

Psychology professor develops tool to measure religious coping during trauma

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Why does an all-powerful, all-loving God permit suffering?

It's a question that people have pondered and attempted to explain for

centuries, going as far back as the Hebrew Bible's Book of Job. Theodicy is this attempt to understand and justify the contrary co-existence of evil, the love of God, and affirmation of God's power.

Although theodicy has been identified as a theological and philosophical concern, little empirical research has been conducted about how it affects individuals psychologically, especially for those experiencing hard times.

Professor Crystal Park in the Department of Psychological Sciences in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences developed a tool to measure theodical struggling. Park is also a principal investigator at UConn's Institute for Collaboration on Health, Intervention and Policy.

The study was published in May in *Current Psychology*, an international peer-reviewed psychology research journal.

"This growing research on theodicies suggests their importance in myriad aspects of health and well-being. To advance research on this question, we created an assessment tool to explicitly measure the extent to which people experience their suffering as in conflict with their beliefs about God as loving, powerful and protective," says Park.

Focusing on Christian beliefs, Park worked with co-investigator Professor M. Elizabeth Lewis Hall from Biola University to develop a suite of meaning-related measures, including the Theodical Struggling Scale. They also partnered with Biola University Professor Jason McMartin, Professor Eric J. Silverman from Christopher Newport University, Professor Kelly M. Kopic from Covenant College, Associate Professor Laura Shannonhouse from Georgia State University, and Jamie D. Aten, founder and executive director of the Humanitarian Disaster Institute at Wheaton College.

The team conducted four consecutive studies to develop and refine the set of scales. The researchers conducted interviews with diverse Christian denominations to determine broad representations of Christian views. Along with a measure of theodical struggle, they developed measures of lament, intimacy with God, spiritual surrender, suffering with Jesus, and Christian flourishing.

"Results of the four studies taken together provide a solid foundation for future work to better understand how and why people struggle to reconcile their beliefs about God with their experiences of suffering and how their struggling might resolve. This work likely has implications for intervention to help people who are suffering from highly stressful or traumatic situations," says Park.

According to Park, the measure may pave the way for further research on how different types of suffering, such as a natural disaster or motor vehicle accident, impact theodical struggling and one's reconciliation with God.

"With this scale in hand, many research questions can be posed to advance our understanding of theodical struggling and how people engage in struggling," says Park.

Another publication in the journal *Spirituality in Clinical Practice* was published earlier this year. Park and her colleagues conducted three separate studies evaluating spiritual surrendering among Christians to develop the Christian Spiritual Surrender Scale (CSSS). Spiritual surrender is a religious coping practice in which an individual actively chooses to submit to God's will.

The CSSS aims to measure the relationship of Christian spiritual surrender and well-being. Results from the studies indicate that spiritual surrender is closely connected to well-being and may potentially alleviate

the impacts that negative events can have on one's satisfaction with life.

In addition to broadening the researchers' understanding of spiritual surrender, the project has clinical implications, as it could be used to evaluate positive religious coping. This may be particularly important for clinicians working with those facing chronic or terminal health conditions. The CSSS could illuminate how clients turn over their suffering to God and the benefits of doing so and may help care providers identify positive forms of surrender.

More information: Crystal L. Park et al, When suffering contradicts belief: measuring theodical struggling, *Current Psychology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1007/s12144-023-04642-w](https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-023-04642-w)

Laura Shannonhouse et al, Spiritual surrender: Measurement of an emic Christian religious coping strategy, *Spirituality in Clinical Practice* (2023). psycnet.apa.org/record/2023-37051-001

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