

Anxiety and Depression among Orthodox Jews: Links to Religious Core Beliefs and Practices

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Background

According to cognitive theory, core beliefs about oneself, others and the world influence situation-specific automatic thoughts which, in turn, influence emotions (e.g., Beck, 1995). For religious individuals, core beliefs may take on specific religious themes that are congruent with ethnic and cultural values. Additionally, common religious practices may too be linked to emotions. The culture of Orthodox Judaism is one which deeply values religious principles and behaviors. It is therefore possible that religious core beliefs and practices may be particularly significant for its members. This study examined the degree to which trust in God (core religious beliefs about God's benevolence) and common religious practices predicted levels of worry, anxiety and depression among Orthodox Jews.

Participants & Procedure

One hundred and forty one Orthodox individuals ($n=13$ Hassidic; $n=37$ Yeshiva Orthodox; and $n=91$ Modern Orthodox) participated in an internet based survey. Participants ranged in age from 18-67 years (mean age = 37.6, $SD = 12.7$). Females comprised 50.4% of the sample. The majority of participants were from the USA ($n=63$) and Canada ($n=49$) but a sizable number were from Israel ($n=23$) and elsewhere ($n=6$).

Measures

Demographics. Single items assessed for age, gender, level of education, income, and current employment.

Worry was assessed by the 16-item Penn State Worry Questionnaire (Meyer, Miller, Metzger & Borkovec, 1990).

Anxiety was measured by the 20-item trait subscale of the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (*STAI-T*; Spielberger, Gorsuch & Lushene, 1970).

Depression was measured by the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (*CES-D*; Radloff, 1977).

Religious Core Beliefs. We created a 12-item measure to assess for the belief that God is benevolent (e.g., "God is compassionate towards human suffering") including four reverse-scored items (e.g., "Sometimes God is unkind to me for no reason.") Reliability of this measure in the sample was satisfactory ($\alpha = .76$)

Religious Practices. We created a 5-item measure of general religious practices assessing for perceived religiousness, recent changes in religious activity, and frequency of prayer, synagogue attendance, and religious study. Reliability of this measure in the sample was satisfactory ($\alpha = .72$)

Results

None of the demographic variables (age, gender, education, income or current employment) were significantly tied to worry, anxiety or depression in the sample. As such, these variables were not controlled for in subsequent analyses. Three regression analyses were conducted on worry, anxiety and depression, respectively, with religious core beliefs and practices entered as simultaneous predictors. Standardized beta weights for predictors as well as indices of variance accounted for are presented below.

Regression – Religious Beliefs & Practices as Predictors of Worry, Anxiety and Depression

Variable	Worry	Anxiety	Depression
Beliefs	$\beta = -.10$	$\beta = -.29^{**}$	$\beta = -.33^{***}$
Practices	$\beta = -.28^{**}$	$\beta = -.17^{\S}$	$\beta = -.20^*$
R ²	.11 ^{***}	.15 ^{***}	.21 ^{***}
F for ΔR	7.37	10.32	15.40

Notes: $\S p < .10$, $*p < .05$; $**p < .01$, $***p < .001$.

Discussion

In this study, religious core beliefs and practices were associated with lower levels of worry, anxiety and depression among Orthodox Jews, accounting for 11-21% of the variance in these variables. This suggests that religiousness serves as a significant protective factor against distress in the Orthodox Jewish community. The findings of this study underscore the importance of conducting a thorough clinical assessment of religious factors across cognitive and behavioral domains, and practicing psychotherapy in a manner that is respectful of religious beliefs and practices when working with Orthodox Jewish individuals.

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