

Research Paper

The Role of Spiritual Capital and Mindfulness in Predicting COVID-19-Related Stress in College Students



Minoo Miri^{1*}  Mojtaba Firuzinezhad²  Mahboobeh Maleki³  Mohammadd Khosravitanak⁴ 

1. Department of Counseling, Faculty of Educational Sciences, Farhangian University, Tehran, Iran.

2. Deputy Director of Planning and Program of the General Directorate of Education of South Khorasan, Birjand, Iran.

3. Department of Counseling, Faculty of Educational Sciences, Payame Noor University, Qazvin, Iran.

4. Department of Educational Sciences, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran, Iran.



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ABSTRACT

Background and Objectives: The stress related to Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) can be a risk factor for other psychological disorders in society. The present study aims to investigate the role of spiritual capital and mindfulness in predicting COVID-19-related stress in college students.

Methods: This is a descriptive-correlational study. The study population consist of all male and female students of Farhangian University in Birjand, Iran during 2021-2022. Of these, 242 eligible students were selected using a web-based non-probabilistic sampling method. They completed the Spiritual Capital Scale of Golparvar et al. (2015), the Southampton Mindfulness Questionnaire of Chadwick et al. (2008), and the Corona Stress Scale of Salimi (2015). For data analysis, Pearson's correlation test and multiple regression analysis were used in SPSS software, version 22. The significance level was set at 0.05.

Results: The relationship between spiritual capital and COVID-19-related stress ($r=-0.585$, $P<0.01$), and between mindfulness and COVID-19-related stress ($r=-0.4569$, $P<0.01$) was negative and significant. The spiritual capital explained 34.2% of the variance and the mindfulness explained 19.9% of the variance in COVID-19-related stress.

Conclusion: Spiritual capital and mindfulness can predict the COVID-19-related stress among college students. This indicates the need for planning to improve individual, social, and spiritual abilities of students during the pandemic.

* Corresponding Author:

Minoo Miri, Assistant Professor.

Address: Department of Guidance & Counseling, Farhangian University, Tehran, Iran.

Phone: +98 (915) 3618451

E-mail: m.miri@cfu.ac.ir

Introduction

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has affected the mental health of people in the world [1]. In most cases, patients with COVID-19 have fever and respiratory symptoms such as cough and shortness of breath. Several studies have also reported the occurrence of gastrointestinal symptoms such as diarrhea, nausea, vomiting, anorexia, and abdominal pain [2]. The pandemic has caused stress in people [3]. The unpredictable situation of the disease, the uncertainty about the treatment methods, the time needed to control the disease, and its hazards have made this disease as one of the most stressful events in recent years [4]. People in this period mostly have the fear of getting infected or cause the infection of their relatives as well as the fear of its social and economic consequences [5]. The COVID-19-related stress can cause severe psychological problems including depression, somatization disorder, and anxiety [6] which can lead to chronic psychopathology. To provide appropriate mental health services and develop prevention and intervention strategies for people in response to COVID-19, it is very important to understand the alleviating factors related to COVID-19-related stress and other mental problems [7].

Providing spiritual capital can increase patients' spirit to easily cope with problems. Spiritual capital means that the belief in God and following his orders gives a man a generative, dynamic, guiding, and regulating force like a capital source [8]. Spiritual capital is defined as the power and influence resulting from attachment to a superhuman force, which gives peace, purpose, and hope [9]. In support of spiritual capital, the evidence shows that spirituality and spiritualism are fundamental factors for forgiveness, health, and well-being [10]. Shahzadi and Raja's study showed that spiritual motivations reduce occupational stress caused by COVID-19 [11]. In another study, it was shown that spiritual capital is an important factor in dealing with COVID-19 [12]. On the other hand, psychological variables such as mindfulness can play an adaptive role in improving the psychological state caused by COVID-19. Mindfulness simply means being aware of thoughts, actions, emotions, and feelings in the present moment, and being purposeful and non-judgmental [13]. Mindfulness causes the ability to create a different relationship while experiencing internal feelings and external events through creating moment-by-moment awareness and directing behaviors based on wise responsibility instead of automatic reactivity [14]. In different studies, the role of mindfulness in COVID-19-related anxiety [15], the relationship between mind-

fulness and perceived stress of pregnant women [16], the relationship between mindfulness and academic stress [17], the role of mindfulness in reducing negative mental health consequences [18], and the relationship between mindfulness and the stress of getting infected with COVID-19 [19] have been confirmed.

Considering the importance of COVID-19-related stress among college students, the need to investigate the factors related to this problem, which can cause other psychological disorders, is very important because COVID-19 has affected the mental health of college students [20]. On the one hand, due to the novelty of this disease, a few studies have been conducted on the COVID-19-related stress and adaptation during the pandemic. Therefore, the present study aims to investigate the role of spiritual capital and mindfulness in predicting COVID-19-related stress among college students.

Methods

Participants

This is a descriptive-correlational study. The study population consists of all male and female students of Farhangian University in Birjand, Iran during 2021-2022 (n=650). Of these, 242 eligible students were selected by a web-based non-probability sampling method (using social media such as Telegram and WhatsApp). The entry criteria were age 19-22 years and willingness to participate in the study. The exclusion criterion was the return of an incomplete questionnaire. The students participated in this study voluntarily. Necessary statements about the study objectives, questions, and the importance of cooperation were provided to them. Ethical principles including the declaration of informed consent, confidentiality of participants' information, and being free to leave the study were fully observed. After obtaining the necessary permits, the questionnaires were prepared and distributed online using social media (Eitaa, Telegram, WhatsApp, and Instagram) due to the restrictions and the serious health risks during the pandemic.

Instruments

The Spiritual Capital Scale was developed by Golparvar et al. (2014), and has 21 items and four subscales of spiritual value (items 9-12), attachment to God (items 1-8), transcendental relationship with God (items 17-20), and spiritual influence (items 13-16) rated on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (very little) to 5 (very much). The total scores range from 21 to 105, where higher scores indicate more spiritual capital. Golparvar et al. provided

evidence for the face validity and content validity of this questionnaire, and by using the exploratory factor analysis, they showed that it had favorable four-factor structure. The reliability using the Cronbach's alpha method for the subscales of spiritual value, attachment to God, transcendental relationship with God, and spiritual influence were 0.76, 0.90, 0.83, and 0.65, respectively, indicating acceptable reliability of this questionnaire [10].

The 16-item Southampton Mindfulness Questionnaire was developed by Chadwick et al. (2008). It measures three factors including conflict with thoughts (items 8, 13, 3, 6, 2, 16), accepting thoughts (items 12, 4, 11, 7, 10), and awareness of thoughts (items 1, 14, 9, 5, 15). The items are rated on a 7-point Likert scale from 0 (strongly agree) to 6 (strongly disagree). The total score ranges from 0 to 96, where higher scores indicate higher mindfulness. In the study by Chadwick et al. the concurrent validity showed that this questionnaire has a positive and significant correlation with Brown and Ryan's Mindful Attention Awareness Scale ($r=0.60$) and a positive correlation with the positive affect subscale (0.27). and a negative significant correlation with negative affect subscale ($r=-0.62$) of Positive and Negative Affect Schedule, and a negative significant correlation with psychotic symptoms Lovibond & Lovibond ($r=-0.34$). Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.89 in the non-clinical group and 0.82 in the clinical group [21]. In the study by Foroughi et al. three factors were confirmed for the Persian version using the exploratory factor analysis. These factors explained 50.51% of the total variance of mindfulness. The Persian version had also a good convergent validity with self-compassion (0.59) and positive affect (0.40), and a good divergent validity with negative affect (-0.35) and depression (-0.36), anxiety (0.30), and stress (-0.51) subscales. Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the Persian version was 0.78 for the conflict with thoughts, 0.69 for the acceptance, 0.62 for the awareness of thoughts, and 0.76 for the overall questionnaire [22].

The 18-item Corona Stress Scale was developed by Salimi et al. (2019) with three subscales including psychological states (items 1-8 and 17, 18), physical states (items 9-13), and stress-related behaviors (items 14-16). The items are rated on a five-point Likert scale from 0 (never) to 4 (always). The total score ranges from 0 and 72, where the higher scores indicate higher stress. The Cronbach's alpha coefficients for psychological states, physical states, stress-related behaviors, and the whole questionnaire are 0.92, 0.82, 0.57, and 0.91, respectively. There is a positive and significant correlation between the scores of this scale and Depression, Anxiety, Stress Scale [23].

Data analysis

For data analysis phase, Mean $\pm$ SD, Pearson's correlation test, and multiple regression analysis were used in SPSS version 22 software. significance level was set at 0.05.

Result

OF 242 participants, 135(56%) were male and 107(44%) were female. Regarding marital status, 153(63%) were single and 89(37%) were married. Regarding the age factor, 50(20%) were at the age of 18-20 years, 171(71%) at the age of 21-23 years, and 15(9%) at the age of 23-25 years. Regarding the field of study, 182(75%) were studying in teaching, 9(4%) in history teaching, 26(11%) in geography teaching, 19(8%) in counseling and educational support, and 6(2%) in other fields.

As shown in Table 1, all correlation coefficients regarding the relationship of spiritual capital and mindfulness with COVID-19-related stress were negative and significant ($P<0.01$).

As shown in Table 2, the F value obtained for the regression model was 32.213, which was significant ($P<0.01$). This shows that spiritual capital can explain the changes in COVID-19-related stress well and the presented model is appropriate. The adjusted R square value was 0.342, indicating that the spiritual capital explained 34.2% of the variance in COVID-19-related stress. The value of the standardized regression coefficient (β) was -0.180 for spiritual value, -0.126 for attachment to God, -0.233 for transcendental relationship with God, and -0.228 for spiritual influence ($P<0.01$). Therefore, it can be said that spiritual capital negatively and significantly predicts COVID-19-related stress among college students.

As shown in Table 3, the F was 20.856, which was significant ($P<0.01$), indicating that mindfulness can explain the changes in the COVID-19-related stress and the presented model was appropriate. The adjusted R square value was 0.199, indicating that mindfulness explained 19.9% of the variance in COVID-19-related stress. The beta coefficient value was -0.189 for the component of conflict with thoughts, -0.186 for accepting thoughts, and -0.154 for awareness of thought ($P<0.05$). Therefore, it can be said that mindfulness negatively and significantly predicts COVID-19-related stress among college students.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlation coefficients between the study variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Spiritual value	1									
Attachment to God	0.024**	1								
Transcendental relationship with God	0.054**	0.291**	1							
Spiritual influence	0.502**	0.285**	0.6320**	1						
Spiritual capital- total	0.777**	0.587**	0.867**	0.742**	1					
Conflict with thoughts	0.097	0.137*	0.107	0.148*	0.145*	1				
Accepting thoughts	0.109	0.136*	0.152	0.206**	0.189**	0.704**	1			
Awareness of thought	0.060	0.118	0.138*	0.135*	0.147*	0.542**	0.594**	1		
Mindfulness- total	0.107	0.152*	0.153*	0.194**	0.192**	0.880**	0.921**	0.771**	1	
COVID-19-related stress	-0.45**	-0.132**	0.512**	0.502**	0.585**	-0.403**	-0.410**	-0.367**	0.456**	1
Mean±SD										
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
20.79±3.108	17.50±2.728	22.71±4.058	9.70±1.534	70.70±8.672	13.56±2.392	11.40±2.964	9.91±1.653	34.87±6.093	1.64±2.42	

*P<0.05, **P<0.01

Table 2. Results of multiple regression analysis for predicting COVID-19-related stress based on spiritual capital

Model	B	SE	Beta	t	P	R	Adjusted R ²	F	P
(Constant)	27.171	1.110		24.478	0.001	0.594	0.342	32.213	0.01
Spiritual value	-0.140	0.050	-0.180	-2.788	0.006				
Attachment to God	-0.112	0.049	-0.126	-2.278	0.024				
Transcendental relationship with God	-0.139	0.043	-0.233	-3.220	0.001				
Spiritual influence	-0.360	0.111	-0.228	-3.256	0.001				

Table 3. Results of multiple regression analysis for predicting COVID-19-related stress based on mindfulness

Model	B	SE	Beta	t	P	R	Adjusted R ²	F	P
(Constant)	22.231	0.964		2.031	0.001	0.457	0.199	2.856	0.01
Conflict with thoughts	-0.192	0.084	-0.189	-2.171	0.024				
Accepting thoughts	-0.153	0.072	-0.186	-2.130	0.034				
Awareness of thoughts	-0.225	0.108	-0.154	-2.091	0.038				

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the role of spiritual capital and mindfulness in predicting COVID-19-related stress among the students of [Farhangian University](#). Based on the results, the relationship between spiritual capital and COVID-19-related stress was negative and significant; by improving spiritual capital, the stress can be reduced. No study has been conducted in the target community to compare the results. However, the results of the present study are in line with the findings of similar studies. Abshahi and Golparvar showed a negative and significant relationship between spiritual capital and occupational stress [24]. Fatehizadeh and Badei showed a significant positive correlation between spirituality experience and stress-coping strategies among students [25]. The study by Fatemi et al. among medical students of [Islamic Azad University, Tehran Medical branch](#) showed that the growth of spirituality is one of the important predictors to deal with high-stress conditions [26]. The spiritual capital is a continuous connection between man and God through acts of worship and prayer [10]. The spiritual capital is based on constant trust and appeal to God and the spiritual beliefs according to the concept of meaningful life. Attachment to God, spiritual value, spiritual influence, and transcendental relationship with God (as the main components of spiritual capital) are spiritual resources that people can use when facing stress [24]. When a person feels that s/he is connected with God, s/he can solve many of her/his mental problems including stress by trusting on this transpersonal power.

Based on the obtained results, the relationship between mindfulness and COVID-19-related stress was negative and significant; by the increase of mindfulness, the stress can decrease. Zare et al. found a negative and significant correlation between COVID-19-related anxiety and the mindfulness dimensions of describing, acting with awareness, non-judging, and non-reactivity. These components could explain the COVID-19-related anxiety [15]. Talebi showed a negative and significant correlation between mindfulness and perceived stress in pregnant women [16]. Alipour Shahir et al. showed that mindfulness training was effective in reducing COVID-19-related anxiety and its components in doctors [27]. Weiss et al. found that the improvement of mindfulness helps students cope with academic stress and COVID-19-related stress [17]. Voss et al. in a study on Dutch and Belgian samples showed that positive personality traits such as optimism, mindfulness, and resilience protect against negative mental health outcomes such as fear of COVID-19, depression, stress, and anxiety during the

pandemic [18]. The findings of Hardstone and Medvedev showed that mindfulness significantly predicted lower levels of depression, anxiety, and stress during the lockdown [28]. Dillard and Meier showed that people with higher mindfulness reported less stress and anxiety. Higher mindfulness was associated with lower worry about the virus and lower negative impact in case of infection [19]. Mindfulness is the attention to one's experiences without bias and judgment. By emphasizing the present moment, being non-judgmental, and teaching proper breathing techniques and maintaining peace, mindfulness helps people have more control over their mind and psyche in difficult situations with a correct and non-judgmental understanding of the conditions. Mindfulness helps people to stay calm and focused and gain the ability to control their thoughts and feelings while are fully aware of them and accepting them without judgment. Acquiring this ability makes people feel more in control of their lives and respond with more calmness and awareness to the problems, instead of giving automatic negative responses in stressful conditions [29]. Mindfulness increases cognitive flexibility and allows a person to avoid ruminations and reach psychological flexibility. Mindfulness, by focusing on the present moment, reduces unpleasant thoughts; its calmness techniques reduce symptoms such as post-traumatic stress, Coronavirus-related stress, anxiety, and fear [27].

The limitations of this study included the inability to generalize the results, use of a correlational design and thus being cautious about having causal inference from the results, Using only questionnaires to collect data, not controlling the effects of confounding variables (such as age, education, etc.), and the method of sampling. Therefore, to generalize the results, it is recommended to conduct more studies in other cities with different cultures in Iran using questionnaires along with interviews and applying other sampling methods such as simple random sampling. Moreover, it is recommended to set up mindfulness workshops and measure the positive effect of mindfulness in students on their teachers and families experimentally as well as spiritual interventions to strengthen the spiritual capital of students and teachers.

Conclusion

Spiritual capital and mindfulness can predict the COVID-19-related stress among college students. This indicates the need for planning to improve individual, social, and spiritual abilities of students during the pandemic.

Ethical Considerations

Compliance with ethical guidelines

The study obtained ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee of [Birjand University of Medical Sciences](#) (Code: IR.BUMS.REC.1400.209).

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Authors' contributions

Conceptualization and Supervision: Asghar Farhadi and Ibrahim Hassanpour; Methodology: Elahe Mahdavi; Investigation, Writing the original draft and final approval: All authors; Data collection: Mohammadd Khosravitanak; Data analysis: Mahboobeh Maleki; Funding acquisition and Resources: Ibrahim Hassanpour, Elahe Mahdavi, Sima Kiani, and Reza Noori.

Conflict of interest

All authors declare no conflict of interest.

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