

BOOK

intervencao em situacoes Limite Desestabilizadoras CRISES e TRAUMAS

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Spirituality religion and resilience promotion in disasters trauma.

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The World is becoming a truly post-modern society, a place where we are learning to incorporate uncertainty in our view of the world. The absolute is giving way to the relative; objectivity to subjectivity; function to form. In the modern view of the 20th century, seeing was believing; in the post-modern world of the turn of the century, believing is seeing. Conviction yields to speculation; prejudice to a new open-mindedness; religious dogma to a more intuitive, inclusive spirituality. Even the concept of God receives a changed emphasis, from the materialist's 'out-there' being, to a spirit that is more intimately part of us¹.

The historical split between "facts" and "values"; science and religion is being reconsidered. There has been the recent shift away from dichotomies such as therapy/spirituality, science/religion towards a both/and syntheses in the "New Science" and spirituality. The "Cartesian anxiety" and dualism that has dominated western thought in the last 300 years is now less apparent, and science is more inclusive of different paradigms².

Spirituality is a concept globally acknowledged [2]. However, attempts to reach a consensus regarding its nature have not met with success [3]. In discussing spirituality, one is really

discussing the ways in which people fulfil what they hold to be the purpose of their lives. Thus it becomes possible to see why so many different definitions of spirituality have been proposed.

Human beings are considered to have two realms of existence. The outer realm consists of a person's interaction with the world; the inner realm is his or her interaction with the transcendental, this may be a divine being or ideals hinted at through such experiences as beauty, awe and love. Most people would hold that correct action in the outer realm consists of justice and magnanimity, and the inner realm dealt only through sincerity [4]. These principals may arise from different contexts thus in the monotheistic faiths one acts justly to know God, whereas in Buddhism one acts justly to be released from suffering [5]. But most people "with various beliefs" have spiritualities that are fundamentally similar.

Doctors and Clinicians are healers

Doctors and Clinicians are healers importantly through the caring relationships they form with patients. Caring often requires calling out an individual's inner strengths. These strengths amongst others include spiritual resources, which support integration or wholeness of body, mind and spirit. By addressing the spiritual and religious dimensions in patient care clinicians can truly be holistic and bring well-being to the fore front- the need of the day. Thus spiritual and or religious care that is ethical and sensitive is an invaluable part of total patient care.

Attending to the spiritual dimensions of the patient can provide the physician with a more in-depth understanding of the patient and his or her needs. We may thus use a variety of spiritually informed therapeutic tools that can greatly facilitate the patient's coping ability, thus enhancing well being and recovery.

Clinicians' own religious or spiritual practices or non-practices may impact upon their ability to function effectively in this area of clinical practice. Thus this is an area we must take cognisance of. As doctors, we have been trained to be objective and to keep our beliefs and practices out, but over time we have strayed into keeping the patients beliefs, spiritual, religious needs and supports out, thus potentially ignoring an important aspect that might be the core to their coping and support system, that is integral not only to recovery but to their 'well being' - which is what we have set out to achieve in the first place.

Spirituality and Religiosity for the patients.

There is evidence that many seriously ill patients use religious beliefs to cope with their illness [10]. Religious/ spiritual involvement is a widespread practice that predicts successful coping with physical illness [11]. Further studies by Koenig at Duke University suggest that high intrinsic religiousness predicts more rapid remission in depression, an association that is particularly strong in patients whose physical function is not improving [12]. In a meta analysis of more than 850 studies examining the relationship between religious involvement and various aspects of mental health, between two thirds and three quarters of these have found that people experience better mental health and adapt more successfully to stress if they are religious [13]. Another analysis of 350 studies examining religious involvement and health found that religious people are physically healthier, lead healthier live styles and require fewer health services [14].

The Place of Spirituality in Disasters

Catastrophes generally challenge the human's capacity to transcend shock and the impact of loss and grief. A disaster of stupendous scale can bring about profound and lasting psychological sequelae. Shock, panic and bafflement are often the first reactions followed

by numbness, and/or agitation, followed by post traumatic stress symptoms of nightmares, flashbacks, acute hyper arousal, insomnia and avoidance followed by depression. The symptoms do not necessarily follow each other in simple progression but, often, are mixed. These latter symptoms can last for years resulting in severe disability. My work on the ground with the Tsunami disaster in several countries in Asia, the earthquake disaster in Kashmir Pakistan, the cyclone disaster in Bangladesh and the Cyclone Nargis disaster in Myanmar together with the interviewing of victims and observing their positive coping and use of their spiritual and religious belief has aided these understandings.

In disasters a recognisable issue is the place of religion, spirituality and rituals in enhancing resilience, coping and rebuilding through acceptance and finding some meaning even in their suffering and loss. This is illustrated by an example, when a woman who had lost her family and all her possessions expressed her perception of her situation as, "I have lost every thing I had and now I have only my God". This is at a time when this disaster had raised issues about the existence or role of God in the developed world

We might understand this in the context of the endemic death denial of our culture.¹⁴ When death threatens personally or presents itself so shockingly as in the recent disasters, the reality that it cannot be avoided may be realised at this point, although many people steadfastly might refuse to face human mortality Cooper-Clarke aptly described this apparent contradiction as that " We are so hedged around with material comfort, health care and insurance against disaster that many can remain shielded from the knowledge of human frailty and vulnerability, which is the everyday experience of many in these affected areas".

From the interviews of these disaster victims, we established that rather than rocking their faith, this set back has bolstered their belief. Paradoxically it seems that faith survives and may even strengthen in spite of suffering and this indiscriminate “act of god”.

It is also important to understand the worldview of different cultures. It is assumed that Eastern religions foster more stoicism and acceptance. In addition it is a tenant of the Hindu religion, that the past determines the future.¹⁵ Thus the concept that a disaster could not be prevented as it was destined to happen might be considered fatalistic. On the other hand it can also be very optimistic. If the past predicts the future then the present certainly does as well and things can change. Therefore one ultimately is in control of one’s life according to this type of religious reasoning.

Religion and Coping with Stress and Disasters

Some questions that are relevant include how often do people turn to religion when coping with psychological, social, and situational stress? Is there evidence that religious coping is effective in relieving stress? If effective, how does religion facilitate coping? In this chapter, We can first discuss these questions as they relate to stress in general, and then examine studies on religion’s role in coping with disaster stress in particular.

Random surveys of the population since 1940 by the Gallup Organization have consistently found religion to be widely prevalent and important to Americans. Surveys over the past five years indicate that about 95 percent of the U.S. population believe in God, more than 90 percent pray 65-70 percent are church members, at least 40 percent have attended church, synagogue, or temple within the past seven days, and about six out of ten say that

religion is “very important” in their lives. Many persons also turn to religion when experiencing stress or feeling fearful or anxious.

Coping with Health Problems

The role of religion in coping with stress has been documented best in persons suffering from health problems. 1. Many Studies find that prayer and other personal religious practices are common responses to medical illness and disability. For example, more than seventy studies have now examined the role that religion plays in coping with health problems such as arthritis, 2 diabetes, 3 kidney transplant, 4 haemodialysis, 5 cancer, 6 surviving with cancer, 7 coronary artery disease and bypass surgery, 8, 9 heart transplant, 10 lung transplant, 11 HIV/ Aids, 13 cystic fibrosis, 14 sickle cell disease, 15 amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, 16 chronic pain, 17 and severe illness in adolescents. 18 Regardless of their age, people use religion to cope when they become stressed over their health or the health of a loved one.

The use of religion in this way frequently been associated with less depression and predicts the development of less depression over time in hospitalized patients. 19 Recovery from depression may also be affected by religious, with religious individuals experiencing more rapid remission of symptoms than those are less religious. 20, 21

Coping with Loss and Trauma

Other life stresses besides poor health also elicit religious responses. Research indicates that people to help them cope with loss of loved ones, loss of possessions, and loss of security that result from traumatic situations. For example, Maton surveyed eighty-one members of a bereaved parents group (mean age 46, 77% women), dividing them into high-and low-stress samples. 22 Depression self-esteem and religious support were assessed using standard questionnaires. High life stress was defined by death of a child within the previous two years (33 subjects) and low life stress if the death occurred more than two years previously (48 subjects). In the overall sample, those reported greater spiritual support experienced significantly less depression. Effects were stronger in the high-stress group; those with greater spiritual support indicated both less depression and greater self-esteem. In the low-stress group, spiritual support was unrelated to either depression or self-esteem. Thus, religion appears to be particularly important for people during periods of high stress, underscoring its usefulness as a coping behavior.

In another study, this time of older adults Koenig and colleagues examined the use of religion by one hundred older adults (over 55 years) from North Carolina participating in the Duke Longitudinal II study of aging. 23 Subjects were asked how they coped with the worst event or situation in their entire lives, the worst event in the past ten years, and the most difficult of their lives. Questions were asked in an open-ended format (without mentioning religion in the questions) in order to avoid biasing responses. Forty-nine percent of stressful events were health related, 29 percent were family related, and 22 percent involved other traumas and losses. Of the 556 different coping strategies, 17 percent were religious in nature, representing the most common category of coping activity. Religious ways of coping

were more common among women than men (58% of women used religion to cope with at least one of the three events vs. 32% of men)

There is ample evidence that young people also rely on religion to cope with stress. For example, Mattlin and colleagues examined the coping strategies of 1,556 married people from Detroit, Michigan. 24 Participants were asked what coping resources they used to deal with the most stressful event or situation that occurred in the previous year. A list of coping resources was presented; 55 percent of respondents indicated that religion was used either “some” or “a lot” when dealing with stressors. Religion was used most often when respondents were dealing with more serious stressors having to do with illness or death and less often for minor problems.

Especially important are the results of prospective studies that follow individuals over time to see whether religion makes a difference in their coping. People who suffer the loss of a loved one through death or trauma have been studied to determine whether those with spiritual beliefs experience a faster resolution of their grief. In one such study, Walsh and colleagues examined 135 relatives and close friends of patients with terminal illness. 25 Standardized measures of grief were administered at one, nine, and fourteen months after the loved one’s death. At the fourteen-month follow up, most subjects who reported no spiritual beliefs had still not resolved their grief. Those with strong spiritual beliefs, however, resolved grief symptoms progressively over the fourteen-month period. Strength of spiritual belief remained a highly significant predictor of fewer grief symptoms after other relevant confounders were taken into account.

Religious beliefs may also be used negatively and maladaptively. Some persons feel punished by God, angry at God, or abandoned by God when undergoing negative life

experiences that seem senseless and prolonged. For example, when fifty-eight breast cancer patients talked about the role that religion played in their coping with the illness, the vast majority reported it was helpful and comforting; however, 17 percent used negative emotion words to describe religion's helpfulness. 26 While not common, negative forms of religious coping do occur and are a robust predictor of worse mental health when studied over time. 27 Negative religious coping (as described above) is uncommon among those who are deeply religious and associated instead with infrequent religious practice and low religiousness in general. 28

As suggested above, the degree to which people use religion to cope varies by the severity of the stressor. Shrimali and Broota compared coping strategies with major and minor surgery between three groups. 29 One group of thirty patients was scheduled for minor surgery, a second group of thirty was scheduled for major surgery, and thirty subjects not under going surgery were recruited as controls. Before surgery, belief in God was highest among subjects scheduled for major surgery. After surgery, however, belief in God decreased in the major surgery group but did not change in the other groups. Thus, as the severity of a stressor increases and sense of personal control diminishes the likelihood of turning to religion increases. As the old saying goes, "There are no atheists in the foxholes."

Ken Pargament from Bowling Green University is perhaps best known for his research on religious coping among persons dealing with non-health-related stress. In his book, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping*,

He discussed hundreds of studies that have examined the prevalence of religious coping behaviours and how effective they are in helping people cope. 30 Across a wide range of

stressful circumstances, especially during and after severe psychological trauma, turning to religion is a common almost automatic – response.

Characteristics of Religious Copers

There are certain personal characteristics that help to predict whether person will use religion to cope with stress and be resilient. Those more likely to do so are older, female, poorer, less educated, ethnic minorities (African American or Hispanic,) and immigrants from India, the Arab countries, Hispanic countries, or Africa. Moreover, groups that are more religious may derive greater benefits from religion, as well. For example, Ellison and colleagues surveyed a random U.S. sample of 1,344 African Americans. All subjects were experiencing a major life crisis that caused great mental distress or personal problems. 32 Among the ways of coping that investigators inquired about was the use of prayer, asking the question. “Did you pray or get someone to pray for you?” Nearly 80 percent answered “yes.”

Those less likely to turn to religion when coping with stress tend to be younger, male, Caucasian, well educated, healthy and economically well off. Recent immigrants to the United States from areas of the world such as northern Europe may be less likely to use religion, as well. Consider that weekly religious attendance in Sweden is only about 3 percent, 33, 34 and the use of religion to cope with the stressful life experiences is reported by only about 1 percent of that population. 35 Similarly, only 50 percent of people in the Netherlands indicate that are religious, 36 only 43 percent are affiliated with religious organizations, and less than 30 percent indicate that having a strong faith is important. 37

Likewise, in a study of Norwegians who were dying from cancer, 43 percent did not believe in God and 45 percent received not comfort from religious beliefs. 38

The opposite is true for those in Islamic countries. For example, a study of forty-five cancer patients in Switzerland and forty cancer patients in Egypt found that, whereas only 38 percent of Swiss patients indicated that faith in God and prayer were important sources of support, 92 percent of Egyptian patients reported that God/Allah was significant in helping them to copy. 39

Thus, religious beliefs and behaviors are commonly used to cope with stresses of all kinds, including health problems, financial stressor, loss of loved ones, and other situational stressors. This is especially true in the United States.

Coping with Disaster-Related Stress

The discussion above addresses the use of religion when coping with stress in general. What about when coping with the stress of natural disasters or acts of terrorism? How does religion facilitate coping with such events. Several early studies indicated that turning to religion, demonstrated by an increase in religious beliefs, was common among disaster victims. 40, 41 Even in the 1960s, religious rituals were recognized as a way that many coped with the anxiety and uncertainty surrounding disasters. 42,43 Religious beliefs may be used to explain disasters as a form of supernatural punishment, as was seen after the mid 1960s Trinity River floods in Texas 44 and after Tropical Cyclone Martin hit the Cook Islands in the South Pacific in 1997. 45 In these situations, religion may hinder rather than help recovering victims, although this opinion be quite controversial.

In a comprehensive review of factors that either mediated or protected against the development of psychopathology following disasters, Gibbs concluded that “contemplative

styles of coping-the 'philosophical theoretical'...should also be supported, as this may help the individual find some personal or religious meaning for the disaster." 46 There is evidence people use religion to cope with disaster and often report considerable benefit. This research is reviewed below by type of disaster.

Mechanisms: How Does Religion Help?

Following disasters an in depth grounded interview was carried out of 68 community members who displayed resilience and attributed their coping to their belief and religion and practice. The objectives of the study were to understand the possible mechanism of action of the belief in the demonstrated positive coping with the trauma of the disasters. The subjects were from Galle Srilanka Tsunami disaster, Muzafabad Pakistan Earthquake disaster, Yangoon Myanmar Cyclone Nargis disaster and Dhaka Bangaldesh Cyclone disaster.

From the analysis of the grounded interviews there were at least ten reasons why religious beliefs and practices help people cope after disasters, many of which have backing in the research literature. Although expressed largely in Judeo-Christian terms, similar principles exist in other major world religions, although they may be expressed in different language or symbols depending on the particular culture.

1. *Positive worldview.* Religion provides a positive worldview that promotes optimism and coherence. Religion explains things and provides answers. Although those answers may not be satisfying to everyone, for many people they are sufficient. Rather than cold, merciless, and random, the religious world is an orderly place, friendly, with someone in control. That someone is usually a benevolent kind, merciful, forgiving, and caring Divinity, who responds to

prayers and watches over people. Although severe trauma may challenge such beliefs (see below), having them fosters optimism and allows for coherent explanations. Having such explanations, as discussed previously, helps people cope better.

2. *Meaning and purpose.* The religious worldview is one imbued with meaning, and individuals in such a world have a purpose and often a calling. Each human is special and here for a reason. He or she possessed a particular combination of talents that no one else has. Negative life experiences are viewed as contributing to spiritual growth and maturation. These events, no matter how distressing, can lead to something good or positive. The Christian scriptures say, “And we know that in all things Gods works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans 8.28, NIV). There are comparable sayings among the teachings of all great world religions. A major function of religion throughout history has been to enable people to transcend suffering. With meaning, almost anything can be endured. Viktor Frankel, a Viennese psychiatrist imprisoned in a German concentration camp during World War 11, emphasized that those who survived the camps were individuals who maintained meaning and purpose in their lives.⁶¹
3. *Psychological Integration.* A religious belief system, by helping to interpret life experiences and giving them meaning and coherence, enables the individual to more readily integrative events into his or her existing worldview. Such experiences need to be integrated so that the world can continue to be seen as stable, safe, and predictable. Thus, even when religious beliefs appear to provide harsh explanations that involve punishment and damnation, such beliefs

provide a group-sanctioned answer that maintains a coherent world that makes sense. Disaster victims crave for the return of an orderly world and are often not able to move on with their lives until this has been achieved.

4. *Hope and motivation.* Religion provides explanations that foster hope for better times ahead. Again, because good results are always possible for the religious person, this helps combat the hopelessness associated with severe loss and devastation. Even if better times are not possible in this life, there is at least the hope that things will improve in the afterlife. Hope gives people motivation to make the necessary adjustments to adapt to difficult circumstances.
5. *Personal empowerment.* Religion provides personal empowerment by giving those who might otherwise feel helpless and powerless tools to make a difference in their situations. For example, a disaster victim can pray to God for strength to cope with difficult losses, for healing of an injury, for recovery of a sick loved one, for a new job, or for financial resources. Consequently, he or she does not feel as helpless. Instead, the person can now do something (pray) that is believed to make a difference. Knowing that one can talk directly to God, the Creator, the original and ultimate force in the universe, helps to infuse life with power. No longer must a person rely entirely on other people, outside agents, or the random forces of nature to determine his or her fate.
6. *Sense of control.* Religious beliefs give the disaster victim a sense of control that he or she would otherwise not have. Related to the empowerment described above, religion puts control back into the hands of the person. The perceived ability to relate to and influence God helps the religious person regain a degree of control. In that case, it is important to believe that God is indeed in control.

Even the belief that God is punishing the person for past sins by allowing traumatic events to occur may still be better than believing that no one is in control. The belief that no one is in control in a situation where one's life is being threatened can be a source of tremendous anxiety. The religious person feels in control through his or her relationship with God and, in fact, may not need to feel in control because he or she is more able to give up control by "putting it in God's hands." When there is nothing there is nothing that can be done by the individual to change a situation, then turning things over to God may reduce anxiety and make the person more functional. For this to work, the person must be able to trust that God will take care of things and that God has his or her ultimate best interests at stake. That sense of trust may be altered by severe traumatic events (see below) and pastoral counselling may be needed to re-establish it.

7. *Role models for suffering.* Religious scriptures provide role models for suffering that help people accept their situations and provide solutions for dealing with them. For example, the book of Job in the Bible describes a man who lost everything—all of his possessions, all of his children, and even his health. This is exactly the salutation in which many disaster survivors find themselves. Job responded as most people respond. He became frustrated and angry with God and began questioning God. If a character in the Bible can feel this way, this validates the disaster survivor's feelings. That validation helps to normalize such feeling and makes them less threatening. Furthermore, things turned out well for Job in the end, giving the disaster survivor hope that his or her own situation may also have a happy ending.

8. *Guidance for decision making.* Religion provides guidance for making positive decisions that ultimately reduce stress. For example, severe stress following a disaster may cause a person to drink alcohol or use drugs to numb his or her feeling (which religious beliefs discourage). While alcohol or drugs may reduce stress in the short run, they may lead to addiction and interfere with recovery in the long run. Religious beliefs also encourage decisions to forgive and not hold on to grudges or resentment, helping to maintain social relationships that may be necessary to cope with stress and facilitate recovery. Religion promotes a reaching out to others and encourages people to provide for the needs of others worse off than they are. This, in turn, may help distract disaster victims from their own problems and provide a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment from helping others (as well as increase support from others in their own time of need).
9. *Answers to ultimate questions.* Religion provides answers to Ultimate questions that secular culture and science cannot address. Again, “having answers” helps the disaster victim psychologically integrate the negative events he or she may have experienced. As long as the answers lead to positive adaptation and pro-social behaviour, it doesn’t really matter whether they are the “right” answers (particularly if no right answer can be proven). On the other hand, some religious may promote aggression or retaliation, in which case religious answers would not be helpful. Most mainstream, traditional religious belief systems, however, promote forgiveness, acceptance, and pro-social actions.
10. *Social support.* Religion provides social support, particularly for those who are involved in the religious community. Social support is known to reduce the

stress of negative life events and to provide practical resources to meet those challenges. Most religions encourage love of neighbor and providing for those in need. Thus, religious beliefs encourage people to care for one another even when it is inconvenient, and promise divine rewards. Furthermore, in religions that believe in a personal God, this becomes another source of support for the individual. The belief in a loving, omnipotent God that protects, cares for, and watches over people, a God with whom one can communicate, provides a powerful partner in dealing with stressful situations.

Summary

Spirituality and religion are important to patients and particularly in times of great stress as in illness, loss and severe trauma. Many studies following disasters show that religion is frequently used to cope and often brings comfort and hope that enables survivors to heal and move on with their lives. In this section, I reviewed some of this research and explained how religious beliefs and practices facilitate psychological adaptation to severe trauma. Because of the potential long-term impact of unmet spiritual needs on mental health, expert spiritual care following disaster is important. Mental health counsellors should screen victims for spiritual needs and refer them to spiritual caregivers as necessary.

