



Working with Spiritual Struggles in Psychotherapy: From Research to Practice

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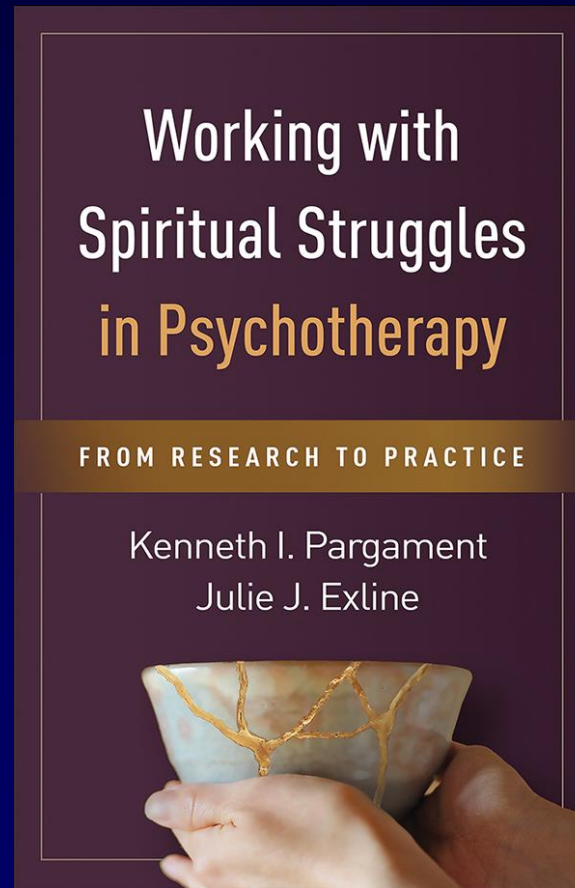


Julie Exline





My Only “Plug”



Wrestling with the Angels

❖ The Story of George





Key Points

- ❖ Spiritual struggles are a natural part of life
- ❖ Spiritual struggles have profound implications for health and well-being
- ❖ Spiritual struggles are a fork in the road
 - ❖ To decline
 - ❖ To growth
- ❖ Spiritual struggles are a vital topic for healthcare



A Definition of Spiritual Struggles

(Pargament & Exline, 2022)

- ❖ Spiritual struggles refer to experiences of tension, strain, and conflict about sacred matters with the supernatural, within oneself, and with others.





Three Types of Spiritual Struggle

❖ Supernatural





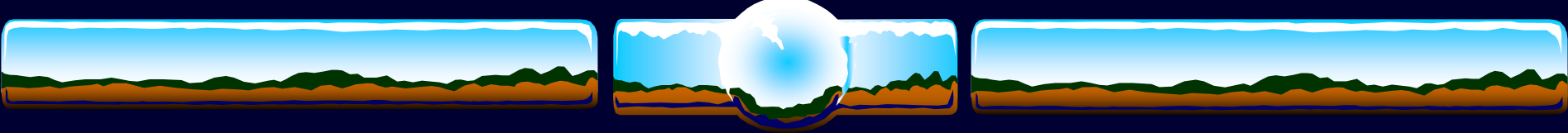
Divine Struggles

- ❖ “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? Why are thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring?” (Psalms XXII, 1-2).



Divine Struggles

- ❖ “I’m suffering, really suffering. My illness is tearing me down, and I’m angry at God for not rescuing me, I mean really setting me free from my mental bondage. I have been dealing with these issues for ten years now and I am only 24 years old. I don’t understand why he keeps lifting me up, just to let me come crashing down again” (undergraduate dealing with bipolar illness).



Divine Struggle Items (Exline et al., 2014)

Felt as though God had let me down

Felt angry at God

Felt as though God had abandoned me

Felt as though God was punishing me

Questioned God's love for me



Demonic Items

(Exline et al., 2014)

Felt tormented by the devil or evil spirits

Worried that the problems I was facing were the work of the devil or evil spirits

Felt attacked by the devil or by evil spirits

Felt as though the devil (or an evil spirit) was trying to turn me away from what was good



Three Types of Spiritual Struggle

- ❖ Supernatural
- ❖ Intrapersonal





Intrapersonal Spiritual Struggles

Moral Struggles of Peter Moen (1951)

“I must recognize with bitter and painful regret how inexpressibly badly I have lived. . .I have reduced to dust all moral and material values” (p. 26).





Moral Struggle Items (Exline et al., 2014)

Wrestled with attempts to follow my moral principles

Worried that my actions were morally or spiritually wrong

Felt torn between what I wanted and what I knew was morally right

Felt guilt for not living up to my moral standards



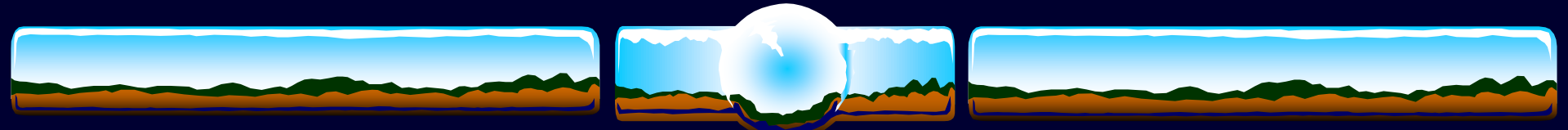
Ultimate Meaning Struggle Items (Exline et al., 2014)

Questioned whether life really matters

Felt as though my life had no deeper meaning

Questioned whether my life will really make any difference in the world

Had concerns about whether there is any ultimate purpose to life or existence



Doubt Items

(Exline et al., 2014)

Struggled to figure out what I really believe about religion/spirituality

Felt confused about my religious/spiritual beliefs

Felt troubled by doubts or questions about religion or spirituality

Worried about whether my beliefs about religion/spirituality were correct



Three Types of Spiritual Struggle

- ❖ Supernatural
- ❖ Intrapersonal
- ❖ Interpersonal





Interpersonal Struggle Items (Exline et al., 2014)

Felt hurt, mistreated, or offended by religious/
spiritual people

Felt rejected or misunderstood by religious/spiritual
people

Felt as though others were looking down on me
because of my religious/spiritual beliefs

Had conflicts with other people about
religious/spiritual matters

Felt angry at organized religion



Some Points about Struggles

- ❖ Spiritual struggles are not a sign of weak faith



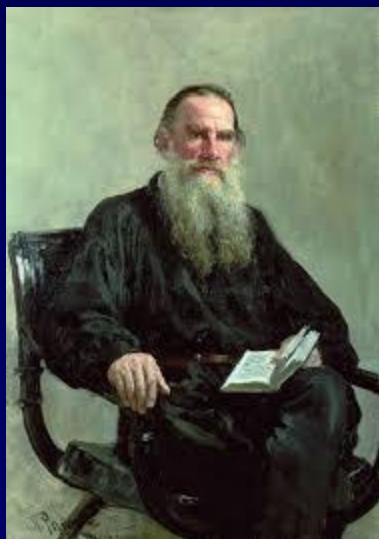
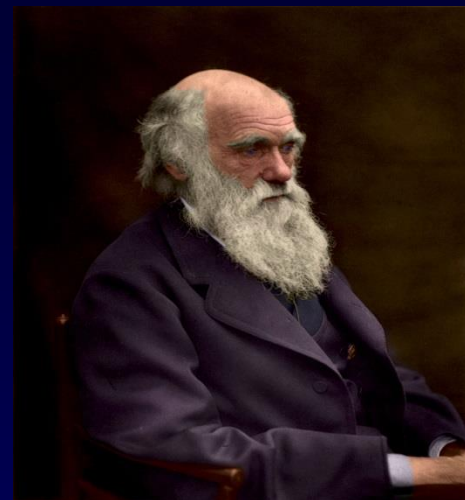
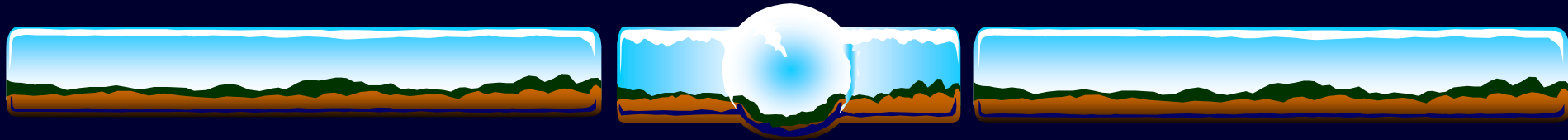
Guess the Struggler

- ❖ “I am told God lives in me – and yet the reality of darkness and coldness and emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul.”



Some Points about Struggles

- ❖ Spiritual struggles are not a sign of weak faith
- ❖ Spiritual struggles are not uncommon

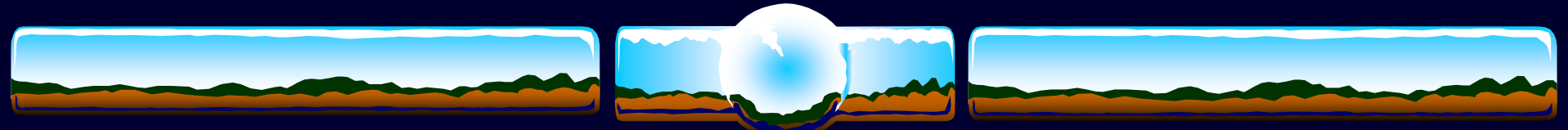




Spiritual Struggles are not Uncommon

(Pargament & Exline, 2022)

- ❖ 70% report spiritual struggles at some point in their lives
- ❖ 1/3 to 1/2 report spiritual struggles in last few weeks
- ❖ Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Atheists
- ❖ All demographic groups



Spiritual Struggles are Not Uncommon (Winkelman et al., 2013)

- ❖ 69 advanced cancer patients
 - ❖ 58% endorsed a spiritual struggle
 - ❖ 30% wondering why God allowed this to happen
 - ❖ 29% wondering whether abandoned by God
 - ❖ 25% angry at God
 - ❖ 25% questioning God's love for them
 - ❖ 22% feeling cancer is punishment from God



Some Points about Struggles

- ❖ Spiritual struggles are not a sign of weak faith
- ❖ Spiritual struggles are not uncommon
- ❖ Spiritual struggles grow out of personal, social, and situational factors

Triggers of Struggle: Illness



Triggers of Struggle: COVID





Triggers of Struggle: Natural Disaster

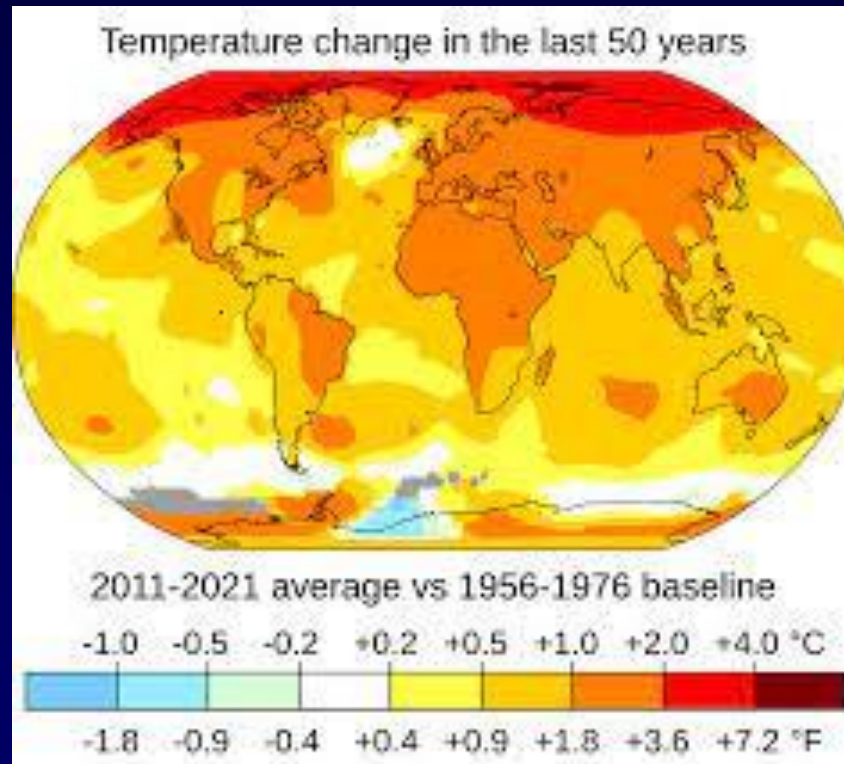




Triggers of Struggle: Transgressions



Triggers of Struggle: Climate Change



Triggers of Struggle: War





Some Points about Struggles

- ❖ Spiritual struggles are not a sign of weak faith
- ❖ Spiritual struggles are not uncommon
- ❖ Spiritual struggles grow out of personal, social, and situational factors
- ❖ Spiritual struggles are a natural but often painful part of life



Intense Pain of Spiritual Struggles

“ 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” (Chittister, pp. 4, 81, 91).



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

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



Spiritual Struggles and Suicidality (Currier et al., 2017)

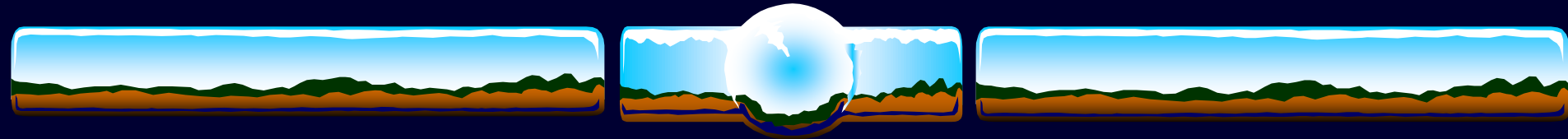
- ❖ Study of veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan
- ❖ Completed comprehensive measure of suicidality
- ❖ Higher levels of spiritual struggles strongly tied to suicidality (e.g., likelihood of future attempts)
- ❖ Spiritual struggles were only significant predictor of suicidality



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

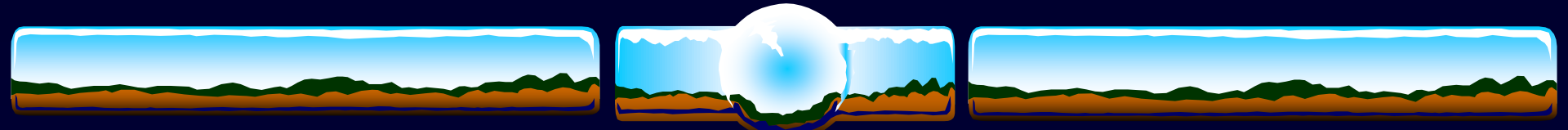
(Pargament, Koenig, Tarakeshwar, & Hahn, 2001, 2004)

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



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

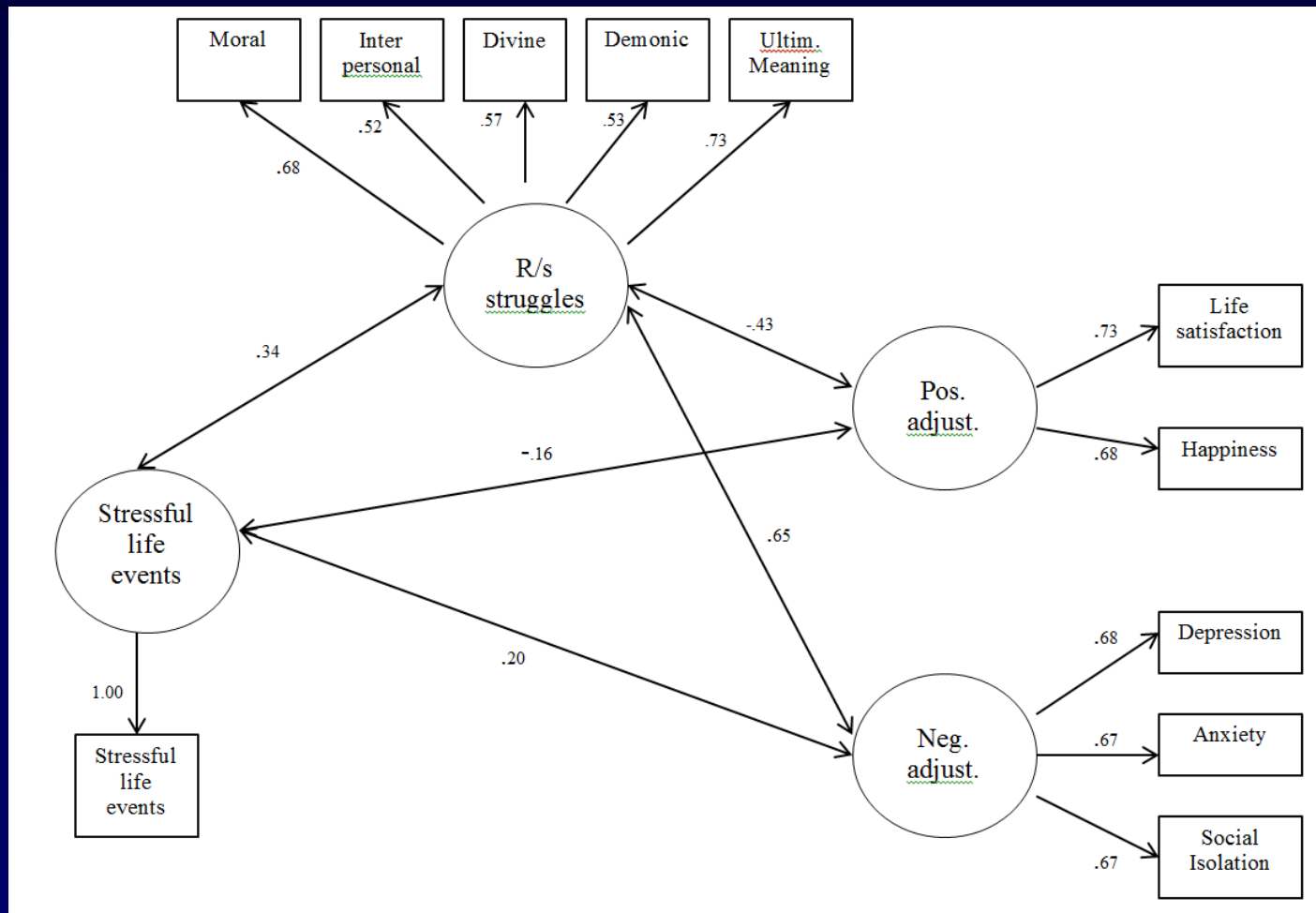


Specific Spiritual Struggle Predictors of Mortality

- ❖ **“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 Mediate the Link between Stressful Life Events and Adjustment

(Pomerleau et al., 2019)





But?

Can Spiritual Struggles Lead to Growth?

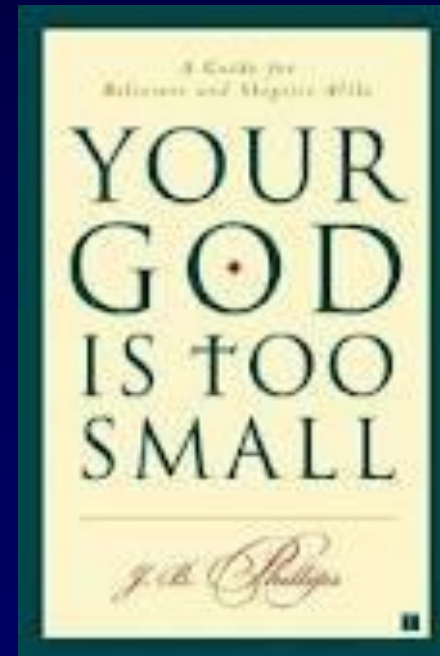
- ❖ Growth as transformation
 - ❖ A change in life priorities
 - ❖ Discovery of personal strength
 - ❖ Finding a new life path
 - ❖ Experiencing a greater sense of closeness with others





Struggles with the Divine: Can They Foster Growth?

- ❖ Honest expression of negative feelings may increase a sense of intimacy with God.
- ❖ Challenge old or simple ideas about God

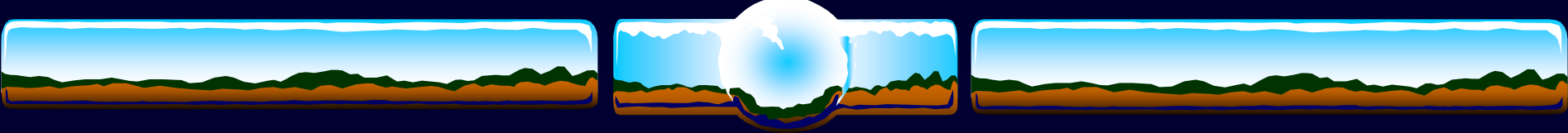




Moral Struggle: What Good Is It?

- ❖ Foster soul searching
- ❖ Awareness of moral limitations
- ❖ Can encourage repentance, reconciliation





Ultimate Meaning Struggles: Where's the Hope?

- ❖ See the emptiness of certain values (e.g., financial gain; social climbing; power)
- ❖ Find a deeper purpose in life





Doubt Struggles: Possible Benefits?

- ❖ Cultivate critical thinking
- ❖ Clarify what we truly believe vs. what we've simply been told





But?

Can Spiritual Struggles Lead to Growth?

❖ Classic religious exemplars

❖ Mohammad

❖ Moses

❖ Job

❖ Jesus

❖ Buddha





But?

Can Spiritual Struggles Lead to Growth?

- ❖ Classic religious exemplars
- ❖ Narrative accounts
 - ❖ Spiritual struggle “gives life depth and vision, insight and understanding. It not only transforms us, it makes us transforming as well” (Chittister, 2004, pp. 82, 85)



But?

Can Spiritual Struggles Lead to Growth?

- ❖ Classic religious exemplars
- ❖ Narrative accounts
- ❖ Empirical research
 - ❖ The bottom line: Studies do not show a consistent link between spiritual struggles and growth
 - ❖ Bottom line: Don't sentimentalize spiritual struggles



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





Pain and Gain?

(Jung et al., 2022)

- ❖ 174 South Africans who reported an interpersonal transgression
- ❖ Two waves of data over six month period
- ❖ Spiritual struggles at baseline predicted:
 - ❖ Increases in depression
 - ❖ Increases in post-traumatic growth

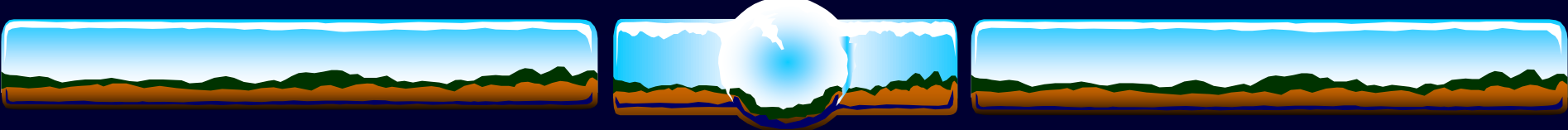


But?

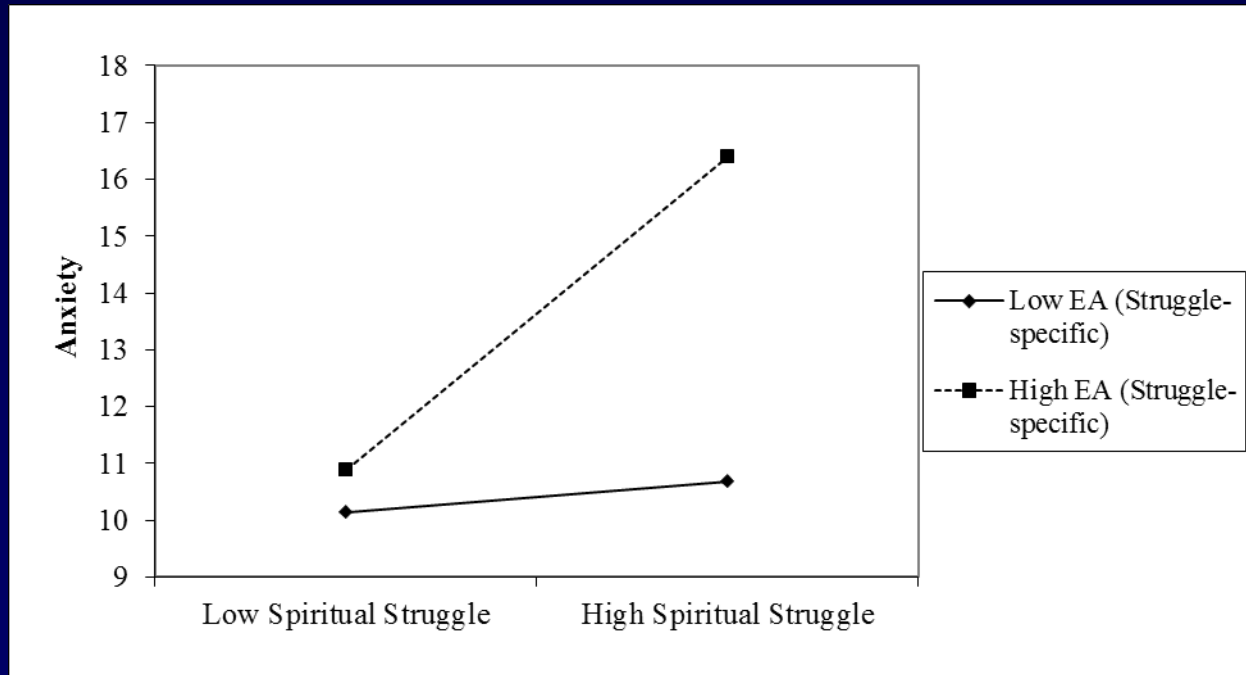
Can Spiritual Struggles Lead to Growth? It Depends

❖ Acceptance of struggle





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





R. D. Laing (1964)

“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.”



But?

Can Spiritual Struggles Lead to Growth?

It Depends

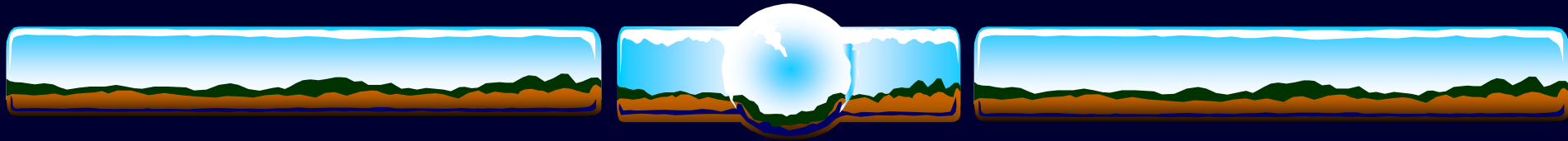
- ❖ Acceptance of struggle
- ❖ Finding support for the struggle





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).



But?

Can Spiritual Struggles Lead to Growth? It Depends

- ❖ Acceptance of struggle
- ❖ Being able to find support for the struggle
- ❖ Being able to find a resolution to the struggle



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).



Practical Implications

- ❖ Don't change the subject
- ❖ Don't assume you understand
- ❖ Don't judge
- ❖ Don't offer easy answers



Practical Implications

(Pargament & Exline, 2022)

- ❖ Ask about Spiritual Struggles
 - ❖ Have your problems affected you religiously or spiritually? How?



Practical Implications

- ❖ Ask about Spiritual Struggles

- ❖ Listen to and Normalize Spiritual Struggles





Normalization

- ❖ Spiritual Discussion Group in Transitional Facility (Phillips et al., 2002)





Kintsugi:

From Brokenness to Wholeness

“The heart must break to become large. . . when the heart is broken, then God can put the whole universe in it” (Harvey, 1991, p. 54).





Practical Implications

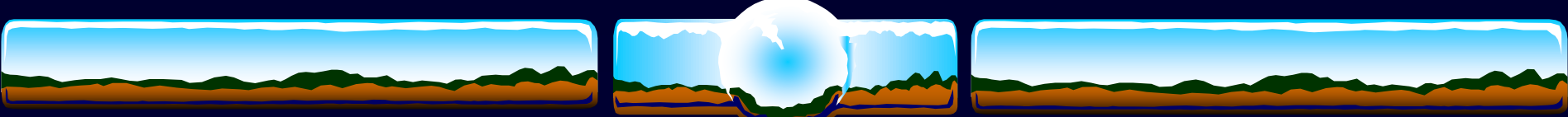
- ❖ Ask about Spiritual Struggles
- ❖ Listen to and Normalize Spiritual Struggles
- ❖ **Build Bridges with Religious Communities**





Practical Implications

- ❖ Ask about Spiritual Struggles
- ❖ Listen to and Normalize Spiritual Struggles
- ❖ Build Bridges with Religious Communities
- ❖ **Develop and Evaluate Interventions to Address Spiritual Struggles**



Winding Road: Illustrative Activities (Oemig et al., 2013)

- ❖ Write and share spiritual autobiography
- ❖ Share spiritual struggles
- ❖ Visualize ideal older spiritual self
- ❖ Share a sacred object with the group
- ❖ Write a group-lament to God





Winding Road: Quantitative Results

Decline in Spiritual Struggles	< p. 01
Decline in Psychological Distress	< p. 01
Decrease in Stigmatization	< p. 05
Increase in Positive Affect	< p. 05
Increase in Behavioral Control	< p. 05
Increase in Emotional Control	< p. 05
Increase in Religious Value-Behavior Congruence	< p. 05
Increase in Acceptance from God	< p. 05



Winding Road: Qualitative Results

❖ Greater Acceptance of Struggles

“I’m ok with the fact that I have struggles now. It’s ok for me to be struggling with this. Its ok to not have the answer right now. That’s a little scary but that’s ok. Its ok to be scared, its ok to be confused and just take my time, try to figure it out, and not let anybody else pressure me about things.”

Practical Implications

- ❖ Ask about Spiritual Struggles
- ❖ Listen to and Normalize Spiritual Struggles
- ❖ Build Bridges with Religious Communities
- ❖ Develop and Evaluate Interventions to Address Spiritual Struggles
- ❖ Anticipate Spiritual Struggles before They Occur





Conclusions

- ❖ Spiritual struggles are a natural part of life
- ❖ They can be a source of great distress, but they can also be a source of growth and transformation
- ❖ Health professionals can help clients and patients respond to spiritual struggles in ways that lead to greater wholeness and growth

Thank you!

