

The Psychology of Faith in Mental Health

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ABSTRACT

Faith and spirituality are increasingly recognized as crucial factors in supporting mental health. This study examines the role of faith in strengthening psychological resilience, regulating emotions, and providing social support, while also highlighting the ambivalent effects of religious struggles. A narrative review design is employed with a systematic search of PubMed, Scopus, and Google Scholar for articles published between 2019 and 2025. Fifteen peer-reviewed studies were analyzed qualitatively to identify thematic patterns. The findings reveal that faith provides meaning-making frameworks, enhances psychological flexibility, and fosters community support that reduces depression, anxiety, and stress. At the same time, religious struggles are associated with higher levels of distress, showing that faith has both protective and risk dimensions. The novelty of this work lies in synthesizing recent cross-cultural evidence, thereby expanding the psychology of religion beyond Western contexts. The conclusion emphasizes the importance of integrating culturally.

ABSTRAK

Iman dan spiritualitas semakin diakui sebagai faktor penting dalam mendukung kesehatan mental. Kajian ini menelaah peran iman dalam memperkuat resiliensi psikologis, mengatur emosi, serta menyediakan dukungan sosial, sekaligus menyoroti efek ambivalen dari konflik religius. Desain tinjauan literatur naratif digunakan dengan pencarian sistematis melalui PubMed, Scopus, dan Google Scholar untuk artikel yang terbit antara 2019 hingga 2025. Sebanyak 15 artikel peer-reviewed dianalisis secara kualitatif untuk mengidentifikasi pola tematik. Hasil menunjukkan bahwa iman menyediakan kerangka pemaknaan, meningkatkan fleksibilitas psikologis, serta memperkuat dukungan komunitas yang menurunkan depresi, kecemasan, dan stres. Pada saat yang sama, konflik religius terkait dengan tingkat distress yang lebih tinggi, sehingga iman memiliki dimensi protektif sekaligus berisiko. Kebaruan penelitian ini terletak pada sintesis bukti lintas budaya terbaru, yang memperluas pemahaman psikologi agama di luar konteks Barat. Kesimpulan menekankan pentingnya integrasi pendekatan berbasis iman yang sensitif terhadap budaya dalam psikoterapi dan layanan kesehatan mental.

INTRODUCTION

Mental health problems such as depression and anxiety have risen significantly worldwide, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. The World Health Organization (World Health Organization, 2022) reports that one in eight people globally experiences a mental disorder. Alongside biomedical and psychological interventions, research has increasingly recognized religious faith and spirituality as protective factors that enhance psychological resilience, provide meaning, and regulate emotions (Faruk et al., 2025; Koenig, 2020).

Despite these promising findings, several gaps remain. First, there is an evidence gap, as most studies have focused on Western populations, leaving non-Western and religiously conservative societies underexplored (Othman et al., 2025). Second, a knowledge gap persists regarding the ambivalence of faith, as religious struggles have been associated with higher distress but remain underexamined in diverse cultural contexts (Exline et al., 2014). Third, a practical gap exists as mental health practitioners often lack training in integrating faith-sensitive approaches in therapy (Lee et al., 2025).

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This study addresses these gaps by synthesizing recent literature (2019–2025) on the role of faith in mental health. The objective is to: (a) analyze how faith contributes to resilience, emotional regulation, and social support; (b) examine the potential negative consequences of religious struggles; and (c) highlight implications for clinical practice and community-based mental health interventions.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a narrative review design with a systematic literature search strategy. Searches were conducted in Google Scholar, PubMed, and Scopus between January 2019 and September 2025 using the keywords faith, religion, spirituality, psychology, and mental health.

Inclusion criteria: (1) Published between 2019–2025; (2) peer-reviewed journal articles in English; (3) directly examined the relationship between faith/religiosity/spirituality and mental health outcomes (e.g., depression, anxiety, resilience, well-being); (4) primary research studies.

Exclusion criteria: (1) Non-peer-reviewed publications; (2) articles unrelated to mental health outcomes; (3) duplicates.

From an initial pool of 58 articles, 7 were retained after screening and applying inclusion/exclusion criteria. Data extracted included author(s), year, population, research design, and findings. The synthesis was organized into themes: (a) faith and resilience, (b) faith and emotion regulation, (c) social support, and (d) ambivalence of faith.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

From the systematic review process, fifteen studies published between 2019 and 2025 were identified as relevant. These studies examined the relationship between faith and mental health outcomes in various cultural and clinical contexts. Four major themes emerged: (a) faith as resilience, (b) faith and emotion regulation, (c) social support through religious communities, and (d) the ambivalence of faith.

Table 1. Summary of Included Studies on Faith and Mental Health (2014–2025)

<i>Author(s), Year</i>	<i>Country/Population</i>	<i>Research Design</i>	<i>Mental Health Variable(s)</i>	<i>Key Findings</i>
Captari et al. (2018)	Global, psychotherapy clients	Meta-analysis	Depression, anxiety	Faith-integrated therapy more effective than standard interventions
Exline et al. (2014)	USA, adults	Scale development, quantitative	Religious/Spiritual struggles	Validated scale showed struggles predict higher psychological distress
Koenig (2020)	Global, COVID-19 context	Review + empirical reports	Stress, well-being	Faith practices reduced stress, promoted well-being
Othman et al. (2025)	Malaysia	Qualitative	Balanced mental health	Islamic psychospiritual approaches

				improved well-being
Faruk et al. (2025)	Canada, Muslim communities	Qualitative	Service accessibility	Faith-based tailoring improved mental health service uptake
Lee et al. (2025)	Online intervention participants	Experimental study	Religious conflict, coping	Intellectual humility intervention reduced conflict and distress
Okan et al. (2025)	Turkey	Psychometric study	Spiritual justice	New scale validated, associated positively with well-being

The reviewed studies converge on the finding that faith enhances resilience. In times of crisis, faith provides individuals with frameworks of meaning and hope that buffer against depression and anxiety (Captari et al., 2018; Demir et al., 2025; Othman et al., 2025). These meaning-making processes are consistent with cognitive theories of stress appraisal, in which adversity is reinterpreted as manageable when linked to higher purposes.

In terms of emotion regulation, faith-based practices such as prayer, gratitude, and forgiveness contribute to psychological flexibility and emotional stability (Koenig, 2020). These findings align with positive psychology perspectives that highlight how religious coping strategies enhance acceptance and reduce negative affect.

Faith also offers social support, particularly through communal belonging and faith-based services. Studies show that religious communities facilitate service uptake among minorities and provide emotional support that reduces feelings of isolation (Faruk et al., 2025; Lee et al., 2025). This resonates with classical sociological perspectives (e.g., Durkheim) that religion reinforces social cohesion, which directly translates to psychological well-being.

At the same time, findings emphasize the ambivalence of faith. Religious struggles such as doubt, conflict with beliefs, or feelings of abandonment by God are strongly associated with increased distress (Exline et al., 2014). This dimension remains underexplored outside Western contexts, creating a knowledge gap that future research should address

CONCLUSION

This review concludes that faith plays a dual and complex role in mental health. On the one hand, faith strengthens resilience, supports emotion regulation, and fosters social belonging, thereby reducing symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress. On the other hand, faith can also generate psychological vulnerability through religious struggles, such as doubt, conflict, or feelings of abandonment.

The novelty of this study lies in its synthesis of recent (2019–2025) and cross-cultural evidence, moving beyond the dominance of Western-based findings in the psychology of religion. By highlighting both protective and ambivalent aspects of faith, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the role of religion in mental health.

These findings emphasize the importance of integrating culturally sensitive and faith-informed approaches in psychotherapy and public health practice. For psychology as a discipline, this review provides a framework that encourages clinicians and researchers to treat faith not merely as a protective factor, but as a dynamic psychological variable that can either promote or hinder well-being depending on context and experience.

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