



Shaken to the Core: Shaping the Trajectory of Spiritual Struggles

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The Organization

- ❖ Spiritual struggles as a double-edged sword
- ❖ Spiritual struggles as a source of pain and suffering
- ❖ Spiritual struggles as a source of growth and positive transformation
- ❖ Factors that shape the trajectory of spiritual struggles
- ❖ Practical implications



The Trajectory of Spiritual Struggles

- ❖ Short-term spiritual struggles
- ❖ Long-term spiritual struggles
- ❖ Short pain and suffering
- ❖ Chronic pain and suffering
- ❖ Growth and positive transformation
- ❖ Partial or complete religious and/or spiritual disengagement



Intense Pain of Spiritual Struggle

“It was life-altering to me. It was cataclysm in the midst of calm. It was the end of the dream, the loss of the hope. It was forced change at the center of my personal universe. It was impossible. . . God had become a question mark, not a certainty. Religious life had become cruel, not fulfilling. As I tried to pray, shaken, isolated, and in darkness, I could feel the dust of my soul under my tongue. . . My body went on living but my soul had died in a darkness so thick I could not see through it. . . Suddenly without warning. . . I would find myself swimming in a sea of black, my arms and legs heavy and lifeless, tears in my eyes. The frustration of it all swept over me like waves on a beach, pulling me under, upending me in deep water, washing me out away from a firm emotional shore. Day after day, the struggle raged. . . Struggle is never done without cost. Real struggle marks us for life” (pp. 4, 81, 91).



Spirituality and Health Study (McConnell et al., 2006)

❖ Participants

- ❖ 1629 participants
- ❖ Age: Mean = 49.1 years, SD = 17.76
- ❖ 75.3% Christian
- ❖ 56.2% Attend religious services “almost every day” or “every day”
- ❖ 55.3% Engage in private prayer “almost every day” or “every day”
- ❖ 59.9% “Very religious” or “fairly religious”



Spirituality and Health Study (McConnell et al., 2006)

❖ Measures

- ❖ Mental Health: Symptom Assessment-45 Questionnaire (Davison, Bershadsky, Bieber, Silversmith, Maruish, & Kane, 1997)
 - ❖ Anxiety
 - ❖ Depression
 - ❖ Hostility
 - ❖ Interpersonal Sensitivity
 - ❖ Obsessive-Compulsive
 - ❖ Paranoid Ideation
 - ❖ Phobic Anxiety
 - ❖ Somatization
- ❖ Religious Struggle: Negative Religious Coping Subscale of Brief RCOPE (Pargament, Koenig, & Perez, 2000)
- ❖ Social Support: Six items adapted from previous research (Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988)



Spirituality and Health Study (McConnell et al., 2006)

❖ Summary

- ❖ Spiritual struggle positively associated with all forms of psychopathology after controlling for demographic variables and social support
- ❖ Relationships between religious struggle and psychopathology stronger for individuals with recent illness or injury



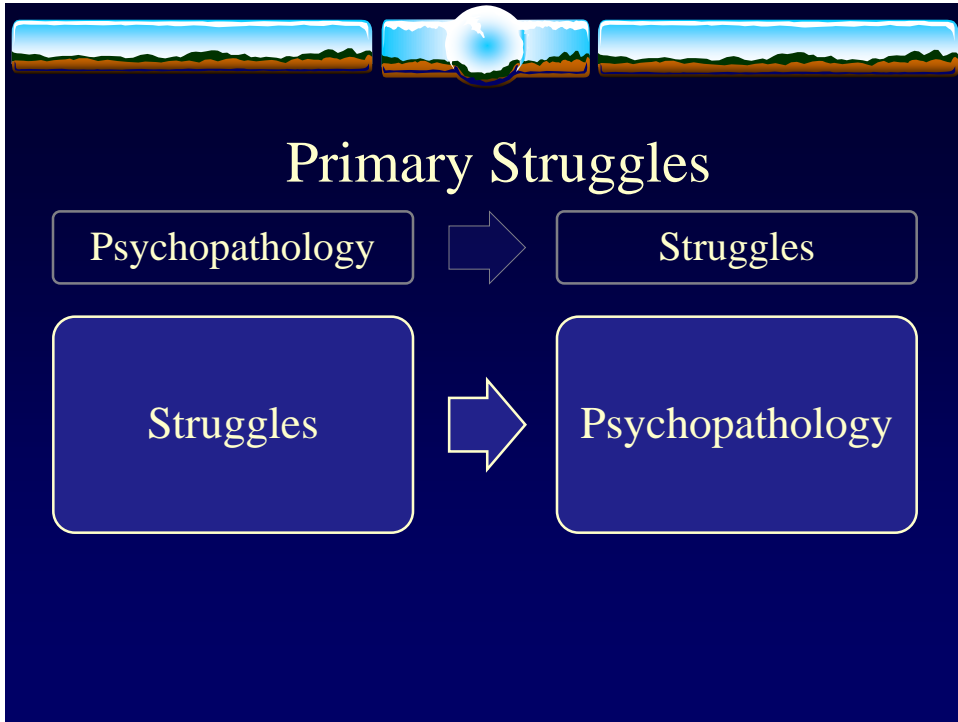
Secondary Struggles



Psychopathology



Struggles





Spiritual Struggle as a Predictor of Addiction

(Caprini & Pargament, 2008)

- ❖ 90 freshmen complete measures of addiction and religious struggles at three points in time over first year of college
- ❖ After controlling for neuroticism, social support, and global religiousness, spiritual struggles predict greater likelihood of developing 11 of 15 types of addictive behaviors, including
 - ❖ Gambling
 - ❖ Food starving
 - ❖ Prescription and recreational drugs
 - ❖ Sex



Religious Coping among Medically Ill Elderly Patients: A Two-Year Longitudinal Study

(Pargament, Koenig, Tarakeshwar, & Hahn, 2001, 2004)

- ❖ 596 hospitalized patients over 55
- ❖ Duke University Medical Center
- ❖ Durham VA Medical Center
- ❖ 1996-1997
- ❖ Two year follow-up
- ❖ 176 deceased



Measures

- ❖ Number of Active Diagnoses
- ❖ Subjective Health
- ❖ Severity of Illness Scale (ASA)
- ❖ Activities of Daily Living (ADL)
- ❖ Mini-Mental State Exam (MSE)
- ❖ Depressed Mood
- ❖ Quality of Life
- ❖ Positive Religious Coping and Religious Struggle
- ❖ Global Religious Measures (Church Attendance, Private Religiousness, Religious Importance)
- ❖ Demographics



Consequences of Spiritual Struggles

- ❖ Struggles with the divine predicted increases in depressed mood, declines in physical functional status, declines in quality of life after controls
- ❖ Struggles with the divine predicted 22-33% greater risk of mortality after controls



Specific Spiritual Struggle Predictors of Mortality

- ❖ **“Wondered whether God had abandoned me” (RR = 1.28)**
- ❖ **“Questioned God’s love for me” (R = 1.22)**
- ❖ **“Decided the devil made this happen” (R = 1.19)**




Spiritual Struggles among Patients with Multiple Myeloma (Sherman et al., 2005)

- ❖ 213 multiple myeloma patients
- ❖ Negative religious coping associated with greater fatigue, pain, clinician and self-rated depression, and distress
- ❖ Other measures of religiousness were unrelated to indices of health



Landmark Religion and Health Study (Abu Raiya et al., 2015)

- ❖ Representative national sample (N = 2200)
- ❖ All types of spiritual struggle tied to
 - ❖ Greater depression
 - ❖ Greater anxiety
 - ❖ Less life satisfaction
 - ❖ Less happiness
- ❖ Controls for religious commitment, neuroticism, and social isolation



Ano and Vasconcelles Meta-Analysis (2004, Journal of Clinical Psychology)

	Number of Studies	Cumulative Effect Size	Confidence Interval
Spiritual Struggles with Negative Health Outcomes	22	.22*	.19 to .24



Correlates of Spiritual Struggles among Muslims

(Abu-Raiya and Pargament, 2006)

❖ Depression	$r = .35$
❖ Purpose in Life	$r = -.41$
❖ Angry Feelings	$r = .32$
❖ Positive Relationships	$r = -.44$
❖ Alcohol Use	$r = .62$
❖ Poorer Physical Health	$r = .35$



Correlates of Spiritual Struggles among Hindus

(Tarakeshwar et al., 2003)

❖ Depression	$r = .40$
❖ Life Satisfaction	$r = -.40$
❖ Marital Satisfaction	$r = -.27$



Correlates of Spiritual Struggles among Jews (Rosmarin, 2008)

❖ Depression	$r = .34$
❖ Anxiety	$r = .27$
❖ Worry	$r = .15$



Spiritual Struggle as a Dark Night of the Soul

“The Divine assails the soul in order to renew it and thus to make it Divine . . . As a result of this, the soul feels itself to be perishing and melting away, in the presence and sight of its miseries, in a cruel spiritual death. . . For in this sepulcher of dark death it might abide until the spiritual resurrection which it hopes for” (Saint John of the Cross, 1584/1910).



Spiritual Struggles as Launching Pads for Transformation

“Without struggle, we would remain frozen in the religion of our childhood, crystalline structures ill-equipped to deal with the changes we experience within ourselves over time and the changes we encounter in a complex, fast-paced world.”



Struggle as a Prelude to Growth

“Things die in the winter time; they come back in the spring. They bloom, they regenerate. People go through issues with their spiritual journeys where they reach a point where they feel that nothing else is happening. They can learn no more, they can do no more, and they just feel like they’re at a point where they’re burned out and they’re dead. . . And then all of a sudden there’s a new spark of life and a new passion – a new goal to achieve” (Rockenbach et al., p. 68).



Sharon Parks on Struggle

“The gladness on the other side of shipwreck arises from an embracing, complex kind of knowing that is experienced as a more trustworthy understanding of reality” (Parks, 2000).



Frank James III on Struggle and Growth

“I am still trying to make sense of Kelly’s death. I don’t know why God did not rescue Kelly from the cold grip of the mountain. What I do know is that my relationship with God has entered another dimension – more mystifying and more honest. . . There is disappointment, sadness and confusion, but there is no retreat from God. Instead, I find myself drawn to God. Where else can I go with my grief? To be sure God is more mysterious and enigmatic than I thought, but still I can’t shake loose from Him. There seems to be a kind of gravitational pull to God. . . God has manifested himself in my grief. Somehow he is found in the disappointment, the confusion, and the raw emotion. This does not exactly make sense to me and I am quite sure I don’t like it. But I have felt the divine gravity pulling me back toward God, even while I am dumbstruck by his hiddenness. My conception of faith has become Abrahamic, which is to say, I must trust God even though I do not understand him. . . This magnificent promise does not indemnify us from the grief of losing a beloved brother or even disappointment with God. It does, however, take my faith to depths I never fathomed and hope gradually begins to poke through the heartache.”



Trajectories of Spiritual Struggle

(Desai & Pargament, 2015)

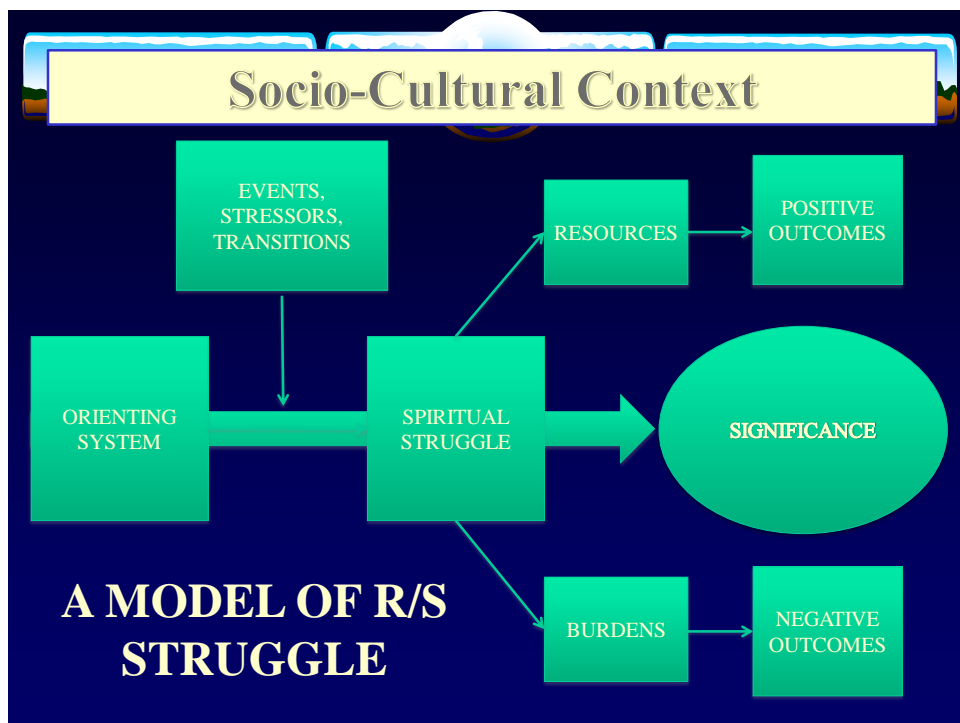
- Longitudinal study of 127 students reporting spiritual struggles over 6-8 weeks
- 53.5% report struggle at least partially resolved
- 40% report no change in struggle
- 2.4 report intensified struggle
- 48.8% report growing from their struggle
- 26.8% report both growth and decline.
- Only 3% report solely decline



Spiritual Struggles and Growth

- ❖ Medically ill elderly patients who voiced more r/s struggles also reported greater spiritual growth.
- ❖ College students who reported that they had experienced a sacred violation (i.e., desecration) in a romantic relationship also reported more growth following the trauma (e.g., new priorities in life, greater self-reliance, more closeness to God, enhanced spirituality).
- ❖ R/s struggles among medical rehab patients tied to greater post-traumatic growth, but also more anxiety and depression

Spiritual Struggles as a Fork in the Road to Growth or Decline





A Life Enhancing, Well-Integrated Orienting System

❖ Flexible but Enduring

“My idea of God is not a divine idea. It has to be shattered time after time. He shatters it himself. He is the Great iconoclast” (C. S .Lewis, last words of A Grief observed, 1961, p. 346).



McIntosh and Spilka Study

- ❖ People who are both highly religious committed and spiritually flexible showed fewer physical symptoms, greater well-being, and better life adjustment.



Spiritual Struggle at Two Times

- ❖ **CHRONIC** (*High Struggle at Baseline and High Struggle at Follow Up*)
- **ACUTE** (*High Struggle at Baseline and Low Struggle at Follow Up*)
- **ACUTE** (*Low Struggle at Baseline and High Struggle at Follow Up*)
- **NONE** (*Low Struggle at Baseline and Low Struggle at Follow Up*)



Dangers of Getting Stuck

- ❖ “It is not struggle that destroys us. It is the unwillingness to move beyond struggle even when the struggle goes on forever. We don’t forget the abandonment. We still feel the flames of jealousy. We still resent bitterly their new partner. We know we are divorced but refuse to be separated. It is not the struggle itself that kills us. It is allowing ourselves to stay locked in mortal combat with it” (Chittister, 2003, p. 72).



A Life Enhancing, Well-Integrated Orienting System

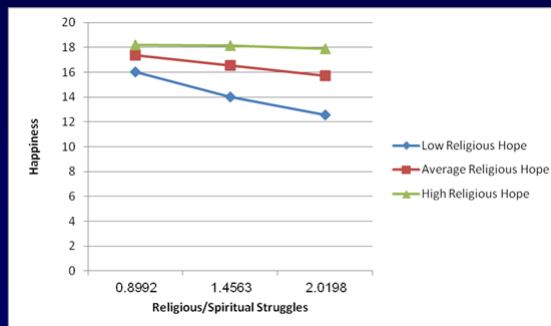
- ❖ Flexible
- ❖ Broad and deep



The Limits of Pure Healthy-Mindedness (James, 1902)

- ❖ “The method of averting one’s attention from evil, and living simply in the light of good is splendid as long as it will work. . . But it breaks down impotently, as soon as melancholy comes, and even though one can be quite free from melancholy one’s self, there is no doubt that a healthy-mindedness is inadequate as a philosophical doctrine, because the evil facts which it refuses positively to account for are a genuine portion of reality; and they may after all be the best key to life’s significance, and possibly the only openers of our eyes to the deepest levels of truth” (p. 160).

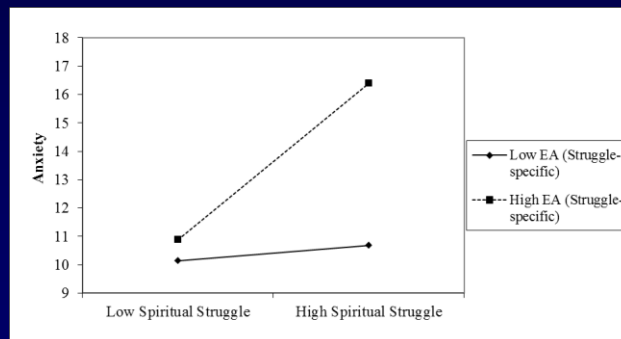
Religious Hope Protects against Effects of Spiritual Struggle on Unhappiness (Abu Raiya et al., 2016)



A Life Enhancing, Well-Integrated Orienting System

- ❖ Flexible
- ❖ Broad and deep
- ❖ Differentiated
 - ❖ “There is a great deal of pain in life and perhaps the only pain in life that can be avoided is the pain that comes from trying to avoid pain” (Laing, 1964).

Experiential Avoidance Magnifies the Effects of Spiritual Struggles (Oemig et al., 2016)



A Life Enhancing, Well-Integrated Orienting System

- ❖ Flexible
- ❖ Broad and deep
- ❖ Differentiated
- ❖ Benevolent



A Benevolent Theology

- ❖ “All agada is a way of affirming that life is a precious gift, not a dirty trick – and that at the heart of the mystery, there is meaning.” (Karff, 1979, p. 143).



Stigma of Spiritual Struggles

- Of African American men in homeless shelters, 46% reported that negative feelings toward God were unacceptable (Smith & Exline, 2002).
- A mother's response to the introduction of evolution into a university's curriculum: “If [my daughter's] faith is shattered or shaken, I'd rather see her dead” (Nesson, 2001).



A Life Enhancing, Well-Integrated Orienting System

- ❖ Flexible
- ❖ Broad and deep
- ❖ Differentiated
- ❖ Benevolent
- ❖ Self-reflective



Beyond Human Agency: Spiritual Experiences

- ❖ Perceived closeness with God and spiritual experiences along with positive religious coping efforts appear to facilitate growth (Exline et al., in press)



What Not to Do

- ❖ Don't change the subject
- ❖ Don't assume you understand
- ❖ Don't judge
- ❖ Don't offer r/s bromides or cliches
- ❖ Don't try to "solve" the struggle



What to Do

- ❖ Listen for spiritual struggles
- ❖ Encourage a conversation
- ❖ Normalize spiritual struggles
- ❖ Be a caring, compassionate presence
- ❖ Foster a life-enhancing, well-integrated orienting system
- ❖ Be a spiritual mentor and model



Spiritual Mentoring

“Spiritual mentors and confessors can be inestimable companions to give assistance during the Dark Night as they can provide the orientation and the perspective of someone experienced and wise, and someone who is not immersed in this darkness” (Dura-Vila and Dein, 2009, p. 2).



Spiritual Struggles as a Fork in the Road to Growth or Decline

