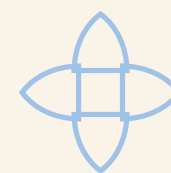


Love and Flourishing Project

THE HUMAN FLOURISHING PROGRAM
at Harvard's Institute for Quantitative Social Science





The Love and Flourishing Project

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*Ed. in the original impression for the artist's collection
Mary Cassatt*

Maternal Caress, Mary Cassatt, National Gallery of Art

Welcome to the Love and Flourishing Project

Love is a deeply human transformative force that binds us to one another and compels us to seek the good of others. Whether in deepening intimacy with a significant other, nurturing bonds between parents and children, strengthening friendships, caring for elders, or fostering solidarity with neighbors and even adversaries, love forms the foundation of our most vital human connections. It shapes our values, motivates our actions, and permeates the fabric of our social institutions.

Given the vast influence of love on personal and collective well-being, it deserves a more central place in scholarly inquiry and public discourse. Yet researchers have long struggled with fragmented definitions, limited metrics, and cultural inconsistencies about what constitutes love. To address this, the Love and Flourishing Project integrates centuries of philosophical and theological wisdom with insights from contemporary social science to deepen our understanding of love in its many expressions.

The Love and Flourishing Project focuses on developing practical measures and promoting love across diverse contexts of interpersonal love: the tenderness of parental care, the intimacy of romantic partnership, the loyalty of friendship, the moral duty of neighborly compassion, and the radical generosity of loving one's enemies. It also includes emerging dimensions such as love of place, love of the divine, and the experience of God's love as seen through the eyes of a child. These measures provide a means of capturing love in its many expressions, making the invisible visible, so that it can be studied, nurtured, and acted upon. Our exploration of this important topic spans multiple forms of interpersonal love. In the pages that follow, we delve into these expressions of love, unpacking their theoretical foundations and practical implications for individuals, families, communities, and societies. Through this inquiry, we invite you to reflect on how the intentional cultivation of love, grounded in wisdom, evidence, and everyday practice, can foster healing, resilience, and lasting transformation.

Ultimately, this work equips scholars, practitioners, and communities with new tools to harness love's transformative power. By doing so, it contributes to a vision of flourishing grounded not only in health or prosperity, but in connection, compassion, and purpose. We hope this work inspires continued inquiry, collaboration, and investment in the science and practice of love, not as sentiment, but as a generative force for healing, resilience, and human flourishing. In a world marked by fragmentation and need, love remains our most enduring and unifying power, worthy of both rigorous scholarship and bold efforts to promote love throughout society.

Love as a Pathway to Human Flourishing

As noted above, love is a transformative force, binding us to one another and driving us to seek the good of those around us. Whether deepening a relationship with a significant other, strengthening a friendship, guiding parents as they nurture children, supporting us in caring for older relatives, or uniting us with our neighbors, love is the underpinning of our most significant bonds. It molds our values, motivates our actions, and weaves its way through the very fabric of our societal structures.

In philosophical and theological thought, “human flourishing” is often understood as a holistic state of well-being, integrating physical, emotional, relational, moral, and spiritual dimensions.¹ From Aristotle’s notion of *eudaimonia* to modern conceptions in positive psychology, flourishing signifies living in a way that fulfills one’s potential and nurtures both personal and communal thriving.² In essence, “flourishing is a state in which all aspects of one’s life are good, including the contexts in which that person lives.”^{1,3} Because flourishing includes the contexts, communities, and environments around us, true flourishing requires love.⁴

Love, in its broadest and deepest sense, unifies the physical, emotional, relational, moral, and spiritual dimensions of life, precisely the domains that human flourishing aims to integrate. By shaping both our personal motivations and our communal norms, love provides the relational scaffolding through which we become our best selves and contribute to the well-being of those around us. Our work on love extends these themes, arguing that communities and institutions shaped by love can generate profound, long-lasting benefits for well-being.⁵

Here we present a vision of love that we believe is both empirically grounded and urgently needed. We write with the conviction that love, though often overlooked in academic disciplines and essentially absent from social policy, is a powerful, underutilized force for human flourishing. Our aim is to reframe love not simply as a personal virtue or emotion, but also as a public good, capable of transforming relationships, institutions, and societies.

We define love as involving either a *unitive* desire to be with the beloved or a *contributory* desire for the good of the beloved, or, ideally, especially in human relationships, both. This two-fold understanding of love allows us to move beyond romantic or sentimental notions of love and toward a richer, more analytically coherent understanding. Whether in families, friendships, workplaces, schools, or civic life, we believe that love, when properly cultivated, has the capacity to promote wholeness, healing, and a deeper sense of meaning and belonging. Our vision is to build what we, and others before us, have called a “civilization



of love.”⁶ This is not a utopian ideal, but a moral and practical framework for shaping social structures in ways that affirm human dignity. In such a civilization, love would no longer be seen as peripheral, but as central to education, healthcare, governance, and economic life. We offer policy proposals and evidence-based interventions, from parenting programs and forgiveness workbooks to compassion training and workplace climate reforms, that can help bring this vision to life.

We also believe that love is not only beneficial to the recipient but deeply transformative for the one who loves. It enhances our own flourishing, emotionally, physically, socially, and spiritually. Furthermore, love can be contagious. It has the power to spread across relationships and communities, generating reciprocal acts of kindness and ripples of prosocial behavior. Just as harm cascades through networks, so too can benevolence.

This vision of love is not naïve, it includes the hard work of loving those who have wronged or offended us, and is sometimes referred to as *love of enemy*. We see this not as passivity but as a radical act of goodwill that interrupts cycles of hatred and opens the possibility for reconciliation and peace. In a time marked by division and disconnection, we believe that such love is not only possible, but also necessary.

Our hope is that this work will inspire renewed attention to love in academic research, public health, education, and beyond. We believe that love, rightly understood and rightly practiced, is essential to human flourishing, and we invite others to join us in building a world where love is central to who we are and how we live together.

For further reading see:

VanderWeele, T.J. and Lee, M.T. (2025). Love and human flourishing. *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 15(4):4663, 1-32. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.5502/ijw.v15i4.4663>

“We believe that love, rightly understood and rightly practiced, is essential to human flourishing, and we invite others to join us in building a world where love is central to who we are and how we live together.”

An Analytical Definition of Love

Love has long been recognized as a vital force in promoting well-being at every level of human life, nurturing individual growth, strengthening family bonds, and shaping the trajectory of entire communities. Yet despite its central role in the human experience, love remains a remarkably elusive concept.⁷ Since the earliest systematic inquiries into human behavior and emotion, philosophers,

theologians, and later social scientists have sought to define and measure love, grappling with its complex dimensions and the diverse ways it is expressed across interpersonal relationships, cultural frameworks, and developmental stages.

From Plato’s vision of love as a longing guiding us toward greater beauty,⁸ to Thomas Aquinas’ view of love as desiring union with another and wanting their good,⁹ **love is more than just a passing feeling, it is a steady disposition of heart and will.** While linguistically and culturally multifaceted, a shared emphasis is the affirmation of another’s value and the intention to foster their flourishing. We define love as two interrelated dimensions⁴:



The Academy of Plato,
Salvator Rosa,
National Gallery of Art

Unitive love

A disposition towards desiring a perceived good or desiring union with it, either as an end itself or with it being a source of delight in itself

Contributory love

Desiring good for a particular object for its own sake

We have argued elsewhere that any time the word “love” is used as a verb (e.g. “He loves...” or “She loves...”) one, or both, of these forms of unitive or contributory love are in view. However, generally with interpersonal relationships we rightly expect both to be present. Nevertheless, in some instances only one or the other of the unitive or contributory aspects may be present and understanding this possibility helps us make sense of the wide range of ways we speak of love and the complexity of its dynamics.

As described below, evidence from our studies indicates both forms are closely related yet distinct. When both elements come together, the results can be transformative.

For further reading see:

VanderWeele, T. J. (2023). On an analytic definition of love. *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy*, 25:105-135. Available at: <https://jesp.org/index.php/jesp/article/view/2695>



Good Human Qualities, Daniel Nikolaus Chodowiecki, National Gallery of Art

Empirical Evidence on Love: Health and Social Benefits

The varieties of love that appear in human life, encompassing both whom we love and what we love, are undeniably complex and diverse. Our research indicates that while unitive and contributory love are closely related, they are also distinct.¹⁰ ¹¹ Yet when these two dimensions come together, when we not only wish to be with someone but also actively seek their good, the effects can be powerful⁴. Families are more cohesive,¹² relationships are deeper and more fulfilling^{13, 14} and trust flourishes.¹⁵ Even a simple benevolent gesture can ignite a ripple effect of goodwill, uniting people and increasing social connection.¹⁷

Though measuring love remains a challenge due to its conceptual richness, a growing body of empirical research suggests that love, expressed across various relationships and settings, has profound implications for health and well-being:

Parental Love

Positive relationships with parents are strongly linked to adult flourishing,¹⁸ including long-term mental health outcomes,^{10, 16, 19} stronger social relationships,¹⁶ and a reduced risk of substance misuse.²⁰

Marital Love

Higher-quality spousal relationships are associated with lower risks of mortality,²¹ depression,^{22, 23} and accelerated health decline over time,²⁴ highlighting both psychosocial and physiological benefits.

Forgiveness

Forgiveness, which could be conceptualized as a restoration of contributory love, has been shown in randomized trials to reduce depression and anxiety,^{25, 26} while increasing hope,^{23, 24} self-esteem²⁴, and flourishing.²⁷

Compassion and Loving-Kindness

Practices such as loving-kindness meditation enhance positive emotions²⁸ and self-compassion²⁹ and decrease symptoms of depression,^{25, 26} and posttraumatic stress disorder²⁷.

Acts of Kindness

Benevolent behaviors, which are related to love,¹² not only increase personal happiness^{31, 32} but can also trigger “cascades” of prosocial behavior within social networks¹⁴.

By integrating love more intentionally into institutional practices and public policies, we create conditions conducive to individual and societal flourishing.

For further reading see:

VanderWeele, T.J. and Lee, M.T. (2025). Love and human flourishing. *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 15(4):4663, 1-32. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.5502/ijw.v15i4.4663>



Social Policy Implications of Love Research

Across cultures and centuries, love has been heralded as the most powerful bond uniting people, central to moral action and often seen as the foundation of a meaningful life. Philosophers from Aquinas⁶ to Frankfurt³³ have described love as the fundamental reason for all of our actions, while religious traditions throughout the world emphasize its transformative power in urging care for neighbors, strangers, and even enemies.^{6, 34, 35, 36}

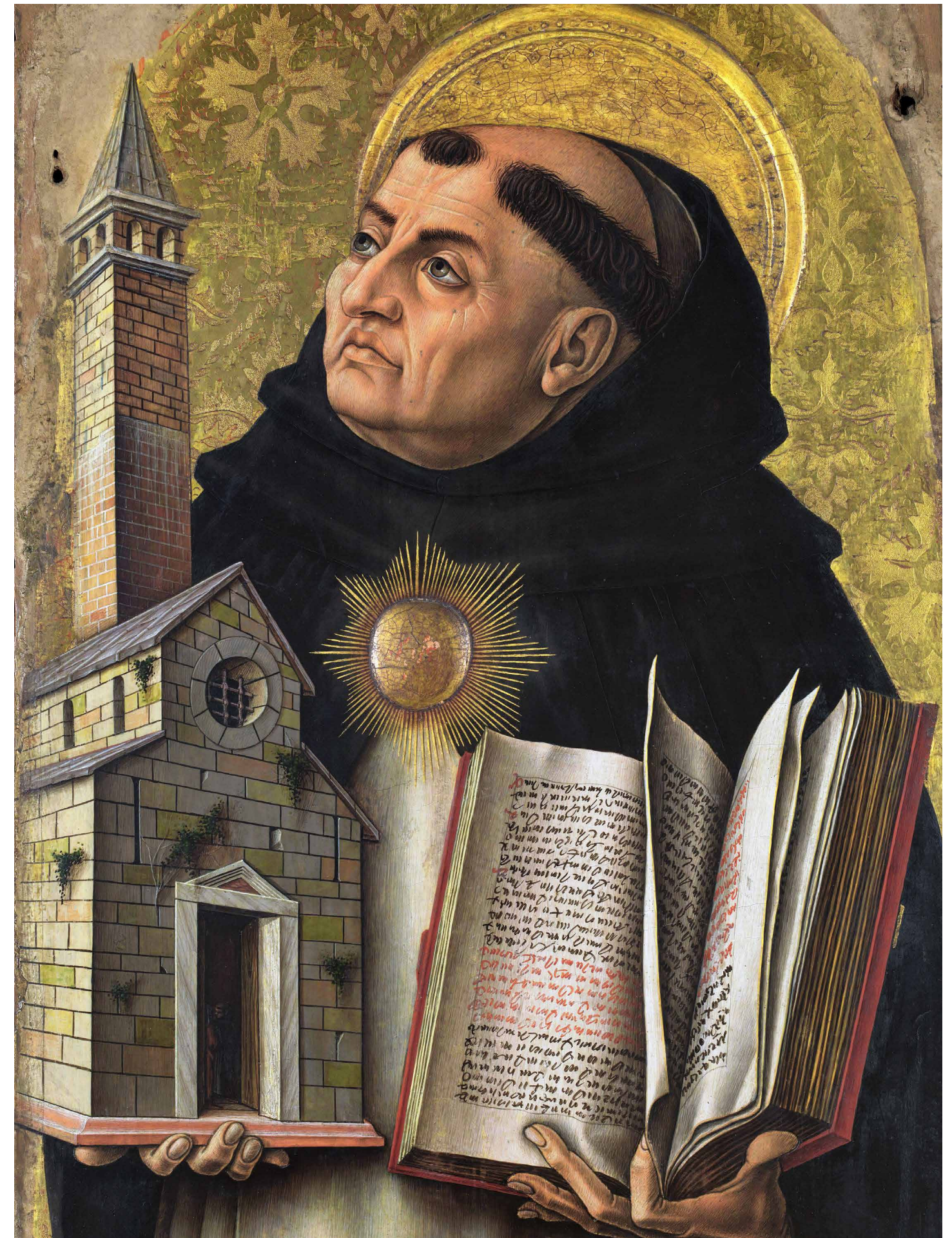
Research confirms what these traditions have long claimed: loving relationships, expressed through parental care, enduring partnerships, everyday compassion, and socially supportive environments, enrich lives across a wide spectrum of outcomes.^{16, 19, 20, 22, 25} Those who regularly give and receive love tend to experience better mental and physical health,^{37, 38, 39} increased resilience,⁴⁰ and stronger social ties.⁴¹ Love supports emotional development in children,^{34, 35} workplace satisfaction in adulthood,^{42, 43, 44} and purpose in later life.^{45, 46}

Because love operates in families, schools, workplaces, religious communities, and civic life, healthy expression of love can and should be amplified through intentional policies. **Far from being an abstract or sentimental ideal, love, especially when expressed through both unitive and contributory dimensions, is a tangible force with the potential to transform systems and cultures.** As Pope John Paul II wrote, building a “civilization of love” is not only a moral imperative, but increasingly supported by empirical evidence as a viable public strategy for improving well-being and social cohesion.⁴⁷

By embedding love in the structures of everyday life, through policies, practices, and norms, we create ripple effects that extend far beyond individual relationships. Schools that teach empathy and respect can help create healthier climates for learning,⁴⁸ workplaces that foster cooperation over competition increase morale and productivity,^{39, 40} positive media reporting can encourage loving action, and community-building initiatives can help reinforce the social fabric that sustains care and connection.^{49, 50, 51} Towards the end of this document, we have a series of further ambitious potential policy proposals to help promote love and human flourishing in society.

For further reading see:

VanderWeele, T.J. and Lee, M.T. (2025). Love and human flourishing. *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 15(4):4663, 1-32. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.5502/ijw.v15i4.4663>



Saint Thomas Aquinas, Carlo Crivelli, National Academy of Art

Love of Neighbor

The concept of “love of neighbor” is deeply rooted in many cultural and religious traditions.^{8, 32, 33} While much past research often concentrates on romantic or parental love, our work highlights a more universal form of goodwill, one that sees each person’s intrinsic worth and dignity, whether they be a romantic partner, close friend, a stranger, or even an enemy. This expansive form of love not only fortifies individual bonds, but it also has the potential to transform entire communities.^{52, 14} In the words of Aquinas:⁶ **“To love is to will the good of the other.”** Love is a vision that fosters empathy and compassion, rippling outward to inspire broader goodwill. Indeed, love’s real power lies in its capacity to unify people through hope, healing, and a shared sense of humanity.^{53, 54, 55}

Although another widely used instrument, the Compassionate Love scale, focuses on care of others specifically in response to suffering,¹² our “love of neighbor” framework is more general: it extends to anyone, friend or stranger, and does not presuppose that the other person is in distress. To measure this broader orientation toward goodwill, we developed a Love of Neighbor Scale, an instrument that reflects our commitment to innovation in studying more universal forms of love.

Our instrument is informed by the two-fold unitive-contributory understanding of love discussed above. We crafted a set of 12 indicators. These items were refined and tested through cognitive interviews, pilot studies, and analytic discussion and critique in various cultural contexts, ensuring clarity and cultural adaptability. This approach situates “love of neighbor” as a universal disposition to seek both connection with and the flourishing of any person one encounters, whether a “close neighbor” or a “far neighbor.”

Empirical findings from three studies (involving U.S. college students, a large multinational sample, and a longitudinal study) provide **strong evidence for the reliability and validity of the new measure.**⁸ Overall, the *Love of Neighbor Assessment* offers a promising empirical framework for studying how this disposition shapes individual well-being, moral action, and broader social cohesion.

Why It Matters

1. Universal Relevance: This work supports ethical teachings across cultures and may serve as a bridge between differences in everyday interactions.

2. Actionable Insights: By identifying how love of neighbor waxes or wanes across contexts or cultures, researchers and practitioners can design and now evaluate the effects of interventions, from school curricula to workplace training, to foster greater understanding, healthy connection, and goodwill.

3. Measuring Goodwill serves to open the door for large-scale research on how investments in fostering neighborly love can impact personal well-being, social cohesion, and broaden public health.

Our research on the love of neighbor moves beyond intimate circles and into the public sphere, presenting robust tools and concepts that underscore the transformative power of genuinely caring for the “neighbor,” near or far, in each of our lives.

The Love of Neighbor Assessment

The **Love of Neighbor Assessment** is comprised of twelve items divided evenly between two dimensions: Unitive and Contributory Love. Respondents rate each statement on a five-point scale: **(1)** “Never true of me”, **(2)** “Rarely true of me”, **(3)** “Sometimes true of me”, **(4)** “Often true of me”, and **(5)** “Always true of me.”

Unitive Love

I deeply desire to be fully present with those I encounter
I make necessary sacrifices in order to listen to others
I try to take joy in every person I meet
I seek to understand every person in my life just as they are
I seek to be with others because every person has incredible worth and dignity
I am fully committed to participating in the lives of others

Contributory Love

I deeply desire the wellbeing of every person I encounter
I make necessary sacrifices in order to help the people I meet
My own wellbeing depends on meaningfully contributing to the wellbeing of others
Whenever appropriate, I seek to show those around me affection or compassion
I seek the wellbeing of others because every person has incredible worth and dignity
I am fully committed to having goodwill towards others, even those who have hurt me

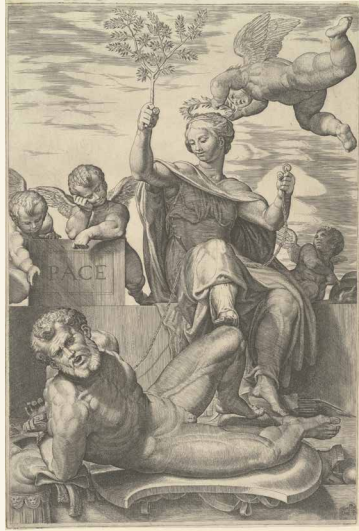
The use of this measure in research, in assessments, and ideally in community and even nationally representative samples to understand how love is changing over time would help advance love of neighbor throughout society.

We have used a similar approach to that of love of neighbor as a template for assessments of other forms of love in interpersonal relationships including parent-child love, romantic and spousal love, love in friendship, love of stranger, and others, and those measures are also available on the Program website. However, we would like to specifically highlight one additional form of love we believe is especially important for society today and that is love of enemy.

For further reading see:

VanderWeele, T. J., Padgett, R., Case, B., Cowden, R., Hanson, J., Hinton, C., Kurniati, N.M.T., Lomas, T., Long, K., Niemiec, R., Bechara, A.O., Rutledge, J.C., Teubner, J., Town, S., Wilkinson, R. and Lee, M.T. (2026). Love of neighbor assessment: validity, reliability, and a template for measurement. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 16:1575175. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1575175.

Love of Enemy



Allegory of Peace, Domenico Tibaldi, National Gallery of Art

Conflict, division, and violence are persistent elements of the human condition. Yet, as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. profoundly observed,⁵⁶ **love is “the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend.”** Love, when understood as an attitude that recognizes the dignity and worth of every person, has the capacity to foster understanding, heal division, and guide us toward reconciliation.⁵⁷ When expressed through care, respect, and a commitment to every person’s flourishing, including those we view as adversaries, love becomes more than a personal virtue; it becomes a force for social transformation.

Forgiveness offers a clear example of how love can overcome hostility, **replacing ill-will with goodwill even in the face of deep harm.** As Worthington emphasizes, love and forgiveness, when practiced with intention and consistency, hold the power to heal individuals and renew fractured communities.⁵⁸ Small yet meaningful gestures, an apology, a listening ear, the act of

letting go of resentment, can rebuild trust, reduce hatred, and foster renewed hope.⁵⁹

In today’s climate of escalating polarization, it is increasingly urgent to cultivate compassion not as an abstract ideal but as a practical, learnable skill.⁶⁰ Love, in this sense, becomes a disciplined and deliberate practice. Research and lived experience alike show that even the most fractured relationships can be restored, and divided communities reunited, through sustained acts of empathy, forgiveness, and compassion.^{23, 24, 49, 61}

Among the most demanding and transformative expressions of love is the love of enemy. An “enemy” may be anyone who harbors settled ill-will toward us, or toward whom we might be inclined to hold such ill-will ourselves.⁶² Unitive love toward an enemy entails a willingness to seek a “right” relationship, rooted in the recognition of shared humanity.⁴ Contributory love, by contrast, involves desiring the well-being of the enemy, not because it is earned, but because every person possesses intrinsic worth and dignity.⁴

Love invites us to imagine a new way of living, not only for ourselves but for our communities and the world at large. When nurtured through daily intention, thoughtful study, and compassionate action,^{50, 51, 52} love becomes a radical and unifying force,⁴⁴ one capable of dissolving hatred,⁵³ bridging deep divides, and leading us toward collective healing, justice, and peace.⁴⁹

Although love of enemy has long been honored as a spiritual and ethical ideal across religious and philosophical traditions,^{6, 63, 64, 65} it has seldom been examined through the lens of empirical research. This reflects the inherent challenge of defining, and measuring, such a radical, counterintuitive form of love. Yet in an increasingly fragmented world, developing tools to study love of enemy is vital. Valid, reliable measures allow researchers and practitioners to explore how this form of love relates to mental health, resilience, reconciliation, and social flourishing. Moving beyond abstraction, measurement enables us to identify the psychological, social, and spiritual conditions that foster or inhibit such love across lines of entrenched conflict.

To address this need, we have developed a novel scale to assess love of enemy, distinguishing it from other constructs like forgiveness, empathy, or general prosocial behavior. The scale again evaluates two key dimensions: Unitive love, the desire to be in right or better relationship with the enemy through recognition of their humanity,⁴ and Contributory love, the desire for their well-being regardless of merit.⁴ Demonstrating strong psychometric properties, the scale is currently being embedded in various longitudinal studies to examine its associations with well-being, psychological resilience, spiritual maturity, and even physical health outcomes, and to discern what might facilitate such love of enemy as well. Its relevance extends beyond academia: It holds transformative potential for peacebuilding, trauma recovery, and the cultivation of human flourishing in even the most divided contexts.

The Love of Enemy Assessment

The Love of Enemy Assessment⁶² contains twelve items, with a five-point scale ranging from **(1)** “Never true of me”, to **(2)** “Rarely true of me”, **(3)** “Sometimes true of me”, **(4)** “Often true of me”, and **(5)** “Always true of me.” The scale includes two core dimensions: Unitive love, the desire to be in right or better relationship with an enemy grounded in recognition of their humanity; and Contributory love, the desire for the enemy’s good, independent of any expectation of reconciliation or reward. The items assess attitudes such as hope for the enemy’s well-being, willingness to seek mutual understanding, and resistance to dehumanizing or retaliatory impulses.

Unitive Love

I truly desire to have better relations with those who have ill-will towards me

I make sacrifices in order to improve relationships with those who dislike me

I see the good in people even when they have hurt me on purpose

If someone wishes me harm, I try to understand their reasons

I seek to make peace with those I dislike because every person has incredible worth and dignity

I am fully committed to seeking better relationships with anyone who might consider me their enemy

Contributory Love

I truly desire good even for those who have ill-will towards me

I make sacrifices in order to help those who dislike me

Even when I am mistreated by someone, I try to have compassion for them

When I feel wronged by someone close to me, I still act kindly towards them

I seek the well-being of those I dislike because every person has incredible worth and dignity

I am fully committed to doing good to those who might consider me their enemy

Promoting Love in Parenting

The roots of human flourishing are planted early in life, as our first experiences of love shape the foundation for healthy relationships and lifelong wellbeing.^{66, 67, 68, 69, 70}

Building on this evidence, the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard launched our Evidence-Based Parenting for Flourishing Families initiative, which equips parents with evidence-based principles and strategies to nurture loving relationships with their children that promote flourishing. Yet despite a wealth of insights from child development, psychology, neuroscience, and education, **the vast majority of parents remain cut off from this scientific knowledge.**⁷¹

In response, our initiative translates these principles and strategies into accessible tools that parents can use to cultivate loving relationships with their children and support their wellbeing. An OECD (2020) review article of 29 meta-studies and 81 quantitative studies from around the world concludes that parenting best promotes character skills, mental and physical health, social skills, academic achievement, and job success when it is characterized by warmth, structure, and the encouragement of autonomy.

Our **Evidence-Based Parenting for Flourishing Families** initiative therefore shares practical strategies for fostering loving relationships with children through warmth, structure, and autonomy support. A secure attachment forms the bedrock of love, raising essential questions such as: How can we cultivate a secure attachment with our children to give them a lifelong blueprint for healthy love?⁷² How can we use responsive “serve and return” interactions to nurture positive child development and loving parent-child bonds?⁷³

Yet structure is also important for guiding children’s behavior in healthy ways. Research in this area addresses questions such as: How can we lovingly validate emotions while simultaneously setting firm limits on acceptable behaviors?⁷⁴ How can we adopt authoritative approaches that encourage children to internalize the value of acting with good character?⁷⁵

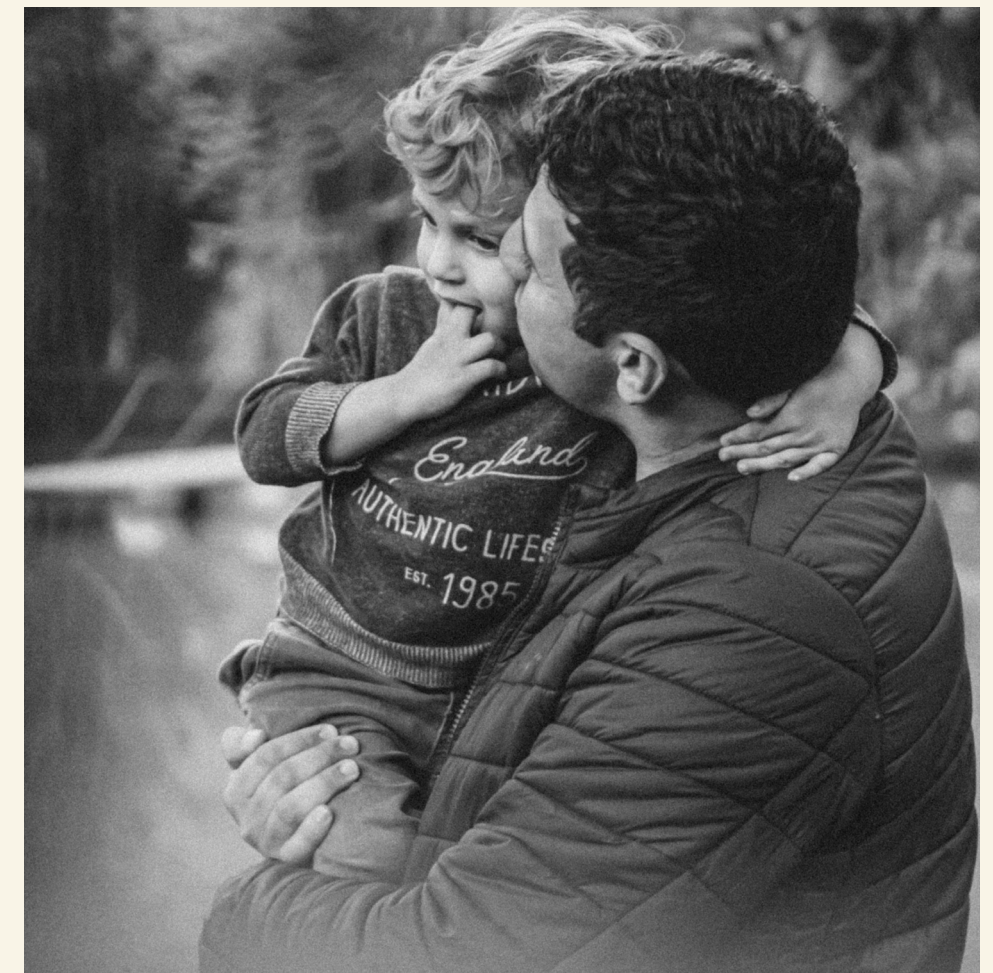
Alongside attachment and structure, supporting autonomy allows children to grow into resilient, self-directed individuals. This dimension raises questions such as: How do we encourage age-appropriate autonomy? How do we instill resilience from a young age?



Madame Helleu Cradling Paulette in Her Arms, Paul-César Helleu, National Gallery of Art

Because flourishing is relational, the initiative also invites parents to reflect on their own experiences of love and wellbeing. We encourage self-reflection through questions such as: How were we loved as children and how might that influence our parenting inclinations? What character strengths do we bring to building loving relationships with our children? How can we regulate our own emotions and practice self-care during challenging parenting moments?^{76, 77}

Ultimately, the initiative empowers parents with evidence-based parenting principles and strategies that enable them to create a virtuous cycle of love and flourishing among children and parents.



Ultimately, the initiative empowers parents with evidence-based parenting principles and strategies that enable them to create a virtuous cycle of love and flourishing among children and parents

Promoting Love in Religious Communities

Given the emphasis on love across religious and spiritual traditions, we are seeking to actively promote love within religious communities. Elsewhere we have argued that generic measures of religious or spiritual practice should be complemented by tradition-specific measures that meaningfully reflect the theological commitments embedded across different faith traditions.⁷⁸ As a first step, we have developed work that explores the measurement and promotion of love within the Christian Tradition, as a part of our work on the Flourishing and the Church Initiative.



The Good Samaritan, Jean-Marie Delatre and Simon Francois Ravenet I after William Hogarth, National Gallery of Art

At the heart of the Flourishing and the Church framework is a “both/and” model of flourishing that integrates classical theological virtues, faith, hope, and love, along with dimensions of flourishing and well-being adapted from contemporary empirical research. Within the Christian tradition, care for the poor is strongly emphasized throughout the scriptures. For example, in the Gospel of Luke, the story of the Good Samaritan illustrates what is meant by the love of neighbor, which includes the love of the stranger and even those that one might consider an enemy (Luke 10:25-37). In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus identified two commandments from the Hebrew Bible as the most important of all: to love God with all one’s heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love one’s neighbor as oneself (Mark 12:29-31; see also Deuteronomy 6:4–5 and Leviticus 19:18).

Building on these scriptures, numerous Christian saints from Augustine of Hippo to Basil of Caesarea, to Catherine of Siena taught and embodied the practice of care for the poor. Recent work from our Program considers the extent to which religious communities continue to live out their mandate of care for neighborhoods and communities by describing the collective social impact of congregations and faith-based organizations across the United States.⁷⁹ This work underlines the way in which theological forms of love, often meditated upon in private devotional reading or in corporate religious worship, can have reverberating societal impact beyond the walls of religious institutions.

Given the emphasis on love in the Christian tradition, our model for Flourishing and the Church considers the interconnectedness of three domains: individual Christians, the congregation, and the community. In each of these domains, our measures of love are used to explore how individuals practice love of neighbor, of enemy, and of God; how congregants experience and practice love amongst themselves; and, importantly, the extent to which members of the community experience a sense of love and care when they interact with congregation-led social programs.

In a time when faith communities are reimagining their purpose amidst societal upheaval, an exploration of love in and through religious communities invites clergy, scholars, and congregants alike to consider how love, for God, for neighbor and enemy, and for the created world underpins what it means to flourish as individuals and in our wider communities.

For further reading see:

Long, K.N.G., Nakamura, J.S., Long, P.M., Gregg, R.J., Abraham, F., Counted, V., Johnson, B.R., and VanderWeele, T.J. (2025). Flourishing communities: The role of faith communities in the promotion of flourishing and the common good. *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, 44:84-107.

Promoting Love in Children Through Hope

We have also partnered with World Vision International to promote love in children through hope. This work began as an initiative to identify and validate measures for how children around the world experience God's love and how those experiences cultivate hope, resilience, and flourishing. Rooted in Christian theology but designed for broad cultural and interfaith relevance, the project bridges developmental psychology, theology, and measurement science to create the first validated cross-cultural tool for assessing children's spiritual well-being. At its core, this work asks: how can something as deeply personal, sacred, and diverse as a child's experience of divine love be meaningfully understood, and how might it be measured? The answer lies in centering children's voices. Through interviews with 658 children across eight countries, Albania, Bolivia, Iraq, Lesotho, Senegal, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Uganda, the project documented how children describe love, faith, hardship, and hope in their own words. These narratives were complemented by theological insights from scholars representing Catholic, Orthodox, Evangelical, and Protestant traditions, alongside rigorous validation work conducted by researchers from Harvard, Duke, and Claremont Graduate University.

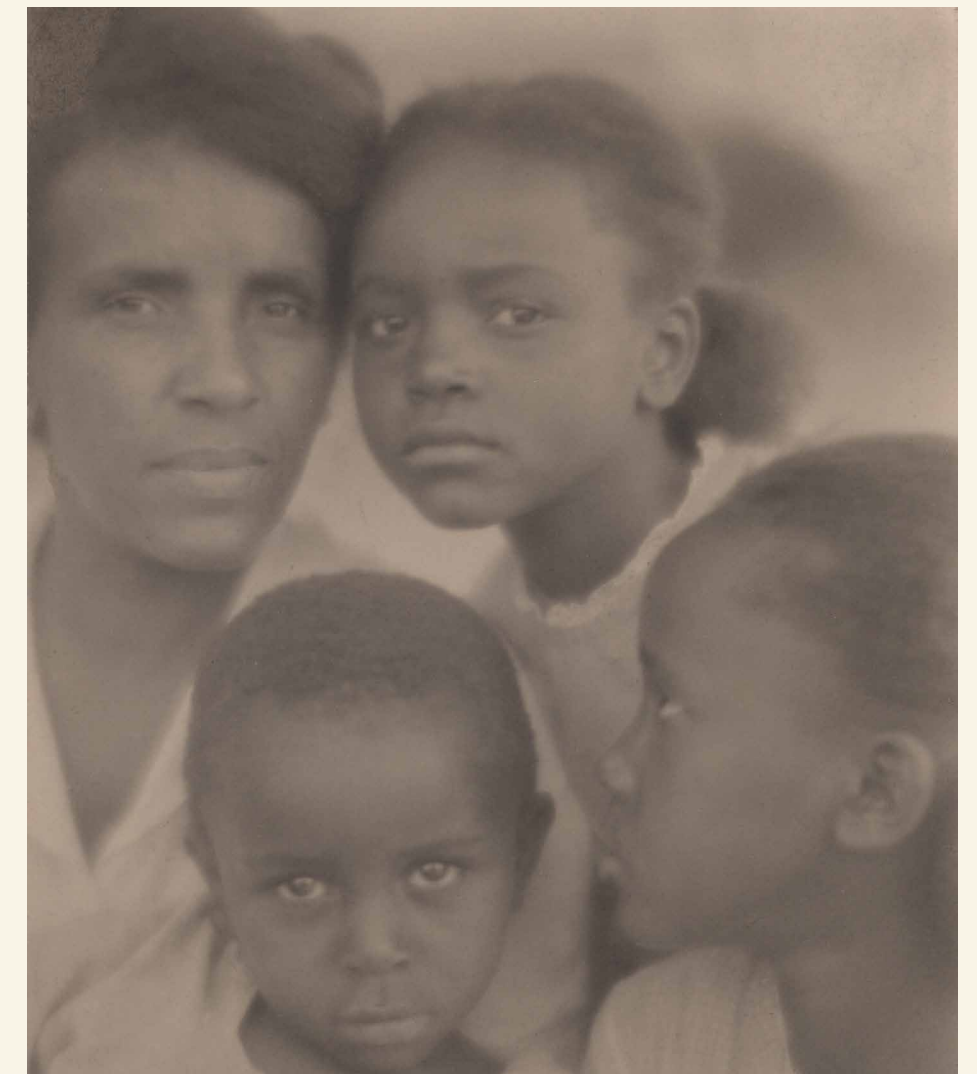
The result is an approach, and accompanying scale, that captures six interrelated "Signs of Hope" as expressions of God's love: compassion, joy, purpose, resilience, wisdom, and personal faith. Each dimension is developmentally appropriate, relationally grounded, and scientifically validated. For instance, compassion is expressed through empathy and kindness; joy through gratitude and the felt sense of being loved; purpose through a commitment to meaning and making the world better; resilience through perseverance in adversity; wisdom through moral integrity; and personal faith through trust in God and engagement in spiritual practices.

By validating these six dimensions across diverse contexts, the approach and measure demonstrates that hope is both a universal and culturally nuanced force. Whether through prayer, community rituals, ancestral traditions, or daily acts of love, children draw strength from human relationships that mirror divine love. This finding underscores that **caregivers, mentors, and communities are vital conduits of God's love, shaping a child's capacity for hope and flourishing.** Importantly, children and caregivers reported that the questions were meaningful and respectful, affirming the instrument's credibility as both a research tool and a relational resource.

This innovation represents more than measurement; it is a new theory of change for spiritual well-being. It reframes hope not just as an internal feeling but as a relational and spiritual reality: the lived expression of God's love in a child's life. By quantifying spiritual well-being alongside physical and emotional health, the tool positions hope as an essential indicator of holistic child development. World Vision plans to deploy this approach and measure across more than 70 countries, enabling programs to better understand and support children's flourishing. Early findings show distinct patterns of hope across regions, offering actionable insights for tailoring interventions. In a time of global instability, this initiative offers a transformative vision: when children are seen, loved, and supported, hope flourishes, and with it, the possibility of healing, resilience, and deep human flourishing.

For further reading see:

Spiritual Care Partners. 2024. Measuring the Experience of God's Love in Children. Research Report. Available at: <https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/2025-09/Measuring%20the%20Experience%20of%20God%27s%20Love%20Final%20Report%206.6.25.pdf>



Portrait of a Family, Edith R. Wilson, National Gallery of Art

Promoting Love through Forgiveness

Another way in which we are seeking to promote love in society is through promoting forgiveness which can be seen as a restoration of love when some wrong or harm has taken place. Our work on flourishing and forgiveness at the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard is advancing a global, interdisciplinary effort to understand forgiveness as both a moral virtue and a measurable determinant of health and well-being. Integrating empirical science, philosophy, and spiritual traditions, the project positions forgiveness as a foundational practice for psychological resilience, relational repair, and societal healing.

Theoretical Foundations

Forgiveness can be conceptualized through two interrelated dimensions: decisional forgiveness, **the conscious choice to replace ill will with goodwill, and emotional forgiveness, the deeper release of persistent negative emotions.**⁸⁰

⁸¹ While emotional forgiveness is often more difficult and prolonged, previous research finds that forgiveness reduces depression and anxiety^{23, 82, 83} while enhancing hope,^{68, 84} posttraumatic growth,⁸⁵ and flourishing.⁸⁶

Forgiveness is also deeply rooted in religious and cultural traditions—from Christianity, Judaism, and Islam⁸⁷ to Hinduism, Buddhism⁸⁹ and indigenous worldviews.⁸⁹ The current initiative builds upon this legacy while grounding its approach in psychological science and public health research, recognizing that unresolved resentment carries profound costs for both individual and collective flourishing.

From Concept to Practice

The *REACH Forgiveness Model*, developed by Dr. Everett Worthington,⁹⁰ a faculty affiliate at the Program, offers a structured process for practicing forgiveness:

- **Recall the hurt objectively,**
- **Empathize with the offender,**
- **Altruistically offer forgiveness,**
- **Commit to forgive, and**
- **Hold onto forgiveness through time.**

Originally developed for clinical use, REACH has since been adapted into workbooks and digital tools accessible to broader, non-clinical populations.



The Prodigal Son,
Honoré Daumier
National Gallery of Art

Global Impact: The Forgiveness Trial

In 2024, in collaboration with Dr. Worthington and others, we published results of a landmark randomized controlled trial evaluating a 2–3 hour self-guided version of the REACH workbook across five relatively high-conflict countries: Colombia, Hong Kong, Indonesia, South Africa, and Ukraine.²³ Involving 4,598 adults who had experienced significant interpersonal harm, the study found that the intervention significantly reduced unforgiveness, depression, and anxiety.²³ Participants also showed marked gains in decisional forgiveness, trait forgiveness and forbearance, and finally also in overall flourishing.

These effects were sustained or improved at a four-week follow-up, highlighting the potentially longer-term benefits of forgiveness even in the absence of formal therapy.²³ The trial demonstrated that low-cost, culturally adaptable, and self-guided interventions can generate measurable improvements in mental health and human flourishing across diverse global contexts.

The Global Forgiveness Movement

This research has motivated the Human Flourishing Program's broader Global Forgiveness Movement, a growing interdisciplinary and intercultural initiative to promote forgiveness as a public good. From educational settings and mental health care to faith communities and post-conflict societies, forgiveness is emerging as a transformative practice for healing personal wounds and fostering social cohesion.

Scholars such as Worthington, Enright, Luskin, and VanderWeele have been instrumental in this shift, showing that forgiveness is not only morally commendable, but also scientifically measurable, psychologically beneficial, and socially constructive.^{23, 24, 65, 66, 91, 92, 93, 94} Their work bridges moral philosophy and empirical inquiry and has reshaped how forgiveness is understood in secular and spiritual frameworks alike.

Forgiveness is not about excusing injustice or forgetting harm, it is about transforming our responses, cultivating compassion, and reclaiming agency in the aftermath of pain.^{56, 65} In doing so, forgiveness becomes a powerful tool for countering cycles of resentment and retaliation, enabling both individuals and societies to move toward reconciliation and flourishing. Forgiveness enables love. The forgiveness workbook is free and is available at the Global Forgiveness Movement website: <https://hfh.fas.harvard.edu/forgiveness>.

For further reading see:

VanderWeele, T.J. (2018). Is forgiveness a public health issue? *American Journal of Public Health*, 108:189-190.

Ho, M. Y., Worthington, E., Cowden, R., Bechara, A. O., Chen, Z. J., Gunatirin, E. Y., Joynt, S., Khalanskyi, V.V., Korzhov, H., Kurniati, N.M.T., Rodriguez, N., Salnykova, A., Shtanko, L., Tymchenko, S., Voytenko, V.L., Zulkaida, A., Mathur, M. and VanderWeele, T.J. (2024). International REACH Forgiveness Intervention: A multi-site randomised controlled trial. *BMJ Public Health*, 2:e000072.

Policy Recommendations

Implementation and Impact

A core part of our mission at the Human Flourishing Program is to ensure that our empirical research reaches and benefits people worldwide. While much remains to be done, we would ambitiously put forward the following set of future recommendations for advancing love and human flourishing throughout society.

International and UN-Specific Policy Recommendations

- **Integrate Love and Forgiveness into UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):** Advocate for the explicit inclusion of love, compassion, reconciliation, and forgiveness within SDG frameworks, particularly Goals 3, 4, 5, 10, and 16. Encourage nations to include social cohesion, community trust, and intergroup forgiveness as indicators in their Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs).
- **Support a Global Framework for Reconciliation and Healing:** Establish a UN Resolution on Forgiveness and Reconciliation as critical tools for peacebuilding and post-conflict recovery. Promote truth-telling, trauma-informed reconciliation, and reparative justice through the UN Peacebuilding Commission and OHCHR.
- **UNESCO Educational Initiatives:** Encourage UNESCO to adopt guidelines promoting love, forgiveness, empathy, and compassion in school curricula globally. Launch a Global Compassion Curriculum Initiative supported by academic institutions and peace education networks.
- **WHO Recognition of Relational and Spiritual Well-being:** Call on WHO to recognize love, forgiveness, and relational health as determinants of mental and social well-being. Fund studies through WHO's mhGAP program on the impact of forgiveness and compassion on health in conflict zones.
- **Day of Global Reconciliation and Healing:** Expand the observance of the UN World Day for the Prevention of, and Healing from, Child Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Violence to include global education on forgiveness and trauma recovery. Establish an International Day for Reconciliation through Forgiveness to promote unity among divided populations.
- **Global Mental Health and Trauma Healing Frameworks:** Encourage international donors (UNICEF, UNDP, World Bank) to fund programs integrating love and forgiveness in trauma recovery efforts. Develop global training toolkits for NGOs and frontline workers on healing-based, compassion-driven psychosocial care.



National-Level Policy Recommendations

- **Integrate Love and Forgiveness into Public Health Strategy:** Recognize love and compassion as determinants of well-being in national health strategies. Support NIH/CDC-funded studies on the effects of forgiveness interventions on public health outcomes.
- **Education Reform and Curriculum Development:** Encourage social-emotional learning that includes love, empathy, compassion, and forgiveness across K-12 education. Fund teacher training and school-based restorative practices that are rooted in mutual dignity.
- **Criminal Justice Reform:** Restorative justice is an approach to addressing harm that focuses on healing relationships, accountability, and repairing the damage caused, rather than punishment alone. Promote restorative justice programs grounded in love in prisons and courts to foster accountability, healing, and reintegration.
- **National Reconciliation Commissions:** Reparative justice is a framework of justice that emphasizes repairing the harm done to individuals or communities through acknowledgment, accountability, and actions that restore dignity, trust, and balance. Create bipartisan commissions to examine historic and systemic harm, with recommendations for reparative justice grounded in love.
- **Federal Grants for Healing and Belonging:** Provide funding to organizations advancing community-based healing, relational wellness, and love-of-neighbor programming.

State-Level Policy Recommendations

- **State Public Health Initiatives:** Include love and relational well-being in state behavioral health indicators. Encourage compassion-based practices and forgiveness therapy in public health departments.
- **Statewide Educational Models:** Support statewide adoption of restorative, trauma-informed education models. Partner with academic institutions to evaluate and scale forgiveness-based education interventions.
- **Faith and Spiritual Integration:** Encourage state mental health services to collaborate with chaplains and spiritual leaders on trauma care. Fund interfaith efforts focused on compassion and neighborly love.
- **Training for Frontline Workers:** Require training in trauma-informed and compassion-based de-escalation techniques for police, case workers, and public servants.

Community-Level Policy Recommendations

- **Community Healing Dialogues:** Support public storytelling events and dialogue circles that promote healing across diverse groups.
- **Local Support for Grassroots and Faith-Based Initiatives:** Provide municipal grants to nonprofits and congregations advancing healing and reconciliation practices.
- **Youth Empowerment and Mentorship Programs:** Integrate love and forgiveness education into after-school and mentorship programs, in underserved areas and elsewhere.
- **Compassionate Safety and Violence Prevention:** Embed love and forgiveness frameworks into community policing, neighborhood watch, and violence prevention efforts.
- **Departments or Commissions for Healing and Social Cohesion:** Establish municipal or county-level commissions dedicated to relational well-being, trauma recovery, and social trust. These bodies can coordinate local initiatives, distribute small grants, and track progress on relational health and cohesion.



Future Directions

At its core, love warrants robust inquiry in both the sciences and the humanities, broader discussion in public life, and dedicated practice in our daily routines.⁹⁵ Scholars have highlighted how genuine care and empathy can enhance psychological well-being, foster community resilience, and even positively influence physical health.^{96, 97} Meanwhile, forgiveness research continues to unveil how deliberate acts of forgiveness, restoring love, can reduce depression and anxiety, improve relationships, lessen the desire for vengeance, and improve flourishing.⁷⁴

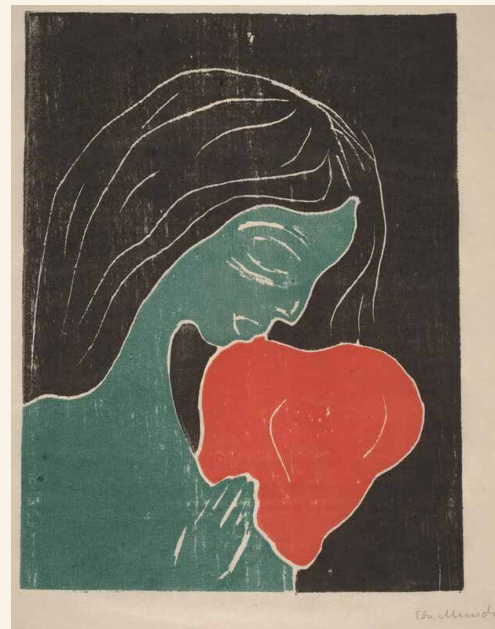
The success of our measures suggests rich possibilities for ongoing research:

- **Longitudinal Studies** may reveal whether promoting love of neighbor, and love of enemy leads to better community resilience and individual health and wellbeing outcomes, and how to facilitate such love in practice.
- **Cross-Cultural Comparisons** could highlight how social conditions and cultural norms influence love, compassion, and forgiveness.

Practical Interventions, such as reflective exercises, policy shifts, community programs, forgiveness exercises, and empowering acts of kindness may encourage and spread forms of everyday love, promoting a more cohesive and empathetic society.

Love of Neighbor Initiative

Grounded in the conviction that love is central to human flourishing, we are launching a new Love of Neighbor Initiative that aims to: (i) promote love in all different types of relationships – from parenting to schools to friendship to religious communities and beyond; (ii) begin nationally representative tracking of love of neighbor and love of enemy assessments to see how these are distributed throughout society and how they may be changing over time; (iii) encourage the promotion of love within policy, and the recognition of love as a social determinant of health from institutions ranging from the World Health Organization to the American Psychiatric Association; and (iv) support campaigns promoting a universal love of neighbor. For a fuller human flourishing, we need to be striving towards love, and towards a “civilization of love.” **The research is compelling, and the policy and promotion opportunities are numerous.** The Love of Neighbor Initiative aims to better enable us to love one another.



The Heart (Hjertet), Edvard Munch
National Gallery of Art



Conclusion

In times of conflict, whether between individuals or larger communities, love and forgiveness stand out as powerful tools for healing and reconciliation, reminding us that even in the darkest circumstances, there remain practical steps we can take to foster unity and maintain hope.⁹⁸ By openly discussing and promoting love, teaching the practice of forgiveness, and systematically studying these ideas, we create space for deeper empathy, conflict resolution, transformative growth, loving communities, and human flourishing.

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About the Program

Founded in 2016, the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard’s Institute for Quantitative Social Science has a twofold mission **to study and promote human flourishing, and to develop systematic approaches to the synthesis of knowledge across disciplines**.

Many topics that are fundamental to human well-being such as happiness itself, virtue, religious community, meaning, and purpose have traditionally been viewed as principally falling within the purview of the humanities, often of philosophy or theology. However, a robust empirical research literature on these topics has now developed from sociology, political science, economics, education, psychology, medicine, public health, and other empirical sciences. The Program’s research contributes to the broad question of how knowledge from the quantitative social sciences can be integrated with that of the humanities on questions of human flourishing and how best to carry out this synthesis of knowledge across disciplines.

The Program produces research publications and sponsors educational activities, such as courses, seminars, and conferences, for the Harvard University community and beyond. The Program has helped lead the Global Flourishing Study which is a worldwide longitudinal study of over 200,000 individual spanning 22 countries and all six populated continents to examine the distribution and determinants of well-being world-wide. The Program has a range of initiatives designed to increase public awareness of the science of human flourishing and the adoption of practices that can improve it throughout society.

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