COPING WITHOUT RELIGION? RELIGIOUS COPING, QUALITY OF LIFE, AND EXISTENTIAL WELL-BEING AMONG LUNG DISEASE PATIENTS AND MATCHED CONTROLS IN A SECULAR SOCIETY

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Abstract

The present study examined religious coping following negative life events among three groups of participants in Denmark: severely ill lung disease patients (n = 111), individuals facing other negative life events (n = 91), and a healthy control group (n = 246) matched on age, gender, education, and region. The aims of the study were to explore the degree to which major life stressors mobilize greater levels of religiousness in a secular society like Denmark, the types of religious behaviors and coping strategies employed (if any), and the associations between religious coping and well-being among the participant groups. While we found no differences in the level of general religious activities between groups, lung disease patients reported greater use of positive religious coping than the control group, especially asking forgiveness and religious meaning-making. Hierarchical regression analyses indicated that negative religious coping was significantly associated with poorer overall quality of life (QoL) among lung disease patients (β = .19, p < 0.01), whereas congregational support was associated with better QoL (β = .20, p < 0.01) and existential well-being (β = .19, p < 0.01) in the control group. Positive religious coping was not associated with well-being measures in any of the groups. The results suggest that despite secularization, religion continues to be a relevant factor among Danes, particularly for those facing severe illness. The practical implications of these findings for health care are considered.

Keywords: Lung disease, negative life events, religiousness, religious coping, quality of life, existential well-being, secular

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The idea that negative life events such as life threatening illness, accidents, or bereavement elicit religiosity or faith in something greater than mankind is well-known and reflected in the famous saying: “There are no atheists in foxholes.” Although this maxim may be overstated, studies in the United States (US) have shown higher levels of religiousness among people facing life and death situations (Pargament, 1997). Life crises appear to mobilize religious and spiritual resources, and psychological theories suggest that this phenomenon may stem from a need to reduce death anxiety by affording a sense of psychological security and the hope of immortality (Vail et al., 2010). Specifically, according to terror management theory (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986), reminders of human mortality make people engage in their own cultural world views and values to enhance self-esteem and deal with existential concerns. Religious and spiritual ideas are more appealing in this situation because they afford literal immortality, as opposed to secular ideas of symbolic immortality like making major contributions to the cultural society that will persist after one’s demise or, more modestly, living on through the next generation. Experimental psychology has provided some evidence that religion may be more appealing when reminded about death, even among non-religious people. In a study by Jong, Halberstadt, and Bluemke (2012), explicit measures (questionnaires) as well as implicit measures (single-target Implicit Association Test) were applied to test how thoughts of death influence belief in supernatural agents. Participants were instructed to categorize a series of nouns as real or imaginary (including religious concepts as God, Angel, Heaven) as quickly as possible. Hesitations in categorizing religious concepts as imaginary among non-believers in the death priming condition were interpreted as signs of implicit religiosity caused by mortality salience. The study showed that participants explicitly defended their own worldviews; religious participants were more confident that supernatural beings exist, whereas non-religious participants were more confident that they do not. However, when measured implicitly, death priming increased beliefs in religious supernatural entities among all participants, regardless of their prior religious or non-religious worldviews.

Religion may serve other important functions in times of stress besides being a buffer against death anxiety. In this vein, Pargament (1997) suggested that religion may serve multiple purposes among people coping with major life events, including finding comfort and support from a higher being and obtaining social support from a religious or spiritual community. Religion can also function as a way of gaining control, either