Exploring the Effects of Christian Worldviews on Heart Rate, Stress, and Adjustment After Loss in Bereaved Individuals

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Exploring the Effects of Christian Worldviews on Heart Rate, Stress, and Adjustment After Loss in Bereaved Individuals

Emma Radini Ratnavel

Undergraduate Honors Thesis
University of Connecticut
Thesis Advisor: Dr. Crystal Park
Honors Advisor: Dr. John Redden
Abstract

The objective of this study is to investigate the correlation between Christian values, perceptions of God, and physiological stress, assessed through heart rate, among individuals who are experiencing grief due to the loss of a loved one. Previous studies have analyzed various physiological effects on the body. There are very few studies that examine the correlation between Christian values and heart rate in bereaved participants. To explore these topics further, this study analyzes 59 undergraduate students who have recently lost a loved one, identify as a Christian, and are at least 18 years old. The participants' perceptions of God and Christian worldviews were assessed in a survey. On the physiological side, heart rate is measured as an indicator of stress. We hypothesized that bereaved participants with a stronger perception of God and Christian values would have lower levels of physiological stress, which would reflect a lower heart rate. This hypothesis is based on the idea that Christian values, faith, and religious beliefs could serve as coping mechanisms that provide comfort, support, and meaning in times of distress, thereby reducing the physiological stress response. Although the results show minimal correlation between Christian worldviews and heart rate, it still serves as a valuable contribution to the field by opening up the discussion about the potential connections between Christian values and coping after loss. This project implies the need for more extensive research involving larger and more diverse samples which could give us more insight on the intricate connection between the religious mind and body. It prompts further extensive research and inspires scholars to delve deeper into the utilization of Christian teachings as holistic coping mechanisms for managing physiological stress and overall well-being.
Introduction

Religious Beliefs and Coping

In times of stress, an individual's religious beliefs, encompassing their perception of God and faith in an afterlife, can contribute to a positive mindset and perspective (Weber & Pargament, 2014). These beliefs play a role in shaping how individuals perceive and respond to challenging circumstances, thereby aiding the coping process and potentially reducing stress levels. The presence of religious beliefs can offer a framework for finding meaning in difficult experiences, which is particularly relevant during times of grief and loss (Stroebe, 2007). This sense of purpose and meaning can provide individuals with a sense of direction and help them navigate emotional stressors. A strong perception of God can significantly impact stress levels and the ability to deal with complex situations (Park, 2006). After stressful events, religious beliefs can bring comfort, reduce loneliness, and offer support (Ahrenfeldt et al., 2019). Individuals with a lack of knowledge of God are more likely to put more weight and stress on situations (Peteet et al., 2013). There are very few studies that examine the link between perception of God and feelings of stress after loss.

Living Out Christian Values

Christianity, as a faith and spiritual practice, holds distinct characteristics that differentiate it from other religions, belief systems, and spiritual practices. These unique aspects influence how Christians approach challenging situations and cope with stress. When Christians encounter stress or adversity, their faith provides a framework for understanding these experiences within God's plan for their lives (Shattuck & Muehlenbein, 2020). Although they may initially struggle to understand how stressful experiences fit into God’s plan for their life,
Christian teachings emphasize the assurance that God will fulfill His promises (Gianaros et al., 2018). This belief instills confidence that even amidst challenges, there is a greater purpose. This perspective may offer comfort and reduce feelings of hopelessness in the face of adversity.

Christian values teach one how to overcome obstacles and turn to Jesus during difficult moments of suffering (McIntosh et al., 2020). For instance, believers are encouraged to share their feelings and thoughts with Christ through prayer (Anderson & Nunnelley, 2016). This can help one feel less alone as they carry the burden of their struggles. As they turn to God in their suffering, they can release their emotions in a sense of companionship, as Christians believe that God is present and attentive to their prayers (Shattuck & Muehlenbein, 2020).

Christian values teach an individual to feel closer and more known by Christ (Anderson & Nunnelley, 2016). When Christians undergo struggles, they are asked to rely on God. They do this by living in His strength and remembering the ways that Jesus suffered on the cross (Knabb & Vazquez, 2018). This understanding can help someone feel less alone during stressful moments because they believe that God understands human suffering intimately (Anyan & Knizek, 2018). This understanding fosters a sense of companionship, as believers feel that they are not alone in their struggles. Living in God's strength also encourages a sense of resilience and endurance, knowing that divine support is available (Schnell & Hefti, 2020).

As they are coping, they are taught to imitate Christ in peace (Krok et al., 2018). They are taught to live out a life of peace and goodness as they praise and glorify Jesus for His faithfulness and sacrifices (Maltby et al., 2003). This change in perspective can help an individual have a more peaceful mindset and positive outlook on life and their circumstances. Christian teachings emphasize imitating Christ's qualities, including peace and goodness
(Roberts et al., 2009). This perspective encourages believers to adopt a peaceful mindset through challenges. This shift in focus from personal struggles to embodying Christ-like attributes can lead to a more positive outlook and a sense of purpose amid adversity.

When an individual has a weaker perception of God, they may be more prone to stray away from core values, prayer, and practices that would typically help ease stress and bring peace (Liem et al., 2022). For example, a weaker relationship with God may lead to protesting with God, hiding feelings, challenging God, and questioning God (Newton & McIntosh, 2009). If someone carries these worries and doubts in their mind, this can lead to increasing levels of stress. Overall, Christianity's distinct teachings and values shape how believers interpret and respond to stress.

**Christian Teachings of Forgiveness**

Christian values of forgiveness can play a significant role in helping individuals cope with grief and stress. Forgiveness, as taught in Christianity, involves letting go of resentment, anger, and the desire for revenge (Sharp et al., 2018). This value encourages the extension of compassion and understanding to oneself and others. When one practices forgiveness they can feel relief from emotional burden. Grief and stress can be accompanied by intense emotions, including anger, guilt, and resentment (Park et al., 2017). Christian values of forgiveness encourage individuals to release these negative emotions, which can provide emotional relief and prevent stress.

Forgiveness can contribute to a sense of closure, helping individuals navigate the complex emotions associated with loss (Shafi & Rizvi, 2015). For instance, forgiving oneself for perceived shortcomings and regrets and extending forgiveness to others can facilitate their healing (Roberts et al., 2009). Grief can lead to strained relationships and conflicts, especially if
there are unresolved issues (Park, 2020). Forgiveness can help resolve these conflicts, which can reduce additional stress and contribute to a healthier grieving process. Christian values of forgiveness can contribute to inner peace and harmony. As one can let go of grudges, one can begin to restore a peaceful mindset and manage stress. Grief and stress can lead to cycles of negative thinking (Roberts et al., 2009). Forgiveness redirects their focus from pain and suffering to a more positive outlook. Christianity teaches that forgiveness is not only a moral virtue but also a reflection of God's forgiveness toward humanity (Weber & Pargament, 2014). Embracing these values allows one to align with Christian teachings, and spiritual alignment and provides a sense of purpose during difficult times.

Overall, forgiveness can create a space for healing, enabling individuals to navigate grief more healthily and effectively. While the process of forgiveness varies for each individual, it can serve as a method for emotional healing and resilience, especially among those who hold Christian values.

**Religious Coping — Prayer, Religious Service Attendance**

Religious spirituality can give one a quiet space to have gratitude and meditation through prayer. A consistent prayer life is a common coping strategy used by individuals during challenging situations. Prayer and religious services are forms of direct communication and relationship with God (Roberts et al., 2009). Therefore, these practices can be used to calm stress and center one's thoughts. If someone's relationship with God is weaker, they may find themselves in significantly more distress because of a lack of peace and coping mechanisms, and occurrence of negative reappraisal (Anyan & Knizek, 2018).

Christian religious practices encourage a sense of quiet, stillness, and peace. These values can help a person detach from their current stressors and focus on positive expression and
perspective. Spirituality can decrease stress by giving a person the freedom to give up the control and weight they carry (Bell et al., 2012). For instance, when someone believes in a God greater than themselves, they can share the weight of their situations with their God. This allows them to have a lighter outlook on life and reduces the pressure of taking on the burden alone (Bruce et al., 2017). It can help someone realize that they are not responsible for everything that happens in their lives. Religiosity can increase one’s meaning of life and life after death (Masters et al., 2007). When inevitable outcomes occur, a connection to God can make some feel less isolated and alone. Religiosity has been seen to give people a sense of purpose, identity, and perspective.

Grief and Bereavement Lead to Stress

When one is bereaved and mourning the loss of a loved one, they may manifest many signs of distress such as anxiety, crying, trouble sleeping, struggle to concentrate, loss of appetite, digestive problems, lowered immunity, an increase in inflammation, joint pain, headaches and more (Stroebe, 2007). Grief can have negative impacts on the body, and drastic changes can lead to a decline in physical, mental, and emotional health.

Grief typically occurs in waves that subside as time passes (Shear et al., 2013). On the other hand, stress can come and go as a result of various triggers. For instance, someone who is stressed may feel overwhelming pressure about their life, relationships, job, finances, and more (Shear et al., 2013). Stress prompts the body’s fight-or-flight reaction (Brewer et al., 2022). This in turn increases heart rate, dilates coronary blood vessels, increases blood flow, and increases the availability of oxygen and energy to the heart (Järvelin-Pasanen et al., 2018). Moreover, chronic stress can cause high blood pressure, heart disease, and irritable bowel syndrome (Stroebe, 2007).
A bereaved individual can suffer from serious stress which ultimately weakens the heart muscle (Masters & Hooker, 2013). This can leave someone with chest pains, shortness of breath, or an abnormal heart rhythm which can lead to long-term damage to the heart (Schiweck et al., 2019).

**Heart Rate as an Indicator of Stress**

When a person is stressed, their body releases epinephrine and norepinephrine (Schiweck et al., 2019). These hormones signal the body to increase the heart rate, blood pressure, and respiratory rate (Schiweck et al., 2019). These temporary physical changes occur because the body is in fight-or-flight mode which is perceived as a threatening situation to the body (Shear et al., 2013). Therefore, this study uses heart rate as an indicator of stress in bereaved individuals.

Stress is a complex physiological and psychological response to various stimuli. This response triggers a cascade of physiological reactions. Hormones act as messengers prompting the body to undergo a series of immediate adjustments (Bell et al., 2012). An escalation in heart rate, elevation in blood pressure, and acceleration in respiratory rate can contribute to spikes in heart rate which affect one’s heart rate variability. Physical and emotional threats can lead to psychological and emotional stressors intended for acute situations, but they can be triggered chronically in response to ongoing stressors, leading to potential health issues (Schiweck et al., 2019).

This relationship between stress and physiological responses can be researched in various contexts. One such context is the realm of bereavement, where individuals navigate the challenging terrain of grief and loss. In this scenario, heart rate emerges as a pertinent indicator of stress in bereaved individuals. By monitoring heart rate fluctuations, researchers can
potentially gain insights into the emotional and psychological strain experienced by individuals undergoing the grieving process.

Using heart rate as an indicator of stress helps us analyze the connection between the mind and the body. Heart activity is known to change with emotion and physical activity (Tobin, et al., 2022). Since heart rate can reflect one’s emotional state, this variable will allow us to physiologically analyze stress. This interplay shows the holistic nature of stress, one that transcends the boundaries between psychological and physiological realms.

By recognizing heart rate fluctuations as a valuable marker, particularly in the context of bereavement, researchers gain a window into the ways stress impacts individuals. This paves the way for a deeper understanding of human responses to stress and opens more targeted interventions to support those grappling with its effects.

**Hypothesis**

Christian religious beliefs and practices can have a significant effect on physiological responses, mindset, perspective, outlook on life, and coping strategies. These factors can affect the way a person manages stress. When an individual is stressed, hormones signal the body to increase heart rate; therefore, this study will use heart rate as an indicator of stress. It is hypothesized that bereaved Christian individuals who have lost a loved one in the past 2-6 months will have a lower heart rate in a stressful scenario if they have a stronger connection with God in comparison to individuals who have a weaker connection to God.
Methods

Participants

Participants consisted of 59 undergraduate students who qualified for the “Christian World Views” study through the University of Connecticut Participant Pool. Screening surveys were given at the beginning of each semester to identify participants who qualified for the study. Students 18 years and older who experienced the death of a close friend or family member in the past 2-6 months and who identify with a Christian religion (including Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical, etc.) were eligible for the study.

Measures

Spiritual/Religious Affiliation: Participants were asked about their religious affiliation.

Christian Suffering: Participants were asked about their suffering in relation to God. They were given a five-point survey where they chose how strongly they agreed with each statement. They were asked about the extent to which their suffering has made them more aware of God's power, whether it leads to sharing their heart with Christ, and if they feel known by Christ more intimately. Furthermore, they were asked if their suffering makes them more dependent upon God, if it increases the time they spend with God, whether they think it is a privilege to suffer, and if they believe it is similar to the uptaking of the cross Jesus suffered.

Christian Struggling: When people encounter challenging situations, they may struggle to understand how their experiences fit into God’s plan or why these experiences happen to them. Participants were asked to answer questions about their struggles and how they impact their faith on the same five-point scale. They were asked about their struggles, protesting God, hiding their
feelings, and challenging and questioning God. They were further asked about their understanding of God's mighty power in the world, belief in God’s power to change the world around them, doubt, understanding of God’s love, control, and ability to help them.

**Christian Surrender:** Participants were asked how stressful experiences describe their beliefs, faith, and actions in relation to surrender. They were asked to rate how much a statement has affected them on a five-point scale from not at all, a little, a moderate amount, a lot, or a great deal. They were asked whether they worry that God won’t take them when they need Him and whether they question God’s existence. Furthermore, they were asked if they surrender their suffering and troubles to God.

**Christian Flourishing:** Participants' responses in relation to their flourishing were analyzed on a 5-point scale. They were asked if God’s grace and love have made them believe that God wanted more than what they wanted for themselves. Furthermore, they were asked if they obtained God-like qualities including selflessness, patience, and gentleness.

**Christian Intimacy:** Participants were asked to rate each prompt based on their experiences in their relationship with God. They were asked to indicate how much they agreed with each item. For instance, they were asked if they lean on God during difficult moments, need God, are aware of God's activity, and feel God welcoming them.
Procedure

After the participants signed up for a research visit, they received a reminder email. They were asked to refrain from exercise, caffeine, and alcohol for 24 hours before the visit. All participants completed a questionnaire before the study. Participants provided information on their age, gender, ethnicity, race, and the nature of the loss. For instance, they were asked to include how many months prior their loss occurred, their relationship to the person they lost, the cause of death, type of illness/disease, how expected the death was, how distressing it currently is, how emotionally connected they were to the person and how frequently they would interact with them. At the start of the research visit, they were asked to sign the consent form. They were given the chance to ask questions about the study. Following the consent form, the participant completed a questionnaire while the researcher stepped out of the room. The questionnaire includes a demographic form, questions regarding their waist circumference, and weight, questions assessing characteristics about the death of their loved ones, Christian Worldview Scales, Core Bereavement Items (CBI), and questions about beliefs in God and the afterlife. Once the questionnaire was completed, the participant notified the researcher, who returned to the room and instructed the participant to put on a heart rate variability (HRV) monitor. Participants went to the restroom to put on the circular strap. They were instructed to wet the strap to make sure that it stuck and clip it right below the sternum, touching the skin around the chest. After the participant put on the HRV monitor, the researcher connected the strap to a Bluetooth monitor and asked to use an Elite HRV app to record and monitor the participant’s heart rate throughout the study. The participant was then set up to work on a puzzle for 5 minutes. Once the 5 minutes passed, the first timestamp from the HRV app was recorded to get a baseline heart rate variability reading. Then they are set up for a 20-minute writing prompt.
saying, “You indicated in a previous survey that a close family member or friend passed away recently. Please write about your experience with the loss and how you understand the loss in as much detail as possible. You will be given 20 minutes for this writing exercise. Please write until you are instructed to stop. Do not be concerned with spelling, grammar, or sentence structure. Please do not include identifying information about yourself or others in what you write.” The participant was told to write about anything relevant to their loss for the full 20 minutes. Then the researcher stepped outside the room and knocked on the door to let them know 5 minutes were remaining. The HRV app was left open on the researcher's device to ensure the Bluetooth stayed connected. Once the 20 minutes passed, the researcher re-entered the room and recorded the second time stamp from Elite HRV. After this, the participant was moved back to the computer to complete the questionnaire, which included the last few SPANE questions. Then the participant was asked to work on the puzzle for five more minutes as the researcher stepped out of the room once again. After five minutes, the participant took off the HRV monitor and was given credit for completing the study. The whole study took approximately 90 minutes.
Results

Descriptive Statistics

With a total of 59 participants, we studied responses on belief in God, belief in the afterlife, Christian suffering, lament, struggling, surrender, and intimacy. The mean for each category respectively is 3.0339, 2.9831, 2.9136, 2.8396, 1.9153, 2.750 and 3.5203. The skewness is -0.786, -0.573, -0.288, -0.464, 1.470, 0.218 and -0.705 respectively. The kurtosis is -0.265, -1.023, -0.667, -0.530, 1.383, -0.880 and -0.705. The range is 1.00, 4.00, 3.70, 3.00, 4.45, 4.00 and 4.00 respectively.

The descriptive statistics for the 59 participants show that the square root of the average belief in God had a minimum of 1.00, a maximum of 2.00, and a standard deviation of 0.31030. For belief in the afterlife, there were 59 valid participants with a minimum of 0.00, a maximum of 4.00, and a standard deviation of 1.16695. For the average of Christian suffering, there were 59 valid participants with a minimum of 1.00, a maximum of 4.70, and a standard deviation of 0.96480. For the average Christian lament, there were 59 valid participants with a minimum of 1.08 a maximum of 4.08, and a standard deviation of 0.7837. For the average Christian struggling there were 59 valid participants with a minimum of 1.00 and maximum of 2.34 and a standard deviation of 1.10064. For the average Christian surrender, there were 59 valid participants with a minimum of 1.00, a maximum of 5.00, and a standard deviation of 1.17082. For the average of Christian intimacy, there were 59 valid participants with a minimum of 1.00 a maximum of 5.00, and a standard deviation of 0.88508.

With a correlation of significance at the 0.01 level (1-tail) a “**” is shown and a correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed) when a “*” is shown. The Pearson correlation coefficient of the square root of belief in God is 0.994**, belief in the afterlife is 0.357*, the
average of Christian suffering is 0.672**, the average of Christian lament is .455**, and the average of Christian struggling is -.340**, average Christian surrender is 0.657**, and the average of Christian intimacy 0.744**.

**Correlations**

The correlation between heart rate and belief in God where N=40 gives a Pearson coefficient of -0.019. The correlation between heart rate and belief in the afterlife where N=40 gives a Pearson coefficient of -0.129. The correlation between heart rate and Christian suffering where N=40 is -0.136. The correlation between heart rate and Christian lament where N=40 gives a Pearson coefficient of -0.099. The correlation between heart rate and Christian's struggling where N=40 gives a Pearson coefficient of 0.202. The correlation between heart rate and Christian surrender where N=40 gives a Pearson coefficient of -0.206. The correlation between heart rate and Christian intimacy where N=40 gives a Pearson coefficient of -0.127. None of these correlation coefficients were statistically significant.
Discussion

We hypothesized that strong religious beliefs and practices within bereaved Christians can affect physiological responses, mindset, perspective, outlook on life, and coping strategies. It was predicted that these factors can affect heart rate and the way stress is managed. However, our findings did not support this hypothesis because none of the religion variables we assessed were significantly correlated with HR.

This lack of association was unexpected. The lack of correlation may be due to a very healthy sample and therefore a relative lack of impact of psychosocial variables on heart rate. Furthermore, the participants may not have been particularly distressed by their loss. For instance, our sample was composed largely of young college students. During this time, we noticed that many students had gone through the loss of a grandparent or older loved one who they hadn’t connected with in a while. Therefore, their loss may not have impacted them as significantly as it would impact an older person who had lost a spouse, significant other, or childhood friend.

Despite these findings, it may be that religion does exert salutary effects on coping with highly stressful situations that we were unable to detect in this study. The body releases epinephrine and norepinephrine when one is stressed (Schiweck et al., 2019). Not only do these hormones signal the body to increase the heart rate, but they have other physiological effects as well. Heart rate is just one physiological factor that is impacted by stress. Therefore, future research could analyze various physiological indicators of stress including breathing, muscle tension, blood pressure, sleep, vision, eating, headaches, and more.

Limitations of the study might explain the lack of significant associations. For example, our sample only included young Christian college students. Therefore the gravity of their loss...
may not be as significant as an older participant losing a loved one closer in age (Shear et al., 2013). Christian values may grow stronger later in life, so the students in the participant pool may not have had a strong relationship with Christian values (Shear et al., 2013). Therefore, further studies could assess a sample with older participants who have gone through significant losses.

Furthermore, this study was cross-sectional, meaning participants were only assessed during one stress window. Stress levels may be more triggering at other times or when specific memories are retrieved. In further research, participants could be assessed more often and at a variety of stressors.

The sample of this study was heterogeneous in that every member had different levels of stress and time after their grief. Although all participants identified as Christian, they all had different levels of religiosity. In future studies, it would be helpful to compare Christian participants to atheist participants to analyze the differences in heart rate. Moreover, the sample could be assessed at a more specific time frame after loss with more similar strengths in religiosity.

**Conclusion**

This study examined the correlation between Christian values and heart rate as an indicator of stress in bereaved participants. Although Christian worldviews and heart rate weren’t found to be significantly correlated in this bereaved sample, this study sparks discussion on the effects of a perception of God on one’s holistic health. There are very few research studies that analyze the effects of spirituality and religiosity on overall health and adjustment after loss. As this topic is researched further, the sample can be adjusted to be more uniform in experiences. For instance, future samples should include people who participate in one particular Christian
practice such as prayer, religious-based counseling, spiritual direction, or frequent confession. Then this sample could be compared to a sample of atheists who do not carry Christian beliefs. Moreover, it could be beneficial to study older participants who may be more affected by their loss. Future studies could implement a sample of widows or widowers. Despite our current findings, future research in religiosity and stress levels can pave the way for a more holistic approach to health. Connections in spirituality, religious practices, and Christian worldviews to physiological health will give us methods to improve symptoms of stress including heart rate, breathing, muscle tension, blood pressure, sleep, vision, appetite, headaches, and more (Järvelin-Pasanen et al., 2018).

**Acknowledgments**

I feel blessed to have had the opportunity to interweave my love for my Catholic faith, Christian worldviews, behavioral neuroscience, and physiology in my senior honors research project. I am thankful to Dr. Crystal Park for her mentorship in this unique field of research which I am proud to have explored. I cannot wait to see the future of research in Christianity, religion, spirituality, and neuroscience. It was a privilege working with other talented researchers including Zachary Magin, everyone on the CWV study, Sinead Sinnott, and everyone in Dr. Park’s lab. Most special thanks to my parents, little brother Matthew, and grandparents for encouraging me to bring my faith into every aspect of my life; their faith inspires my passion and work as a researcher and student.
Figures and Tables

Table 1

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*Bivariate Variables*  

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*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01
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