

Getting inside the mind of Islam: How American Muslims cope with 9/11's aftermath

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Albert Einstein once said that science without religion is lame, and religion without science is blind. Now a Tel Aviv University researcher is one of the first to explore the link between these two realms in the Muslim world.

Clinical psychologist Dr. Hisham Abu-Raiya of Tel Aviv University's Bob Shapell School of Social Work is investigating how various Islamic beliefs and practices impact the psychological well-being of its adherents. Among American Muslims, he's attempting to scientifically quantify how the after-effects of the 9/11 attacks have affected mental well-being and what therapeutic role Islam plays, hoping to identify a clinical path for recovery. It is the first study of its kind and has findings applicable to other religions, the researcher says.

Since 9/11, U.S. Muslims have faced an increasing number of security checks, harassment, and verbal abuse. Via an online questionnaire, Dr. Abu-Raiya surveyed 138 American Muslims, asking how they coped with these new stressors. His findings were reported in [Psychology of Religion and Spirituality](#) in October.

The God response

During his post-doctoral studies at New York University, Dr. Abu-Raiya had witnessed firsthand how 9/11 impacted the Muslim community. For

this study, he investigated the high volume of negative events experienced by American Muslim participants. The large majority reported experiencing at least one stressful interpersonal event after the 9/11 attacks, including anti-Muslim insults, special security checks in airports, and verbal harassment.

The Muslims who created support groups or became more active at their local mosques, where they found strength in communal support. Theirs were considered positive responses and included a sense that they were experiencing "a test from God." Participants in general reportedly increased religious practices such as prayer, fasting, mosque attendance, and Quran reading following the 9/11 attack. Those who described feeling isolated from others and their community were more likely to report feelings of anger and depression. They were more likely to doubt God or their faith, and to express the possibility that God was punishing them.

A tool to assess Islam

To interpret the questionnaire responses, Dr. Abu-Raiya used a tool he developed during his Ph.D. studies at Ohio's Bowling Green State University, the Psychological Measure of Islamic Religiousness (PMIR) — a scientifically-based, multi-dimensional tool for studying the psychological aspects of Islam. This assessment is similar to, yet different from, measures that quantify faith among other religious groups.

"Religion can offer an immense amount of support to the individual and community," says Dr. Abu-Raiya. "My findings can help clinicians identify the kind of behavior that leads to positive responses — and how to help patients better reach their goal of healing."

Religion can be used explicitly in the clinical setting as an important

coping tool for life stressors, he adds, noting that the story of Job from the Quran — the same story that appears in the Old Testament — was particularly useful in guiding one patient through a long-term depression. Because all religions share universal values, Dr. Abu-Raiya's study of Islam on the emotional well-being of patients in a clinical setting can certainly be applied to other religions, including Judaism and Christianity.

He notes that his research can also be used to increase awareness of the profound and traumatic impacts of the 9/11 attacks on Muslims living in the United States.

More information: More about his work can be found on his website: www.hishamaburaiya.com/

Provided by Tel Aviv University

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