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Study On The Relationship Between Spirituality And Emotion Regulation: A Systematic Review

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Abstract: Spirituality and emotion regulation are essential elements of psychological health, each playing an important role in mental wellness. Spirituality, which can be described as the pursuit of meaning, transcendence, and a connection to something larger than oneself, positively impacts emotional processes. Emotion regulation, involving the strategies employed to manage emotional responses, includes constructive techniques like cognitive reappraisal and unhelpful ones such as emotional suppression. This review examines the expanding research surrounding the relationship between spirituality and emotion regulation, highlighting how spiritual beliefs and practices promote healthier emotional processing. The relationship is complex, though, and some spiritual beliefs may be a factor in maladaptive regulatory habits like suppression or shame, which shows that the effects of spirituality on emotion regulation are not universally positive. Evidence indicates that spirituality strengthens emotional resilience by fostering mindfulness, acceptance, and cognitive restructuring, helping individuals handle stress and negative emotions more effectively. Additionally, research shows that people with higher degrees of spirituality are more likely to use adaptive emotion regulation techniques, contributing to better psychological health and overall well-being. All things considered; spirituality is a useful yet intricate component of emotion regulation.

Keywords: Spirituality, Emotion Regulation, mindfulness, Cognitive Reappraisal, Psychological well-being.

INTRODUCTION

Spirituality and emotion regulation are two areas that have attracted considerable interest in both psychology and interdisciplinary studies. Spirituality, commonly understood as a quest for meaning, purpose, and a sense of connection to something larger than oneself, has been recognized for its ability to enhance mental health (Pargament, 2007). In contrast, emotion regulation involves the methods by which individuals manage their feelings, encompassing how they perceive, express, and control emotions (Gross, 2002).

There are two types of emotion regulation: maladaptive (such as repressing feelings) and adaptive (such as employing techniques like cognitive appraisal). The connection between spirituality and the management of emotions is a significant field of study, especially given that both concepts have separately been associated with favorable psychological results.

One way in which spirituality can impact emotion regulation is by fostering mindfulness and acceptance (Brown and Ryan, 2003). Spiritual practices like prayer, meditation, or mindfulness have been proven in several studies to assist people in managing stress and negative emotions (Koenig et al., 2012). Particularly during difficult circumstances, spirituality might give people coping strategies or frameworks that improve their emotional resilience (Chida et al., 2008). According to a growing body of research, spirituality may play a significant role in adaptive emotion regulation, and incorporating spiritual practices into therapeutic settings may offer comprehensive approaches to emotional well-being (Hood et al., 2018). Although there is an

expanding range of literature, the mechanisms that explain this relationship are still intricate and varied. This review intends to consolidate current research on this subject, emphasizing important discoveries, theoretical viewpoints, and possible effects on psychological well-being. By exploring empirical studies and theoretical frameworks, this paper aims to offer a thorough comprehension of how spirituality influences emotion regulation.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Spirituality

According to Joseph et. al. (2017), spirituality should be seen as “a more general, unstructured, personalized, and naturally occurring phenomenon, where an individual seeks closeness and/or connectedness with a higher power or purpose.” Other scholars characterize spirituality as a quest for universal truth and a process allowing individuals to uncover meaning and significance in the world around them (Woods and Ironson, 1999). Spirituality can also be viewed as a dynamic experience, perpetually exploring new aspects; it may involve understanding the ultimate boundaries of existence and pursuing a broader sense of life’s meaning. Hart (1994) described spirituality as a manner in which a person experiences their faith in daily life and a “style in which the individual refers to the final conditions of individual existence.” Consequently, spirituality represents a multidimensional theoretical concept. Essentially, it embodies transcendence through inner peace, harmony, or connectedness with others (Boswell et al., 2006)

Many scholars are acquainted with Abraham Maslow, who is recognized as the founder of Humanistic Psychology and his five-tier hierarchy of needs. While Humanistic Psychology is commonly attributed to Maslow, by the mid-1960s, he expanded his focus to include a transpersonal or spirituality-oriented psychology, stepping beyond the confines of a strictly humanistic viewpoint. Maslow’s research on self-actualized individuals led him to assert that transcending the self is essential for achieving the highest level of self-actualization. According to Heszen-Niejodek and Gruszynska (2004), transcendence is a common dominator throughout numerous spiritual beliefs. Spirituality is distinct from religion, as religion is often associated with particular rituals, institutional affiliations, and social connections, while spirituality focuses more on personal encounters with the unseen and the recognition of something greater than ourselves (Tover-Murray, 2011). According to Thoresen (1998), religion is mainly viewed as a social construct, while spirituality is typically examined at the individual level and within a specific construct. Although both spirituality and religiosity share common roots related to transcendence, they should not be regarded as interchangeable. These concepts are different areas, though they do overlap in their meanings (Krok, 2009).

A variety of scholars who have explored spirituality comprehensively have identified multiple dimensions. Bennet and Bennet (2007) identified 13 spiritual qualities: Aliveness, caring, compassion, Harmony, Empathy, Eagerness, Respect, Sensitivity, Expectancy, Love, Joy, Willingness, and Tolerance. According to Mahoney, spirituality is also associated with qualities such as Mortality, Hope, opportunities for learning, Forgiveness, Compassion, Community, Charity, and Meaning. A comprehensive analysis by Mitroff and Denton (1999) indicated that spirituality is an enduring and universal concept that encompasses a wide array of attributes, including inner peace, sacredness, and interconnectedness, among others. Therefore, it is evident that there seem to be many different aspects of spirituality as methods or individuals are pursuing these practices (Ratnakar and Nair, 2012)

Research has shown that spirituality has a positive effect on both mental and physical health as well as other favorable health outcomes like coping mechanisms, subjective well-being, health-related quality of life, mental illness recovery, or a decrease in addictive or suicidal behaviors (Mueller et al., 2001; Miller and Thoresen, 2003; Kharitonov, 2012; Unterrainer et al., 2014). However, it is important to keep in mind that spirituality is a multifaceted concept that is measured using many instruments and described in various ways (Lun and Bond, 2013).

Emotion Regulation

“The processes by which individuals influence which emotions they have when they have them, and how they experience and express these emotions” is what emotion regulation is defined as (Gross, 1998). There are two viewpoints on emotion regulation: the micro viewpoint, which concentrates on particular strategies employed to manage emotions in specific situations or contexts, and the macro viewpoint, which examines the competencies and skills that contribute to effective emotion regulation. The first viewpoint, introduced by James Gross (1998), highlights the significance of specific strategies like situation selection, alteration, attentional deployment, cognitive restructuring, and response modulation for successful emotion regulation. These strategies entail altering one’s surroundings, focus, thoughts, or actions to regulate emotional reactions.

The second viewpoint, supported by Gratz and Roemer (2004), emphasizes the fundamental competencies and skills needed for effective emotion regulation, including emotion acceptance, cognitive flexibility, distress tolerance, and interpersonal effectiveness. These competencies are believed to be crucial in various contexts and are linked to improved mental health outcomes.

Emotional regulation pertains to how individuals manage their emotions, including when they feel them and how they express and experience those emotions (Gross, 1998). Gross (1998) also introduced the Processual Model of emotion regulation, which differentiates between two phases in which emotion regulation can occur: before or following the generation of emotion. He termed these phases antecedent and response-focused processes, respectively (Cabello et al., 2013). The strategies for emotion regulation evolve throughout the emotional reaction, beginning with the assessment and interpretation of the stimulus, which triggers emotional strategies that shape the emotional response (Gross, 1998; Yigit and Ragip, 2014). This model identifies five stages in the emotional process where various emotion regulation strategies can be employed (Gross and John, 2003). Among these, two primary emotion regulation strategies have been investigated: cognitive reappraisal, which changes the emotional significance of an event by modifying the cognitive evaluation before the emotion is produced, and expressive suppression, which restricts the outward expression of an emotion after it has arisen (Cabello et al., 2013; Gross and John, 2003). Cognitive appraisal is generally associated with enhanced interpersonal functioning, improved psychological well-being, better academic performance, and increased social competence, whereas expressive suppression is often correlated with a reduction in positive feelings, lower interpersonal satisfaction and social support, and diminished psychological well-being and life satisfaction (Gross and John, 2003).

According to Gratz and Roemer (2004), emotion regulation is a complex concept that encompasses the capacity to comprehend, accept, and effectively utilize emotions, manage and adjust them, control impulses, and steer behavior towards achieving goals. It also involves the capacity to endure negative emotional states when they are linked to activities that bring meaning to an individual's life (Gratz et al., 2018; Gratz and Tull, 2010). In this contrast, challenges in emotion regulation arise from one or more deficiencies in various aspects, including: the ability to perceive and understand emotions; the capacity to accept experienced emotional states; the ability to regulate impulses and sustain goal-directed behavior even when faced with negative emotional experiences; and the adaptability to employ suitable emotion regulation strategies that allow for emotional modulation, ultimately leading to improved well-being (Gratz and Roemer, 2004; Hallion et al., 2018). Thus, the authors suggest that it is not the strength of the emotion or the individual's reaction to it that defines their level of emotion regulation, but rather how they give their response towards emotion experienced, and consequently, the path they choose to take in response to it (Gratz et al., 2018).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Relationship between Spirituality and Emotion Regulation

A common component of spirituality is the belief in a greater power, purpose, and transcendent significance, which many people find to be an essential foundation for managing their emotions (Wagani and Colucci, 2018). Understanding the interaction between the two domains, that is, spiritual beliefs and cognitive emotion regulation, can offer insights about emotional health. Singh and Agarwal (2025) explored the interplay between cognitive emotion regulation strategies and spiritual beliefs. The research discovered a beneficial connection between spirituality and cognitive emotion regulation. People who possess higher degrees of spirituality often employ more effective cognitive emotion regulation techniques, like positive reappraisal and acceptance. This indicates that spirituality aids individuals in managing their emotions more successfully by fostering resilience and decreasing emotional distress. Even with these advantages, spirituality may not always have a favorable impact on controlling emotions. Some spiritual beliefs, especially those based on strict doctrines, dread, or guilt, might cause maladaptive coping mechanisms like self-blame or emotional suppression (Tover-Murray, 2011; Krok, 2009).

Research conducted by Vishkin et al. (2019) revealed connections between spirituality and two adaptive strategies of emotion regulation: situational acceptance and cognitive reappraisal. According to his study, firstly, individuals who identify as spiritual often perceive themselves as a broader system governed by a higher authority. They believe that rather than resisting this order, they should strive to coexist with it harmoniously. Consequently, those with higher levels of spirituality are more likely to employ situational acceptance as a strategy for regulating emotions. Secondly, spiritual individuals also tend to view their experiences as components of a larger meaning framework. This inclination to reinterpret emotional experiences aligns with a specific emotion regulation strategy known as cognitive appraisal, which entails altering the perceived

significance of an emotional event (Gross and John, 2003). Therefore, individuals with higher levels of spirituality engage in cognitive reappraisal compared to those with lower levels (Vishkin et al., 2019).

Spiritual practices such as prayer and meditation serve as tools for regulating emotions by fostering mindfulness, providing social support with the help of communal activities, and promoting acceptance within individuals (Graca and Beandao, 2024). Although it is claimed that mindful meditation creates a state of “nonappraisal,” nothing is understood about how mindfulness could affect appraisal processes (Garland et al., 2016). A study conducted by Garland et al. (2016) stated that the level of state mindfulness achieved during mindfulness was a strong predictor of an increase in cognitive reappraisal over time, indicating that mindfulness may enhance emotion regulation by facilitating cognitive appraisal. The connection among psychological well-being, spirituality, and emotion regulation has been extensively investigated in current studies. Safara et al (2020) carried out an empirical investigation to assess the roles of spirituality and emotion regulation in forecasting the psychological health of older adults. The result of the study showed that emotion regulation, along with two main aspects- reappraisal and suppression, has a notable and direct link to psychological well-being. These results support earlier research that highlights the importance of adaptive emotion regulation techniques in influencing mental health (Gross, 2015). Moreover, spirituality has reportedly been associated with improved mental well-being and emotional strength in older adults in this study. Hence, the study reinforces the idea that both spirituality and emotion regulation contribute to the psychological well-being.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the complex connection between spirituality and emotion regulation, as well as their joint effects on psychological well-being. Evidence suggests that spirituality promotes adaptive emotion regulation techniques, including cognitive reappraisal and situational acceptance, by encouraging mindfulness, meaningful interpretation, and resilience (Vishkin et al., 2019; Graca and Beandao, 2024). Spiritual beliefs and practices offer individuals a framework for managing stress and fostering emotional stability, which consequently enhances psychological well-being (Pargament, 2007; Koenig et al., 2012). Some spiritual beliefs can result in maladaptive techniques like self-blame or emotional suppression, especially if they are based on fear, guilt, or strict doctrines (Tover-Murray, 2011; Krok, 2009). Additionally, research highlights that individuals with a higher degree of spirituality are more likely to utilize effective emotion regulation methods, supporting the notion that spirituality acts as a psychological asset for emotional management. (Singh and Agarwal, 2025; Vishkin et al., 2019). Based on these findings, future studies should delve deeper into the fundamental processes that clarify the relationship between spirituality and emotion regulation. Furthermore, incorporating spiritual practices into therapy could provide a more holistic method for enhancing emotional health, especially for individuals facing psychological challenges (Garland et al., 2016). By recognizing the synergistic effects of spirituality and emotion regulation, mental health practitioners can create well-rounded interventions that foster emotional resilience and overall mental well-being (Mueller et al., 2001; Miller and Thoresen, 2003).

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