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Use of Daily Diary Methods to Investigate Associations of Religious, Spiritual, and Health Behaviors

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Background

Previous research has shown that religious behaviors, spirituality, exercise, and sleep are associated with better overall health outcomes. In general, religiousness and spirituality are associated with better mental and physical health. For instance, research investigating levels of religious involvement and spirituality indicated an association between high levels of spirituality and increased psychological well-being (Ivzor, Chan, Gardner, & Prashar, 2013). Studies have also linked religious involvement to some health behaviors. Research has shown that those identifying as religious or spiritual demonstrate better health behaviors. These include increased physical activity, healthier diet, and fewer risk-taking behaviors (Cheadele & Dunkel Schetter, 2017).

In particular, aspects of religious and spiritual behavior have been associated with healthier exercise behaviors. Church attendance has been found to be associated with increased physical activity and exercise (Nagel & Spouts-Emch, 2006). The same study also found that increased prayer time was significantly related to more physical activity and exercise (Nagel & Spouts-Emch, 2006). In a comprehensive review of 37 R/S and exercise studies, 68% showed a positive correlation between R/S and increased exercise (Koenig, 2015).

Because of concerns about participants accurately recalling daily religious, spiritual, and health behaviors, we were interested in using daily diaries to collect data. Gathering data through a daily diary method involves participants recording details about their daily experiences in fixed interval responses. Using a daily diary to collect data on behavior patterns is desirable because the level of retrospective bias is decreased from a typical survey method. In addition, daily diaries allow researchers to investigate questions that are not usually answered through the use of other research methods, such as uncovering average behavior or systemic patterns (Iida, Shrout, Laurenceau, & Bolger, 2012). We employed daily diaries to analyze religious and spiritual behaviors and health behaviors among college students. In addition, we used fitness trackers during the daily diary period to monitor sleep behavior and physical activity. These provided objective measures of health behaviors. For the present project, we focused on self-reported physical activity.

Methods

Participants

Seventy-six participants were recruited from a small, Christian, liberal arts college in the Midwest. More females participated (n=49) than males (n=27), and most participants were between the ages of eighteen to twenty years old (n=70). The majority of participants, 82.9%, identified their ethnicity as not Hispanic or Latino (n=63) and 88.2% identified their race as White (n=67). Eighty-two percent (n=62) of participants identified with a Christian denomination whereas 14% endorsed no religious identification.

Procedures

Pre-Survey Visit: Participants took an initial pre-survey to assess their normal health and sleep behaviors as well as religious and spiritual traits and demographics. Participants took this survey online in the presence of research assistants. After taking the survey, research assistants taught participants how to wear a fitness tracker.

Daily Diary: Participants completed a daily diary across two weekend days and five subsequent continuous weekdays. The participants completed the diary each morning before noon to ensure the most accurate answers. The daily diary was administered online and took ten minutes or less to complete. The diary assessed sleep patterns, health, diet, exercise and religious and spiritual behaviors, including both private and public practices, that occurred within the previous 24 hours.

Measures:

Our findings support the hypothesis that religiousness and spirituality are associated with greater physical activity. This could explain observed associations of religiousness, spirituality, and health.

We are continuing to collect data for this project and look forward to validating our findings using fitness tracker data and examining physical activity as a mediator of associations of religiousness and spirituality with overall health.

References


