Development and validation of instruments to assess potential mechanisms of the religion-health connection

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Many studies suggest an association between religious involvement and health but fewer are prepared to account for why this relationship exists. In testing a theoretical model of the religion-health connection including explanatory mechanisms such as social support, social norms, positive affect, positive self-perceptions, and sense of meaning, we encountered two constructs for which existing validated instruments were not readily available in the literature: perceived religious influence on health behaviors, and illness as punishment from a higher power. The first mechanism involves the idea that religiously involved individuals are healthier because they live a healthy lifestyle in accord with religious prescriptions or proscriptions. The second proposes a negative influence of religious involvement, whereby illness may be viewed as punishment for sin, which may ultimately lead to negative health outcomes by a pathway that is yet to be fully understood. We used a systematic iterative process to develop and validate brief instruments to assess these constructs, for use in a national telephone survey of the religion-health connection among African Americans. The instruments appeared to have strong internal reliability (α = .83, .91, respectively) as well as test-retest reliability (r = .59, .84, respectively, p < .001). Evidence for construct validity is also discussed, as are recommendations for research using these instruments.