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The Influence of Religion and Spirituality on Mental Health: A Psychological Study in District Mansehra, Pakistan

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Abstract

This study explores the role of religion and spirituality in mental well-being in District Mansehra using a qualitative research approach with phenomenological research design. The research aims to understand individuals' lived experiences, perceptions, and coping mechanisms related to their religious and spiritual beliefs. A purposive sampling technique was used to recruit 20 participants from diverse backgrounds, including religious practitioners, community leaders, mental health professionals, and individuals actively engaged in religious or spiritual practices. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in Urdu or Pashto, based on participants' preferences, and data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-step model. The findings highlight key themes such as spiritual coping mechanisms, psychological comfort derived from religious rituals, the influence of religious leaders, feelings of religious guilt, and barriers to seeking professional mental health services. The study underscores the significance of religion and spirituality as both supportive and challenging factors in mental well-being. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, and cultural sensitivity, were strictly maintained. The study provides insights for mental health professionals and policymakers to integrate faith-based perspectives into mental health support systems.

Keywords: Spiritual healing, Religious beliefs, Coping strategies Anxiety and Depression

Introduction

Religion and spirituality have been a part of human existence for thousands of years, impacting not only such realms as morality and social behavior, but the very psyche of the individual as well. Religion typically signifies organized bodies of beliefs with communal practices while spirituality is often seen as more individualized and experiential, relating to the search for meanings in life (Zhang et al., 2025). There is significant research on how religion and spirituality relate to mental health, with some



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studies indicating religious beliefs and spiritual practices may both promote and impair mental well-being (Nguyen et al., 2024). People frequently resort to religious or spiritual practices as forms of coping during periods of stress, grief, and uncertainty that could lead to increased mental resilience (Warraich, 2023). The role of faith in mental health care is complex and determined by many variables such as cultural context, personal belief systems and type of religious beliefs.

Some of the most important ways that religion and spirituality can influence mental health include the sense of purpose and meaning in life. Most spiritual doctrines are based on caring, forgiveness, and faith in a supreme spirit that empowers the world. This edge provides comfort and reassurance in challenging times and reduces the symptoms of anxiety and depression (McKay & Whitehouse, 2015). It has been demonstrated that prayer, meditation, and other spiritual rituals are useful in reducing stress and improving emotional wellbeing by facilitating mindfulness and self-reflection (Tacey, 2004). Furthermore, it is not unheard of for religious communities to provide powerful support groups that can help build social networks to prevent loneliness and increase all aspects of psychological well-being (Wong et al., 2024).

These positive effects don't take away, however, from the negative implications—but religion does overwhelm mental health, mainly surrounded by guilt, fear, and strict dogma. Certain religious teachings have the potential to engender feelings of shame or self-blame, thus contributing to increased anxiety or depression, especially among those grappling with personal or moral conflicts (Cutrona, 2000). Religious fundamentalism and radical beliefs may also encourage intolerance, social isolation or internalized suffering in people that feel alienated from their religious environments (Warraich, 2023). Religion can also get in the way of seeking treatment; in some cases, religious leaders or institutions can discourage medical or psychological intervention in favor of relying on faith-based healing, which can lead to a delay from receiving help for mental health disorders (Nanji, 2022).

Where the intersection of religion and spirituality lies in the world of mental health is additionally influenced by cultural and demographic factors. For example, older adults generally report higher levels of religious involvement, associated with increased life satisfaction and decreased depression (Wong et al., 2024). On the other hand, younger generations might be more inclined toward spirituality, eschewing organized religion, and adopting practices like mindfulness, meditation, or personal belief systems to cope (Cutrona, 2000). Moreover, culture has a central role in the internalization of religion and its effect on mental health. In some cultures, religious practice is intimately connected to group identity and social convention, while in others, it is understood as a personal and individual process (Loue, 2010).

Problem of Statement

Mental health disorders are becoming increasingly acknowledged as potential important risk to public health worldwide, however in many societies, particularly in District Mansehra these days, religious and spiritual ideologies still more widely remain the basis for their understanding of psychological distress and the way to cope with mental health problems. Now, there are many studies reporting the positive and negative effects of religion and spirituality on mental health yet not much work has been done specifically with individuals from a diverse and culturally and religiously enriched community such as Mansehra. Although many people in this area utilize prayer, spiritual healing, and religious counselling as means of coping, the potential effects and psychological



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implications of these modalities are not well understood. In addition, religious practices may also be a source of stress and guilt, as well as a source of mental health stigma, making individuals' experiences with psychological distress more complex. Hence, the objective of this study was to qualitatively investigate the role of religion and spirituality in mental well-being among people in District Mansehra, showing the perceptions, coping strategies, and socio-cultural aspects regarding the mental health.

Research Objectives

1. To Examine the impact of religious beliefs and practices on mental health outcomes
2. To analyze the role of spirituality in coping with stress, anxiety, and depression
3. To explore the relationship between religious community support and psychological well-being

Literature Review

Religion, spirituality, and mental health has been examined extensively in psychological, sociological, and medical research. Researchers have also studied how religious beliefs, spiritual practices, and engagement in community life can positively affect mental health, as well as how rigid religious beliefs and religious trauma can harm mental health. This literature review aims to highlight at the most fundamental positive and negative effects of religion and spirituality on mental health through a comprehensive overview of major studies identified.

History of religion, spirituality, and mental health

For centuries, researchers have explored the link between religion, spirituality, and mental health. In ancient times, mental health problems were frequently ascribed to supernatural beings, punishment from the Deity, or demonic possession. For example, various religious traditions (i.e. Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam) developed spiritual healing practices that alleviated psychological distress. For example, in several of the ancient Hindu scriptures such as Upanishads it has been discussed about practices such as meditation and self-realization to achieve mental peace (Nhlumayo, 2021). In similar parallels, Buddhist practices brought mindfulness and meditation methods, which are now widely applied in mental health for their benefits (Murphy, 2016).

The medieval era of Europe saw religious institutions in total control of care for the mentally ill. As such, places like monasteries and churches offered refuge to those with mental illnesses, although treatment often consisted of exorcism or faith-based therapy (Fabrega, 1991). The age of enlightenment saw reforms and development in the understanding of mental health and the cause of mental illness away from supernatural explanations towards more medical and psychological approaches (Sussman, 2017). Religious and spiritual beliefs reemerged as an inspiration for psychological theorizing, however, an early psychologist, examined the effects of mystical experiences on human functioning and the role of faith as a provider of comfort and fortitude (Fabrega, 1991).

Starting in the 20th and now into the 21st centuries, researchers have begun to delve into the links between religion, spirituality, and mental health in a systematic manner. Positive psychology has focused on grace, gratitude, and faith and religious coping as factors in mental well-being (Lou, 2016). Religion and spirituality are now considered influential in mental health treatment, with many therapists bringing spirituality into psychotherapy (Hodge et al., 2022). The sections that follow explore the negative and



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positive effects of religion on mental health.

The Positive Influence of Religion and Spirituality on Mental Health

With plenty of studies indicating that, through emotional aid, stress-lifting, and the offering of meaning in life, religious belief and spirituality are important contributors to the promotion of mental health. Research demonstrates that people who actively participate in religious or spiritual practices tend to have lower levels of anxiety, depression, and stress than people who do not engage in religious or spiritual practices (Nwobodo & Offiah, 2017). You know, one of the main ways that religion does so positively influence our mental health is by providing coping strategies for stress and adversity. Religious coping (e.g., prayer, meditation, reading scripture) frameworks help individuals find meaning in suffering and hardship, thereby ameliorating emotional distress.

Perhaps the most important benefit of religious engagement is its robust connection with having greater life satisfaction as well as psychological resilience Yaden et al conducted a study on this,¹ showing that (2022) found that attending religious services regularly was associated with higher and overall well-being despite depressive symptoms. Perhaps this is due to the social support and sense of belonging provided by religious communities. Spiritual customs, services and praise groups allow people to meet others with similar interests and such people connect together and help them not feel lonely and have sense of belonging (Kišjuhas, 2024). Moreover, religious communities often offer concrete support at times of crisis, like financial assistance, counseling services, and help with daily needs, which can significantly impact mental wellbeing (Nwobodo & Offiah, 2017).

They also help mold and shape anyone's moral and ethical beliefs, which can positively impact mental health. Religious teachings promote behaviors like forgiveness, gratitude, and altruism, which are associated with better psychological health for example, research conducted by Yancey (2024) indicated people who practiced gratitude because of their spirituality had lower stress levels and more inner peace. Amenorrhea has a similar effect (even used to not menstruate) and forgiveness—one of the aspects most mentioned in religions—has been shown to reduce anger, emotional stability, and relations to others (Anderson et al., 2025)

Health care plans are also taking note of faith-based approaches to mental health treatment. Many religious and spiritual traditions include meditation, mindfulness, and prayer in a therapeutic approach to managing stress and emotional distress. Studies have also indicated that meditation practices grounding in spirituality such as Buddhist mindfulness meditation and Christian contemplative prayers also tend to associate with decreased levels of anxiety and depression, through improving relaxation and emotional regulation. Indeed, religious faith has also been associated with lower rates of substance abuse, as spiritual beliefs tend to be less favorable to excessive alcohol and drug consumption. Programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), for example, incorporate a spiritual dimension into the recovery of individuals with addiction, indicating submission to a higher power and improvement in their moral self as a vital part of the journey to sobriety (Voltaire, 2025).

The negative impact of Religion on mental health

While the positive mental health effects of religion are abundant, guilt, fear, and strict belief systems can also have negative impacts on mental health. Perhaps the most



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commonly raised red flag regarding negative religious influence is religious guilt and scrupulosity (excessive fear of moral or religious failure). In some religious doctrines, strict moral codes and ideas of divine punishment can generate feelings of guilt and self-blame when individuals believe they are violating the tenets of their faith. This type of religious guilt has been associated with higher levels of anxiety, obsessive-compulsive behaviors and depression, particularly in those who are raised in very conservative religious groups (Snodgrass et al., 2024).

These can manifest in another big area of trauma, religious trauma, when someone experiences psychological harm as a result of experiencing or witnessing something detrimental in the name of faith. Individuals who escape from authoritarian or fundamentalist religious groups may experience a condition known as religious trauma syndrome (RTS), which includes symptoms such as fear, anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). People who leave these strict religious communities are often shunned socially, lose contact with family, and experience an identity crisis that can lead to severe mental health consequences (Voltaire, 2025).

Religious intolerance and discrimination have negative impacts on mental health as well. Some people are being excluded by the community and probably that community even make them feel bad because of their beliefs or lifestyle. For instance, closeted LGBTQ+ persons in conservative religious spaces frequently face rejection and discrimination that can contribute to heightened rates of depression and suicidal thoughts. This also contributes to the factor that religious beliefs may discourage people with mental health disorders from seeking professional help, as mental illness can be seen as a punishment for lack of faith or a spiritual problem. Faith healing is one approach integrated by some religious leaders over medical treatment, causing those in need to miss out on the psychological support offered in medical care (Snodgrass et al., 2024)

Fundamentalism and religious dogmatism are also sources of psychological distress. Unfortunately, when people are indoctrinated that their faith is the singular truth, they may experience cognitive dissonance when confronted with differing worldviews. When this automatic sense of predictability is disrupted it can include emotional distress, self-doubt, and resistance to new ideas. Furthermore, rigid demands for upright religious conduct can lead to lack of hope and inadequacy among believers, especially those who cannot live up to the ethical standards required for true followers of their religion (Voltaire, 2025).

The Influence of Religion in Different Cultures and Demographics

Across cultural and demographic groups, the influence of religion and spirituality on mental health can be very different. For instance, older adults tend to report greater levels of religious involvement which is related to higher levels of psychological resilience and life satisfaction. By comparison, younger generations are more often "spiritual but not religious" and integrate alternative forms of spirituality, including yoga and mindfulness practices, into their coping strategies. As a result of this generational shift in belief, young people have begun to show a distinct trend to seek personal spiritual fulfillment outside of organized religion (Hochstetler & Hill, 2024). as an expression of changing attitudes toward traditional religious institutions.

Cultural differences also impact religious influence on mental health. In contrast, for the collectivist societies, religion plays a role that goes beyond the social cultural practices, and is crucial for community cohesion and psychological support. On the other hand, in more individualistic areas, spirituality is a personal goal instead of a community focus.



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Moreover, there is a cultural difference on religious attitude towards mental health treatment. Some cultures have integrated psychotherapy religiously while others promote methods of faith healing and discourage medical treatment (Lawal et al., 2024)

Research Methodology

Qualitative research was carried out in this study to investigate the role of religion and spirituality in mental health in District Mansehra. Researcher adapted a phenomenological research design to help gain insights into the lived experiences of individuals, their perceptions and copings with regards to religious beliefs and spirituality. Using a purposive sampling method, 20 participants from a variety of backgrounds were recruited, including religious practitioners, community leaders, and mental health professionals, as well as those who were practicing religion or spirituality. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in Urdu or Pashto based on participants' preferences. The duration of each interview was between 40 to 60 minutes and, with informed consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. Thematic analysis, using Braun and Clarke's six-step model was used to identify recurring themes, including spiritual coping, the psychological comfort of religious rituals, the influence of religious leaders, feelings of religious guilt, and barriers to professional mental health services. Ethical aspects were strictly fulfilled through obtaining informed consent, assuring confidentiality by anonymizing participants, cultural sensitivity regarding the religious beliefs and mental health issues discussed.

Results and Discussion

Based on the qualitative part of the analysis, five main themes were identified which highlight the importance of religion and spirituality for individuals in District Mansehra in mental well-being. The results point to the way that religious beliefs and rituals shape the psychological states of people and affect how well they cope with stress, grief and anxiety. Here is a refined discussion of each theme, along with verbatim quotations and verbatim examples from the respondents, maintaining the anonymity.

Theme 1. Spiritual Coping Mechanism in Time of Distress

The most notable theme that emerged from the study and the interviews was a pattern of spiritual coping mechanisms in times of distress. Prayer, reciting the Quran and seeking divine help frequently provided respondents with emotional relief and aided them in enduring hardship. Many said their faith provided them with inner strength and guided them in moments of despair. As one respondent narrated, *"I've had times in my life when I was just lost. There was a phase when I was financially struggling and there were family issues. I would sit alone at night, thinking my world was turning upside down. But whenever I reached for prayer, a wave of relief washed over me. My problems did not magically vanish overnight, but there was peace in my heart knowing that I had handed over my worries to the God. It just took a weight off me, like I wasn't bearing my burdens alone."*

Another respondent added

"When my father died unexpectedly, I was broken-hearted. I wasn't able to sleep, and my life felt aimless. But then I would read the verses in the Quran that said to have patience and to endure. What comforted me was that suffering in this world is meaningful and that God tests those whom He loves. Gradually, this belief enabled me to accept my loss, and, while the pain never entirely dissipated, my faith gave me the



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strength to live with it.” These accounts demonstrate how faith can offer psychological resilience in adversarial times. Exclusively spiritual coping mechanisms, like prayer and trust in divine help, act as emotional lodestars, enabling people to stay mentally afloat.

Theme 2. Psychological comfort through religious rituals

Another constant theme was the psychological solace, drawn from religious rituals. Many respondents argued that structured religious practices whether five daily prayers, fasting or attending congregational prayers created a sense of stability in their lives. These rituals not only fortified their faith but also comforted them, alleviating stress and anxiety. Respondent said, *“Before sunrise every morning, I wake up for Far prayer. Such tranquility in the silence of the time. It lets me start my day with a blank canvas. It doesn’t matter how stressed I am finally just doing wudu (ablution) and standing in prayer makes me feel that I am renewing myself.” It helps me detach from my worries, at least for some time, and kick off my day on the right track.*”

Another respondent shared

“In the holy month of Ramadan I feel a different kind of peace. There is an indescribable pleasure in fasting, breaking the fast with the family, and performing the tarawih prayers. This routine seems so spiritual to me, and while doing it, my mind feels clearer and heart feels lighter during that time. “Fasting is a mental and physical challenge for me, and the mental discipline I learn from it applies to other parts of my life as well.” These stories imply that religious rituals serve more than the function of “checking the spiritual box. They also provide psychological order and discipline of the self, which are needed to sustain emotional equilibrium. The routine of say-in prayers, fasting and so on is predictable and can be especially soothing when the future feels uncertain.

Theme 3. The Role of Religious Leaders

The vast majority of respondents mentioned that religious leaders play an important role in their psychological and emotional state. Since people often turned to religious leaders like imams and scholars during personal crises, they were seen as wise beings who talk to God and have access to knowledge from God, Respondent said that, *“I was unemployed and my life was a mess. I felt completely worthless. When I was younger, one day I went to the local mosque and asked to meet with the imam. I confessed everything I was feeling, bracing for him to brush my concerns aside as weak faith. But instead, he listened patiently to me. He shared with me that tests and trials are not a punishment, rather everyone faces tests, and mentioned stories of some of the most noble people in history, our prophets, who faced terrible trials. This gave me hope, and for the first time in months, it felt like someone actually understood what I was going through.”*

Another respondent added

“When my marriage hit a rough patch, I consulted a religious scholar. I was about to give up, but he pressed me to deal with what I was going through with patience and wisdom. He offered spiritual guidance that changed my perspective. It didn’t solve my problems overnight, but it gave me the mental strength to deal with them more rationally.” These types of experiences shed light on the ways in which religious leaders serve as “informal counselors,” supporting people spiritually as well as emotionally. Their importance in mental health is particularly salient in communities where access to



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professional mental health services may be limited or stigmatized.

Theme 4. Religious Guilt and Mental Health Challenges

Religion is often a source of solace; however, for some, it breeds religious guilt and anxiety. Respondents described feeling the pressure to meet religious expectations and the emotional anguish that ensued when they didn't, respondent shared, *"Since childhood we have been taught that the major sin is missing our prayers. And there are days when I feel burnt out mentally and cannot do justice to all the religious components. But when I fail, I just feel such guilt. And then I think I must be a bad Muslim, which makes me feel worse. Rather than being at peace within a religion, I often feel as though I am failing it."*

Another respondent shared

"I have anxiety, and sometimes my mental health makes it difficult for me to focus in prayer," wrote another respondent. *But those around me do not know this. If my faith is strong, they say, I would not feel anxious at all. "This just doubts me more and instead of going for help, I feel ashamed."* Though religion offers structured guides, the further you stray and the more guilt/harm you encounter, your mental health might suffer as a result. If we do not talk about them in a public way, we may be crushing a spirit of kind, compassionate, religious practice, one that genuinely understands the challenges of mental health.

Theme 5. Barriers to Seeking Professional Mental Health Services

Survey respondents were also often reluctant to seek help for their mental health from qualified professionals as a result of religious and cultural beliefs. There was this prevailing idea that mental despair must be handled only with faith, that it was somehow unnecessary even shameful to see a therapist, one respondent Explained, *"When I was suffering from depression I considered going to find help from a psychologist. But my family advised me that all that was needed was to increase my faith. They thought mental illness is simply a weakness of belief, and that prayer should suffice to heal me. So, I never went to therapy, although I knew I needed it."*

Another respondent added

"In our community people believe that if a person goes to psychiatrist, he is 'mad.' My panic attacks had no medical solution, so I was home with a religious healer. His prayers did help me in a spiritual matter, but I also knew deep down that I needed professional therapy. But I was afraid to ask for it, thinking how anyone would look at me." These accounts demonstrate an urgent need to connect the worlds of faith and mental health services. Promoting partnerships between these groups and mental health professionals can help alleviate that stigma and allow for a more holistic view of healing.

Discussion

This study finds that religion and spirituality are important for mental health because they offer psychological strength, affective equilibrium, and sense of meaningfulness. Many respondents explained that practicing prayer, fasting, and reciting sacred texts helped them cope with stress, anxiety, and challenges in life. This corroborates past research, showing that those who are involved in religion experience lower rates of



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depression, greater life satisfaction, and better emotional regulation (Voltaire, 2025). Human beings feel a sense of hope and reassurance when they feel spiritually connected to a higher power, reducing feelings of despair and loneliness (Snodgrass et al., 2024).

“Religious communities and faith leaders are also key sources of social and emotional support,” the researchers added. A common response to the above question was that they derived comfort and guidance by talking to a religious scholar or attending congregational gatherings. This is consistent with studies showing that religious communities provide needs for belongingness and group acceptance, which could facilitate well-being and act as a buffer against mental health problems (Murphy, 2016). But faith-based support can also be a double-edged sword if people feel pressured to live up to rigid religious ideals. Others reported feelings of guilt due to violations of their religious beliefs, as well as fear of divine punishment, resulting in elevated anxiety and distress, corroborating previous research that suggests that rigid religious belief can promote obsessive-compulsive symptoms, as well as excessive self-criticism (Snodgrass et al., 2024).

Additionally, stigma against mental health problems is particularly high in religious communities. (Most respondents were reluctant to seek professional psychological help, convinced that their struggles would raise suspicion as to faith, not medical condition that needed treatment.) This confirms past research indicating that religious individuals are generally less inclined to seek therapy, owing to their cultural and spiritual beliefs favoring divine/fallen healing measures over medical intervention (Lawal et al., 2024). This challenge highlights the need for a holistic approach that combines religious and psychological support for individuals struggling with faith and mental health. This can be achieved through improving awareness about mental health in religious circles, training spiritual leaders for basic counseling and integration of faith-based institutions with practitioners of mental health.

Conclusion

The wavering nature of the relationship between religion, spirituality, and mental health is emphasized in this study. And, although religious beliefs and practices can provide emotional resilience, meaning, and coping strategies, they can also lead to psychological suffering where they create shame, impose unrealistic expectations, or stigmatize the search for mental health treatment. It indicates that a comprehensive response, which includes not only spiritual but also psychological intervention by qualified professionals, may provide the best treatment option to help support those suffering from mental health concerns. By encouraging open discussions, training faith leaders in mental health awareness, and integrating religious perspectives within therapeutic practices, we can work towards a more inclusive and supportive mental health framework.

Recommendations

- Faith-based organizations must run awareness programs in their spaces to inform people about mental health and the fact that faith does not require you to be mentally unwell.
- Religious scholars training needed in mental health counseling guiding their people but also encouraging psychological counseling by professionals when necessary.
- This information can be used to initiate public awareness campaigns that will dispel the notion that mental distress is a fully spiritual concern, emphasizing through



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education that mental health conditions should be treated with appropriate medical interventions.

- As mental health professionals, ensure that religious and cultural sensitivities are integrated within therapy so that individuals do not feel stigmatized in the professional environment of counseling.
- Integrating faith is the answer, like working with organizations to work with faith-based organizations in collaboration with mental health providers.

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