

Faith and Stress

An Article compiled by Emily Zeig, December 4, 2001 while a student in Psych 335 at Hope College

Introduction

Recently, psychologists have become more and more aware of the positive effects that a person's faith may have on an individual's life. A relatively large amount of literature is devoted to the stress-buffering role of different religious variables in coping with significant negative life stresses and daily stress (Fabricatore, Handal, & Fenzel 2000). Though research has shown that stress can have negative consequences on a person's life, stress may actually help one advance in his or her spiritual walk. Faith can also positively affect stress and help a person to cope.

High Stress Life Events in Relation to Stage of Faith Development

According to James and Samuel (1999), spiritual growth can be a constructive consequence of highly stressful life experiences. They examined the relationships between the experience of common high stress life events and measures of adult spiritual development. They administered a 4-part survey to 332 people, 19 to 79 years old. It measured intrinsic and extrinsic religiousness using the Intrinsic/Extrinsic-Revised Scale, universalistic spiritual orientation using the Religious Beliefs Inventory, faith style and stage using the Fowler Scale, and experiences of high stress events using an adapted survey. They found that faith stage is associated with the experience of a high stress life event, though only data for males showed statistically significant support. This finding follows Fowler's argument that faith development is not an automatic function of biological maturation, chronological or mental age, or psychological development. The movement to the next stage occurs when the equilibrium of a given stage is upset by crises or other experiences (Fowler 1981). High stress life experiences, which include personal illness or the death of a spouse, parent or child, are the catalysts for an inner search. This search might challenge previously held views about the meaning and purpose of life and lead to changes in spiritual beliefs, values, and practices. Individuals in stage five of Fowler's theory are more likely to have experienced a high stress life event than those in earlier stages of faith development (James and Samuel 1999).

Personal Connection with God and Reactions to Stress

Researchers have suggested that external, and behavioral indicators of religious involvement can affect well-being. However, Fabricatore, Handal, and Fenzel (2000) show that personal spirituality has a more direct and powerful effect on well-being. They examined three different hypotheses with 120 undergraduates: stressors would have a

negative impact on subjective well-being; personal spirituality would positively predict subjective well-being; and personal spirituality would moderate the relationship between stressors and subjective well-being. The results showed that personal spirituality significantly adds to the prediction of subjective well-being. Personal spirituality was also found to moderate the relationship between stress and life satisfaction, allowing those with a deep personal relationship with God to maintain satisfaction with their life even in the face of stressors. According to the spiritual life integration survey created by Fenzel in 1996 and used in this study, those individuals who have a relationship with God and integrate their relationship into their daily living will also use that relationship to help them deal with life's difficulties.

The Effects of Different Types of Religious Involvement on Stress

Although people reporting a personal relationship with God have a more positive outlook on life, their level of religious involvement may also affect the way they handle stress. By examining three types of religious involvement - attendance at religious services, religious salience, and spiritual help-seeking - Schnittker (2001) sought to define how each adds buffers to stress. He used Americans' Changing Lives, a large, nationally representative, and longitudinal data set to look for interactions. Despite some inconsistencies among previous research, the general conclusion is that religious involvement is positively related to psychological well-being (Schnittker 2001). Schnittker then examined whether certain types of religious involvement may be more beneficial than others. For example, attendance at religious services has powerful effects on psychological outcomes. Those attending religious services may feel more support because of the social network of those with similar beliefs (Schnittker 2001). Spiritual help-seeking through prayer or personal religious counsel makes an individual feel valued and unique and therefore may decrease the chance of major overwhelming stresses. Religious salience may reflect an individual's reassurance of his or her personal purpose in life and cause a more positive outlook on life. In the end, Schnittker found that religious involvement does not necessarily affect a person's response to a single, isolated stressful event. However, with multiple stressful life events, religion helps a person to cope.

Religious Faith and Coping with Daily Stress

Most research on the interaction of religion and stress in an individual's life focuses on large stressors or negative life events with long-term effects. Often these researchers do not concern themselves with the everyday stresses of life. A study performed by Plante, Saucedo, & Rice (2001) investigated the association between the strength of religious faith and the ability to cope with daily stresses. The participants, who included 68 students and 64 faculty at a Catholic university, measured their stress over a seven-day period. Other measures used included the Santa Clara Strength of Religious Faith Questionnaire, the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale, the Symptom Checklist-90 Revised, the Weinberger Low Self Esteem Scale, and a 10-point daily stress, coping, and strength of faith scale. Unfortunately, the results did not show a statistically significant relationship between religious faith and the ability to cope with daily stress.

Conclusion

From the studies conducted by James and Samuel (1999), Fabricatore, Handal, and Fenzel (2000), Schnittker (2001), and Plante, Saucedo, and Rice (2001), it seems that religion and faith can play an important role in the amount of stress in a person's life and the way they choose to cope with it. Faith gives a person a place to find support personally through a relationship with God, but it is also a place to find social support from others with similar beliefs. It is evident that faith plays a role in dealing with multiple or large, life event stressors, but research has not proven the role of faith in coping with minor everyday hassles that also cause a lot of the stress in an individual's life. Overall, personal spirituality and a relationship with God are a useful resource for maintaining a more positive view of life in the face of stressors.

References

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<http://www.hope.edu/academic/psychology/335/webrep/faithstress.htm>