

Religious Change, Mental Health, and Well-being of Orthodox Jewish Women during the Gap-Year in Israel

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Abstract

Jewish women in large numbers are opting to spend a year between high school and college engaging in religious studies at seminaries designed for English speakers in Israel. Students spending this gap-year of study in Israel often experience religious change and personal growth. The interaction between religious change and positive and negative psychological functioning is examined among a sample of Modern Orthodox female gap-year students. In this study, the psychological functioning explored included anxiety, depression, somatization, self-esteem and eating issues. The current findings support prior research documenting the correlation between religious change, decreased internalizing symptoms, and positive character development. The mental health benefits of religious coping, trust in God, and prayer are explored as well as related components of self-esteem, communal support, and spiritual struggle which help promote well-being. Overall evidence supports the correlations between religious change, decreased internalizing symptoms, and positive character development. Clinical implications and recommendations for educators are presented.

Main Research Questions:

Do self-reports of religiosity and well-being correlate with each other?

Do self-reported changes (from Time 1 to Time 2) in mental health difficulties (i.e. internalizing symptoms and eating issues) correlate with self-reported changes in religiosity and positive characteristics (i.e. character traits and self-esteem)?