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**Trauma, Forgiveness, Resilience & Meaning-making: International Humanitarian Relief in  
Uganda**

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### **Abstract**

This study examines the relationships among traumatic stress, resilience, forgiveness (of self and others), and meaning in life in Uganda, a context shaped by prolonged sociopolitical conflict, environmental disasters, and limited mental health services. Drawing on trauma psychology, global mental health, and international psychology literature, this research investigates how these constructs interact in a post-conflict, crisis-prone environment. A total of 148 participants were recruited through humanitarian outreach programs during a two-week trauma healing mission in Uganda. Participants completed self-report measures assessing traumatic stress symptoms, resilience, forgiveness, and meaning in life. Results indicated that traumatic stress was negatively associated with resilience and presence of meaning, while positively related to the search for meaning. Forgiveness of others was positively correlated with both resilience and meaning, whereas self-forgiveness was not significantly associated with traumatic stress. Education level was positively correlated with resilience and marginally with presence of meaning. Cultural and religious factors, particularly Pentecostal beliefs emphasizing divine rather than self-generated forgiveness, may partially explain the weaker association between self-forgiveness and trauma. These findings highlight the importance of culturally grounded, meaning-centered, and relationally informed approaches to trauma recovery in low-resource and post-conflict settings.

*Keywords:* traumatic stress, meaning-making, forgiveness, resilience, post-conflict  
Uganda

### **Trauma, Forgiveness, Resilience, & Meaning-making: International Humanitarian Relief in Uganda**

Uganda faces multiple, overlapping challenges that profoundly affect the daily lives and psychological well-being of its population. Widespread poverty, unemployment, and limited access to essential services create persistent stress and vulnerability, particularly in urban slums where overcrowding, poor sanitation, and inadequate infrastructure are common. The population also contends with political instability, historical violence, and ongoing social divisions, which reinforce collective and individual trauma. Environmental disasters, including landslides and floods, further exacerbate displacement, loss, and economic hardship, while high rates of illiteracy and limited educational opportunities constrain personal development and resilience. Lambert and Witting (2021) found that access to basic resources, economic strain, and health problems are important factors in understanding psychological distress. Together, these social, political, environmental, and educational crises create an environment in which trauma is not only widespread but continuously reinforced, limiting individuals' capacity to experience meaning, agency, and psychological restoration.

Trauma is a complex psychological phenomenon, encompassing experiences that can profoundly disrupt individuals' emotional and behavioral functioning. Event trauma refers to "a negative emotional response to a perceived horrifying or terrifying event that disrupts the way one normally connects their identity with their experience" (Blehm, 2024). Collective trauma is "experienced by a group or community and may manifest as human-made or natural" (Cameron et al., 2022). Individual responses to trauma vary widely, with resilience, social support, and engagement in meaning-making processes mitigating the negative effects of traumatic exposure (Bonanno, 2013; Park, 2010; Enright et al., 1998). Promoting forgiveness and community-based

coping strategies further enhances recovery, enabling post-traumatic growth and emotional well-being. Within international psychology, trauma is understood not only as an individual experience but also as a culturally embedded process, influenced by collective history, social norms, and community-level stressors.

This study was part of the 115th humanitarian mission of the MeaningfulWorld, in 50 countries & 26 states in the USA. MeaningfulWorld team engaged communities, universities, urban slums, educational ministry, and NGOs to deliver trauma-healing workshops, mental health education, and meaning-centered interventions. Programs included the 7-step Integrative Healing Model, emotional intelligence training, and forgiveness practices designed to promote resilience, meaning-making, and reconciliation. Using data collected through validated psychological measures, this study examines relationships among traumatic stress, resilience, meaning, and forgiveness in a post-trauma context. We hypothesized that higher levels of traumatic stress would be associated with lower resilience, forgiveness of self and others, and presence of meaning. Additionally, education level was expected to positively correlate with resilience and meaning-making.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Participants were recruited in Uganda during a two-week humanitarian mission in 2024, resulting in 148 individuals aged 20–61. Gender distribution was relatively balanced (52.7% female, 47.3% male), and most participants were Ugandan (95.9%). Religious affiliation was diverse, with Anglican (23.0%) and Christian (22.3%) most common. Recruitment took place through workshops and outreach with four universities and three counseling centers in Mbarara

and Kampala. Participation was voluntary, with informed consent obtained. IRB approval was obtained from Luther College.

## **Measures**

The Harvard Trauma Questionnaire (HTQ) assessed trauma-related symptoms experienced during the past week using 16 items rated on a 4-point Likert scale from 1 (not at all) to 4 (extremely). The HTQ also included an open-ended item allowing participants to describe their traumatic experiences. Forgiveness was measured using the three-item forgiveness subscale of the Brief Multidimensional Measure of Religiousness/Spirituality, rated on a 4-point Likert scale from 1 (never) to 4 (always or almost always). The Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) assessed presence of and search for meaning using 10 items rated on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (absolutely untrue) to 7 (absolutely true). Resilience was measured with the Brief Resilience Scale (BRS), consisting of six items rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

## **Procedure**

This study was conducted in person in Uganda during a two-week humanitarian mission in 2024. Recruitment occurred at trauma healing workshops, university outreach events, and counseling programs. After receiving a brief explanation of the study, with a statement outlining the study's goals, interested individuals provided informed consent and completed paper versions of the HTQ, MLQ, BRS, and forgiveness measure. Surveys required approximately 30 minutes to complete. Upon completion, participants received a 2-hour workshop on trauma healing, and the 7-step Integrative Healing Model (Kalayjian, 2018, 2022, 2023), a debriefing, as well as providing information about available psychological support resources locally.

### **Analytic Strategy**

Descriptive statistics and bivariate Pearson correlations were computed to examine associations among traumatic stress, resilience, forgiveness (of self and others), and meaning in life (presence and search). All variables were screened for linearity, normality, and outliers prior to analysis. Statistical significance was evaluated using an alpha level of  $p < .05$ , and all tests were two-tailed. Given theoretical expectations, correlations between education level and key psychological variables were also examined. Significant associations were interpreted in light of trauma and meaning-making frameworks.

### **Results**

The study examined relationships among traumatic stress, resilience, forgiveness (self and others), meaning in life, and education level. As expected, traumatic stress was negatively associated with resilience ( $p < .001$ ) and presence of meaning ( $p = .01$ ), while it was positively associated with the search for meaning ( $p < .001$ ). Forgiveness of others was positively related to both resilience and presence of meaning, whereas self-forgiveness showed a weaker association with traumatic stress and did not reach statistical significance. Education level was positively associated with resilience ( $p = .04$ ) and marginally with presence of meaning, but not significantly with forgiveness or the search for meaning. These results partially support the study hypotheses and suggest that cultural and contextual factors may influence self-forgiveness, highlighting the importance of considering local beliefs and practices in trauma recovery.

### **Discussion**

The present study examined relationships among traumatic stress, resilience, forgiveness (of self and others), and meaning in life in Uganda, a context marked by prolonged conflict, environmental disasters, and structural inequalities. Findings supported the hypothesized associations between traumatic stress, resilience, and meaning-making, while offering insights into forgiveness processes in this cultural context. As predicted, higher traumatic stress was linked to lower resilience and reduced presence of meaning, as well as greater engagement in the search for meaning. Education level was positively related to resilience and modestly associated with presence of meaning, suggesting that formal learning may support coping and existential understanding.

Forgiveness findings were culturally informative. Forgiveness of others correlated with greater resilience and meaning, whereas self-forgiveness was not significantly related to traumatic stress, indicating its role may be contextually limited. Cultural and religious norms, including beliefs emphasizing divine forgiveness, may constrain the psychological relevance of self-forgiveness. Self forgiveness was only up to God. These results highlight the importance of culturally grounded, meaning-centered interventions. Programs integrating resilience training, forgiveness practices, and educational initiatives may foster adaptive coping and well-being in low-resource, post-conflict settings. Future research should explore how cultural, religious, and educational factors influence self-forgiveness and meaning-making in trauma recovery.

### **Limitations**

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, participants were recruited via convenience sampling from humanitarian workshops and outreach programs, which may limit generalizability. Second, baseline mental health and trauma history were not collected,

precluding causal inference. Third, literacy barriers required researcher assistance for some participants completing self-report measures, potentially influencing responses. Finally, the sample size was moderate ( $N = 148$ ), which may limit statistical power for detecting smaller effects.

Despite these constraints, the study provides preliminary evidence on the complex interplay of traumatic stress, resilience, forgiveness, and meaning in a culturally specific post-conflict setting. The findings highlight avenues for contextually relevant interventions and future research exploring culturally moderated mechanisms of post-traumatic adaptation.

Within international psychology, this study highlights the need for future research using larger and more diverse cross-cultural samples to better capture culturally moderated pathways of post-traumatic recovery.

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