

# Avoiding spiritual struggles and existential questions is linked with poorer mental health

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Fear of confronting the tensions and conflicts brought on by existential concerns—the "big questions" of life—is linked with poorer mental health, including higher levels of depression, anxiety and difficulty regulating emotions, according to a new Case Western Reserve University study.

"Religious and spiritual struggles—conflicts with God or religious [people](#), tough questions about faith, morality, and the meaning of life—these are often taboo topics, and the temptation to push them away is strong," said Julie Exline, professor of psychological sciences at Case Western Reserve and co-author of the research.

"When people avoid these struggles, anxiety and depression tend to be more intense than if they faced these struggles head-on."

People who more fully embrace these struggles with fundamental beliefs and values report better [mental health](#) than those who don't, Exline added.

The study, based on a survey of 307 adults about recent life experiences, was published in the *Journal of Contextual Behavioral Science*.

Among the study's findings:

- An unwillingness to accept spiritual struggle could contribute to major social ills, leading to lost opportunities to engage with

people of different faith beliefs and backgrounds and come to view them as threatening.

"This avoidance may lead to the rejection of whole groups of people based on their religious differences or perceived incongruence between, for example, their sexuality or gender-based identity and religious teachings," Exline said.

- Mental health providers may find it useful to help clients with spiritual struggles face their difficulties in a more proactive way.

"People seem to be more emotionally healthy if they're able to accept troubling thoughts," Exline said. "Looking at spiritual doubts in an objective way seems to help. You may or may not work through them, but at least you can tolerate having them."

- Avoidance itself is not a problem; rather, the behavior can become problematic when escaping becomes harmful or contrary to personal goals and sets a rigid pattern of experiencing and responding to the world.

"Regular spiritual avoidance can make it difficult to identify, work toward or experience the qualities that lend a sense of purpose to life," she said.

- Using emotional and cognitive energy to push thoughts away will not stop them from continuing to intrude over time.

"Continually being re-visited by these thoughts can create strains on emotional health, especially if a person sees this kind of questioning as morally unacceptable and dangerous," Exline said.

Provided by Case Western Reserve University

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