

Religion/Spirituality and Adolescent Psychiatric Symptoms: A Review

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Background

A growing literature points to a potential protective effect of religiosity on the mental health of adults. However, developmental differences may limit generalization of such findings to younger populations. Research postulating a connection between religiousness and mental health in adolescents has also emerged. Although many studies have confirmed such an association, the findings are not uniform for all types of psychiatric problems studied. Further, the precise dimensions of religion and spirituality that may contribute to any protective effects remain unclear. We reviewed the literature on religion/spirituality as it pertains to adolescent psychiatric symptoms.

Methods

Articles for review were located through the search of MEDLINE and Psych Info (up to and including 2005) databases.

Each article was categorized by the type(s) of independent (religious/spiritual) variable used, the type(s) of dependent (psychiatric) variable used, and the results of comparisons. Multivariable analyses were coded rather than bivariable results if available.

One hundred and fifteen articles were reviewed that examined relationships between religion/spirituality and adolescent substance use, delinquency, depression, suicidality, and anxiety. Each study was assigned a score indicating the quality of methodology used. A Kruskal-Wallis test was used to detect any association between methodology score and results.

Results

Ninety-two percent of articles found at least one significant ($p < .05$) relationship between religiousness and better mental health. A Kruskal-Wallis test of methodology rating score versus results category (positive, mixed positive/non-significant, non-significant, or negative) revealed no association ($\chi^2 = 2.74$; $df = 3$; $p = 0.43$). Evidence for relationships between greater religiousness and less psychopathology is best for the area of teenage substance use, while most lacking in research on anxiety disorders. Measurement of religion/spirituality was heterogeneous. All four commonly used variables, public religious activities, importance of religion, religious beliefs, and denomination, were usually related to better mental health in some way.

Depression	All Articles	Public Religious Activities	Religious Importance	Religious Beliefs	Denomination
Positive Results Only	5	3	1	1	1
Mixed Positive/Non-significant	9	2	0	1	1
Non-significant Only	3	1	4	1	1
Negative Results	4	1	1	0	0
Total	21	7	6	3	3

Suicide	All Articles	Public Religious Activities	Religious Importance	Religious Beliefs	Denomination
Positive Results Only	5	2	2	0	3
Mixed Positive/Non-significant	8	2	2	0	0
Non-significant Only	6	2	3	1	0
Negative Results	1	0	0	0	0
Total	20	6	7	1	3

Anxiety	All Articles	Public Religious Activities	Religious Importance	Religious Beliefs	Denomination
Positive Results Only	1	0	1	1	.
Mixed Positive/Non-significant	2	1	0	0	.
Non-significant Only	2	1	0	1	.
Negative Results	1	0	0	0	.
Total	6	2	1	2	.

Objectives

- To review the research literature on relationships between religious or spiritual variables and five mental health outcomes in adolescents: substance abuse, behavior problems, depression, suicidality, and anxiety
- To examine differences in associations based on measurement of religion/spirituality
- To examine differences in associations based on methodological rigor of investigations

Category applied to results	Definition
"Positive"	In all calculated relationships, greater religiousness or a particular denomination was associated with better mental health ($p < .05$)
"Mixed positive and non-significant"	At least one calculated correlation was such that a religious variable was associated with better mental health, and at least one correlation was statistically non-significant
"Non-significant"	No measured relationships between religion and mental health were statistically significant
"Negative"	at least one of the calculated relationships was such that an aspect of greater religiousness was associated with worse mental health, or, in the case of denomination, meaning that having any religious denomination was related to worse mental health than having no religious affiliation

Figure 2. Categories applied to results

Substance Abuse	All Articles	Public Religious Activities	Religious Importance	Religious Beliefs	Denomination
Positive Results Only	29	22	12	7	15
Mixed Positive/Non-significant	29	10	5	3	8
Non-significant Only	0	1	1	0	1
Negative Results	3	1	1	0	1
Total	61	34	19	10	25

Delinquency	All Articles	Public Religious Activities	Religious Importance	Religious Beliefs	Denomination
Positive Results Only	10	5	2	1	4
Mixed Positive/Non-significant	17	6	2	4	2
Non-significant Only	4	7	2	3	3
Negative Results	4	1	0	0	0
Total	35	19	6	8	9

Conclusion

Results suggest that, while a connection between adolescent substance use and religion has been adequately established, further research on the relationship of religion/spirituality to delinquency, depression, suicidality, and anxiety is warranted. Measurement of religiousness/spirituality should be more standardized and multidimensional, and future analyses should control for substance use.

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