



THE IMPACT OF SPIRITUAL BYPASSING ON EMOTIONAL REGULATION, SELF- ACTUALISATION - CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

¹Ms. Pravinna B, ²Mr. Chanthuru S

¹III B.Sc Psychology, ²Assistant Professor

Department Of Psychology, Rathinam College Of Arts And Science, Coimbatore-641021, Tamil Nadu,
India.

Abstract

This conceptual paper examines spiritual bypassing as a potential barrier to emotional regulation and self-actualisation in midlife adults. Spiritual bypassing refers to the use of spiritual beliefs or practices to avoid confronting unresolved emotional difficulties and psychological distress. The paper proposes that such avoidance may disrupt emotional regulation by limiting emotional awareness and processing, while indirectly constraining self-actualisation by impeding self-reflection and personal growth. By synthesizing existing psychological and spiritual literature, this study highlights theoretical pathways through which spiritual bypassing may undermine emotional resilience and the realisation of human potential in adulthood. The paper offers a conceptual framework to guide future empirical research and inform integrative psychological and spiritual practices.

Index Terms — Spiritual bypassing, emotional regulation, self-actualisation, emotional avoidance, personal growth, emotional resilience.

Introduction

Spirituality plays an important role in many parents' lives by offering meaning, moral guidance, and emotional support during periods of stress. It often helps parents cope with challenges, guide value-based decisions, and foster family cohesion through shared practices (Masters, 2010; Wachholtz & Sambamoorthi, 2011). When practiced authentically, spirituality can promote emotional resilience and mindful parenting.

However, spirituality can also be misused through spiritual bypassing, a concept introduced by John Welwood. Spiritual bypassing involves using spiritual beliefs or practices to avoid confronting unresolved emotional or psychological issues. Rather than supporting healing, this avoidance may lead to emotional suppression, inauthenticity, and hindered personal growth (Cashwell & Young, 2004; Vieten et al., 2013). In parenting, this can disrupt emotional attunement and contribute to unprocessed emotional distress within families.

This issue is closely linked to emotional regulation and self-actualisation. Emotional regulation refers to the ability to manage emotional responses in adaptive ways, which is essential for effective parenting (Gross, 1998). Spiritual bypassing may weaken this capacity by discouraging emotional awareness. Similarly, self-actualisation, defined by Maslow (1943) as the realization of one's potential, requires emotional integration. Avoiding emotional work through spiritual bypassing can obstruct genuine psychological growth (Kramer et al., 2021).

Despite increasing interest in spiritual bypassing, its impact on parents remains under-researched. This study examines the relationship between spiritual bypassing, emotional regulation, and self-actualisation among spiritually engaged parents. By distinguishing healthy spirituality from avoidant practices, the research aims to support more authentic, emotionally grounded parenting and inform psychological and family counseling practices.

Review of literature

Spirituality is often associated with enhanced well-being, resilience, and emotional regulation (Masters, 2010; Sharma & Singh, 2020); however, the misuse of spiritual beliefs and practices to avoid psychological or emotional difficulties—commonly described as spiritual bypassing—has been shown to produce adverse outcomes across diverse populations (Cashwell, Myers, & Shurts, 2004; Delmonte, 1985). Spiritual bypassing masks unresolved emotional distress, undermines emotional regulation, delays trauma and grief processing, and impedes self-actualisation, particularly in clinical, educational, healthcare, and faith-based contexts (Sperry, 2016; Kramer et al., 2019; Zhao & Liu, 2020; Kramer et al., 2021). Overreliance on spiritual coping at the expense of emotional engagement is linked to poorer mental health, reduced resilience, emotional exhaustion, and compromised therapeutic outcomes, especially during periods of crisis such as illness, bereavement, addiction, and collective stress (Pargament & Smith, 1997; Wachholtz & Sambamoorthi, 2011; Cook, 2004; Banerjee & Prowse, 2021; Rowe, 2015). Cultural and religious contexts shape how spiritual bypassing manifests, yet its core function as an avoidance strategy remains consistent across traditions and populations (Ghorbani, Watson, & Weathington, 2009; Kirmayer, 2007; Moes & Taves, 2013). In contrast, authentic, mindful, and emotionally integrated spiritual practices support emotional processing, psychological growth, resilience, and self-actualisation (Walker, 2014; Sullivan, 2017; Turner & Taylor, 2018; Wright & Masten, 2006), underscoring the importance of distinguishing adaptive spirituality from avoidant spiritual strategies in both therapeutic and non-clinical settings (Vieten et al., 2013; Gold & Kivlighan, 2014; Rubel & Atieno Okech, 2017).

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative conceptual research design, utilizing theoretical and interpretative analysis of existing literature to explore how spiritual bypassing may influence emotional regulation and self-actualisation among spiritually practicing parents.

Procedure

The present study chose to use a qualitative conceptual approach in order to examine the supposed effect that spiritual bypassing has on the regulation of the emotions as well as self-actualisation. This was done through an examination of the relevant literature.

The relevant literature and theoretical frameworks were reviewed to determine the concepts and themes linked to the process of emotional avoidance and personal growth. The literature has thus been conceptually interpreted to build an understanding of how the process of spiritual bypassing may impact emotional and self-actualization processes of parents who practice spirituality.

The study aimed at incorporating know-how across different fields in order to emphasize theoretical linkages, theories, models, or mechanisms, while ensuring simplicity, consistency, and integrity with respect to presenting concepts.

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