

Predictors of Growth and Decline Following Spiritual Struggles

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Abstract

This study aimed to identify predictors of growth and decline outcomes following a spiritual struggle. Drawing from Pargament's (1997) theory of the religious orienting system (ROS), four potential predictor categories were identified: spiritual struggle characteristics, religious history, religious coping, and support. Variables from each predictor category were tested as individual predictors of outcome. For this study, college students ($N = 127$) who were experiencing spiritual struggles completed on-line surveys at two time points. Results of regression analyses generally supported hypotheses. Specifically, variables that strengthen the ROS were associated with growth, while variables that weaken the ROS were associated with decline. There was one surprising finding: spiritual struggle severity was related to both growth and decline outcomes. Study limitations and implications are discussed and suggestions for future research are identified.

Keywords: spiritual struggle, growth, decline, predictors, outcomes

Predictors of Growth and Decline Following Spiritual Struggles

Life events and transitions impact people not only psychologically, socially, and physically, but spiritually as well. They can elicit spiritual struggles -- tensions, conflict, and strain with respect to what the individual holds sacred (Exline, 2013; Exline & Rose, 2005; Pargament, Murray-Swank, Magyar, & Ano, 2005). Research demonstrates that spiritual struggles have mixed implications for individuals (refer to Exline, 2013; Exline & Rose, 2005; Pargament, Murray-Swank, et al., 2005 for comprehensive reviews). For example, two meta-analytic reviews demonstrate that spiritual struggles are associated with negative psychological outcomes, including poorer psychological adjustment (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005) and increased depression (Smith, McCullough, & Poll, 2003). In the spiritual domain, spiritual struggles have been linked to greater spiritual distress and poorer religious outcomes (e.g. Pargament, Zinnbauer, et al., 1998; Smith, Pargament, Brant, & Oliver, 2000). However, other studies have found spiritual struggles to be tied to positive outcomes, such as stress-related growth and religious growth (e.g. Koenig, Pargament, & Nielson, 1998; Pargament, Magyar, Benore, & Mahoney, 2005; Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 1998; Pargament, Koenig, & Perez, 2000). This study aims to investigate potential factors that predict the outcomes of spiritual struggles.

Predictors of Growth and Decline

The past few decades have revealed advancements in understanding the predictors of growth following a negative event (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2006). However, there has not been an investigation on factors predicting the divergent outcomes (i.e. growth and decline) following a spiritual struggle. Pargament's (1997) concept of the religious orienting system (ROS) offers a theoretical framework for this investigation, with the

research on predictors of posttraumatic growth adding empirical evidence when available. The ROS is a multidimensional system comprised of personal, social, and religious resources and experiences that individuals can mobilize during hard times. Individuals vary in the size and strength of their ROS. People with stronger orienting systems are better equipped to handle a larger range of critical life events, while those with weaker orienting systems are more vulnerable to the effects of life stressors. Natural developmental transitions, in addition to major life events, also have the potential to overtax or strain the capacity of even strong religious orienting systems. From Pargament's perspective, spiritual struggles arise from an intersection between life events and an individual's ROS (Pargament, Murray-Swank, et al., 2005). It follows, then, that whether spiritual struggles lead to growth or decline may depend on the character of the struggle and the characteristics of the individual's ROS, specifically an individual's religious history, religious coping, and support.

ROS: Struggle Characteristics

The nature of the spiritual struggle itself is likely an important determinant in how the struggle affects individuals. Two characteristics in particular, the severity of the struggle and the ability to find meaning from the struggle, are potential predictors of outcomes given that these characteristics reflect the amount that the ROS is impacted by the spiritual struggle.

Struggle severity. Events of greater severity may be more likely to shake an individual's worldview (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). This is a particularly relevant predictor given that spiritual struggles represent tension within the core aspects of what an

individual holds sacred. Therefore, spiritual struggles of greater severity will likely weaken the ROS and are predicted to be related to decline outcomes.

Finding meaning. Being able to find meaning from one's spiritual struggle likely reflects a stronger ROS as it contributes to the resilience of the spiritual framework. In research on negative life events, the ability to find meaning from a negative life event is often tied to growth outcomes (refer to Park, 2010 for a review). Therefore, being able to find meaning from a spiritual struggle is likely to lead to growth outcomes, whereas not being able to find meaning from a struggle may produce more decline.

ROS: Religious History

The ROS is affected by an individual's religious background. Two characteristics in particular, religious assimilation and perceived God attachment, represent core aspects of an individual's religious history and are likely factors that influence the strength of the ROS.

Religious assimilation. Religious assimilation refers to the degree to which an individual's religious beliefs are incorporated into his/her life. Greater religious assimilation reflects a more cohesive and unified ROS (Pargament, 1997). People who assimilate religion more completely into their lives may be better equipped to come to terms with their spiritual struggles, while a less assimilated ROS may not be as helpful to people when navigating through difficult times (Weinborn, 1999). Therefore, greater and lesser religious assimilation may be predictive of growth and decline, respectively.

God attachment. An individual's perceived attachment to the Divine has been found to be a unique predictor of affect and personality (Rowatt & Kirkpatrick, 2002). Current theory differentiates between two distinct attachment dimensions: avoidant

(versus secure) and anxious (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998; Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000; Rowatt & Kirkpatrick, 2002; Sanford, 1997). These attachment dimensions reflect a God that is unresponsive or inconsistent. As such, higher levels of these dimensions are signs of a more tenuous ROS and may predict decline following spiritual struggles.

ROS: Positive Religious Coping

The ROS is comprised of effective, as well as ineffective, coping resources (Pargament, 1997). Being able to mobilize effective, or positive, religious coping strategies is a sign of a stronger ROS. Therefore, greater use of positive religious coping strategies in response to spiritual struggles will likely promote growth.

ROS: Support

The ROS also includes the individual's system of support, religious as well as secular. A stronger ROS offers individuals more access to secular and religious support. These resources, in turn, should relate to higher levels of growth following a spiritual struggle.

Secular support. Theorists have asserted that support represents one factor that helps individuals grow after life crises (Schaefer & Moos, 1992). A recent meta-analysis provides evidence of this, demonstrating moderately strong links between support and posttraumatic growth (Prati & Pietrantonio, 2009). As such, support may be a factor promoting growth following a spiritual struggle.

Religious support. Religious support has also been identified as helpful to individuals undergoing stressful life experiences. For example, a study of families living in rural poverty areas found that religious support related to a variety of positive outcomes, even after controlling for general support (Willoughby, Cadigan, Burchinal, &

Skinner, 2008). Therefore, religious support may contribute unique variance to the prediction of growth.

Present Study

This study focused on individuals in the midst of a spiritual struggle and investigated potential factors predictive of psychological and spiritual growth and decline outcomes as a result of their spiritual struggle. We hypothesized that factors associated with a stronger ROS (i.e., finding meaning, greater religious assimilation, positive religious coping, secular support, and religious support) would be related to psychological and spiritual growth, whereas factors that weaken the ROS (greater struggle severity, as well as avoidant and anxious God attachment dimensions) would be related to decline.

Methods

Procedure

In order to identify individuals experiencing intrapersonal and divine spiritual struggles, students enrolled in introductory psychology classes at a Midwestern university completed an in-class screening questionnaire ($n = 332$). The screening questionnaire consisted of one item assessing for intrapersonal spiritual struggles, one item assessing for divine spiritual struggles, and a modified version of the Negative Religious Coping scale (NRCOPE, Pargament et al., 2000). Intrapsychic struggles were assessed with the following item: “Currently, to what extent are you experiencing personal conflict regarding your religious beliefs, doubts about religion, or questions about God.” Divine spiritual struggles were assessed with the following item: “Currently, to what extent are you experiencing any tension in your relationship with God, such as confusion, anxiety,

loneliness, frustration, anger, abandonment, or guilt.” Students responded to these questions on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1, *not at all*, to 5, *extremely*. The modified NRCOPE consisted of the Spiritual Dissatisfaction subscale, the Punishing God Appraisals subscales, and 12 additional items to assess for spiritual struggles more thoroughly. This scale was used to substantiate participant responses to the single item indices of spiritual struggles.

Eligibility for the current study was determined by an endorsement of 2 (*a little bit*) or greater on either single item, as well as an endorsement of 2 (*a little bit*) on at least one item of the modified NRCOPE. Eligible individuals were recruited to participate in this study, which consisted of two on-line surveys (Time 1 and Time 2) separated by four to six weeks. Participation was compensated by extra-credit in the psychology class.

Participants

Sixty-nine percent ($n = 229$) of the students who completed the screening questionnaire were eligible for this study. Of these students, 142 completed the Time (T1) survey (62% of screening sample), with 127 completing the Time 2 (T2) survey. Participants who did not complete both time points were excluded from the analyses using a listwise deletion approach. Individuals excluded from analyses did not differ from study participants with one exception: religious affiliation. More individuals who identified as being Catholic did not complete the T2 survey.

The final sample consisted of 127 participants. The majority of participants were female (71.7%), with an average age of 19 years. Participants endorsed between *a little bit* and *moderate* degree of struggle on average (intrapersonal struggle $M = 2.72$; divine struggle $M = 2.49$).

Measures

At T1, participants completed questionnaires assessing all predictor variables, with the exception of finding meaning, and one outcome measure (global distress). At T2, participants completed questionnaires assessing the status of the spiritual struggle, the ability to find meaning from the struggle, and the outcome measures. Global distress was assessed at both T1 and T2 in order to control for T1 levels of distress in regression analyses. Descriptive information for the predictor and outcome measures is reported in Table 1.

Predictor categories.

Struggle characteristics. Struggle severity was assessed by the 15-item Impact of Event Scale (IES; Horowitz, Wilner, & Alvarez, 1979). Participants rated the frequency of intrusive or avoidant thoughts related to spiritual struggles using a 4-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating greater spiritual struggle severity. The directions for this scale were modified to specifically assess thoughts related to the spiritual struggle.

A single item was used to assess the extent participants found meaning from their spiritual struggles using a 5-point Likert scale, with greater scores representing higher levels of meaning found.

Religious history. The 5-item Compartmentalized Religion Scale (Weinborn, 1999) measured religious assimilation. Participants reported the degree to which they agreed with items such as “I take my religion home with me after I leave church,” on a 5-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating greater religious assimilation.

The God Attachment scale (Rowatt & Kirkpatrick, 2002) was utilized to assess avoidant (opposed to secure) and anxious attachment to God. The avoidant attachment

subscale consisted of six items. Two of the three items from the anxious attachment subscale were utilized to improve internal consistency (with Cronbach's α increasing from .58 to .73). Participants responded *yes* or *no* to items reflective of the attachment dimensions. Higher scores are indicative of greater endorsement of that specific attachment style.

Positive religious coping. Four subscales (29 items) from the Positive Religious Coping Scale (Benevolent Religious Reappraisal, Collaborative Religious Coping, Religious Purification, and Spiritual Connection) were selected to assess the use of effective religious coping strategies (PRCOPE; Pargament et al., 2000). Analyses were conducted with the total scale score as the predictor variable. Higher scores reflect greater utilization of positive religious coping strategies.

Support. Perceived secular support was assessed using the 12-item Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS; Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988). The MSPSS measures perceptions of the adequacy of social support using a 5-point Likert scale, with higher scores reflecting greater perceived support.

The 21-item Religious Support Scale (Fiala, Bjorck, & Gorusch, 2002) assessed religious support on a 5-point Likert scale. Participants were asked how much they find support from religious sources, with higher scores reflecting greater religious support.

Outcome measures.

Forced choice growth/decline outcomes. For descriptive purposes, participants were asked to make a summary judgment about the outcome of their spiritual struggle. Specifically, participants responded to the question, "As a result of my spiritual struggle,

I have,” with the following response choices: *grown*, *declined*, *both grown and declined*, or *neither grown nor declined*.

Secular growth. Secular growth following the spiritual struggle was assessed using the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Participants rated how much positive change they had experienced as a result of their spiritual struggle on a 6-point Likert scale, with higher scores representing increased growth. The three items that assessed spiritual change were excluded as spiritual outcomes were assessed using separate measures. The original instructions from the PTGI were modified to substitute the phrase “my spiritual struggle” instead of “crisis.”

Spiritual growth. Five items assessed spiritual growth following the spiritual struggle. Participants were asked to rate how much they agreed with statements such as “Spiritually, I am like a new person” and “Spirituality has become more important to me” on a 7-point Likert scale, with higher scores reflective of greater spiritual growth.

Struggle resolution. A single item was used to assess struggle resolution. Participants responded to the question, “I feel that my spiritual struggle ...” with the following responses: *became worse* (1), *not changed* (2), *been partially resolved* (3), and *completely resolved* (4).

Global distress. Psychological distress was assessed using the Depression, Anxiety, and Hostility subscales from the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI; Derogatis & Spencer, 1975). Participants rated the distress associated with each of the 17-items using a 5-point Likert scale, with greater scores reflective of more distress. An aggregate score of these three subscales was used as an indicator of overall psychological distress.

Spiritual decline. Spiritual decline was assessed using five items, such as “I no longer consider myself a spiritual person” and “My experience of God has changed in a negative way.” Participants responded to these items using a 7-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating greater spiritual decline.

Results

Descriptive Analyses

At follow-up, about half of the participants reported that their struggles were at least partially resolved (53.5%, $n = 68$), with 3% ($n = 4$) of participants reporting complete resolution of their spiritual struggle. Forty percent ($n = 52$) reported no change in their struggle. Only three participants (2.4%) reported an intensification of their struggle. With respect to outcomes, nearly half of the sample indicated growing from their struggle (48.8%) and roughly a quarter (26.8%) reported both growth and decline. Three percent of participants reported experiencing solely decline, with the remainder of the sample (21.3%) reporting neither growth nor decline. Participants' scores on the BSI were significantly lower at follow-up than at T1 ($t(126) = 5.0, p < .001$), indicating declines in level of psychological distress overall.

Potential Confounds

Potential relationships between demographic variables (i.e. gender, religion, age) and criterion measures were identified using ANOVAs and correlations (Table 2). Demographic variables were not related to the outcome measures; therefore, they were not used as controls in the regression analyses. Intercorrelations among the predictor variables were calculated to identify potential multicollinearity (i.e. correlations greater

than $r > .80$, as described in Licht, 1996). None of the predictor variables were correlated at or above this level (see Table 3).

Multiple Regression Analyses

Four separate regression equations were constructed for each criterion measure, with one equation for each predictor category (i.e. struggle characteristics, religious history, support, and religious coping).

A 2-step hierarchical regression equation was constructed for BSI: T1 BSI levels were entered into the first step and the individual predictors were entered into the second step. The remaining regression equations did not control for T1 because change was inherent in the content of the measures themselves (i.e. PTGI, Spiritual Growth, and Spiritual Decline) or because baseline levels of the variable could not be assessed (i.e. struggle resolution). Table 4 summarizes findings from regression analyses.

Predictors of posttraumatic growth. Focusing on the findings from each predictor category, struggle characteristics and positive religious coping categories predicted posttraumatic growth. Struggle characteristics accounted for 17% of variance in posttraumatic growth ($p < .001$), with both meaning and struggle severity emerging as significant individual predictors of increased growth ($\beta = .34, p < .001$ and $\beta = .24, p < .01$, respectively). In addition, religious coping was a significant predictor of increased posttraumatic growth, accounting for 17% of the variance in this criterion measure ($p < .05$; $\beta = .18, p < .05$).

Predictors of spiritual growth. Regression equations for each predictor category were significant for this criterion. Specifically, struggle characteristics predicted 26% of

the variance in spiritual growth ($p < .001$), with struggle severity related to decreased spiritual growth ($\beta = -.16, p < .001$) and meaning related to increased spiritual growth ($\beta = .50, p < .05$). The category of religious history predicted 26% of the unique variance in spiritual growth ($p < .001$), with avoidant attachment related to decreased spiritual growth ($\beta = -.37, p < .001$) and religious assimilation related to increased spiritual growth ($\beta = .29, p < .05$). The support category significantly predicted 14% of the variance in spiritual growth ($p < .001$), with religious support emerging as a significant predictor of increased spiritual growth ($\beta = .39, p < .001$). Lastly, religious coping predicted increased spiritual growth, accounting for 16% of the unique variance for this criterion measure ($p < .001, \beta = .41, p < .001$).

Predictors of resolution. Each category significantly predicted struggle resolution. The struggle characteristics category accounted for 11% of the variance in resolution ($p < .001$), with meaning predicting increased struggle resolution ($\beta = .36, p < .001$). The category of religious history accounted for 9% of the variance in resolution ($p < .01$), with religious assimilation predicting increased struggle resolution ($\beta = .28, p < .01$). The support category was also a significant predictor of resolution ($R^2 = .07, p < .01$), with religious support emerging as the significant predictor of increased struggle resolution ($\beta = .29, p < .01$). Lastly, religious coping accounted for 11% of unique

variance in resolution, predicting greater resolution of the spiritual struggle ($p < .01$; $\beta = .34$; $p < .001$).

Predictors of global distress. Two-step hierarchical regression equations were constructed for global distress. The first step, T1 global distress, accounted for 55% of variance in T2 distress ($p < .001$). Separate regression equations were conducted with variables from each category entered into the second step. The second step was not significant for any predictor category (for struggle characteristics, $R^2_{\text{change}} = .001$, $p = .51$; for religious history, $R^2_{\text{change}} = .01$, $p = .27$; for support, $R^2_{\text{change}} = .02$, $p = .81$; for positive religious coping, $R^2_{\text{change}} = .00$, $p = .83$).

Predictors of spiritual decline. All four categories were predictive of spiritual decline. The regression equation for the struggle characteristics category accounted for 9% of unique variance in spiritual decline ($p < .001$), with struggle severity predicting greater spiritual decline ($\beta = .21$, $p < .05$), while meaning predicted less spiritual decline ($\beta = -.26$, $p < .01$). Twenty-eight percent of the variance in spiritual decline was predicted by the category of religious history ($p < .001$). Avoidant attachment style predicted greater spiritual decline ($\beta = .40$, $p < .001$) and religious assimilation predicted less spiritual decline ($\beta = -.27$, $p < .01$). The category of support predicted 13% of variance in spiritual decline ($p < .001$), with religious support emerging as a significant

predictor of less spiritual decline ($\beta = -.38, p < .001$). Religious coping accounted for 16% of unique variance in spiritual decline ($p < .001$), relating to less spiritual decline ($\beta = -.40, p < .001$).

Discussion

This study attempted to identify factors predictive of spiritual struggle outcomes, with the concept of the religious orientation system (Pargament, 1997) as a theoretical framework. The results of this study generally supported our hypotheses that variables associated with a stronger ROS would be predictive of growth, while variables associated with a weaker ROS would be predictive of decline, with a few notable exceptions.

First, this study sheds light on spiritual struggles in general. Consistent with previous literature, spiritual struggles were found to be a relatively common experience, with approximately 69% of the screening sample experiencing at least *a little bit* of spiritual struggle. This figure is higher than that reported in another study of undergraduate students (Johnson & Hayes, 2003), which found 44% of college students experiencing “distress” caused by “spiritual/religious” concerns. The higher prevalence of spiritual struggles in the current study likely reflects the specificity of the assessment and the aims of our study. Specifically, the screening questionnaire was developed to capture any, even minimal, experiences of spiritual struggles.

This study provides information about the outcomes of spiritual struggles as well. The forced choice categorization revealed that spiritual struggles influenced most participants in some way (growth, decline, or both), with only 20% of participants reporting that their spiritual struggle did not affect them. This demonstrates that spiritual

struggles have significant implications for individuals, which is consistent with previous literature (Exline, 2013; Exline & Rose, 2005; Pargament, Murray-Swank, et al., 2005).

To date, studies have not investigated the course of spiritual struggles. Looking at the “struggle resolution” outcome in detail provides preliminary information about the trajectory of spiritual struggles, albeit over a short time period (four to six weeks). At follow-up, most participants experienced the same level (40%) or only partial resolution (53.5%) of their spiritual struggle. Extrapolating from this, it seems that individuals may grapple with their spiritual struggle for some time. On the positive side, spiritual struggles rarely became more severe, with only 3% of participants reporting worse struggle at T2. Although this study investigated a relatively short time period (four to six weeks), the potential for individuals to continue to experience their spiritual struggles is noteworthy given the research findings demonstrating the detrimental impact of chronic spiritual struggles for physical health outcomes (e.g. Pargament, Koenig, Tarakeshwar, & Hahn, 2001; Trevino et al., 2010).

Turning to the main study questions, our findings support the hypotheses and suggest that factors that strengthen the ROS are predictive of growth. Specifically, finding meaning from the struggle, religious assimilation, religious support, and positive religious coping were each tied to indices of growth. Perhaps more importantly, each of these variables was significantly predictive of spiritual struggle resolution, with finding meaning and positive religious coping emerging as the strongest predictors. This finding is consistent with existing literature on negative life events. For example, Janoff-Bulman (1992) theorized that being able to find meaning from a negative event helps restore an individual’s assumption that the world is a meaningful place, enabling them to grow as a

result of the event. Similarly, the role of positive religious coping on bolstering positive outcomes has been demonstrated in numerous studies (refer to Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005 for a meta-analytic review). This is the first study to demonstrate the role of these variables in promoting struggle resolution. Since spiritual struggles arise when the ROS is overburdened or overtaxed (Pargament, Murray-Swank, et al., 2005), the fact that meaning and positive religious coping predict struggle resolution suggests that these are two critical elements of a strong ROS.

The converse was found to be true as well: Factors that weaken the ROS were related to declines, with struggle severity and avoidant attachment uniquely predicting poorer spiritual outcomes (both decreased spiritual growth and increased spiritual decline). Interestingly, struggle severity was related to both growth and decline outcomes, which was not predicted. Looking closer at the regression analyses for struggle severity sheds some light on these findings. Specifically, struggle severity was a significant predictor of *spiritual* decline and *secular* growth. It appears that spiritual struggles may have different implications for the spiritual and secular domains. Perhaps, because struggles are most proximal to the spiritual dimension, they have greater negative implications for spiritual outcomes. There is some evidence to support this notion. Fontana and Rosenheck (1998) found an inverted “U” relationship between the severity of negative events and growth, with negative events of moderate severity related to increased growth. Extrapolating from their study, it is possible that the same spiritual struggle may be articulated as more severe within the spiritual realm, explaining the relationship with spiritual decline, and less severe within the secular realm, explaining the relationship with secular growth.

There were other unexpected findings as well. First, none of the variables predicted secular decline. This is likely a reflection of the assessment measure selected: The fact that baseline level of global distress accounted for 55% of variance in Time 2 suggests that the assessment measure used was not sensitive to changes over time. Second, in our study, social support was not predictive of any outcome measures, which is inconsistent with previous literature. For example, in the meta-analysis by Prati and Pietrantonio (2009), social support was associated with secular growth (i.e., post-traumatic growth). The inconsistency between our study and their meta-analysis is likely related to the types of spiritual struggles that we investigated. Specifically, our study focused on internal spiritual struggles (i.e., intrapsychic and divine spiritual struggles) and secular social support may not have been as relevant to internal experiences. Studies that investigate interpersonal spiritual struggles may find social support to be more relevant. This idea, that the relationship between support and growth may be mediated by the match between the type of support and the type of stressor, was identified as a future direction for investigation by Prati and Pietrantonio.

Limitations and Implications

There are several limitations for the current study. First, this study was restricted with respect to the sample. Specifically, we investigated a college student sample, which is a relatively well-educated and homogenous sample. Moreover, there were no known triggers or traumatic events that precipitated the participants' spiritual struggles. Additional studies are needed to determine the generalizability of these results across diverse samples (e.g., variety of age groups, education levels, and religious affiliations) and for struggles triggered by specific events. In addition, a listwise deletion approach

was used in statistical analysis, in which participants who did not complete both timepoints were removed from the analysis, which introduces the potential for bias (Graham, 2009). This is noteworthy given that there was a higher attrition for participants who identified as Roman Catholic. Future studies should investigate potential differences in the nature of spiritual struggles experienced by individuals identifying with the Catholic faith that may explain for the higher attrition rate. Second, this study relied on self-report measures and used several non-validated scales that were developed for this investigation. The reliance on self-report introduces the possibility that participants may have attempted to present themselves in a socially desirable manner. However, the fact that participants completed the survey anonymously, on-line, and endorsed positive and negative outcomes suggests that participants were answering honestly. Moreover, given that the spiritual struggles investigated in this study reflect internal turmoil, participants' perceptions are likely more relevant than observer reports. Future studies could incorporate physiological data to buttress participants' self-reported experiences.

In spite of these limitations, this study has important empirical as well as practical implications. Given the detrimental impact of chronic spiritual struggles on health-outcomes, future studies should focus on determining whether the trajectory of spiritual struggles can be altered. Although the follow-up time period for this study was less than two months, the fact that few participants felt that their spiritual struggle had resolved demonstrates the need for interventions addressing spiritual struggles. Most relevant for future interventions is the finding that positive religious coping strategies and finding meaning from the struggle account for approximately 20% of variance in struggle

resolution. Given this, interventions should consider promoting the use of positive religious coping strategies and helping individuals in their search to find meaning from their struggles. Recently, interventions aimed at modifying the course of spiritual struggles have been developed. *Winding Road*, a nine-week spiritually integrated group intervention, is one such intervention (Gear et al., 2008). Results from the pilot intervention ($n = 12$) demonstrated that participants were able to find meaning from their struggle and achieve struggle resolution, which suggests that the trajectory of spiritual struggles is modifiable.

Interventions focused on strengthening the religious orientation system would also be helpful to foster positive outcomes following a spiritual struggle, and potentially to prevent spiritual struggles from occurring in the first place. In this vein, the U.S. Army has recognized spirituality to be one of the four dimensions required for soldier preparation as part of the “Comprehensive Soldier Fitness” program (U.S. Army, 2011). The spiritual fitness dimension of this program is designed to equip soldiers to anticipate and deal effectively with the spiritual struggles that may arise in their military experience (Pargament & Sweeney, 2011). Although efficacy studies need to be conducted on the Comprehensive Soldier Fitness program, this program illustrates the potential value of efforts to strengthen the religious orientation system and the spiritual resilience of people who are about to face traumas, stressors, and other life challenges.

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Table 1

Descriptive Information and Internal Consistencies for Time 1 (T1) and Time 2 (T2) Measures

	Potential	T1			T2		
	Range	Actual	M (SD)	α	Actual	M	α
		Range			Range	(SD)	
Predictor Measures							
Struggle Severity	15 – 60	15 – 52	32.83 (9.33)	.88			
Meaning	1 – 4				1 – 4	2.18 (0.74)	--
Religious Assimilation	6 – 24	6 – 24	14.54 (4.23)	.80			
God Attachment							
Avoidant	2 – 12	6 - 12	8.22 (2.18)	.85			
Anxious	2 – 4	2 – 4	3.08 (0.88)	.73			
PRC	35 – 105	30 – 120	70.27 (18.44)	.95			
Social Support	12 – 60	23 – 60	47.86 (8.35)	.90			
Religious Support	12 – 60	27 - 105	67.95 (15.16)	.94			
Outcome Measures							
Secular Growth	19 – 114				19 – 114	61.88 (20.49)	.95
Spiritual Growth	5 – 35				5 – 35	20.64 (6.70)	.90
Struggle Resolution	1 – 4				1 – 4	2.57 (0.59)	
Global Distress	17 – 85	17 – 67	34.61 (14.48)	.94	17 – 66	30.27 (12.40)	.93
Spiritual Decline	5 – 35				5 – 33	16.80 (7.46)	.89

Table 2

Potential Relationships between Demographic Variables and Outcome Measures

Outcome Variables	ANOVA		Regression
	Gender ^a	Religious Affiliation ^b	Age
Posttraumatic Growth	0.03, $p = .86$	0.97, $p = .46$	-.07, $p = .94$
Resolution	0.05, $p = .82$	0.31, $p = .95$	-.06, $p = .54$
Spiritual Growth	0.01, $p = .92$	.67, $p = .70$	-.01, $p = .89$
Global Distress-Time 2	0.002, $p = .96$	.49, $p = .84$	.11, $p = .24$
Spiritual Decline	2.66, $p = .10$	1.40, $p = .21$	.14, $p = .12$

Note. ^adf = 1, 125; ^b df = 7, 117. Participants chose from eight potential responses for religious affiliations: *Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Agnostic, Atheist, Other*, and *None*.

Table 3

Intercorrelations between Predictor Variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Struggle Severity	—	.06	.04	-.05	.19*	.12	-.24**	.05
2. Meaning		—	.22	-.06	.04	.14	.15	.22*
3. Religious Assimilation			—	.38	.15	.55	.09	.60
4. Avoidant God Attachment				—	.12	-.44***	-.05	.45***
5. Anxious God Attachment					—	.04	-.20*	-.14
6. Positive Religious Coping						—	.04	.59***
7. Social Support							—	.12
8. Religious Support								—

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Table 4

Separate Regression Equations for Each Predictor Category and Each Outcome Variable^a

Predictor Category <i>Variables</i>	Outcome Variables			
	Secular Growth	Spiritual Growth	Resolution	Spiritual Decline
Struggle Characteristics	$R^2 = .17^{***}$	$R^2 = .26^{***}$	$R^2 = .11^{***}$	$R^2 = .09^{***}$
<i>Struggle Severity</i>	$\beta = .34^{***}$	$\beta = -.16^{***}$	$\beta = -.006$	$\beta = .21^*$
<i>Meaning</i>	$\beta = .24^{**}$	$\beta = .50^*$	$\beta = .36^{***}$	$\beta = -.26^{**}$
Religious History	$R^2 = -.001$	$R^2 = .26^{***}$	$R^2 = .09^{**}$	$R^2 = .28^{***}$
<i>Avoidant Attachment</i>	$\beta = -.03$	$\beta = -.37^{***}$	$\beta = -.14$	$\beta = .40^{***}$
<i>Anxious Attachment</i>	$\beta = .13$	$\beta = .10$	$\beta = .14$	$\beta = -.07$
<i>Religious Assimilation</i>	$\beta = .11$	$\beta = .29^*$	$\beta = .28^{**}$	$\beta = -.27^{**}$
Support	$R^2 = -.007$	$R^2 = .14^{***}$	$R^2 = .07^{**}$	$R^2 = .13^{***}$
<i>Secular Support</i>	$\beta = .07$	$\beta = -.02$	$\beta = .004$	$\beta = -.02$
<i>Religious Support</i>	$\beta = .06$	$\beta = .39^{***}$	$\beta = .29^{**}$	$\beta = -.38^{***}$
Positive Religious Coping	$R^2 = .17^*$	$R^2 = .16^{***}$	$R^2 = .11^{**}$	$R^2 = .16^{***}$
	$\beta = .18^*$	$\beta = .41^{***}$	$\beta = .34^{***}$	$\beta = -.40^{***}$

Note. ^aGlobal Distress was excluded as there were no significant regression analyses* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$