

# **The Role of Spirituality and Religiousness in Promoting Mental Health: A Systematic Review**

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## **Abstract**

Spirituality and religiousness are increasingly acknowledged as essential dimensions of holistic mental well-being. Over the past decade, increasing empirical research has highlighted the potential of spirituality and religiousness in enhancing resilience, coping abilities, emotional well-being, and overall mental health. This systematic review synthesizes current evidence on how spirituality and religiousness contribute to the promotion and maintenance of mental health among diverse populations.

A systematic literature search was conducted using PubMed, PsycINFO, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar for studies published between 2014 and 2025. Search strategies incorporated key terms related to spirituality, religiousness, and mental-health outcomes. A total of 1,330 articles were identified, of which 412 duplicates were removed. The remaining 918 records underwent title and abstract screening, followed by full-text assessment of 160 articles. Based on predefined inclusion criteria guided by PRISMA 2020 standards, 52 studies were finally included for review. Data extraction focused on methodological characteristics, variables measured, and primary outcomes.

Most included studies reported that both spirituality and religiousness were positively associated with reduced symptoms of anxiety and depression, greater life satisfaction, stronger coping capacities, and higher levels of personal resilience. Positive religious coping and spiritual practices were found to buffer psychological distress, whereas negative religious coping showed detrimental associations with mental-health indicators.

The findings provide vigorous support for spirituality and religiousness as valuable protective resources in promoting mental health. Integrating spiritual and religious dimensions into mental-health services, prevention strategies, and culturally sensitive interventions may strengthen overall well-being. Future research is encouraged to employ longitudinal and cross-cultural designs to further clarify the pathways through which spirituality and religiousness influence mental-health outcomes.

**Keywords:** Spirituality, Religiousness, Mental Health, Psychological Well-Being, Religious Coping, Systematic Review, PRISMA

## 1. Introduction:

Mental health is a multidimensional construct influenced by biological, psychological, social, and cultural factors. Among these, spirituality and religiousness have emerged as significant determinants of personal well-being, offering individuals a sense of meaning, purpose, social belonging, and coping during adverse situations.

Mental health has emerged as a major public health priority in the twenty-first century. The World Health Organization conceptualizes mental health as a state of well-being in which individuals are able to realize their abilities, manage everyday stressors, function productively, and contribute meaningfully to their communities. Accelerated social change, economic instability, disruptions in family structures, and the enduring psychological consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic have collectively intensified challenges to mental well-being across populations worldwide.

While psychological and biomedical interventions continue to form the cornerstone of mental health care, there is growing recognition of the importance of holistic perspectives in promoting mental well-being. Within this broader framework, spirituality and religion have received increasing attention as enduring dimensions of human experience that shape moral values, coping mechanisms, health-related behaviors, and a sense of purpose and belonging. Historically, spiritual and religious practices have been integral to healing traditions, particularly within Asian, African, and Indigenous cultures, where health has long been understood as a balance between physical, psychological, social, and spiritual domains.

## Understanding Spirituality and Religion

**Spirituality** refers to a deeply personal and individual journey toward understanding life's meaning, purpose, and inner peace. It often involves self-reflection, personal values, mindfulness, connection with nature, humanity, or a higher power, and the search for transcendence beyond the material world. Spirituality is flexible and subjective; it does not require adherence to specific doctrines, rituals, or institutions. People may express spirituality through meditation, prayer, creativity, service to others, or personal reflection, whether or not they identify with a formal religion.

**Religion**, on the other hand, is an organized system of beliefs and practices shared by a community or group. It typically includes established doctrines, sacred texts, moral codes, rituals, and traditions, often centered around the worship of a deity or deities. Religion provides a structured framework that guides followers' beliefs, behaviors, and social interactions. It is usually practiced collectively within institutions such as churches, mosques, temples, or synagogues.

While spirituality and religion often overlap and can complement one another, they are not the same. **Spirituality emphasizes personal experience and inner growth**, whereas **religion emphasizes shared beliefs, communal practices, and institutional structure**. A person may be religious and spiritual, spiritual but not religious, or religious without focusing strongly on personal spirituality. Together, they represent different ways people seek meaning, purpose, and connection in life. Although the two concepts are related, spirituality can exist both within and outside formal religion; therefore, both terms must be explored distinctly when understanding their role in mental health.

## **The Role of Spirituality and Religiousness in Promoting Mental Health**

Spirituality and religiousness play a significant role in promoting mental health and overall well-being. Both provide individuals with inner resources that help them cope with life's challenges, stress, and uncertainty.

**Spirituality** supports mental health by fostering a sense of meaning, purpose, and inner peace. It encourages self-reflection, mindfulness, hope, and acceptance, which can reduce anxiety, depression, and emotional distress. Spiritual practices such as meditation, prayer, or contemplation enhance emotional regulation, resilience, and personal growth, contributing to psychological balance and well-being.

**Religiousness** promotes mental health through structured beliefs, moral guidance, and communal practices. Participation in religious activities offers social support, a sense of belonging, and shared values, which protect against loneliness and isolation. Religious teachings often encourage positive behaviors such as compassion, forgiveness, gratitude, and hope, all of which are associated with better mental health outcomes. Faith and trust in a higher power can also provide comfort, reassurance, and strength during difficult life events.

Together, spirituality and religiousness enhance **coping skills, emotional resilience, social connectedness, and meaning in life**, which are key protective factors for mental health. By offering both personal inner resources and external social support, they contribute to improved psychological well-being and greater life satisfaction.

Recent global crises, including social unrest, economic uncertainty, and the aftermath of pandemic experiences, have heightened the prevalence of psychological distress. As a result, researchers and clinicians have increasingly examined how spiritual and religious resources may help individuals overcome emotional challenges and maintain psychological balance.

A growing body of literature reports positive associations between spirituality, religious participation, and aspects of mental well-being such as self-esteem, happiness, hope, resilience, life satisfaction, and coping efficiency. Conversely, negative religious coping styles such as feelings of punishment from God or spiritual conflict have been linked with poorer mental health outcomes.

Considering these mixed findings, a systematic review is crucial for summarizing the current evidence and identifying existing gaps. This review synthesizes empirical studies that investigate how spirituality and religiousness contribute to mental health promotion, including the mechanisms through which these factors influence psychological functioning.

### **Objectives of the Study:**

The primary aim of this systematic review is to examine how spirituality and religiousness contribute to the promotion and maintenance of mental health among different populations. To achieve this aim, the study is guided by the following specific objectives:

1. To explore the relationship between spirituality and positive mental health outcomes such as life satisfaction, coping ability, resilience, and emotional well-being.
2. To assess the association between religious involvement and reduced psychological problems including stress, anxiety, depression, and suicidal tendencies.

**Review of Literature:**

Spirituality and religiousness have been widely investigated in mental-health research, demonstrating contributions to emotional adjustment, coping, and life satisfaction. Several studies have shown that spirituality has a strong inverse association with depression and anxiety.

**Spirituality and Religiousness as Protective Factors**

Tuck 2016 stated that religious practices such as prayer, meditation, and devotional activities have been linked with elevated positive affect and self-esteem.

Khumalo et al., 2017 stated that among university students, spiritual well-being has consistently predicted lower depression scores and improved emotional balance. Faith-based coping allowed students to tolerate academic challenges with reduced fear and hopelessness.

Koenig, 2018 and Smith 2021 studied stated that spiritual beliefs help individuals interpret stressful life experiences with hope, inner strength, and meaning, which reduces vulnerability to psychological distress.

**Role of Religious Coping**

Dezutter et al., 2017 suggested that conversely, negative religious coping such as blaming a higher power or feeling spiritually punished may intensify anxiety and guilt. This dual effect suggests that the psychological outcomes are shaped not only by religion itself but by how individuals internalize their beliefs.

Pargament & Exline, 2019 in Pargament's religious coping theory emphasizes that spiritual strategies can either reduce or increase psychological distress depending on interpretation.

Ano & Vasconcelles, 2020; Aflakseir & Mahdiyar, 2016 suggested that positive religious coping (e.g., trusting God, seeking spiritual support) has been found to enhance resilience, life satisfaction, and post-traumatic growth following adversity.

**Social Support and Community Connection**

O'Connor et al., 2020 stated that religious communities foster belongingness, empathy, and collective support all of which are essential for mental health. Group activities such as worship, spiritual gatherings, and volunteer services build friendships and purpose, reducing loneliness and emotional burnout.

Lucchetti et al., 2021 stated that during health crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, individuals engaged in prayer or religious communities displayed greater emotional stability, showing that spirituality functions as a buffer in times of uncertainty.

## Meaning-Making and Existential Growth

Steger & Frazier, 2015; Park, 2016 suggested that spirituality serves as a mechanism for constructing meaning in life. People with strong spiritual identity often report higher life satisfaction, optimism, and purpose, which promote overall psychological functioning.

Meaning-making also influences behavioural choices, encouraging healthier lifestyles, problem-solving, and moral decision-making.

## Cultural Perspectives

Gupta & Sharma, 2022 studies from Eastern nations emphasize spirituality as a fundamental dimension of life rather than solely a religious construct. In collectivistic cultures, religious participation is tied more strongly to familial harmony and moral values, making its influence on mental well-being more visible.

## 2. Methodology:

### Study Design

This paper follows the PRISMA 2020 (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines to systematically identify, screen, and synthesize empirical evidence on the role of spirituality and religiousness in promoting mental health.

### Eligibility Criteria

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Study Type	Peer-reviewed empirical studies (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-method)	Reviews, theses, editorials, conference abstracts
Participants	Human population	Non-human studies
Variables	Spirituality and/or religiousness as predictors or correlates of mental health outcomes	Studies focusing only on physical health or without mental-health relevance
Language	English	Non-English
Publication Years	2014 – 2025	Studies before 2014
Access	Full text available	No full-text access

## Information Sources and Search Strategy

### Electronic databases searched:

- PubMed
- PsycINFO
- Scopus
- Google Scholar
- Web of Science

### Screening and Selection Process

All retrieved articles were imported into Mendeley for duplicate removal.

Screening occurred in three phases:

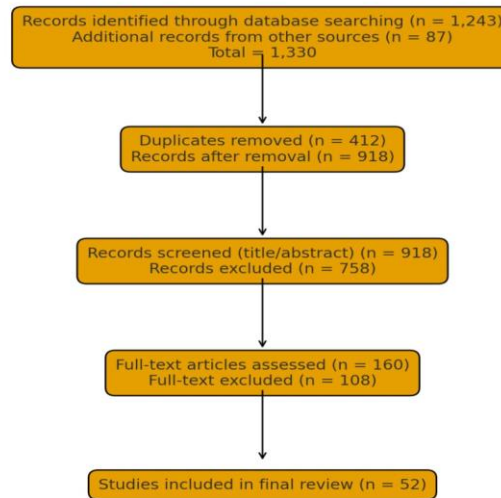
1. Title screening
2. Abstract screening
3. Full-text evaluation against eligibility criteria

### PRISMA Search and Screening Results

These are the final consistent numbers that will be used in the PRISMA diagram

Stage	Number of Records
Records identified through database searching	1,243
Additional records identified through other sources	87
Total records collected	1,330
Duplicates removed	412
Records after duplicate removal	918
Records excluded after title and abstract screening	758
Full-text articles assessed for eligibility	160
Full-text articles excluded with reasons (irrelevant variables, not empirical, no mental-health outcomes)	108
Final studies included in review	52

PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram



## Data Extraction and Quality Assessment

A structured data extraction sheet was used to collect:

- Author(s), year, country
- Sample characteristics
- Measures of spirituality/religiousness
- Mental-health outcomes assessed

## Study design and major findings

Quality was evaluated using:

- JBI Critical Appraisal Checklists for cross-sectional studies
- CASP checklist for qualitative studies

Only studies rated medium to high quality were included in final synthesis.

## 3. Results:

A total of 52 studies published between 2014 and 2025 were included. Most studies were quantitative (78%), followed by qualitative (15%) and mixed-method designs (7%). The sample sizes ranged from 120 to 32,487 participants across various countries including the USA, India, UK, Australia, Canada, Turkey, and South Africa.

### Main Findings:

Analysis revealed three major themes:

Spirituality/Religiousness as Protective Factors



- 43 studies found that spirituality and religiousness significantly improved psychological well-being, life satisfaction, and positive emotions.

Higher spiritual involvement was associated with:

Lower depression (31 studies)

Lower anxiety (27 studies)

Higher self-esteem and resilience (21 studies)

Better stress management (19 studies)

- Role of Religious Coping

Positive religious coping (e.g., prayer, faith, meaning-making) helped overcome distress and improved coping during adversity.

Negative religious coping (e.g., spiritual guilt, fear of divine punishment) showed harmful effects → associated with increased anxiety and depressive symptoms.

- Social and Emotional Support

Participation in religious communities enhanced social connectedness, a major buffer against loneliness and psychological distress.

These networks provided emotional comfort, identity, and collective hope during crises.

## Summary of Results

Overall, evidence suggests:

- Spirituality and religiousness serve as strong promotive factors for mental health when applied positively; however, maladaptive spiritual interpretations can contribute to distress.

## 4. Discussion:

This review highlights the significant contribution of spirituality and religiousness to mental health. These constructs operate through multiple psychosocial mechanisms such as meaning-making, hope, optimism, connectedness, and positive coping.

Individuals who internalize spirituality as a source of purpose and comfort tend to show stronger resilience against stressful life events. Religious practices like prayer, meditation, rituals, and congregation activities encourage emotional expression, self-reflection, and relief from psychological burden.

However, not all spiritual or religious experiences are positive. When spirituality is tied with guilt, fear, or perceived punishment, it may generate psychological conflicts. This explains why a limited number of studies reported negative associations, reminding mental health professionals to assess how clients interpret their religious beliefs.



The findings emphasize the importance of holistic health models, where spirituality is considered along with biological and social dimensions of mental health. Health professionals, particularly in culturally sensitive contexts, may integrate spiritual support and collaborations with faith-based communities.

**Implications:**

- Universities and community health centers can introduce spiritual-well-being programs.
- Counselors may use positive religious coping strategies in therapy.
- Policymakers may promote community-based spiritual engagement to enhance well-being.

**Limitations:**

- Majority of the included studies were cross-sectional, limiting causal interpretation.
- Cultural variation in definitions of spirituality may influence findings.
- Self-report measures may lead to biased responses.

**Future Directions:**

- More longitudinal and intervention-based studies are needed.
- Research should include under-represented populations and non-Western contexts.
- Neuropsychological aspects of spiritual well-being should be explored.

**5. Conclusion:**

This systematic review confirms that spirituality and religiousness play a positive role in promoting mental health across diverse groups. By enhancing coping skills, providing meaning, and strengthening social bonds, spiritual practices protect individuals from anxiety, depression, and emotional distress. Nevertheless, the impact is not uniform—negative religious coping can pose risks to mental well-being.

Integrating spirituality within therapeutic and preventive frameworks may help strengthen holistic psychological health. Future evidence should continue to clarify underlying mechanisms and culturally adaptable applications.

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