded within the family system. Therefore, the concept of “pathways to forgiveness” must be understood as a negotiated process involving both internal psychological transformation and external relational restructuring. These pathways reflect not only the individual’s readiness to forgive but also the family’s capacity to support, validate, and sustain emotional safety.

Family-level forgiveness processes also intersect with social and cultural dynamics. In many societies, disclosure of abuse disrupts deeply ingrained norms regarding family honor, gender roles, and authority, often leading to victim silencing or stigmatization. Studies such as that by Rahbari Ghazani et al. (Rahbari Ghazani et al., 2022) reveal how family-based empowerment interventions can enhance emotional expression and reduce psychological distress, suggesting that open communication and collective emotional processing are essential precursors to forgiveness. Similarly, Rostami et al. (Rostami et al., 2014) found a strong correlation between early childhood abuse and diminished forgiveness capacity in adulthood, emphasizing that unresolved trauma impairs empathy and cognitive flexibility within marital relationships. These findings illustrate that forgiveness, particularly after intra-family abuse, involves repairing both the emotional and ethical dimensions of family life, requiring deliberate interventions to restore self-worth and interpersonal trust.

Empirical work also underscores the mediating role of empathy in facilitating forgiveness among survivors of childhood or domestic abuse. Tariq and Anjum (Tariq & Anjum, 2024) demonstrated that empathy serves as a psychological bridge between past trauma and the capacity to forgive, suggesting that individuals who can engage empathically with others—without denying their own pain—are more likely to experience forgiveness as liberating rather than self-sacrificial. This aligns with Edwards et al. (Edwards et al., 2024), who found that forgiveness mediated the relationship between mindfulness and reduced partner aggression, indicating that self-awareness and emotional regulation enhance both self-forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness. These findings collectively support a model in which forgiveness functions as an emotional regulator that transforms anger into understanding, restoring harmony not through moral concession but through psychological maturity.

Moreover, forgiveness cannot be separated from broader sociocultural and developmental factors. McGaffin et al. (McGaffin et al., 2013) found that self-forgiveness in individuals recovering from substance abuse is closely tied to the reduction of shame and guilt, both of which mirror emotional barriers encountered by survivors of family abuse. Similarly, Webb and Boye (Webb & Boye, 2024) observed that self-forgiveness mitigates suicidal ideation and emotional self-condemnation among individuals struggling with addictive behaviors, reinforcing the idea that forgiveness represents a form of emotional reparation that restores self-cohesion. When applied to family systems, these insights suggest that pathways to forgiveness must address both interpersonal and intrapersonal dimensions—helping survivors release self-directed blame while enabling offenders to take genuine accountability for harm caused.

Forgiveness in the context of abuse disclosure also reveals important developmental and intergenerational implications. Research by Mukul and Ajita (Mukul & Ajita, 2021) highlights how exposure to violence during childhood contributes to the normalization of aggression and emotional dysregulation in later relationships, reducing the likelihood of constructive conflict resolution. This continuity underscores the necessity of interventions that cultivate forgiveness and empathy early in life to disrupt cycles of harm. Basting et al. (Basting et al., 2023) further extend this argument, linking exposure to family-of-origin violence with subsequent patterns of relational aggression in digital environments, such as cyber dating abuse. Such studies demonstrate that forgiveness and accountability are not

isolated psychological acts but components of a lifelong learning process that shapes relational ethics across generations and contexts.

At the same time, the sociocultural dimensions of forgiveness play a particularly prominent role in shaping its meaning and feasibility. In collectivist societies such as Tunisia, where this study is situated, family identity and social reputation are deeply intertwined, and forgiveness processes are often influenced by religious, moral, and community norms. Emotional disclosure and acknowledgment may therefore be constrained by concerns about family cohesion and public perception. Petersson and Plantin (Petersson & Plantin, 2023) observed similar dynamics in Sweden, where male survivors negotiated forgiveness through the reconstruction of intimacy and masculinity, revealing how gender norms shape forgiveness pathways. Thus, cultural frameworks dictate not only how families interpret abuse disclosure but also how they structure the process of moral repair and emotional reintegration.

Equally, trauma-informed approaches to forgiveness underscore the necessity of addressing both individual suffering and systemic injustice. Ayaya et al. (Ayaya et al., 2023) and Spearman et al. (Spearman et al., 2023) caution that premature or coerced forgiveness can perpetuate harm if structural inequalities or power imbalances remain unaddressed. Hence, genuine forgiveness must be distinguished from forced reconciliation, requiring a supportive ecosystem of safety, validation, and professional guidance. Rahbari Ghazani et al. (Rahbari Ghazani et al., 2022) and Akhtar and Barlow (Akhtar & Barlow, 2016) both advocate for empowerment-based and structured therapeutic frameworks to ensure that forgiveness aligns with psychological readiness rather than societal pressure.

The growing intersection between clinical practice, moral psychology, and trauma research has led to the recognition of forgiveness as a dynamic relational process rather than a static outcome. Scholars such as Ha et al. (Ha et al., 2019) emphasize that forgiveness evolves through identifiable stages—recognition of harm, emotional processing, cognitive reframing, and relational repair. Similarly, Edwards et al. (Edwards et al., 2024) highlight the interplay between mindfulness and forgiveness as mutually reinforcing mechanisms that cultivate emotional clarity and compassion. These models align with the conceptual shift from forgiveness as moral obligation to forgiveness as psychological self-determination, where survivors regain

agency and coherence by reconstructing meaning and relational boundaries.

Finally, the existing literature underscores that forgiveness following abuse disclosure is inherently pluralistic—encompassing emotional, cognitive, moral, spiritual, and social dimensions. Each pathway contributes uniquely to the reconstruction of family systems disrupted by trauma. Integrating findings from clinical, sociocultural, and developmental studies (Akhtar & Barlow, 2016; Ayaya et al., 2023; Basting et al., 2023; Edwards et al., 2024; Ha et al., 2019; McGaffin et al., 2013; Mukul & Ajita, 2021; Petersson & Plantin, 2023; Rahbari Ghazani et al., 2022; Rostami et al., 2014; Spearman et al., 2023; Tariq & Anjum, 2024; Webb & Boye, 2024) suggests that forgiveness in families after abuse disclosure represents not only an emotional transition but also a form of moral reconstruction rooted in empathy, justice, and personal growth.

The aim of this study is to identify and rank the key pathways to forgiveness in families following abuse disclosure, integrating qualitative insights and quantitative prioritization to construct a comprehensive model of post-trauma relational healing.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study adopted a sequential exploratory mixed-methods design consisting of two distinct phases. The first phase involved a qualitative content analysis to identify the key pathways to forgiveness in families following the disclosure of abuse. The second phase employed a quantitative ranking survey to prioritize these pathways based on their perceived importance and frequency within family dynamics.

The target population for the quantitative phase included families, counselors, and social service professionals in Tunisia who had experience with or professional exposure to family forgiveness and post-abuse recovery processes. Using a purposive sampling strategy, 223 participants were selected to ensure representation of diverse socio-cultural backgrounds, family structures, and professional expertise. Participants ranged in age from 25 to 60 years and included both genders and various educational levels.

2.2. Measures

In the qualitative phase, data were gathered exclusively through a comprehensive systematic literature review

focused on studies published in peer-reviewed journals, reports, and theoretical frameworks addressing forgiveness in families after abuse disclosure. The literature search spanned psychology, social work, and family studies databases (including Scopus, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar). Sources were included until theoretical saturation was achieved—when no new themes or concepts emerged from the data.

Each document was imported into NVivo 14 software, where open, axial, and selective coding were conducted to extract major and minor thematic pathways to forgiveness, such as empathy development, acknowledgment of harm, reconciliation efforts, and the role of spiritual coping.

In the quantitative phase, the themes and subthemes derived from the qualitative phase were operationalized into a structured questionnaire. Participants rated and ranked the identified pathways using a five-point Likert scale, reflecting both perceived significance and emotional accessibility in the process of forgiveness within family contexts.

2.3. Data Analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic content analysis within NVivo 14. Codes were continuously refined through iterative comparison and researcher consensus until a hierarchical model of forgiveness pathways was established. Reliability was ensured through intercoder agreement exceeding 0.85.

Quantitative data from the second phase were analyzed using SPSS version 26. Descriptive statistics were first used to summarize the demographic characteristics of participants. Then, Friedman's ranking test and mean score comparison were applied to prioritize the forgiveness pathways identified in the qualitative phase. Additional inferential analyses, including Kendall's W coefficient, were used to assess the degree of consensus among participants regarding the importance of each pathway.

3. Findings and Results

The qualitative phase of this study aimed to explore and conceptualize the diverse pathways to forgiveness in families after abuse disclosure. Using a systematic literature review and inductive content analysis through NVivo 14, recurring themes and patterns were identified from existing research, clinical models, and theoretical perspectives. Through iterative coding and conceptual integration, seven major themes emerged, each representing a core dimension of the forgiveness process within family systems following

the revelation of abuse. Each theme includes multiple subthemes with associated open codes (concepts),

illustrating the emotional, cognitive, relational, and social mechanisms underpinning forgiveness.

Table 1

Main Themes, Subcategories, and Concepts

Main Themes (Categories)	Subcategories	Concepts (Open Codes)
1. Emotional Acknowledgment and Validation	1.1 Recognition of Harm	Awareness of abuse impact; acknowledgment of emotional pain; confronting denial; validation of victim's experience
	1.2 Expression of Emotions	Emotional ventilation; controlled anger release; acceptance of sadness; therapeutic crying; affect labeling
	1.3 Empathic Engagement	Perspective taking; compassion building; emotional resonance; mutual emotional recognition
2. Accountability and Responsibility	2.1 Offender Responsibility	Admission of wrongdoing; remorse expression; apology formulation; responsibility acceptance
	2.2 Family Accountability	Shared moral reflection; collective healing responsibility; moral realignment
	2.3 Reparation Efforts	Symbolic restitution; restorative gestures; compensatory actions; behavioral change commitment; trust repair
	2.4 Transparency Processes	Open dialogue; truth disclosure; narrative reconstruction
3. Cognitive Reframing and Meaning Reconstruction	3.1 Attribution Reassessment	Reducing self-blame; recognizing systemic factors; cognitive differentiation; reframing intent
	3.2 Meaning-Making	Spiritual reinterpretation; post-traumatic growth; existential insight; narrative integration
	3.3 Acceptance of Complexity	Ambivalence tolerance; recognizing moral grayness; relinquishing need for revenge
4. Relational Reconnection and Reconciliation	4.1 Trust Rebuilding	Gradual relational testing; emotional safety negotiation; boundary formation
	4.2 Restorative Dialogue	Mediated family communication; guided storytelling; repair conversations; conflict-sensitive listening
	4.3 Role Reconfiguration	Redefining family roles; boundary restructuring; shifting caregiver dynamics
	4.4 Relationship Renewal	Symbolic reconnection rituals; renewed attachment behaviors; positive memory reinforcement
5. Spiritual and Cultural Coping Resources	5.1 Religious Forgiveness Models	Divine mercy belief; prayer for healing; religious counseling; confessional rituals
	5.2 Cultural Rituals of Purification	Collective forgiveness ceremonies; symbolic cleansing; ancestral acknowledgment
	5.3 Spiritual Transformation	Transcendence experience; surrender to higher power; compassion meditation; moral transcendence
6. Social and Therapeutic Support Structures	6.1 Professional Intervention	Family therapy; trauma counseling; forgiveness-focused interventions; psychoeducation
	6.2 Peer and Community Support	Support groups; survivor networks; empathetic witnessing; public storytelling
	6.3 Legal and Institutional Context	Protective frameworks; justice involvement; institutional validation; advocacy networks
7. Resilience and Growth Outcomes	7.1 Emotional Regulation	Mindfulness practices; stress tolerance; adaptive coping; emotional stability
	7.2 Relational Resilience	Strengthened family cohesion; cooperative problem-solving; renewed intimacy; empathy-based bonding
	7.3 Post-Forgiveness Flourishing	Enhanced meaning in life; improved well-being; self-compassion; intergenerational learning; moral maturity

The first major theme, *Emotional Acknowledgment and Validation*, reflects the crucial initial stage in the forgiveness process, where family members begin to confront the reality of harm and validate the emotional experiences of those affected. This involves recognizing the extent of psychological and relational damage caused by abuse and providing a safe space for the victim to express feelings of anger, grief, and fear. Emotional expression and validation act as a therapeutic release, breaking the silence often surrounding abuse and allowing empathy to emerge within

the family system. When emotions are acknowledged and mirrored by others, the groundwork for forgiveness and healing is established through genuine emotional resonance and understanding.

The second theme, *Accountability and Responsibility*, captures the moral and interpersonal mechanisms through which individuals and families reestablish ethical balance after abuse disclosure. Forgiveness is not possible without the offender's explicit admission of guilt, remorse, and commitment to behavioral change. Equally, families must

engage in shared moral reflection, recognizing their collective responsibility to support the victim and promote justice within relational boundaries. Acts of reparation—symbolic or practical—alongside transparent communication and truth-telling processes restore a sense of moral coherence. These practices shift forgiveness from passive endurance toward active moral restoration, where trust begins to rebuild through accountability.

The third theme, *Cognitive Reframing and Meaning Reconstruction*, highlights the internal cognitive work required to transform the narrative of abuse and its emotional consequences. Victims and family members engage in reinterpreting past events, reassessing attributions of blame, and constructing new meanings that align with growth and resilience. This process involves reframing harmful beliefs about guilt, intent, and worthiness, as well as seeking existential understanding through spirituality or philosophy. Through meaning-making, individuals develop a sense of coherence and purpose beyond trauma, enabling forgiveness to emerge as an outcome of insight rather than obligation. Accepting complexity and moral ambiguity also allows family members to hold space for compassion while maintaining boundaries.

The fourth theme, *Relational Reconnection and Reconciliation*, focuses on the interpersonal repair that follows acknowledgment and cognitive reframing. Forgiveness manifests in relational behaviors, where trust is cautiously rebuilt through open communication and negotiated boundaries. Restorative dialogues enable family members to express needs, clarify intentions, and reconstruct relationships based on new expectations of safety and respect. Over time, these interactions may lead to symbolic or emotional renewal—moments that affirm continued connection despite past harm. Reconciliation does not erase trauma; rather, it transforms the relationship into a consciously rebuilt bond grounded in empathy and mutual understanding.

The fifth theme, *Spiritual and Cultural Coping Resources*, emphasizes the mediating role of faith, spirituality, and cultural traditions in facilitating forgiveness. Many families draw upon religious teachings about mercy and compassion, using prayer, confession, and spiritual counseling to reframe forgiveness as a sacred act. Cultural rituals—such as collective purification or ancestral acknowledgment—provide symbolic mechanisms for releasing resentment and reaffirming community harmony. Spiritual transformation through meditation or moral

transcendence allows individuals to locate forgiveness within a higher moral order, providing existential relief and emotional healing that extend beyond interpersonal contexts.

The sixth theme, *Social and Therapeutic Support Structures*, addresses the external systems that sustain the forgiveness process. Professional interventions, including trauma-informed family therapy and psychoeducational programs, help families navigate emotional turbulence while promoting safe relational practices. Peer networks and survivor groups further validate individual experiences and create social solidarity. Institutional and legal frameworks also play an indirect role by affirming justice and safety, which are often prerequisites for authentic forgiveness. When families experience both professional and community-based support, they are better equipped to integrate forgiveness into a stable and empowering recovery journey.

Finally, the seventh theme, *Resilience and Growth Outcomes*, captures the transformative results of successful forgiveness processes. Families who engage deeply with emotional acknowledgment, accountability, and cognitive restructuring often report enhanced emotional regulation, reduced hostility, and strengthened relational resilience. Forgiveness becomes a vehicle for psychological growth—promoting compassion, moral maturity, and renewed life satisfaction. This phase often leads to the development of self-compassion and intergenerational learning, where past harm serves as a catalyst for building healthier family patterns. Ultimately, forgiveness culminates not in forgetting or excusing abuse, but in achieving an evolved sense of peace, empowerment, and emotional wholeness.

Following the identification of the seven major qualitative themes, the second phase of the study aimed to quantitatively rank the pathways to forgiveness based on their perceived importance and practical influence in facilitating reconciliation within families after abuse disclosure. The structured questionnaire, developed from the qualitative phase, was distributed among 223 participants in Tunisia, including family members, social workers, and mental health professionals. Using SPSS-26, the analysis employed Friedman's test and mean ranking scores to determine the relative importance of each forgiveness pathway. This statistical ranking reflects participants' collective judgments regarding which processes are most crucial for initiating, maintaining, and completing forgiveness in the post-abuse context.

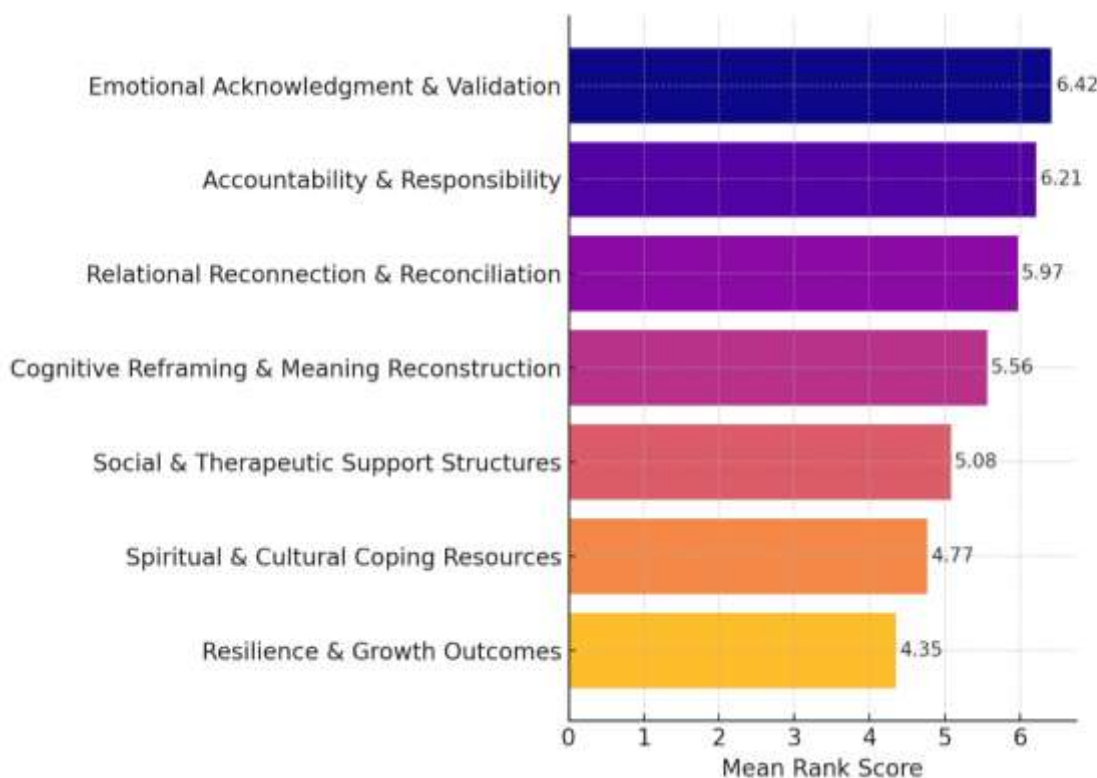
Table 2

Ranking of Pathways to Forgiveness in Families After Abuse Disclosure (N = 223)

Rank	Forgiveness Pathway (Theme)	Mean Rank Score	Interpretation
1	Emotional Acknowledgment and Validation	6.42	Primary emotional entry point to forgiveness; foundational process for healing
2	Accountability and Responsibility	6.21	Central moral and ethical determinant; linked to justice and sincerity
3	Relational Reconnection and Reconciliation	5.97	Key interpersonal domain restoring trust and emotional safety
4	Cognitive Reframing and Meaning Reconstruction	5.56	Facilitates internal transformation and meaning-making after trauma
5	Social and Therapeutic Support Structures	5.08	Provides structural and professional scaffolding for emotional repair
6	Spiritual and Cultural Coping Resources	4.77	Enhances forgiveness through faith, rituals, and moral transcendence
7	Resilience and Growth Outcomes	4.35	Represents long-term adaptation and flourishing as end-stage effects

Figure 1

Ranking of Pathways to Forgiveness in Families After Abuse Disclosure



The ranking results indicated that emotional acknowledgment and validation emerged as the most crucial pathway to forgiveness (mean rank = 6.42), signifying its role as the emotional foundation upon which other processes build. Participants emphasized that without the recognition and validation of pain, forgiveness lacks authenticity and depth. Accountability and responsibility ranked second (mean rank = 6.21), underscoring the importance of moral repair and truth-telling in facilitating genuine forgiveness. Relational reconnection and reconciliation held the third

position (mean rank = 5.97), highlighting the need for rebuilding trust and safety in interpersonal relationships. The mid-ranked dimensions—cognitive reframing and social and therapeutic support—reflect internal cognitive transformation and external structural assistance that sustain recovery. Lower-ranked but still essential dimensions included spiritual and cultural coping resources (mean rank = 4.77), which serve as contextual enhancers, and resilience and growth outcomes (mean rank = 4.35), representing the ultimate integration and flourishing phase achieved through

sustained forgiveness work. Together, these findings suggest that forgiveness is perceived as a multistage and interdependent process, beginning with emotional authenticity and culminating in psychological resilience.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study sought to identify and rank the key pathways to forgiveness in families following abuse disclosure, combining a qualitative thematic analysis and a quantitative ranking of identified themes. The mixed-methods approach revealed that emotional acknowledgment and validation represented the highest-ranked pathway, followed closely by accountability and responsibility, while resilience and growth outcomes ranked lowest, functioning as a long-term result rather than an initiating factor. This hierarchical structure provides a deeper understanding of how families navigate the moral and emotional reconstruction process after abuse. The findings suggest that forgiveness emerges through a staged and interdependent process—beginning with emotional recognition, followed by moral accountability, cognitive reframing, and relational reconnection, and ultimately leading to resilience and personal growth.

The high ranking of *emotional acknowledgment and validation* underscores the importance of emotional safety and recognition of harm as foundational elements in the forgiveness process. Participants perceived acknowledgment as the emotional gateway to reconciliation, emphasizing that forgiveness cannot occur without the validation of pain and suffering. This finding aligns with earlier evidence that forgiveness-based interventions focusing on acknowledgment and emotional expression yield improved psychological well-being and reduced trauma symptoms (Akhtar & Barlow, 2016). Similarly, Ha et al. (Ha et al., 2019) found that survivors of sexual abuse who engaged in forgiveness writing therapy experienced significant post-traumatic growth, primarily through processes of emotional articulation and meaning reconstruction. The present results reaffirm that the therapeutic transformation of emotional pain into empathy and understanding forms the psychological foundation for forgiveness in families recovering from abuse.

The second-highest ranked pathway, *accountability and responsibility*, reflects participants' shared belief that forgiveness without acknowledgment of wrongdoing lacks authenticity and depth. The qualitative analysis highlighted that genuine forgiveness requires a moral equilibrium

wherein offenders accept responsibility, express remorse, and commit to behavioral change. This is consistent with findings by Edwards et al. (Edwards et al., 2024), who demonstrated that forgiveness operates as a mediating factor between mindfulness and reduced psychological partner aggression—implying that emotional awareness and accountability reduce cycles of harm. The emphasis on moral responsibility also parallels the arguments of Spearman et al. (Spearman et al., 2023), who documented that post-separation abuse tactics often exploit moral pressure to induce premature forgiveness, leading to further psychological harm. Therefore, the recognition of accountability as a top-ranked factor supports the growing scholarly consensus that forgiveness must be contingent on safety, justice, and offender responsibility to ensure that it contributes to healing rather than re-victimization.

Relational reconnection and reconciliation, ranking third, represents the interpersonal manifestation of forgiveness once emotional and moral foundations are secured. Participants described this process as the rebuilding of trust, boundaries, and communication within the family system. This finding aligns with Petersson and Plantin (Petersson & Plantin, 2023), who observed that survivors of child sexual abuse require gradual relational reconstruction to achieve intimacy and forgiveness in adult relationships. Similarly, Rahbari Ghazani et al. (Rahbari Ghazani et al., 2022) found that family-based empowerment programs grounded in short-term solution-oriented therapy improved emotional expression and reduced psychological distress in adolescents from high-risk families. Together, these studies support the view that relational reconciliation is not an immediate outcome but a gradual process that requires empathy, transparency, and the restructuring of family interactions. Forgiveness in this sense becomes a collaborative act, deeply embedded in the family's ability to reestablish a safe emotional climate and reconstruct damaged bonds.

The mid-ranking dimensions—*cognitive reframing and meaning reconstruction* and *social and therapeutic support structures*—illustrate the interaction between internal cognitive processes and external support mechanisms. Participants indicated that reframing perceptions of harm, integrating new meaning, and recognizing the complexity of human behavior help facilitate forgiveness. This resonates with Ha et al. (Ha et al., 2019) and Akhtar and Barlow (Akhtar & Barlow, 2016), who found that therapeutic approaches emphasizing cognitive restructuring lead to emotional relief and meaning-making among trauma

survivors. McGaffin et al. (McGaffin et al., 2013) similarly emphasized that self-forgiveness in substance abuse recovery requires reframing internalized guilt and shame into acceptance and self-compassion. When applied to familial abuse, cognitive reframing enables both victims and offenders to deconstruct rigid attributions of blame and begin reconstructing moral coherence.

The recognition of *social and therapeutic support structures* as a middle-ranking factor reflects participants' awareness of the role that systemic and professional support plays in sustaining the forgiveness process. This finding aligns with the view that forgiveness is facilitated by social scaffolding rather than being purely intrapersonal. Ayaya et al. (Ayaya et al., 2023) demonstrated that children exposed to institutional abuse benefit significantly from stable caregiving and psychosocial support structures that foster emotional resilience. Similarly, Rahbari Ghazani et al. (Rahbari Ghazani et al., 2022) highlighted that structured family-based interventions enhance emotional regulation, a precursor to forgiveness and empathy. These insights underscore the necessity of supportive environments—therapeutic, communal, and legal—to ensure that forgiveness occurs within a framework of safety and empowerment rather than coercion.

Spiritual and cultural coping resources were ranked sixth, highlighting their secondary yet meaningful role in the forgiveness process. In many collectivist cultures, spirituality, religion, and cultural rituals are invoked as moral and emotional mechanisms for releasing resentment. This aligns with prior research by Tariq and Anjum (Tariq & Anjum, 2024), who found that spirituality and empathy positively predict forgiveness tendencies among young adults who experienced childhood abuse. The lower ranking in this study may reflect the nuanced role of spirituality in Tunisia's cultural context—where religious narratives of mercy coexist with social taboos surrounding abuse disclosure. Nonetheless, spiritual resources provide symbolic frameworks through which families interpret suffering and justice, facilitating acceptance and reconciliation when integrated with emotional and moral processes.

Finally, *resilience and growth outcomes* were ranked lowest, confirming their status as long-term consequences rather than immediate precursors to forgiveness. Participants viewed resilience and post-forgiveness flourishing as outcomes achieved only after substantial emotional and moral repair. This result corresponds with longitudinal perspectives suggesting that forgiveness ultimately

contributes to psychological integration and personal growth. For example, Webb and Boye (Webb & Boye, 2024) observed that self-forgiveness alleviates self-condemnation and suicidal ideation among individuals struggling with addictive behaviors, indicating that forgiveness restores coherence and hope over time. Similarly, Rostami et al. (Rostami et al., 2014) found that adults with histories of childhood abuse exhibited greater forgiveness capacity when they had developed higher levels of emotional maturity and relational stability. The findings collectively suggest that resilience and flourishing are byproducts of a fully integrated forgiveness process that transcends trauma through self-awareness, empathy, and moral reconstruction.

Taken together, the ranked findings support a hierarchical and process-oriented model of forgiveness in families following abuse disclosure. Emotional acknowledgment and validation initiate the process by creating psychological safety, while accountability establishes moral legitimacy. Cognitive reframing and social support sustain the process by offering meaning and external validation, and spiritual resources contextualize forgiveness within broader moral narratives. Finally, resilience and growth outcomes represent the culmination of these interactions, signifying the family's capacity to internalize healing and sustain positive relational change. These results reinforce the view that forgiveness, rather than being a singular decision, unfolds through a dynamic and multidimensional progression that integrates emotional, cognitive, relational, and cultural mechanisms (Akhtar & Barlow, 2016; Ayaya et al., 2023; Edwards et al., 2024; Petersson & Plantin, 2023).

The alignment between the current findings and previous empirical research supports the theoretical coherence of this model. The interplay between empathy, accountability, and emotional regulation mirrors the pathways identified by Edwards et al. (Edwards et al., 2024), where mindfulness and forgiveness co-regulated aggressive behavior through increased self-awareness. Similarly, the emphasis on relational reconciliation parallels Basting et al. (Basting et al., 2023), who demonstrated that exposure to family-of-origin violence predicts relational dysfunction in adulthood, and that forgiveness processes mitigate the intergenerational transmission of aggression. In this sense, forgiveness operates as both an emotional repair mechanism and a preventive strategy for future relational harm. The findings also extend the framework proposed by Mukul and Ajita (Mukul & Ajita, 2021), who noted that exposure to violence during childhood increases aggression; forgiveness may counteract this tendency by fostering empathy and emotional

regulation, thereby breaking cycles of interpersonal violence.

Cultural and contextual factors further shape the significance of the ranked pathways. In Tunisia, where this study was conducted, family identity and religious values play central roles in shaping emotional expression and moral responsibility. Participants' moderate ranking of spiritual and cultural coping suggests that while religion provides a moral framework, emotional and relational processes remain the primary catalysts for forgiveness. This nuanced pattern resonates with findings by Petersson and Plantin (Petersson & Plantin, 2023), who observed that survivors' approaches to forgiveness are culturally mediated, balancing social expectations and personal authenticity. Thus, the present study contributes to a culturally grounded understanding of forgiveness by integrating psychological and moral dimensions with the sociocultural realities of collectivist family systems.

Overall, the study advances both theoretical and practical understandings of forgiveness as a multidimensional construct. By combining thematic analysis with statistical ranking, the research offers a structured, empirically grounded hierarchy of forgiveness pathways that can guide future interventions and policy development. The findings highlight that the most effective interventions must begin by fostering emotional acknowledgment and moral responsibility before progressing toward cognitive and relational reconstruction. Moreover, the study underscores the need for culturally sensitive therapeutic frameworks that respect local moral norms while safeguarding individual psychological well-being.

5. Suggestions and Limitations

This study, while comprehensive, is not without limitations. First, the reliance on a literature-based qualitative phase, though rigorous, may have restricted the emergence of context-specific themes that could arise from direct interviews with survivors or practitioners. Second, the sample size of 223 participants from Tunisia, although statistically sufficient, may not capture the full diversity of family structures, cultural beliefs, and religious interpretations present across different regions or socio-economic backgrounds. Third, the self-reported nature of quantitative data may introduce social desirability bias, particularly in a cultural context where family reputation and morality influence participant responses. Finally, the cross-sectional design prevents causal inferences about the

temporal sequencing of forgiveness processes, limiting the ability to trace how families progress from emotional acknowledgment to resilience over time.

Future research should extend this model by employing longitudinal and multi-sample designs to trace the temporal dynamics of forgiveness and its psychological correlates. Studies incorporating direct qualitative interviews with survivors, family members, and therapists could enrich understanding of the lived experience of forgiveness across different cultural contexts. Furthermore, cross-cultural comparative studies could reveal how religious, legal, and social frameworks influence the prioritization of forgiveness pathways. Experimental or intervention-based research may also test the efficacy of targeted programs that strengthen emotional acknowledgment and accountability, assessing their impact on long-term family cohesion and well-being. Finally, incorporating physiological and neurocognitive measures could deepen understanding of the emotional regulation mechanisms that underpin forgiveness processes.

Practitioners working with families following abuse disclosure should prioritize interventions that establish emotional safety and validate victims' experiences before introducing forgiveness-oriented discussions. Therapeutic programs should emphasize offender accountability and moral repair, ensuring that forgiveness arises from empowerment rather than coercion. Integrating cognitive reframing exercises and trauma-informed communication strategies can facilitate meaning reconstruction and relational trust. Moreover, involving social and community resources—including counseling centers, religious leaders, and peer support groups—can strengthen the sustainability of forgiveness-based interventions. Ultimately, family therapy models must balance compassion with justice, fostering forgiveness as a path toward mutual healing, moral growth, and the prevention of future harm.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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