

**The Moderating Effect of Spirituality on the Relationship Between  
Stressful Life Events and Depression and Anxiety Among Adolescents**

**By**

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**A Doctoral Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of  
the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Psychology  
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## **Abstract**

Research in the area of developmental psychology has shown that adolescence is the period of the life span during which individuals attempt to solidify their identities. One aspect of this process is developing a system of beliefs and values by which a person can live. The system of values may include spiritual beliefs, which are often subject to intense evaluation during adolescence. Once the adolescent has chosen his or her spiritual “creed” he or she has to determine the role in which it will play in his or her life.

Studies have shown that spirituality plays an important role in the lives of adults. Research with adult samples has shown positive correlations between spirituality and psychological adjustment, happiness, health and life satisfaction. A 2000 study by Young et al. found that spirituality acted as a moderator between life stressors and the psychological symptoms of anxiety and depression. Although they report a very similar value for spirituality in their lives, this type of research with adolescent populations is lacking.

The purpose of this study was to determine whether spirituality would moderate the effect of life stressors on anxiety and depression. The study sought to replicate the results of Young et al. with an adolescent rather than adult population. The sample consisted of 100 adolescents ranging in age from 14 to 17 years and in the 9<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grades.



The participants were asked to complete the Adolescent Perceived Events Scale (APES), Spiritual Involvement and Beliefs Scale (SIBS), Beck Depression Inventory (BDI), and the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI).

Results revealed a positive correlation between life stressors and levels of anxiety, and a negative correlation between the mean impact of life stressors and depression. Spirituality negatively correlated with depression and anxiety, and it significantly predicted levels of anxiety and depression above life stressors. The moderation effect found in the Young et al. study was not replicated in this study. Current results showed that with an increase in spirituality the relationship between life stressors and anxiety became positive and gained strength. Differences between adolescent and adult manifestations of anxiety, as well as the adolescent's need to understand and assimilate important life events into his or her newfound belief system are proposed as possible explanations for the pattern of the results obtained in the study.

## Introduction

According to Webster's Dictionary (1993), adolescence is, "between childhood and adulthood, growing up" (p. 5). The word *adolescence* is derived from the Latin *adolescere*, meaning, "to grow up" (Gabriel & Wool, 1995). For those who have ever parented, worked with, or been involved in any fashion with an adolescent, "growing up" seems to be an awfully simplistic way of describing these years of tremendous physical and emotional change.

One of the many changes occurring during adolescence is a new inclination to explore issues of religion and spirituality. Markstrom (1999) proposes that adolescents are searching for answers to questions about their existence, such as, Who am I? And What is my purpose in life? Finding the answers to these questions often leads them to pursue a deeper meaning of themselves and their worlds, and such meaning may be found within the realms of spirituality and religion. According to James (1936), "conversion is a crisis of puberty and adolescence" (p. 12). Although the topic has not been extensively researched, according to the studies that are available, adolescents indicate that religion and spirituality play important roles in their lives and their development (Markstrom, 1999).

An area that has been examined more in depth, however, is the role that religion and spirituality play in the lives of adults. Psychologists studying issues such as happiness, adjustment and life satisfaction have found significant contributions in the

areas of religion and spirituality, including a positive affect on psychological health (Brawer et al., 2002).

Studies have shown that the percentages of adolescents believing in a personal God, praying regularly, attending church on a regular basis, and indicating that religion is extremely important to them parallel those of the adult population (Markstrom, 1999). For those psychologists whose focus is adolescence, it may be necessary to first examine spirituality and religion as they have been linked to the psychological well-being of adults, in order to gain a better understanding of their affects on adolescent development.

Before beginning the exploration of spirituality and religion and their purposes in life, it would be helpful to understand what these terms mean. In our society it is not at all uncommon to hear comments such as, "Oh, John is such a spiritual person," or "Kate comes from a very religious family." Hearing such statements, one would probably assume that spiritual John would fit right into Kate's religious family, and that everyone would have a lot in common. However, depending upon the ways in which "spiritual" and "religious" are being used, John may be quite different from Kate's family.

Although the terms religion and spirituality are often used interchangeably, an argument can be made that they are not the same. When speaking of religion, the reference is usually being made to a specific, organized, system of beliefs, activities, and rites (Kelly, 1995). It is the way in which a person expresses a relationship with a higher power through belief systems and communal rituals (Batten & Ottjenbruns, 1999). Religion has been described as both individual and institutional, and as a construct that includes a fixed system of ideas or ideological commitments (Hill & Pargament, 2003).

Spirituality is seen as a broader concept, described as the set of values and visions by which we live, along with our beliefs regarding who we are in Nature and in the universe (Helminiak, 2001; Marra, 2000). It is our pursuit of understanding the meaning of our lives (Batten & Ottjenbruns, 1999). Spirituality is a “universal experience...less encumbered by the doctrines associated with specific religions” (Polanski, 2002, p. 127).

Miller and Thoresen (2003) have identified two central aspects of spirituality. First, spirituality is concerned with “life’s most animating and vital principle or quality, often described as giving life or energy to the material human elements of the person” (p. 27). In other words, spirituality is part of a person’s character, personality, or disposition. Second, Miller and Thoresen describe spirituality as having “a broad focus on the immaterial features of life, regarded as not commonly perceptible by the physical senses (e.g., sight, hearing) that are used to understand the material world” (p. 27).

According to Marra (2000), “It is possible, but not necessary to “be spiritual” within a religious framework—we may, but need not, embrace the teachings of a particular religion” (p. 68). Miller and Thoresen propose that there can be “unspiritual religiousness” in which a person attends religious services or functions for their practical-social benefits, as well as “unreligious spirituality” where an individual has mystical experiences that are transcendent without religious contexts.

Nevertheless, even with these definitions, spirituality and religion are still often not clearly distinguished in the literature. Helminiak (2001) proposes that religion and spirituality cannot be viewed in complete isolation from one another. Their relationship is explained by Miller and Thoresen (2003) as such:

In one sense, religion is an institutional (and thus primarily material) phenomenon. Though often concerned with spirituality, religions are social entities or institutions, and unlike spirituality, they are defined by their boundaries. Religions are differentiated by particular beliefs and practices, requirements of membership, and modes of social organization. What is spiritual or transcendent may be a central interest and focus, but religions are also characterized by other nonspiritual concerns and goals (e.g., cultural, economic, political, social). Thus, religion can be seen as a fundamentally a social phenomenon, whereas spirituality (like health and personality) is usually understood at the level of the individual within specific contexts. Viewed this way, the field of religion is to spirituality as the field of medicine is to health (pp. 27-28).

To add to the lack of separateness between the two concepts, the majority of studies with religion and spirituality as variables have focused on concepts that are specific to religiosity. Church attendance, attachment, and the participation in religious organizations are often used as measures of spirituality as well as religiosity (Young, Cashwell, & Shcherbakova, 2000). The spiritual practices of prayer, meditation, and contemplation, are often overlooked (Elkins, 1999). Thus, many of the studies cited in the subsequent review of the literature have referred specifically to religion when spirituality may have been a more appropriate term.