The Impact of Religion on Meaning and Mental Health in Young Adults

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Abstract

Mental illness is an increasing problem in today's society especially among young adults. Young adults are in the stage of their lives where existential questioning is a major concern. Existential questioning includes the meaning of life, life after death, the presence of a God and other major concerns that do not have one true, clear answer. Meaning-making and purpose in life is a major contributing factor to the mental wellness of an individual. Religion, as a meaning making entity, can aid in the treatment of mental illness and avoidance of developing the illnesses to some degree. Religion also provides treatment techniques and community support for young adults who are experiencing existential questioning. Religion has an overall positive effect on meaning making and on mental wellbeing. Young adults who encounter mental instability due to a lack of meaning and purpose often find solace in religion.

Keywords: Mental Health, Young Adults, Religion, Logotherapy, Meaning, Purpose, Tikun Olam, Brokenness

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Introduction

Mental Health and Meaning

Victor Frankl is very well known for his book, *Man's Search for Meaning,* about his experiences in concentration camps during World War II. However, the greater population is likely unaware that this book is also the basis for Frankl's logotherapy. Logotherapy focuses on the idea that life is to find meaning. The broader idea of meaning and a person's physical and mental wellness are more correlated than known before (Schulenberg et al. 2008). Meaning can be "associated with a range of outcomes, such as stable mood and less psychological distress, more proactive and sociable behavior, and favorable attitudes toward life and the self" (Schulenberg et al. 2008 p.448). Meaning and having a purpose in life can correlate to ideas of sociability as well as be a positive incentive for health and wellness. Values and purpose are all part of the more general sense of meaning and these ideas contribute to an individual's overall mental and physical health. Frankl believed that,

> the search for meaning encompasses four basic needs. The first is the need to have a sense of purpose in life, to believe that one's life has purpose. The second is the need for a sense of efficacy, to believe that one is able to meet challenges and to achieve goals. The third is self-worth, to believe that one is a worthy person with desirable characteristics. The fourth is the need for value, to believe that one's actions are good and justified. (Galek et al. 2015 p. 1)

Meaning behind the processes of life and the purpose of one's actions are significant to the mental health and well being of individuals in any circumstance.

Religion and Meaning Making

Religion can be a source for finding answers to existential questions and meaning in life. In many religious traditions, the answers can be found to questions like: is there a God? and what is my purpose on earth? and what happens after death? While it is impossible to say that any religion has the true answer to these questions, religion can be evaluated from a psychological lense to determine the purpose of religion itself. The primary purpose of religion is to answer these existential questions that have no rational explanation besides what can only be explained by the supernatural (Van Tongeren et al. 2013). In addition Van Tongeren, Hook, and Davis (2013) studied 423 undergraduate students to determine if religion provides meaning in life and specific beliefs that cause the reasoning. They found that defensive religion, which is associated with dogmatic, simplistic, exclusivity, correlated with greater meaning in life. These results were found as a consequence of a higher belief in literal immortality and higher levels of religious commitment (Van Tongeren et al. 2013).

Meaning Making and Young Adults

The stages of life each have many milestones that are important for that stage. For instance babies learn to walk and talk, children learn abstract concepts, teenagers think they have life figured out, and young adults have existential crises. While this may sound dramatic, young adults are often sent away from home for the first time to attend college or start to look for jobs and try to move out of their parents' home to live on their own. This time is a period of 'finding oneself' and defining what a person may want to do and be and what they believe, independently of the influence of their parents. Along with this idea of becoming an individual comes existential questioning. Who am I? What is my purpose on earth? Is there a God? These are all questions that a young adult may ask themselves whether intentionally or not. It may be more realistic to consider other questions a young adult may reflect upon including: what job do I want? Will I be able to

get that job after graduating? What kind of people do I want to surround myself with? Should I really go to church/synagogue/temple this week?

Patrick Manning, a Seton Hall University professor, highlights the need for college and university professors to understand the factors behind "their students' psychological distress" (Manning 2017). Manning explains that individuals without meaning and purpose in life are less capable to experience life's challenges. He also suggests that a reason for the growing mental crisis is that many "young people have rejected traditional religious frameworks" (Manning 2017). These religious frameworks often serve as a template for meaning making and a purpose in life. With a lack of religiosity, young adults may have trouble creating meaning in their lives and find a purpose.

Why it is Important

Mental illness can affect an individual's ability to do almost anything and everything. Severe depression can lead to an individual not being able to get out of bed and go to work. Anxiety can lead to avoidance of important tasks or places such as the doctor's office, certain outings with friends, relationships, and anxiety can even affect a person in their workplace. Mental illness is an important topic because it can affect anyone at almost anytime. It is important to look at religion and psychology when discussing the topic of mental health as religion affects large areas of a person's life including their behavior, morals, and decision making processes. Young adults, specifically those who are attending college or universities are more at risk to develop mental illness due to a variety of variables including social pressure, stress from school work, the pressure to do many different activities, and existential questioning. One study states that "college and university students experience stressors that may contribute to the development of problems

ranging from concentration difficulty, fatigue, and anxiety to suicidality, eating disorders, and other psychiatric illnesses" (Burris et al. 2009).

Personal perception is one of the main influences contributing to whether or not religion has a positive or detrimental effect with regards to mental health as a young adult is developing and going through the meaning-making stage in life. Religion affects young adults in both a positive and negative way depending on one's relationships with religion, organized or personal spirituality. The positive association leads to the positive effects of including religion in the treatment of mental illness. The negative association leads to the detrimental effect of including religion in the treatment of mental illness. Young adults are especially affected by mental illnesses due to existential questioning and the age of onset of mental illnesses. For those young adult individuals who are already associated with religion and spirituality, religion can have a positive effect on mental illness because of its properties of meaning-making and community support, especially during a time of existential questioning and increased stressors.

Religion is Helpful

Developing Meaning

One role religion has played throughout history is the meaning it can bring to a person's life. Religion can be a helpful tool to answer existential questions such as, "Why are we here?" and "What is the purpose of life?" Existential questioning is a significant aspect of the young adult's transition from adolescence to adulthood. Young adults are tasked with the challenge of discovering who they are as an individual without the potentially overbearing influence of their parents. This includes defining their own belief system, who they choose to interact with, and what type of career they are looking to pursue.

Evidence shows that frequency of church attended among adolescents and young adults is "positively related to believing that one has a purpose in life" (Galek et al. 2015 p. 2). In the study *Religion, Meaning and Purpose, and Mental Health* mention of two additional studies helps to confirm that belief in God correlates to finding meaning and purpose in life. This study included 1,453 participants that completed a mailed survey questionnaire to examine the involvement of religion on the idea that life lacks meaning and its relation to psychiatric symptoms. Results of the study confirm that religiosity has a positive, and almost curative, relation with mental illness (Galek et al. 2015). In addition, the study results report that the lack of meaning and purpose causes a detrimental effect on mental health (Galek et al. 2015). In another study done in China to relate anxiety, religiosity, meaning of life and mental health, results showed that meaning of life negatively correlated with anxiety and positively correlated with mental wellness (Shiah et al. 2015). Shiah and colleagues concluded that "meaning of life was found to partially mediate the relation between anxiety and mental health" (Shiah et al. 2015 p. 42). Religion is beneficial to a positive mental health because it has the ability to give answers to the meaning of life and a personal purpose.

Community

One Igbo and Yoruba proverb that has permeated many cultures is the idea that 'It takes a village to raise a child.' This idea translates to the idea that religious groups can act as that 'village' to help support and instill values in the young people of the community. Religions are often not only a deeply personal experience, but also a communal experience. Organized religions create a support group for fellow believers as religious communities such as church or synagogue congregations are made up of like-minded individuals who share a common drive for knowledge. The community experience also often includes religious book study, potluck meals to bond over,

women's guilds that organize events, and youth and young adult groups. Within the community of believers, there is opportunity to socialize and share ideas within more specialized groups based on age or gender.

Community not only includes one's outside interactions, but internal family relations as well. Families, especially parents, have the strongest influence on their child's religious beliefs (Goodman and Dyer 2019). When the child has similar religious views, or lack of religious views, as their parents, this follows in accordance with the social learning theory whereas individuals learn from experiencing and observing their environment, which in this case is the environment of the family.

A study done on parent's religious attendance and how the environment affected children showed that while standardized test performance was negatively related to parental religiosity, the student's social competence and psychological adjustment was positively correlated to parental religiosity (Bartkowski et al. 2008). Researchers emphasized the idea that child-rearing takes a village and that the religious community is a large part in social interactions (Bartkowski et al. 2008). When a parent has significant religious attendance, the child is highly likely to follow with similar beliefs and religious attendance patterns. Young adults who attend religious services and participate within the organization, are more likely to have the community of support than individuals who do not already have this built in support system.

Treatment Plans

Mental illnesses are treated in several ways and are most successful using a multidisciplinary approach. Clinicians are mandated to be versed in multicultural topics, including religion, and must have the ability to incorporate religion into treatment plans even though there are no set guidelines for the incorporation of religion into those treatment plans (Pearce et al.

2019). Treatments for mental illnesses often include some type of talk therapy, also known as psychotherapy, such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and in cases that are chronic or where the patient exhibits more severe symptoms, medication. Anxiety can also be treated with exposure response therapy to little by little desensitize a patient. CBT and psychotherapy may be accompanied by medication and other techniques. CBT teaches a patient techniques that a patient can continue to practice once stopping psychotherapy sessions. Patients are also often encouraged to pursue other avenues to increase mental and overall wellness through bio-psychosocial methods that pertain to the whole person. These avenues include exercising to increase endorphins, healthy eating, ensuring a regular sleeping pattern, creating appropriate boundaries, spending time with others, self care and mindfulness techniques. Self care can take several forms including reading, experiencing nature, creative projects, and care of the physical body.

Mindfulness techniques can be especially related to religious experiences. Studies show "that integrating clients' religion/spirituality (RS) into mental health treatment can improve clinical outcomes" (Pearce et al. 2019 p.74). Overlap can come with meditation, prayer, listening to religious songs and music, readings from one's religion's book, and attending religious services. Meditation has been proved to be a successful avenue to improve mental illness symptoms. A study on female trauma survivors and meditation techniques concluded that a significant reduction of mental health and trauma symptoms occurred after a period of time spent practicing mediation (Yee Lee et al. 2017). Meditation practice produced significant change in mental illness symptoms. The mediation practice included a Tibetan curriculum of breathing techniques, loving kindness, and compassion (Yee Lee et al. 2017). These mediation practices are consistent with other religious traditions and their own ideas of meditation. Meditation and other religious practices can be successful in the aid of treating mental health symptoms.

Religion is Harmful

Negative Associations with Religion

Although most associations with religion are positive experiences, there are also individuals who experience negative interactions with religion. Especially negative associations from childhood can be detrimental to an individual's perspective on religion as well as negative effects on mental health. Some negative experiences with religion may include: negative experiences of religion being against a person's gender identity or sexuality, negative experience with religious figures and abuse by religious figures, and negative experiences being forced to attend religious services. These negative experiences may cause distrust in religious institutions and can even contribute to mental illnesses.

A review by Richmont Graduate University of studies relating to childhood abuse and its effect on religiosity shows that overall most individuals who experience any type of abuse as a child, are less likely to be religious (Walker et al. 2009). In one study that was done specifically regarding religion-related abuse, almost one-third of the cases the individual who had been abused believed that the abuse was punishment that was justified through religious practices (Walker et al. 2009). Abuse causes most individuals to experience a distrust of God and religion (Walker et al. 2009). Along with the distrust of religious institutions, abuse is also linked to mental illnesses such as anxiety and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Not only does negative associations with religion not help with the treatment of mental illnesses, but they can be part of the cause of mental illnesses.

Religious doubt can also "undermine religious coping and other spiritual processes" (Haney and Rollock). Haney and Rollock discovered in their study that for emerging young adults, there was a lack of noticeable difference in report of religious doubt between participants who

identified with a religion versus those who did not identify as being affiliated with any religion (Haney and Rollock). Doubt about religion is associated more with young adulthood than it is with the amount of religiosity. As the study suggests, the data can be interpreted that young adulthood is "characterized by examining values and beliefs" (Haney and Rollock). Religious doubt is influential in young adults and can lead to a distrust in religion. A distrust in religion and doubt can cause more existential questions than are solved by religion.

Logotherapy

The term logotherapy comes from the Greek, 'logos' meaning 'reason.' The primary tenets of Logotherapy are that: life has meaning regardless of circumstance, the motivation for life is to find that meaning, and humans have the ability to find that meaning. Logotherapy and meaning making are an important aspect of treating mental illnesses. The ability to derive meaning from the world and have a purpose in life directly correlates with a positive outlook and mental well being. Frankl's logotherapy is used by mental health professionals in a way to attempt to discover adaptive techniques to deal with life's challenges. Logotherapy is often denoted as the precursor to modern cognitive therapeutic techniques. Logotherapy is used in three main areas. In these three areas,

> physiologically, logotherapy is recognized for its efficacy in the reduction of despair in unavoidable suffering. Psychologically, Frankl developed useful techniques, notably paradoxical intention and dereflection, especially for problems originating in anticipatory anxiety. From the spiritual sphere, many people experience meaninglessness at some point that is characterized by existential vacuum. (Schulenberg et al. 2008 p. 449)

Logotherapists are taught to regard the client as an equal human being. This enables the client to work toward their goals without the need to be 'trained' in a certain way as humans are not animals

or machines (Schulenberg et al. 2008). Other therapeutic methods could be considered as used to train the brain to think differently, but logotherapy strives to keep the individual as is with a more mindful approach and with the intent to find the meaning behind the whole of the individual.

Theology of Brokenness

Tikkun Olam

The Hewbrew Phrase of "Tikkun Olam" represents the larger Jewish philosophy of 'repairing the world' (Winer 2008). It is within this belief that the world is like a 'shattered urn' that needs repairing through religion, social activism, and peace. For most Jews today, Tikkun Olam is the reasoning to advocate for social justice but it is also the idea of creating peace to put the pieces of a broken world back together. It is typical for Jewish people to greet one another with 'shalom' meaning 'peace' in Hebrew. It is also derived from the Hebrew word "*shalem* meaning 'whole' or 'complete'" (Winer 2008 p.440). If the world is broken, as Jewish traditions state, does this mean that humans are inherently broken as well? The tradition comes from the creation of the world, when the divine was shattered. These shattered pieces make up the world, more specifically evil and the newly trapped human souls after the Fall of Man and Adam's sin in the Garden of Eden. The shattered pieces are what need to be repaired so that the world can be reunited with the divine (Tikkun Olam: Repairing the World).

Human brokenness can be looked at from a mental health standpoint, with the idea that the brokenness is in the human brain and the brokenness creates anxiety, depression, or any other mental illnesses that must be repaired. Although Jewish tradition dictates this brokenness in the world, it is also written in the Hebrew scriptures that humans were created in the image of God. As Winer points out, "Creation in God's image, found in Genesis, is the foundation of Jewish ethics. The text says: all human beings are created in the image of God – we are all God's children.

We are all descended from Adam created in the image of God" (Winer 2008 p.434). With this in mind, it can be said that humans are not broken because of the theological idea that humans are made in the likeness and image of God. While humans are far from perfect due to the sin of Adam and Eve, God is perfect and therefore humans were originally perfect.

Christianity

The driving force behind the theology of Chrisitanity is similar to the Jewish experience, as Chrisitanity developed from Judaism. This force is that the sin of Adam and Eve created a broken relationship between humans and God that needed repairing. As for Chrisitians it is not humans that need to work on 'repairing the world,' but Jesus the Christ and His sacrifice and death on the cross that repaired the relationship between humans and God. As is the basic principle with Judaism, the sin is what caused the brokenness. Because of this, the question may be asked, does this mean that sinning is causing the brokenness a person is feeling?

As Susan Nelson describes there are several ways to interpret sin. She mentions "sin as acts-disobeying the will of God, hurting one another and God's creation" as well as "sin as *Habitus*- as a posture to which we are bound; the inability not to sin" and original sin and guilt (Nelson 2000 p.100). Nelson interprets anxiety as the result of the free will of humanity and desire to unite the soul with God (Nelson 2000). Because of this idea of a moral high ground and standard that must be met by not sinning, Christians may have more stress and anxiety in their lives to avoid sin and temptation.

However, most Roman Catholic Chrisitians have participated in the sacrament of Confession at least once throughout their life. The act of Confession includes the parishioner to divulge their secrets and sins to a priest. The priest often will prescribe penance that the parishioner must do to have their sins forgiven. This provides an outlet for Catholic Chrisitans to have relief

and release of some of the stress in their lives. The Christian tradition also teaches that nothing that an individual can do, can break the relationship between the individual and their God as evidenced in the New Testament book of Romans "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39 New International Version). This can also provide relief to Christians as they know that they are saved by Grace through faith and that they are not relying solely on good works.

Conclusion

Young adults endure a time of unknown, new experiences, often new environments through collegiate experiences, new communities of people, existential questioning, and having the ability to form their own views on the world. Because the young adult experience is focused on finding oneself and finding meaning in life, this young adult experience leads to a greater mental instability and the onset of mental illnesses. Meaning making is a significant aspect of an individual's personality that when a lack of purpose is evident, mental wellness can take a drastic decline. Religion plays a large role in the effect of mental health on religion in several capacities both positive and negative. Existential questions can often be answered by religious practices and be found in religious texts. In addition, religious practices such as mediation and prayer can positively help treat mental illnesses. Community support also plays a role in mental wellness and religious organizations form their own communities of support. Sometimes however, religion can be detrimental to mental health when it is associated with negative experience such as in cases of abuse by a religious figure. Religions such as Judaism and Christianity attribute mental unrest to a broken relationship with God caused by sin. Each religion has its own answers to the problem of

sin and brokenness. Judaism answers the problem of sin with the idea of Tikkun Olam to repair the broken world through social justice, peace, and religion. Christianity believes that the problem of sin was fixed through the death of Jesus of Nazareth on the cross. Mental illness, especially for young adults can be explained by the lack of meaning making. Religion can be both the cause and solution for mental illness as it exhibits answers for meaning making and has community support, but also can be harmful in certain cases such as in abuse.

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