

Spiritual Life during Testing Times: How Spirituality Can Help

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Abstract

The novel coronavirus named COVID-19 is one of the prevalent pandemics today however, it is still too early to decide the full extent of impact the virus has had on the lives of the communities compared to the impact of other viruses. In such uncertain times, the present generation is facing a situation where they are questioning the concept of spirituality in the context of physical well-being. The present review article looks into the literature to compile the present knowledge on religion/spirituality on psychological aspects. The article reflects how spiritual life can be used to help people get through suffering and find meaning in their lives.

Keywords: Spiritual Strength, Pandemic, COVID-19, Meaning of Life

Introduction

The history of the world is riddled with centuries of famine, drought, natural disasters, wars, and various forms of diseases that have claimed human life everywhere. In all these stories, there are glimmers of hope and strength and drove humans to come out of the situation and keep moving ahead. The novel coronavirus named COVID-19 is one of the prevalent pandemics that the 21st century. However, it is still too early to decide the extent of impact the virus has had on the lives of the communities compared to the other viruses like SARS and H1 N1. The

article focuses on the role of spiritual life during times of difficulty and reviews how religion/spiritual life can help people get through such times.

The critical role of spirituality in medicine and health care has gained recognition in recent times (Puchalski, Vitillo, Hull, & Reller, 2014). Spiritual life has been associated with improved outcomes in health (Naghi, Philip, Phan, Cleenewerck, & Schwarz, 2012,) and quality of life (Milner, Crawford, Edgley, Hare-Duke, & Slade, 2020). Spiritual life is required to move from the position of challenges- compassion at a distance, dichotomous thinking, conspiracy of silence, and compulsion to save the world (Addiss, 2018)- to one that acts as the Samaritan who did his best to save the traveler (Luke 10: 25-37). The philanthropic and selfless deeds of the Samaritan cater around the compassion he felt and that reflects the nature of the need that all of humanity requires when troubles and terrible conditions occur. The presentation of COVID-19 was one such situation where the spiritual life and nature of a person with spiritual life are questioned.

The Biblical view of spiritual life is one that talks about walking with the spirit (Galatians 5: 16-17), and to bear the fruits of the spirit (Galatians 5: 22-23). Spirituality can be summarised in the diverse and personal ways in which a person seeks meaning, purpose, and connection in their lives (Gilbert, 2011). Often during times of great distress or mental or physical breakdown, people tend to turn towards other means for an answer to their suffering. Though spirituality has been a subject of comfort and confrontation for centuries, there are doubts concerning how a spiritual life can truly help people in times of crisis. There is a need to understand how spirituality and spiritual life can help the general population and how it can be used by pastors and counselors to help those who are psychologically affected by the effects of the pandemic.

Method

The researchers looked into various journal publications, research articles, books, Church documents, and newspaper clippings from 2011 to 2020 to understand recent developments in the understanding of spirituality in crisis times. The search was done using key phrases like ‘spirituality in crisis times/mental health’, ‘role of spiritual life in mental health’, and ‘overcoming the impact of a pandemic’. The search was done in Google Scholar, Google Books, and PsychInfo.

After narrowing down the articles, the following articles were selected for the review.

Data analysis

The themes that were found across the articles were selected and written down in a Word document. After analyzing them, the main themes were clustered together and presented under Results and Discussion.

Results and Discussion

The following are the results of the analysis of the literature. The final two themes that were clustered from the literature were: tested faith and strength during adversity.

Tested Faith

During the World Council of Churches (2020) one of the questions that were presented was ‘Does the pandemic challenge your faith?’ The global pandemic has so far resulted in the death of a hundred, revealed various underlying corruption and disease of the injustice of the society, and has led to the financial and economic difficulty around the world. People of all faith and religion were questioned together about what they are required to do for the future of humanity. The fundamental test of faith in God and God’s providence was prevalent even before the pandemic. However, the pandemic brought up a need to re-examine one’s relationship to their neighbours, God, and the world.

The pandemic brought about a vital change in the daily routine of a large number of people around the world. Lockdown and quarantine ensured that people are made to sit in their homes with themselves and it guaranteed the ‘alone’ time or ‘self-time’ that psychologists recommend to discover oneself. There are studies which show that when individuals perceive the reason for doing a behaviour to be more autonomous, their activities tend to yield more results- when individual actively chose to be alone, it has been found that solitude could lead to relaxation and reduce stress (Nguyen, Ryan, &Deci, 2018).Such states of solitude intensify the battle within a person between fear and faith and help to over the state through prayer which is the God-given source for intimacy and empowerment (Templeton, 2017). As a person understands that they can choose to take time off during the day for self-reflection, the counsellor can persuade them to wrangle the battle between their fear and faith.

The pandemic itself has become a fundamental test of faith in God and God's providence. Psychologists are starting to understand why some people can find peace during the pandemic while others are struggling with their faith (Goodman, 2020). Encounters with a situation like Covid-19 with the Word of God can give rise to spiritual and theological reflections that try to question and answer the reason behind faith. Open-ended discussions and meaningful engagement in such topics question what one can do when faced with a calamity, financial insecurity, social injustice, and relationship uncertainty. Religion and/or spirituality can help people cope with adverse situations. The positive effects of religion were listed down by Goodman (2020): encourage people to reframe events through a hopeful lens as they grow closer to a higher power or seek an opportunity to improve their lives; foster a sense of connectedness through prayer or meditation, spiritual music or meetings; cultivate connection through rituals that help guide and sustain people. Abu-Raiya and Pargament (2015) concluded in their review paper that some form of religious coping was associated with desirable outcomes, whereas others are linked to undesirable outcomes. They also concluded that through religious coping is common in all forms of religious traditions, the nuance and particulars vary in ways that reflect the nature and tenants of each faith. Counsellors and other practitioners need to understand where the faith of the other person is based on and try to help them cultivate their coping style concerning it.

Another major issue when looking at faith during times of pandemic is the issue of the context in which people base their faith. With churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples closed because of the health emergency, a genuine question arises of how religious communities continue to worship and stop losing people of the faith. People have managed to overcome the challenges offered by the pandemic and keep the faith of their congregation (Bartlett, March 2020). One way in which this was possible was with the understanding that positive religious coping during infectious disease outbreaks has been understood to help individuals to reduce their risk of depressive illness (Thomas & Barbato, 2020). Counselors and other practitioners can identify the signs of religious coping like prayers of petition, confession, focusing on the 'world-to-come', seeking support from clergy, or acceptance of adversity as the will of God (Pargament 1990 as cited in Thomas & Barbato, 2020) and help the client overcome their challenges with their strength.

Strength in Adversity

Christians seem to value thoughts and prayers from religious strangers and priest (Thunström&Noy, 2019). It is common for a person to tell a fellow believer who is going through a tough time that they are in their ‘thoughts and prayers.’ Prayer is a powerful medium through which ‘our spirit is purposed to affect and be affected by God’ (Cartwright, 2011, p15). Various prayers during these times reflect on grace, strength, sympathetic to the suffering for those who suffer loss of a loved one or loss of work, courage to accompany those who suffer violence or injustice; Gods’ healing to those who have contracted the virus, and sustain and inspire those who are working in the frontline fighting COVID-19like medical doctors, nurses and supporting staff, and all those who have to get up every day and work to get the community running like police officers, farmers, shop keepers, and so on; consolation and strengthened faith and hope in Jesus Christ to those who have lost their loved one to the virus; respect and solidarity with others especially those who are weak and poor; calm and ignore unsubstantiated rumours; take advantage of living together with family; cultivate responsibility, patience and hope; care for refugees and migrants; being in solidarity with humanity in sadness and grief, for those who don’t have anyone to love and care, and for those who have been suffering during this pandemic; protection and peace; courage not to rush back to our old ways of living but to rebuild the world to be a better place on the foundation of justice, equality and peace; and prayer for the end of the virus.

Pope Francis’ Rosary Prayers for month of May 2020 included a prayer for encouraging families to rediscover prayer at home and his prayers included- comfort for the distraught and those who are grieving the loss of their loved ones, hope for those who are troubled by the uncertain future and its consequences; the hearts of the families of sick and victims be opened to confidence and trust; protecting for doctors, nurses, health workers and volunteers and those who are on the frontline of the emergency and putting their lives at risk; to watch over those who are assisting the sick and to those in the pastoral concern and fidelity to the Gospel; illumination to those men and women in the scientific research so that they may be able to find solutions to overcome the virus; support wisdom, solicitude and generosity for national leaders so as to meet the basic necessities of the life of the people under them and

farsightedness and solidarity to devise social and economic solutions; and for family unity, fraternity and solidarity.

Abu-Raiya and Pargament found that a lot of people across various diverse religious backgrounds rely on their religious and spiritual teachings, beliefs, and practices to cope with life's difficulties, challenges, and stressors. With places of worship closed, reports from giant search engines like Google reveal that there was a surge in the number of searches about prayer and ways to use religion to cope with feelings of anxiety and hopelessness (Kelly-Linden, 2020). There is a strength in knowing that people are moving closer to God and closer to each other through prayer and faith. Reassuring thoughts of how people around the world are coming closer together even when miles apart in their own homes can be used by counsellors and practitioners to comfort their distressed clients. Bentzen (2020) rightfully concluded, "We pray to cope with adversity." The thought that COVID-19 may not be the last pandemic the world will see gives rise to a pit of panic when we realize what sort of a world we are handing down to our children and grandkids. The spiritual gift of prayer as a source of strength in adversity is what we can give down to our next generation.

Conclusion

The pandemic COVID-19 has caused a lot of positive and negative changes in the lives of a lot of people. Though the topic of spirituality and spiritual life has been prevalent in our lives for centuries, the present situation had opened up opportunities for people to question and seek an answer about their faith and practices. Counselors and other practitioners can use the themes of tested faith and strength in adversity through prayer as a means through which they can reach out to their clients of diverse faith.

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