

Religious Beliefs and Practices have a Role in Grieving after Perinatal Loss

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Introduction

It is well established that people use religious beliefs and practices to cope with a wide range of stressful situations. Religion has an especially important role in dealing with bereavement; notably the loss of a child. However, a recent systematic review of 32 studies evaluating the role of religious/spiritual beliefs in recovery from grief or bereavement was indeterminate.

It is surprising, therefore, that there are almost no published studies evaluating the role of such beliefs in recovery from the bereavement of pregnancy loss. We evaluated unpublished religious data from the Perinatal Grief Project and correlate these results with longitudinal results on the Brief PGS to investigate this question.

Methods and Population Studied

Lehigh Valley Perinatal Grief Project

- Most of the 110 women included in this analysis were white and married or in a steady relationship.
- Their mean age was 28.5 years, and average education 13.5 years.
- Almost all who identified a religious affiliation named a Christian denomination.
- 16% experienced ectopic pregnancies; 49% had first trimester spontaneous abortions, 27% fetal deaths, and 9% neonatal deaths
- Women were interviewed 4-6 weeks after a loss, and again 1 and 2 years later. Only those with at least a 1 year follow-up are included.
- Questions were rated on a Likart scale from 1-5.

Religion Questionnaire

Questions related to Positive Religious Coping* ($\alpha = .778$)

1. I know that I need God's continual love and care. (a)
2. It helps to know my friends are praying for me. (c)
3. I don't believe there is a God who can protect me from harm. (score negative) (a)
4. I feel comforted by the presence of God. (a)
5. My religious faith helped me find meaning in my loss. (d)

- a. Seeking spiritual support
- b. Direct intercession
- c. Seeking support from clergy or church members
- d. Benevolent religious appraisal

Questions related to Negative Religious Coping* ($\alpha = .697$)

1. God was punishing me for my sins when I lost the baby. (a)
2. I can't understand why God allowed me to suffer this loss. (b)
3. I sometimes get angry with God for taking the baby away. (a)

- a. Punishing God reappraisal
- b. Reappraisal of God's powers

*Pargament KI, Smith BW, Koenig HG, Perez L
J Scientific Study Religion 1998;37:710-24

Questions Assigned to Intrinsic Religiosity ($\alpha = .834$)

1. Religion fails to answer many questions about the meaning of life. (score negative)
2. One should seek God's guidance when making every important decision.
3. Religious beliefs have nothing to do with my approach to life. (score negative)
4. Nothing is as important to me as serving God as best I know how.
5. I try hard to carry my religion over into all my other dealings in life.
6. Private prayer is one of the most important and satisfying aspects of my religious experience.
7. It doesn't matter whether you go to church; the important thing is to believe.

Questions Assigned to Extrinsic Religiosity

1. What religion offers me most is comfort when sorrows and misfortunes strike.
2. I go to church/synagogue more for social purposes than for prayer.
3. Church/synagogue is important to me as a place to go where I get comfort and refuge from the trial of life.
4. The church/synagogue is important to me as a place where I get comfort and refuge from the trials and problems of life.
5. I have about given up trying to understand "worship", or get much out of it.

Other Religious Items Evaluated

Church Attendance

How often, if ever, have you attended religious services in the past year?
Are you a church member now? Which church?

Belief in God

I do not believe there is a God. (score negative)
I believe in a God to whom I am accountable.
I find myself believing in God some of the time, but not at other times.

Belief in an Afterlife ($\alpha = .635$)

I have the feeling that the baby watches over me.
I believe the baby lives on in heaven.
I never pray for the baby. (score negative)

God's Will

The loss of this baby was the will of God.

Results

Correlations with Greater Grief Total Grief Score

	Belief in Afterlife ($\alpha = .635$)	Neg.Rel.Coping ($\alpha = .697$)	Amb.God*
Time 1 (6-8 wks)	r = .376 p = .0001	.538 .0001	.168 .08
Time 2 (1 year)	r = .317 p = .0001	.337 .0001	.207 .02
Time 3 (2years)	r = .226 p = .05	.166 .10	.154 .15

Correlations with Less Grief

	God answers prayer	Belief in God*
Time 1 (6-8 wks)	r = -.158 p = .10	-.187* .05
Time 2 (1 year)	r = -.235 p = .01	-.226** .02
Time 3 (2 years)	r = -.119 p = .26	-.215* .04

* Only score on subscale Difficulty Coping
** Only score on subscale Despair

Conclusions

- Negative religious coping, belief in an afterlife, and ambivalence about belief in God are all associated with worse grief at 1 year after pregnancy loss.
- A higher score on belief that God answers prayer, and belief in God were associated with lessened grief on at least some subscales at 1 and/or 2 years after pregnancy loss.