

Spirituality and religiosity as predictors of mental health in Jewish adolescents

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between religious actions, spiritual beliefs, and adolescent mental health in Modern Orthodox Jewish high schools. Data were collected from 767 students across 14 Modern Orthodox high schools in the United States using the Jewish Beliefs, Actions, and Living Evaluation (JewBALE 3.0). After accounting for peer and family influence, overall spirituality and religiosity together explained an additional 6% of the variance in adolescent mental health. When examining specific beliefs and practices, these spiritual and religious subscales explained an additional 17% of the variance.

Among the religious actions, tefilla (prayer) and tzniut (modesty) emerged as the strongest positive predictors of mental health. Within the domain of spiritual beliefs, perceiving life as meaningful was the strongest positive predictor. Conversely, belief in Divine Providence in relation to world events was associated with poorer mental health outcomes, suggesting that certain theological concepts may contribute to psychological struggle if misunderstood or oversimplified.

Mediation analyses revealed that tefilla partially mediated the relationship between a sense of meaning in life and mental health, and vice versa: a meaningful life partially mediated the relationship between tefilla and mental health. These findings highlight the interconnection between spiritual meaning and religious practice in the Modern Orthodox Jewish context, suggesting that proper integration can promote adolescent mental well-being.

The study also points to specific educational applications, including the importance of explicitly teaching meaning, reframing modesty as an emotional and relational skill, and presenting prayer as a spiritually engaging practice that allows for student ownership. Additionally, it advocates for teaching theological concepts like Divine Providence with greater philosophical nuance and balancing emunah (faith) and bitachon (trust) with messages of personal agency and responsibility.

Overall, the study's findings suggest that spirituality and religiosity generally serve as protective factors for adolescent mental health. As mental health challenges continue to rise, Orthodox Jewish schools may benefit from thoughtfully contextualizing core religious practices and beliefs to support students' emotional and psychological well-being.

Breif statement: my question was whether or not spirituality and religiosity were predictors of mental health, and if so, what particular spiritual beliefs and religious actions most predicted positive mental health? I found that spirituality and religiosity were both predictors of mental health, and specifically teffilah and modest and finding life meaningful most positively predicted mental health.