

SPIRITUAL RESILIENCE: NAVIGATING COLLEGE STRESS WITH RELIGIOUS SUPPORT

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between religious support and stress in college students, focusing on the challenges of the college transition period. The research explores the potential role of religious support in mitigating stress, building on previous findings linking religiosity to coping skills and well-being. Incorporating a convenience sample ($N = 188$) of college students from a private Christian university who identified as religious, the study employed a bivariate Pearson r correlation to examine the relationship between religious support and stress. Results revealed a negative relationship between the variables and highlighted the significance of religious support in alleviating stress during the critical college transition phase. The findings contribute to understanding the potential benefits of incorporating religious and spiritual factors in stress-reduction interventions for college students, emphasizing the importance of addressing stress for overall well-being and academic success.

Keywords: religious support, stress, college students, college transition, coping skills, well-being

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

College Stress and Transition Challenges

College, a pivotal life phase, necessitates simultaneous academic and social adaptations, demanding proficient time management, self-directed learning, and flexibility in coping with innovative teaching methods (Barbayannis et al., 2022). The transition from high school introduces academic challenges, navigating increased workloads, and heightened expectations (Barbayannis et al., 2022). Socially, the college experience involves relocating, meeting new peers, and engaging in diverse cultural settings (Khojanashvili et al., 2023). This leads to challenges in friendship formation, roommate management, and community integration (Khojanashvili et al., 2023).

Psychological and emotional challenges such as stress, anxiety, and depression are common due to academic pressure, social shifts, and newfound autonomy, impacting adaptation (House et al., 2020). The cultural diversity of college life requires adaptation to varied norms and values, emphasizing

the need for cultural sensitivity (Koo et al., 2021). Financial challenges, including tuition and living expenses, require adaptation to budgeting and fiscal planning, contributing to stress (Montallo, 2019). Transitioning to adulthood mandates developing independence and decision-making abilities amid academic, social, and personal responsibilities (Cerezo et al., 2020). Moreover, the prevalence of technology and online learning demands adaptation to virtual classrooms and digital resources, necessitating new proficiencies (Bartlett et al., 2021). In academic adjustment, key factors include chosen major satisfaction, grades, smoking, drinking habits, and social support (Jeong, 2020). While college offers freedom and opportunities, it can induce instability and stress (Beiter et al., 2015). Female college students often experience higher anxiety levels, with stress being most pronounced during the initial three years of college (Gao et al., 2020).

Chronic stress among students is linked to the emergence or exacerbation of mental health conditions, like anxiety and depression (Liu et al.,

2020), as well as physical health issues, including gastrointestinal problems, headaches, and sleep disturbances (Roberts et al., 2019). Chronic stress has far-reaching consequences, impacting academic performance through interference with cognitive functioning and memory consolidation, leading to underperformance (Taha et al., 2019). Belayachi and Idrissi (2021) conducted a systematic review, finding a significant negative impact of stress on college students' academic achievements in 10 studies. Furthermore, chronic stress affects various aspects of college students' lives, from mental well-being to increased susceptibility to substance abuse (Eddie et al., 2019), highlighting the importance of stress management and support mechanisms for college students. Addressing stress during this critical period is crucial to promoting overall well-being and academic success.

COPING WITH COLLEGIATE STRESS

Several psychological factors influence the successful navigation of the college transition period, each playing a crucial role in combatting collegiate stress. Effective coping mechanisms have been highlighted as essential (Hibbard-Gibbons, 2019), enabling individuals to confront and manage stressors, ultimately impacting overall well-being. Social support, identified as a critical factor (Valenti & Branham, 2023), provides a significant buffer against the negative effects of stress, emphasizing the importance of a robust support system from family, friends, or peers. Examining the interplay between body image and stress, Gao et al. (2020) found that positive body image correlates with improved mental health outcomes during the college transition, underlining the connection between physical and psychological well-being. Positivity levels also play a pivotal role, as maintaining a positive outlook contributes to adaptive coping and increased resilience (Jeong, 2020). Finally, Salsabiela et al. (2019) stress the importance of cognitive reappraisal and emotion regulation, noting that developing these skills empowers individuals to manage stressors more adaptively during the college transition.

RELIGIOUS SUPPORT

Religious support networks can significantly aid adaptation across various dimensions. Carpenter et al. (2012) conducted a prospective study with 111 adolescents to explore the associations between

religious coping, stress, and depressive symptoms. This seminal study contributes to our research on religious support among college students by emphasizing the nuanced role of religious coping in mitigating stress and its potential implications for mental health outcomes. It underscores the need for further investigation into the complex interplay between religious coping, stress, and psychological well-being among young adults in a collegiate setting.

Theoretical frameworks such as the Religious Social Support model by Kenneth Pargament (1997) and his Model of Religious Coping provide valuable perspectives for understanding the intricate dynamics of religious support and stress. Pargament's Religious Social Support model delves into the contributions of religious beliefs, practices, and communities to individuals' social support systems, emphasizing the role of religious institutions and activities in providing emotional, instrumental, and informational support. This framework directs attention to how religious communities foster a sense of community and support through rituals and shared beliefs (Pargament, 1997). Complementing this, Pargament's Model of Religious Coping offers insight into how individuals employ religious beliefs and practices as coping strategies during times of stress. The model highlights the influence of religious coping strategies on individuals' well-being, such as seeking spiritual support and finding meaning through faith. Research within this framework explores the impact of religious coping on mental health, resilience, and the broader social support context (Pargament, 1997). Integrating these models provides a comprehensive foundation for examining the interplay between religious support and stress, acknowledging both the broader social support context and the specific coping mechanisms rooted in religious beliefs and practices.

These seminal studies broaden our understanding of coping mechanisms in diverse student populations. Newer research mirrors this. A study by Robinson et al. (2019) found that college students employing higher levels of religious and spiritual coping strategies reported lower perceived stress, highlighting the potential for culturally responsive stress-reduction interventions. Debnam et al. (2018) also observed a positive relationship between religiosity and coping skills, indicating

that higher levels of religiosity among college students were associated with better coping skills and higher psychological well-being. Both studies underscore the importance of considering religious and spiritual factors when addressing stress and coping in the college population.

College students who lack social support may find assistance through religious avenues. As they adjust to new lifestyles, identities, and choices, religion and spirituality can provide social support and help them navigate stressful situations (Insel et al., 2020). Research has found that religious congregations can serve as positive social settings and provide students with built-in support groups, resulting in larger social circles and more relationships (Philip et al., 2019; Todd et al., 2020). In addition to attending religious services, congregations offer community-building activities such as parenting classes, feeding homeless individuals, sending out missionaries, and hosting food pantries (Hodge, 2020). This leads to increased well-being, a sense of belonging, volunteering, and civic engagement among congregation members (Philip et al., 2019).

Garssen et al. (2022) conducted a comprehensive examination of the reasons underlying the positive impact of religion on mental health. Their study highlighted common threads such as increased social support, cultural integration, and self-regulation. Notably, the frequency of attending religious services and the personal significance assigned to religion emerged as the most influential predictors of positive outcomes. Religious meeting places, often hosting regular services, foster a sense of social support (Garssen et al., 2021). Congregants who are consistent attendees of religious gatherings typically experience heightened social support within their communities (Garssen et al., 2021; Hodge, 2020). The alignment of religious affiliation with family or cultural ties tends to cultivate more fulfilling relationships of better quality. Additionally, religion introduces a distinctive facet of social support through a connection with a higher power (Garssen et al., 2021). This transcendent form of support, rooted in the belief that a higher power is dedicated to one's well-being and ultimate good, transcends physical confines, exemplified by the conviction in an omnipresent deity.

Another facet of religious influence and self-regulation is a widespread practice among numerous faiths aimed at governing conduct and

diminishing self-centeredness (Garssen et al., 2021). Emphasizing the devaluation of material possessions, many religions focus on the after-life or enlightenment pursuits, exerting an impact on thoughts, behaviors, and attention, ultimately mitigating stressors' effects (Garssen et al., 2021; Hodge, 2020). Furthermore, various religious practices such as mindfulness, prayer, meditation, contemplation, and religious rituals have demonstrated favorable outcomes for mental health and overall well-being (Garssen et al., 2021).

STUDY RATIONALE

Addressing the importance of college transition and its impact on physical and psychological well-being, the study focuses on the specific dimension of religious support and its role in alleviating stress during this critical period. Grounded in the awareness that college students encounter unique stressors based on their new environment, the research contributes to the existing literature by investigating the relationship between religious support and stress in college students who identify as religious at a private Christian university.

One primary research question was examined: Is there a relationship between religious support and stress in college students who identify as religious? A bivariate Pearson r correlation analysis was conducted to test the research question, seeking to provide valuable insights into the dynamics of religious support and its relationship with stress among college students. Understanding the relationship between this alternate form of support and student stress can help inform university initiatives focused on social support, meaningful connection, and positive coping strategies incorporating a Christian worldview.

METHODS

Sample

A convenience sample ($N = 188$) of college students was obtained by soliciting students enrolled in four large, on-ground sections of general psychology at a private Christian university in the Southwest. Sampling from general psychology courses increased the likelihood of various majors being captured in the data set. Regarding gender, 26.7% of the sample were male, while 73.3% were female. One individual identified as non-binary, contributing to .5% of the total sample. No additional demographic information was collected.

DATA COLLECTION

Data were collected from participants at one point in time during the fourth week of class. A recruitment script and survey link were made available to students via the university's learning management system. After giving informed consent, participants were directed to the survey page and completed basic demographic information, the Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen et al., 1983), and the religious support scale (Fiala et al., 2002).

MATERIALS

Perceived Stress Scale

Perceived stress was measured by the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS). This is a 10-item survey measured on a Likert scale of 0-4 regarding global perceived stress (Cohen et al., 1983). Scores on the inventory can range from 0 to 40, with higher scores indicating higher levels of perceived stress. A total score is computed by reverse scoring four positively worded items and summing all responses. The PSS has good internal reliability ($\alpha = .78$) and has been incorporated in varying contexts and diverse samples. See Appendix A for a complete list of questions included on the scale.

Religious Support

The Religious Support scale is a 21-item scale measured on a Likert scale of 1-5 (Fiala et al., 2002). The scale focuses on three types of religious support: *God Support*, *Congregation Support*, and *Church Leader Support*. Each subscale demonstrates good reliability, with Cronbach's coefficient alpha for the Congregation Support, *God Support*, and *Church Leader Support* subscales at .91, .75, and .90, respectively (Fiala et al., 2002). The overall scale demonstrates good reliability ($\alpha = .91$), with a total score obtained by adding participants' ratings of all included items and dividing the total by 21. The resulting scores range between 1 and 5. The Religious Support scale provides a good overall measure of support, and its subscales allow for more in-depth analysis and can be used independently of one another (Fiala et al., 2002). See Appendix A for a complete list of questions included on this scale.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Before data was collected, both site authorization and IRB approval were obtained from the university. No publicly identifiable information was collected from students, and all participants signed

an informed consent document before participating in the study. In addition to these considerations, permission to use each of the scales incorporated in the study was obtained (see Appendix B).

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were generated for the religious support and perceived stress variables. Mean, standard deviation, range, skewness, and kurtosis were calculated. Results are described in Table 1.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Religious Support and Perceived Stress

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Min	Max	Skewness	Kurtosis
Perceived Stress	33.38	3.97	24	47	0.070 (<i>SE</i> = 0.177)	0.196 (<i>SE</i> = 0.353)
Religious Support	3.72	.87	.95	5	-.87 (<i>SE</i> = 0.177)	1.266 (<i>SE</i> = 0.353)

N = 188

HYPOTHESIS TESTING

To investigate the relationship between religious support and stress, a Pearson *r* correlation was conducted. Results determined a negative relationship between religious support and stress, $r(186) = -.206$, $p < .01$. These results suggest that those who experience more religious support also experience less stress.

DISCUSSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The current study describes the connection between religious support and stress among college students who self-identify as religious. Results determined that religious support is inversely related to stress, $r(186) = -.206$, $p < .01$. The results indicate that students identifying as religious can derive significant social support from their church, congregation, and relationship with God. These insights hold particular relevance in the context of a Christian university, where ample opportunities exist to cultivate such support during the crucial transitional phase for college students. It is recommended that universities explore implementing targeted religious support programs, recognizing the potential benefits for students seeking this essential aspect of social support.

Future research might deepen understanding of the intricate relationship between religious identification and support. While the current study focused on Christian university students, providing insights into a specific subset, it is crucial to broaden investigations to include students from secular universities. This expansion will offer a more comprehensive perspective on unique challenges and support dynamics across diverse educational settings. Acknowledging the predominantly Christian sample, future research should prioritize inclusivity by incorporating diverse religious perspectives. Gardner et al.'s (2013) study, exploring religious coping among Muslim university students in New Zealand, serves as a model for extending research beyond Western Christian contexts. Future studies should delve into the influence of various faith backgrounds, including Muslim perspectives, on mental health, especially in non-Muslim countries, aligning with Carpenter et al.'s (2012) emphasis on cultural and religious diversity in examining religious coping and mental well-being in university students.

To comprehensively understand how different faith backgrounds influence stress levels, future research should extend its focus to include a range of religious traditions, denominations, and practices. This approach is crucial for capturing the nuanced interplay between religious support and stress across diverse cultural contexts. Embracing a more inclusive approach will contribute to a richer understanding of the intersection between religious identification, support, and stress, offering valuable insights applicable to a broader spectrum of individuals and cultural settings.

While the current investigation primarily focused on specific aspects of religious belief systems, there are other noteworthy avenues for future research to explore and enhance our understanding of this complex dynamic. For instance, it would be interesting to conduct longitudinal studies tracking college students over time, allowing for the discernment of temporal patterns in the relationship between religious support and stress. This approach offers valuable insights into how religious support evolves throughout the college experience, influencing stress levels in the long term. Additionally, exploring mediating and moderating factors is recommended. Future investigations should investigate factors influencing the relationship between

religious support and stress. Identifying specific variables, such as coping strategies and social support networks, might contribute to a nuanced understanding of the mechanisms at play.

A holistic approach is needed to combat collegiate stress. Incorporating evidence-based elements into support programs and interventions is crucial for enhancing the success and well-being of college students. However, future research endeavors should delve into developing and assessing more interventions specifically grounded in religious support for stress reduction. A comprehensive understanding of the efficacy of such interventions can offer valuable insights for mental health practitioners, educators, and religious leaders. This knowledge can be instrumental in tailoring targeted support programs that align with the unique needs of college students within the context of their respective faith traditions.

References

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APPENDIX A: MATERIALS

Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support

Instructions: We are interested in how you feel about the following statements.
Read each statement carefully. Indicate how you feel about each statement.

Circle the “1” if you Very Strongly Disagree

Circle the “2” if you Strongly Disagree

Circle the “3” if you Mildly Disagree

Circle the “4” if you are Neutral

Circle the “5” if you Mildly Agree

Circle the “6” if you Strongly Agree

Circle the “7” if you Very Strongly Agree

	Very Strongly Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mildly Disagree	Neutral	Mildly Agree	Strongly Agree	Very Strongly Agree
1. There is a special person who is around when I am in need.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. There is a special person with whom I can share joys and sorrows.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3. My family really tries to help me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4. I get the emotional help & support I need from my family.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5. I have a special person who is a real source of comfort to me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6. My friends really try to help me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7. I can count on my friends when things go wrong.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8. I can talk about my problems with my family.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
9. I have friends with whom I can share my joys and sorrows.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
10. There is a special person in my life who cares about my feelings.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
11. My family is willing to help me make decisions.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
12. I can talk about my problems with my friends.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

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RELIGIOUS SUPPORT QUESTIONNAIRE

We would like to learn about people's perceptions of support, related to their *life of faith*. Please rate the following items for the degree to which you feel each one applies to you in general. For these items, "**congregation**" refers to regular attendees of your current church. "**Church leaders**" refers to anyone in a leadership position within the congregation, including pastors, deacons, Sunday School teachers, etc. Please respond to items 1 to 21 using the following **5-point scale**:

1 = Strongly Disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Unsure 4 = Agree 5 = Strongly Agree

1. I can turn to others in my congregation for advice when I have problems.
2. If something went wrong, my church leaders would give me assistance.
3. God gives me the sense that I belong.
4. Others in my congregation care about my life and situation.
5. I have worth in the eyes of my church leaders.
6. I feel appreciated by God.
7. I feel close to others in my congregation.
8. I can turn to church leadership for advice when I have problems.
9. If something went wrong, God would give me assistance.
10. Others in my congregation give me the sense that I belong.
11. My church leaders care about my life and situation.
12. I have worth in the eyes of God.
13. I feel appreciated by others in my congregation.
14. I feel close to my church leaders.
15. I can turn to God for advice when I have problems.
16. If something went wrong, others in my congregation would give me assistance.
17. My church leaders give me the sense that I belong.
18. God cares about my life and situation.
19. I have worth in the eyes of others in my congregation.
20. I feel appreciated by my church leaders.
21. I feel close to God.

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APPENDIX B: PERMISSION TO USE SCALES

FROM: ZIMET, GREGORY D <GZIMET@IU.EDU>
SENT: TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 27, 2022 1:16 PM
TO: MAGEN BRANHAM <MAGEN.BRANHAM@GCU.EDU>
CC: ELIZABETH VALENTI <ELIZABETH.VALENTI@GCU.EDU>
SUBJECT: RE: PERMISSION TO USE THE MSPSS

Dear Dr. Branham and Dr. Valenti,

You have my permission to use the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) in your research. I have attached a copy of the scale (with scoring information on the 2nd page), a document listing several of the articles that have reported on the reliability and validity of the MSPSS, and a chapter that I wrote about the scale.

I hope your research goes well.

Best regards,

Greg Zimet

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On Sep 28, 2022, at 11:41 AM, Jeff Bjorck <jbjorck@fuller.edu> wrote:

Hello Magen,

Yes you do have permission. Will you be assessing a Christian sample? In that case the RSS is a great way to go. On the other hand, if you are assessing a sample including other faith groups, you will want to use the Multi-Faith Religious Support scale. You have my permission to use either one.

All the best,

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