



AKADEMIN FÖR HÄLSA OCH ARBETSLIV
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Elderly Abuse and Depression in Developed Countries: Does Religion/Spirituality Matter?

Malin Ljunggren

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Handledare: Gloria Macassa
Examinator: Ola Westin

Sammanfattning

Elderly abuse and depression in developed countries: Does religion/ spirituality matter?

Malin Ljunggren, Folkhälsovetenskap C: Teori och metod med tillämpning, 30 hp.

Syftet med denna uppsats var att undersöka hur spiritualitet och religion skulle kunna fungera som en skyddande faktor för deprimerade äldre (65 år och äldre) som blivit utsatta för misshandel. Granskningen har genomförts med hjälp av vetenskapliga artiklar från olika vetenskapliga sökmotorer utan begränsningdatum.

Resultatet visade att det inte fanns några studier som undersökt relationen i utvecklade länder och särskilt inte i ett europeiskt sammanhang. Dock gav de undersökta artiklarna vissa indikationer på att spiritualitet kan tjäna som en tillgång för deprimerade äldre. Dessutom fann studien att yrkesgrupper som arbetar med äldre som blivit utsatta för misshandel bör uppmuntra dem att delta i spirituella handlingar och diskussioner. Ytterligare studier som undersöker vilken roll spiritualitet kan ha för att påverka och förbättra coping-strategier för misshandlade äldre är absolut nödvändiga. De behövs för att få kännedom om vilka insatser som bör genomföras för att bromsa det ständigt växande problemet med misshandel hos äldre.

Abstract

Elderly abuse and depression in developed countries: Does religion/ spirituality matter?

Malin Ljunggren, Folkhälsovetenskap C: Teori och metod med tillämpning, 30 hp.

The purpose of this thesis was to investigate how spirituality and religion could serve as a protective factor for depressed elderly (65 and older) who are victims of abuse. The review was carried out using scientific articles found through searches of various scientific databases with no limitation date.

Results found no studies which investigated that relationship across developed countries and especially not in the European context. However, the review gave some indications that spirituality might serve as an asset for depressed elderly. In addition the study found that professionals working with abused elderly should encourage them to be involved in spiritual actions and discussions. Studies on what role spirituality can influence and improve coping strategies across abused elderly are urgently needed in order to improve interventions aimed to curb the ever growing problem of elderly abuse.

Keywords: Spirituality, religion, abuse, elderly, depression, developed countries

1. Contents

1. Contents	3
2. Introduction	4
2.1 Objective	5
3. Materials and Methods	6
4. Results	6
4.1 Spirituality and depression among elderly	6
4.2 Spirituality and abuse among elderly	7
4.3 Spirituality, abuse and depression among elderly	8
5. Discussion	9
5.1 Strengths and limitations	10
5.2 Ethical considerations	10
6. Conclusion	10
7. References	11

2. Introduction

Several studies in the last decade have shown a relationship between spirituality and health. With the word spirituality this study and the investigated studies mean a higher level of faith, not necessarily a religious faith.

A study in England based on health surveys from 1999 to 2004 examined the role of ethnicity and religion as an influencing factor in health. The results showed that there were differences both in ethnicity and religion, but also that it was an even greater difference in religion (1). Another study carried out in Australia showed that spirituality is one of the most important factors to a good health and the study also showed that spirituality is as multi-faceted as health (2). According to Fisher, spirituality can be sorted into four domains; personal, communal, environmental and transcendental, and by this sorting he shows that spirituality is multi-faceted and not only attached with religious behavior (2). This approach allows the research on spirituality and health to be seen in a wider angle, with both mental and physical health taken into account.

A literature study by Koenig showed that spirituality and religion can be an asset to better cope with stress, depression, suicide, anxiety and substance abuse (3). However the study also found some evidence showing the opposite, that spirituality and religion can be a disadvantage for mental ill patients. But overall the biggest part of the investigated studies showed a positive connection, for example; a study made in India showed a strong connection between spirituality and mental health (4).

A study made on elderly Korean adults regarding spirituality, depression and perceived health showed that those who had a higher level of spirituality reported a lower level of depression and a higher level of general health (5).

The majority of studies exploring the relationship between religion/spirituality and health have been carried out in North America (USA, Canada) as compared to Europe. However, a study carried out in Bulgaria and Romania showed that a spiritual belief and a practice of faith both influenced on physical and mental health among elderly (6).

According to the National Institute of Mental Health over 2 million citizens over the age of 65 suffer from depression in the US (7). A study made in 1995 showed that the prevalence rate of depression among elderly in nursing homes was 40 to 50% (8). This fact has been the foundation for further research on depression among elderly. For example two studies have shown that a positive religious attitude among elderly has a correlation with low depression prevalence, and that the opposite; a negative religious attitude among elderly has a correlation with high depression prevalence (9,10).

Other studies have shown that elder abuse (a single, or repeated act, or lack of appropriate action, occurring within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust which causes harm or distress to an older person) is increasing worldwide and especially in developed countries with prevalence varying from 3.2% to 27,5% in general population studies (11). WHO defines elder abuse as physical, sexual, mental and/ or financial abuse and/ or neglect of people aged 60 years and older (12). Empirical evidence has found that elderly abuse can have serious consequences for older people who suffer from depression or psychological distress than do their non-abused peers (13 & 14).

A study considering both spirituality and abuse found out that spirituality and religion has proven to be strong factors for greater mental health, more quality of life and decreased depression among middle-aged women who have survived domestic violence (15).

Although much is known about the role of spirituality on overall health of elderly people, little research has been geared towards the potential relationship with depression and abuse among elderly. In the light of increasing number of aging people in developed countries as well as the prevalence of abuse among elderly, it seems important to review the role of potential factors which may help cope with abuse. This study is being performed to summarize the research that has already been done in this area, so the upcoming researchers have a summary to proceed from.

2.1 Objective

The objective of the thesis is to review the role of religion and spirituality as an asset for health among abused elderly in developed countries.

The research question is: Does spirituality play a protective role in abused elderly suffering from depression?

3. Materials and Method

This study is a literature study summarizing (with no year limit) studies that have investigated the role of religion and spirituality on the relationship between abuse and depression among elderly people. Relevant studies have been searched and collected through databases such as PubMed, Medline, Google and Google Scholar. The key words used were “elderly”, “spirituality”, “religion”, “abuse”, “violence”, “mental health”, “depression”, “faith”. Note that “elderly” were used with all the different combinations of the search words and that the searches were limited to key words in English.

The search resulted in 21 peer reviewed articles somewhat connected to the given subject. The majority of the studies investigated the relationship between depression and spirituality among elderly. There were few studies addressing the relationship between abuse and spirituality/religion among elderly.

In the text the word spirituality will be used somewhat interchangeably for religion and spirituality, although they differ. This approach was taken due to the small numbers of scientific articles on the subject matter. In the text the word depression is used as a summing-up word for both depression and a bad mental health. Elderly is defined as people age 65 years or older and abuse is defined according to WHO:s definition of abuse (see above).

4. Results

4.1 Spirituality and depression among elderly

A study carried out in the US, on 66 elderly adults, showed that 77-83% of the participants were positive to cooperation between spirituality and counseling as treatment for depression. The study also showed that those participants who thought spirituality were important had a greater strength of religious faith, a greater interaction and they were also less self-critical in the way they tried to solve their problems, than those who did not

think it was important (16). These findings got substantiated by other studies. For instance a study carried out among African American older adults showed that the participants of the study experienced a high level of spirituality and it worked as a positive contributor when coping with medical treatment for depression (17).

Another study carried out on another population of elder African Americans also investigated how depression and experience of spirituality could be related. The study found that several factors were connected to depression, but it also showed that spirituality was one of the most important factors for recovery from depression (18).

Another study carried out in the US support the findings that have been made on the African American elderly. Corsentino et. al. analyzed data from two large epidemiologic studies carried out within 3 year intervals in North Carolina. The participants were all 65 years and older and the study included questions about physical, mental and social functioning. After controlling for different variables, his findings were very similar to the ones in the African-American studies. Corsentino and the co-authors found that spiritual participation gave the participants mental stimulation and helped them keep the cognitive function healthy later in life. Further the study argued that spirituality were an important factor for recovery from depression, especially among women (19).

A study carried out on homebound elderly examined whether spirituality could be a protective factor when it comes to loneliness and depression. The study used face-to-face interviews with over 40 elderly people, age 60 or older. The findings were that spirituality might prevent loneliness from turning into depression (20). The study researchers found supporting research carried out by Kirby et. al. which previously found that spiritual activities among elderly had a strong relationship with good mental health and wellbeing (21).

Research elsewhere reports that elderly who are already depressed can regain mental health and a meaningful existence with help from spirituality. This conclusion was drawn after a study consisting of 20 interviews with depressed elderly. Spirituality, among other factors, helped them through the treatment they were given (22).

In Australia, studies have indicated that depressed elderly, especially those with a physical disability, turn to spirituality to cope with everyday life (23).

4.2 Spirituality and abuse among elderly

Intimate partner violence is more usual among the younger population, but still, it occurs among elderly as well. A study carried out in the USA investigating how intimate partner violence affects older women showed that spirituality plays a protective role among these women (24). It also showed that spirituality helped them cope with everyday life and that it made it easier for them to receive help. The study was conducted through interviews and the conclusion drawn was that spirituality, family, culture, community support etc. helped the women cope with the intimate partner violence (24). A second study carried out on older women, this time with the origin in Korea, showed that spirituality (both traditional Korean spirituality and Christianity) can be an asset for women exposed for intimate partner violence to cope with everyday life. The researchers of the study also suggested that other professionals in the elder abuse fields acknowledge these findings and implement them into their work (25).

A study investigating spirituality and abuse among elderly, performed in Canada, pointed out the important role of faith leaders. The study pointed out that the faith leaders can play an important role in prevention of elder abuse and also are the one's most likely to detect cases of elderly abuse (26). Another study investigating the role of professionals working with elderly found that their roles were very important when it came to encourage spirituality. That study found that elderly who could not feel safe discussing and practice their spirituality had uncomfortable feelings. To avoid this from happening, the study suggested that the professionals working with elderly should encourage discussions about spirituality, which would include themselves (27). Another study also showed that an increased commitment, regarding spiritual discussions and actions, from the professionals side were helping the elderly to cope with everyday life (28).

4.3 Spirituality, abuse and depression among elderly

Although much research has been geared towards spirituality and depression and spirituality and abuse, nothing has been carried out with all three of the factors when it comes to elderly. However a study carried out on African American women who have survived domestic violence found that those who were spiritual had a lower grade of

depression symptoms than those who were not (29). A study investigating the relationship between spiritual coping and recovery from sexual assault also found that a high level of spirituality was connected to a low level of depression (30).

5. Discussion

This study found out, through the research that has been geared, that no scientific articles has been published on the subject of how spirituality can be an asset for depressed elderly who have experienced abuse. It is important to point out that this study were oriented in developed countries and limited to the English language, it can exist other results in other languages or other countries. However, separate studies were found addressing spirituality/religion and depression or with abuse. Even though the main question of the study; “ Does spirituality play a protective role in abused elderly suffering from depression?”, was not answered through the specific studies, this review has found some clues on the possible direction of these relationships. For instance, results showed that an array of previous studies have found a connection between spirituality and depression (16, 17, 18). Elderly who are spiritual have a better mental health and are less depressed than those who are not. In these studies, spirituality has also been considered to be a positive asset for coping with depression (19, 21).

Other studies carried out on not only elderly but all types of individuals have shown that spirituality is related to mental health (24). Many of these studies found that spirituality increases the coping abilities among people (25, 26, 27, 28). The findings from these studies also showed that spirituality helped people cope with events that were perceived as stressful or uncontrollable (29).

Furthermore, this thesis has shown that spirituality also have connections with abuse among elderly. Those studies showed that abused elderly who are spiritual active can cope and receive help easier than those who are not (24, 25).

Another important finding from the studies investigated in this thesis is that professionals working with abused elderly in some way play an important role in both discovering the abuse and/or protect it from happening (26, 27). Also, the professionals were involved in

discussions and actions regarding spirituality which helped the abused elderly to cope with everyday life (28). These findings are important because they show that abused elderly use spirituality not only to cope with everyday life, but also to connect with other people (the professionals) and receive help (24). In some instances professionals have prepared manuals to inform about issues of abused elderly and faith among elderly (26). An example of this type of manuals is one called “Safety – elder abuse and faith: a guide for service providers on reaching out to faith-based organizations regarding elder abuse”, and give examples on strategies to work after when dealing with elder abuse (31).

One common point among the studies investigated in this thesis is that the authors pointed out that there was a need for further research in the area of abuse, spirituality and mental health (including depression) (1, 6, 20, 25). Some studies even pointed out that more research was needed to be geared towards only spirituality and elderly (32). The findings in this thesis to some extent suggests a path towards the possibility that spirituality plays a protective role for abused elderly suffering from depression, but more empirical evidence is needed, especially across developed nations and especially in Europe in which no study was found addressing the subject.

5.1 Strengths and Limitations

The strength of the study is that is based on scientific publications in peer review journals which lends to accuracy on the evidence to date on the subject area; and the study addressed a new research area within elderly abuse. However, the study has limitations: first, the search found no specific studies which directly addressed how spirituality; - can be an asset for depressed elderly who experienced abuse; secondly, although more articles were found addressing spirituality and abuse and depression separately, still were fewer than expected taking to consideration that the performed search was without year limit.

5.2 Ethical Considerations

This study is a literature review based on peer reviewed scientific articles. It is expected that the articles were ethical cleared in their institutions of origin (anonymized data, confidentiality and other ethical rules).

6. Conclusion

This study investigated whether spirituality could be an asset (as a coping asset) for abused elderly who might develop depression. Results found no studies which investigated that relationship across developed countries. This finding is of importance for policy makers as many countries are experiencing increased prevalence of elderly abuse. However, the review gave some indications that spirituality might serve as asset for depressed elderly. In addition the study found that professionals working with abused elderly should encourage them to be involved in spiritual actions and discussions.

Studies on what role spirituality can influence and improve coping strategies across abuse elderly are urgently needed to help understanding of potential mechanisms

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