



Prayer as religious coping: Does prayer really help?

Jennifer Ripley, Ph.D.,
Audrey Atkinson,
Cara Mulcahy,
Katherine Maslow and
Corinne Engelbert

Regent University

What is Prayer?

- “A “prayer act” can bring a person to their knees in a feeling of vulnerability, especially in times of crisis. Despite the flourishing of scientific reasoning over the past century, nearly 95% of Americans still hold a belief in God or a higher power, and nine out of 10 pray” (Gallup & Lindsay, 1999).
- Throughout literature prayer has been considered an integral part in religious and spiritual practices. Prayer has been defined as “thoughts, attitudes, and actions designed to express or experience connection to the sacred.” (McCullough and Larson, 1999, p. 86).
- Or more simply put, prayer is “people’s vehicle for communication with God” (Matthews, 1998, p. 198).
 - “inward communion or conversation with the power recognized as divine” and as “the very soul and essence of religion” (James, 1960 p. 352).
- Prayer has been shown to happen in many different forms. A study in 1991 identified four types of prayer, including petitionary, conversational, ritual, and meditative (Poloma, & Gallup, 1991).



Functions of Prayer

- Seeking answers from God, advice, understanding or direction, and comfort
- Obtaining strength to cope with situations
- Emotional support (ie. patience, hope, peace)
- Communicating or sharing with God
- Giving God control, seeking his will
- Thankfulness
- Performance based prayers or praying you will be able to do your best in the situation
- In a study of Professional Black Women (Bacchus and Holley, 2004), the participants reported using prayer or meditation as a coping mechanism in five ways:
 - as a protective factor against environmental stressors,
 - to gain personal strength,
 - to find guidance in how to better manage their stress,
 - to obtain guidance with decision making regarding the stress, and
 - to assist in reappraisal of the situation to view it more positively.



Relationship between Prayer and Coping

- Several studies have demonstrated that involvement with religiosity and spirituality are often indicative of lower levels of stress. One of the main components of religiosity and spirituality is prayer, which has also been shown to be related to increased positive affect.
- Positive forms of religious coping have consistently related to better psychological adjustment, including measures of stress and life satisfaction.
- Praying and having faith in God are the strategies that are the most frequently used to cope with personal problems
- “Religious traditions speak to the alleviation of pain and suffering by providing meaning and significance to the stresses of human experience” (Pargament, 1997).



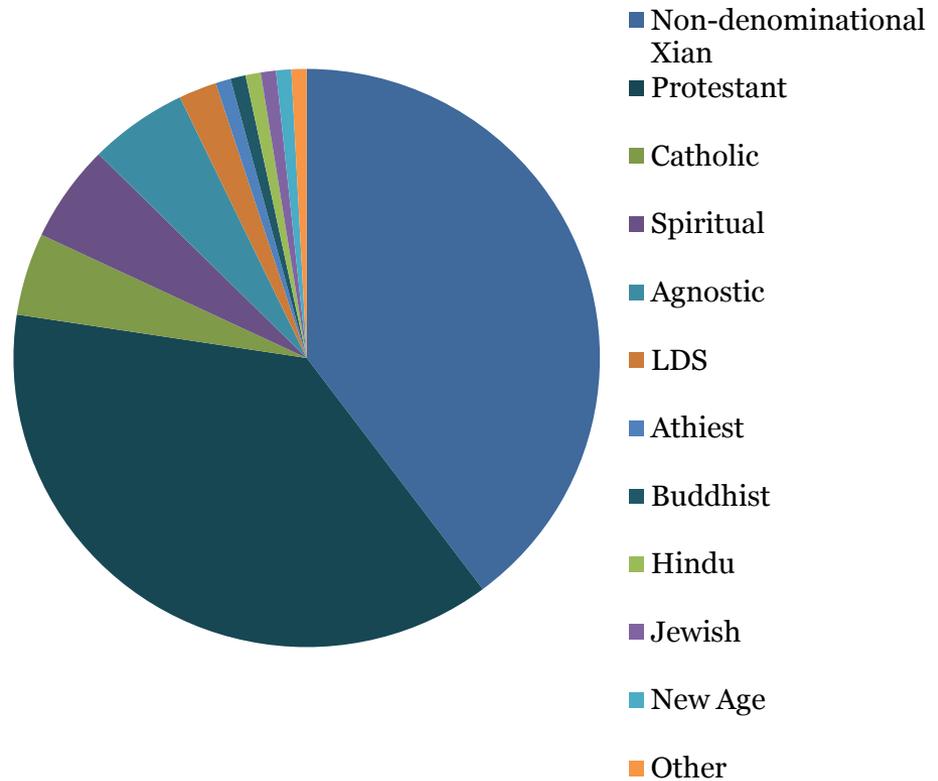
Where has prayer shown to aid in coping with stress?

- Following 9/11, 90% of Americans used religion as a coping method, specifically gathering in groups to pray or using the churches for private prayer (Livingston, C.W., Masta, R., Wallace, B).
- African American women are exposed daily to stressors related to their race and gender. They have been shown to use prayer to help cope with both racism and sexism, by drawing strength from God (Shorter-Gooden, K., 2004).
- Psychologists face many stressors from multiple directions including clients, colleagues, and work settings. Researchers have found that psychologists find prayer to be one of their main sources of coping and a key to their resiliency (Mahoney, 1997; Case & McMinn, 2007).
- Athletes commonly use prayer to cope with performance related stress, including unknown outcomes, anxiety, and nervousness (Coakley, 2001; Czech et al, 2004).



Participants (N=256)

- Younger, mean age = 27
- 71% female
- Higher education than the general population, median bachelor's degree
- 72% Caucasian, 15% African American, small percentage of others
- Religious affiliation (83% Christian)



Procedures

- Snowball method with a graduate course at Regent University
- Completed measure of religiosity (4 items, Fetzer Report) , RCOPE (Pargament; 11 scales), stress perception scaling, and demographic information
- Randomly assigned to prayer intervention (n=99) or journaling intervention (n=107)
 - Prayed or wrote about a stressful life event
- Completed RCOPE and stress perception scaling after intervention



Preliminary Analyses

Data review

- Three subscales required transformations due to positive skew.
- Cook's distance score indicated good results in terms of residual outliers

Qualitative Analyses of content

- Found 6 themes with good inter-rater reliability (+.80)
 - Prayer
 - God as sovereign
 - Reliance on God
 - Reliance on self
 - Reliance on others
 - Personal virtues
- More variance in responding in the journaling intervention as opposed to the prayer intervention
 - Variance for journaling was .23
 - Variance for prayer was .19



Analysis of Prayers/ Journaling

- Was the direction to write a prayer predictive of the theme of prayer in the open ended responses? Yes
 - ANOVA showed violation of Levene's test for homogeneity of variance, $F(1, 221)=10.76, p=.001$
 - Prayer theme was significantly predicted by direction to pray versus the journal, $F(1, 223)= 43.37, p<.001$
- Were other themes predicted by the direction to write a prayer? Yes for 4
 - God's sovereignty, $F(1, 223)= 313.03, p<.001$
 - Rely on God, $F(1, 223)= 32.36, p<.001$
 - Rely on self, $F(1, 223)= 70.84, p<.001$
 - Rely on others, $F(1, 223)= 8.37, p=.004$
- Personal virtues showed homogeneity of variance, $F(1, 221)= .18, p=.67$, and there was no significant difference between groups
 - $F(1, 223)= .05, p=.83$



Quantitative Results

- Repeated measures MANOVA was conducted to determine whether the prayer intervention increased various types of religious interventions as compared to journaling.
- Covariate
 - Measure of individual trait religiosity (adding the 4 items)
 - Covariate significant predictor of outcome variables
 - Pillai's Trace= .63, $F(10, 194)=32.67$, $p<.001$
- Omnibus between subjects MANOVA was not significant
 - Pillai's Trace=.04, $F(10, 194)=.81$, $p= .62$
- Within subjects MANVOA for time was significant (regardless of intervention & including the covariate)
 - Pillai's Trace=.25, $F(10, 194)= 6.54$, $p<.001$
- Within subjects MANOVA by intervention approached significance
 - Pillai's Trace= .08, $F(10, 194)= 1.65$, $p=.09$



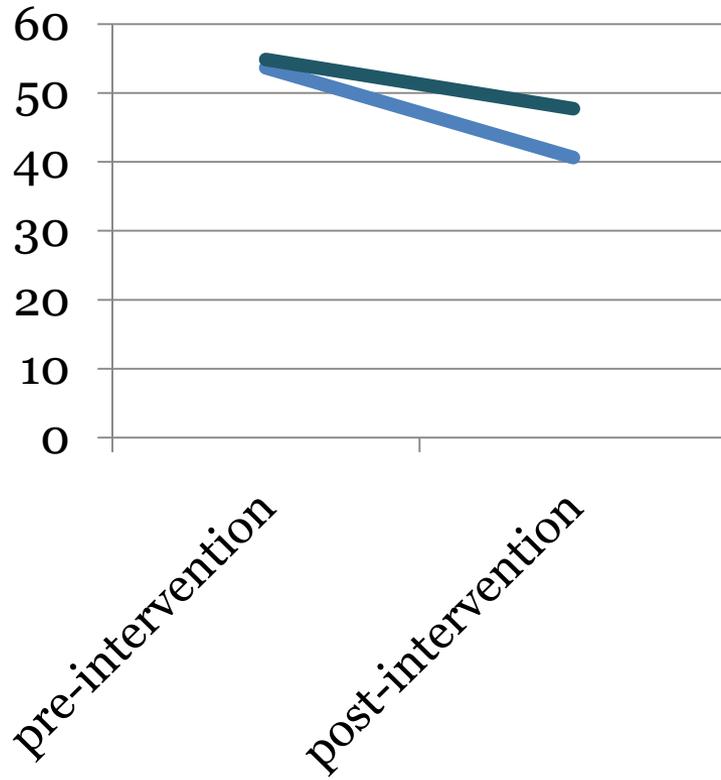
Quantitative Results

- Univariate repeated measures ANOVAs were examined for the time by intervention interaction
- 2 results were significant
 - Perceived stress was significantly lowered for the prayer intervention as compared to the journaling intervention
 - Mean decrease in score in prayer intervention= -13.06
 - Mean decrease in score in journaling intervention= -7.03
 - $F(1, 203) = 7.48, p = .007$
 - Seeking spiritual support increased in the prayer intervention while it decreased in the journaling intervention
 - Mean decrease in score in prayer intervention= .24
 - Mean decrease in score in journaling intervention= -1.80
 - $F(1, 203) = 5.08, p = .03$

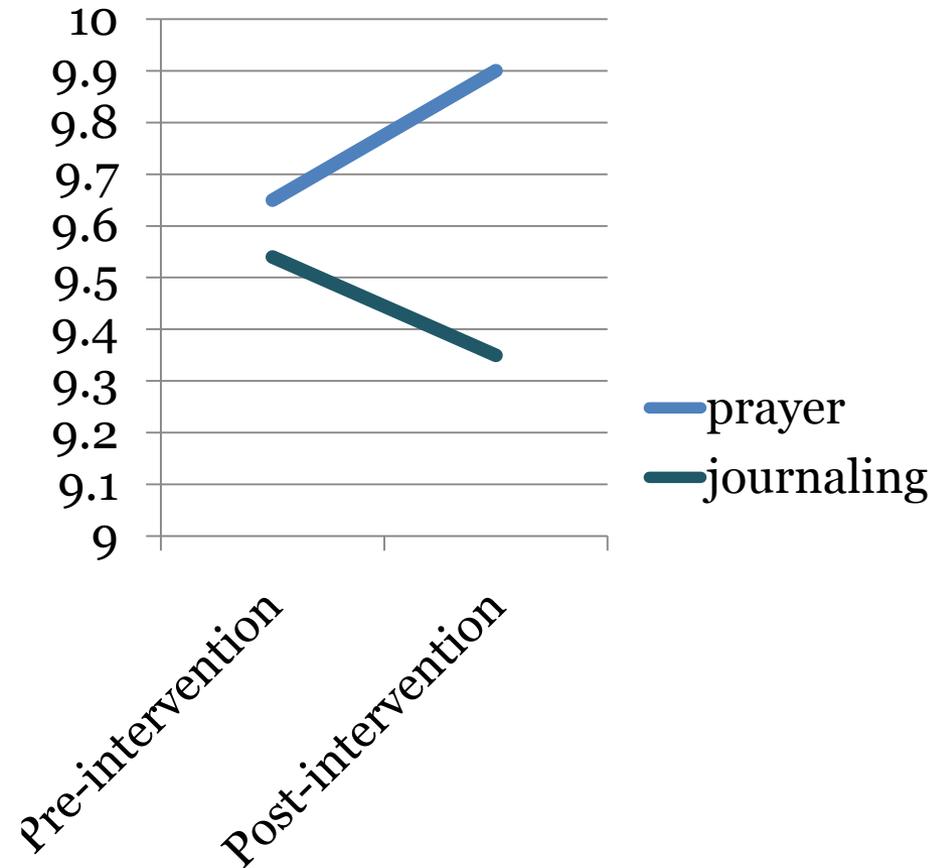


Quantitative Results

Stress Levels (1-100), $p=.007$



Seeking Spiritual Support, $p=.03$



Discussion: Yes, prayer helps

- Results of the present study indicated that seeking spiritual support increased for prayer (mean increase in score .24) while the journaling intervention decreased (mean decrease in score -1.08).
- Perception of stress decreased more for the prayer intervention (mean drop in score -13.16) than for the journaling intervention (mean drop in score -7.03) ,
- Other types of religious coping were not different for prayer than journaling but both improved.
- Because this study used a fairly conservative design with an alternative intervention, equal results are meaningful, even if not significantly different. Participants did improve on all religious coping measures even though the prayer intervention was not different than journaling.



Discussion, Yes prayer helps

- Some non-independence of results is indicated since many people address religious themes in their journaling, although no specific prayers were found in any of the journal entries (e.g. "dear God").
- Study demand characteristics: This presence of religious themes in the journaling intervention may be attributed to the introduction of the RCOPE just before the intervention.
- *Convergence with previous research*
 - As in the present study, several previous studies have demonstrated that forms of religious coping, such as prayer, are often indicative of lower levels of stress, better adjustment and life satisfaction, and increased positive affect (Koenig, George & Siegler, 1988; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).
 - Praying and having faith in God are the strategies that are the most frequently used to cope with personal problems (Koenig, George & Siegler, 1988; Bade & Cook, 2008).



Discussion

- *Implications for future research and clinical practice*
 - Future research may look at specific types of prayer (e.g. intercession, thanksgiving, petition) and coping.
 - This was a limited population in terms of ethnic and religious diversity, so future studies may want to focus on the effect of prayer on coping in other religions or ethnic communities.
 - Understanding the positive effect of prayer on coping provides Christian practitioners with a powerful tool to assist their Christian clients in coping.
 - Using the present study as a guide, clinicians can have their clients speak a prayer, say a silent prayer, or write out a prayer to God in session and use the RCOPE as a pre and post measure to help them be more concrete in measuring the effects of prayer on their coping.

