

The Impact of Spirituality on Suicidal Ideation and Life Uncertainty
among Afghan Refugees

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Abstract

The current study explores the impact of spirituality on suicidal ideation and life uncertainty among Afghan refugees, drawing on the framework of Existential Theory. This research was conducted among 150 Afghan refugees residing in Peshawar, Pakistan. The objective was to examine how spirituality, as a coping mechanism, may reduce suicidal thoughts and intolerance of uncertainty in a population experiencing displacement, trauma, and instability. Data were collected using three standardized instruments: the Religiosity and Spirituality Scale for Youth (RSS), the Intolerance of Uncertainty Scale (IOUS), and the Suicidal Ideation Attributes Scale (SIDAS). Results indicated significant negative associations between spirituality and both suicidal ideation and life uncertainty. The standardized coefficient (Beta = -0.320, t = -4.091, p = .000) confirmed a significant effect on suicidal ideation, while spirituality also negatively predicted intolerance of uncertainty (Beta = -0.380, t = -3.468, p = .001). Furthermore, suicidal ideation and intolerance of uncertainty were moderately correlated (r = -0.295, p = .002). These findings highlight the protective role of spiritual and religious beliefs in mitigating psychological distress, reducing suicidal ideation, and managing uncertainty about the future among Afghan refugees.

Keywords: Spirituality, Suicidal Ideation, Life Uncertainty, Afghan Refugees, Existential Theory.

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INTRODUCTION

Afghan refugees have faced prolonged exposure to war, displacement, and socio-political instability, which frequently leads to severe psychological distress, including a greater risk of suicidal thoughts and an increased intolerance of life's uncertainties (Gibson et al, 2023). In the midst of these hardships, spirituality can act as a vital coping resource, providing emotional strength, a sense of purpose, and resilience. Spiritual beliefs and practices can help individuals find meaning in their suffering, sustain hope, and manage fears about what lies ahead (Michael, 2000). For refugee populations, who often have limited access to formal mental health care, spirituality plays an essential role in supporting psychological well-being (Bożek, Nowak & Blukacz, 2020). These experiences profoundly affect their mental health, commonly resulting in symptoms such as anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, and an overwhelming sense of uncertainty about the future (Temane & Wissing, 2006).

Spirituality refers to an individual's sense of connection to something greater than oneself, which may involve religious beliefs, personal values, inner peace, or a search for meaning and purpose in life (Peselow et al., 2014). Among Afghan refugees, spirituality often plays a central role in coping with trauma, displacement, and ongoing uncertainty about the future (Marznaki et al. 2023). It can act as a psychological and emotional resource that promotes resilience in the face of adversity (Tabei, 2016). Spiritual beliefs may provide hope, a sense of community, and moral guidance, all of which can buffer the effects of mental health stressors such as suicidal ideation and intolerance of uncertainty (Whitehead et.al 2012). In refugee populations who have experienced war, loss, and forced migration, spirituality may offer a framework to understand suffering and to maintain a sense of continuity and identity (Paul Victor, et al. 2019). In this study, spirituality is examined not only as a religious practice but also as a broader existential and coping mechanism that can impact mental health outcomes, particularly suicidal ideation and tolerance of life uncertainty (Sheldrake and Philip, 2025).

Suicidal ideation involves thoughts, considerations, or plans about ending one's own life and represents a serious mental health issue, particularly among individuals who have endured severe trauma, displacement, and prolonged stress common experiences for Afghan refugees (Poorolajal et al., 2022). These individuals often carry heavy emotional and psychological burdens resulting from war, forced migration, separation from family, loss of identity, and uncertainty regarding their legal or social status (Lemke et al., 2023). Such challenges can lead to feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, and emotional numbness, all of which elevate the risk of suicidal thoughts (Güler et al., 2025). Within refugee communities, suicidal ideation may frequently go unexpressed due to stigma, cultural taboos, or limited access to mental health services, complicating early detection efforts (Kassem et al., 2021). Gaining a deeper understanding of suicidal ideation in this population is crucial for creating culturally sensitive mental health interventions and identifying protective factors, such as spirituality that could help reduce these dangerous thoughts (Vitorino, 2023).

Life uncertainty refers to the perceived lack of predictability, control, or security regarding one's future, encompassing worries about safety, stability, livelihood, and identity (Ano et al., 2005). For Afghan refugees, this sense of uncertainty is often widespread, shaped by forced displacement, ongoing political instability, loss of their homeland, and an uncertain future in host countries (Almeida Filho et al., 2023). This ongoing unpredictability can result in chronic stress, anxiety, and a deep sense of

existential insecurity. Refugees frequently face unstable legal status, unemployment, limited access to healthcare and education, and fear of deportation all factors that undermine their sense of control over life (Ali and Saleem, 2024). These challenges increase psychological distress and heighten vulnerability to mental health problems, including suicidal ideation (Khan et al., 2024). Life uncertainty can also impair the ability to make long-term plans or sustain a sense of purpose, further intensifying emotional distress (Brea Larios et al., 2023). Examining this factor is crucial to understanding the mental health difficulties experienced by Afghan refugees and to exploring how protective elements, such as spirituality, might help mitigate its harmful effects (Al-Nuaimi et al., 2022).

This study plays an important role in deepening our understanding of the psychological well-being of Afghan refugees residing in Hayatabad, Peshawar—a location that hosts a significant refugee population due to its proximity to Afghanistan. It seeks to fill an existing gap by investigating the influence of spiritual beliefs and practices on suicidal ideation and perceptions of uncertainty about life. The central aim is to explore spirituality as a potential coping resource that may lessen suicidal thoughts and intolerance of uncertainty among individuals facing displacement, identity struggles, and socioeconomic difficulties. The study proposes that greater levels of spirituality will be linked to lower suicidal ideation and reduced feelings of uncertainty, highlighting the protective function of spiritual and religious beliefs in managing psychological distress. By focusing on the constructive role of spirituality, this research not only contributes to academic knowledge but also offers practical value for mental health practitioners, NGOs, and policymakers working with refugee communities in Peshawar and beyond. The findings may inform the design of culturally sensitive mental health interventions that incorporate spiritual and religious dimensions rooted in Afghan cultural identity.

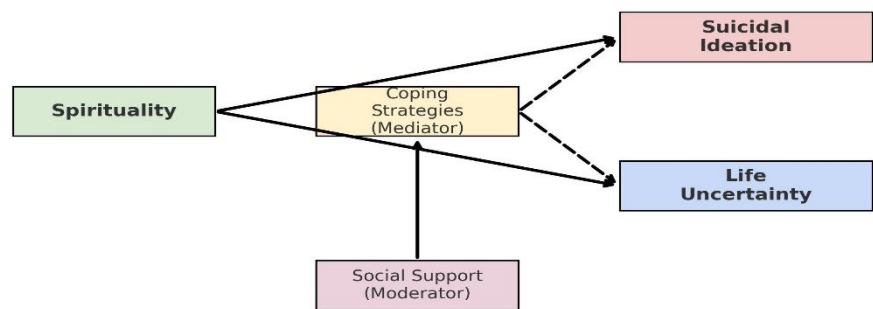


FIG 1: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

METHOD

SAMPLE

The sample size for this study is 150 young adults. This sample size is calculated using Cochran’s formula (1977), a method appropriate for research involving large populations., ensuring a sufficient sample size for statistical analysis. The population for this study consists of young adults residing in Hayatabad, Peshawar. The target population for this study comprises Afghan refugees living in Hayatabad, Peshawar. The Sample was selected using a purposive convenient sampling method.

INSTRUMENTS

THE RELIGIOSITY AND SPIRITUALITY SCALE

The scale was developed and validated by Brittany C. Hernandez in 2011 as part of her doctoral dissertation at Louisiana State University to address the lack of psychometrically



sound tools assessing religiosity and spirituality among youth aged 9 to 17. It consists of 37 items on a Likert-type format. The validation study reported strong internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.84 to 0.90 for Faith-based Coping and 0.80 to 0.87 for Religious Social Support/Activities. Test-retest reliability showed moderate correlations of 0.60 to 0.70. Preliminary validity was supported through factor analysis and correlations with related constructs, confirming the scale effectively measures religiosity and spirituality (Hernandez et al., 2010).

THE SUICIDAL IDEATION ATTRIBUTES SCALE-MODIFIED (SIDAS-M)

The SIDAS-M, developed by Darren Hedley with Philip Batterham as co-developer, was described in *Autism: The International Journal of Research and Practice* (May 2023). Like the original SIDAS, it is a brief five-item scale assessing suicidal thoughts over the past month, including frequency, control, proximity to attempt, distress, and impact on daily functioning. Items are rated on a 10-point scale, summed to a total score of 0–50, with higher scores indicating greater severity. Reliability is high (McDonald's $\omega = 0.93$, 95% CI = 0.90–0.95), and convergent validity is supported through significant correlations with established measures of suicidal ideation and related mental health variables (Hedley et al., 2023)

INTOLERANCE OF UNCERTAINTY SCALE

The Intolerance of Uncertainty Scale (IUS) was developed in 1994 by Freeston, Rheaume, Letarte, Dugas, and Ladouceur to assess reactions to ambiguity, uncertainty, and unpredictable outcomes. Buhr and Dugas translated and validated an English version in 2002, expanding its research and clinical use. The IUS-27 is a self-report questionnaire with 27 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (“not at all characteristic of me”) to 5 (“entirely characteristic of me”). The scale demonstrates excellent reliability, with the original French version showing Cronbach's alpha = 0.91 and the English version $\alpha = 0.94$ (Carleton et al., 2007).

RESULTS

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Age	150	1.00	3.00	2.2000	.73274
Gender	150	1.00	2.00	1.5000	.50168
SES	150	1.00	3.00	1.9267	.71510
Education	150	1.00	3.00	1.9933	.77283
Valid N (listwise)	150				

Descriptive statistics for 150 participants show an average age of 2.20 (mid-range), a gender mean of 1.5 (almost equal male-female distribution), SES mean of 1.93 (mostly lower to middle), and education level mean of 1.99 (moderate education). Standard deviations indicate moderate variability across all variables.

CORRELATION ANALYSIS

CORRELATIONS

	RSS	SID	IOUS
RSS	1	-0.132 .001	-0.278 .003
SID	-0.132 .001	1	-0.295 .002
IOUS	-0.278 .003	-0.295 .002	1



The correlation table reveals statistically significant negative relationships among the three variables. The Religiosity and Spirituality Scale (RSS) shows a weak negative correlation with Suicidal Ideation (SID) ($r = -0.132$, $p = .001$) and a moderate negative correlation with Intolerance of Uncertainty (IOUS) ($r = -0.278$, $p = .003$). This suggests that higher levels of spirituality are associated with fewer suicidal thoughts and lower intolerance of uncertainty. Furthermore, SID and IOUS are moderately negatively correlated ($r = -0.295$, $p = .002$), indicating that individuals with greater suicidal ideation are more likely to struggle with uncertainty. All correlations are statistically significant at the $p < .01$ level.

REGRESSION ANALYSIS
COEFFICIENTS^A

		Unstandardized		Standardized		
		Coefficients		Coefficients		
Model		B	Std. Error	Beta	T	Sig.
1	(Constant)	18.230	4.210		4.330	.000
	RSS	-0.450	0.110	-0.320	-4.091	.000

a. Dependent Variable: SID

The regression analysis reveals a significant negative relationship between the predictor variable, RSS (Religiosity and Spirituality Scale), and the dependent variable. The unstandardized coefficient ($B = -0.450$) indicates that for each one-unit increase in RSS, the dependent variable decreases by 0.450 units, assuming all other variables are held constant. The standardized coefficient ($Beta = -0.320$) reflects a moderate negative effect. A t-value of -4.091 and a p-value of .000 confirm that this relationship is statistically significant. Additionally, the constant value of 18.230 represents the estimated value of the dependent variable when RSS is equal to zero.

COEFFICIENTS^A

		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
Model		B	Std. Error	Beta	T	Sig.
1	(Constant)	4.106	30.500		4.106	.000
	RSS	-2.150	0.620	-0.380	-3.468	.001

a. Dependent Variable: IOUS

The regression analysis indicates that the Religiosity and Spirituality Scale (RSS) has a significant negative impact on the Intolerance of Uncertainty Scale (IOUS). Specifically, the unstandardized coefficient of -2.150 means that for every one-unit increase in RSS, the IOUS score decreases by 2.15 units, assuming all other variables remain constant. The standardized Beta value of -0.380 reflects a moderate negative effect. With a t-value of -3.468 and a p-value of .001, the relationship is statistically significant. In simpler terms, higher levels of spirituality are linked to lower levels of life uncertainty among participants.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explore the influence of spirituality on suicidal ideation and life uncertainty among Afghan refugees, drawing on existential theory. The results demonstrated a significant negative correlation between spirituality and both suicidal thoughts and feelings of life uncertainty, indicating that higher spirituality levels are linked to reduced suicidal ideation and diminished life uncertainty (Taliaferro et al, 2009).

These findings support existing research highlighting spirituality's protective role in managing psychological distress, particularly in populations exposed to prolonged trauma and displacement (Gibson et al, 2023). For Afghan refugees, who frequently endure war-related trauma, socio-political instability, and cultural disruption, spirituality may act as a stabilizing force that provides meaning, hope, and emotional resilience (Crawford, Wright & Masten, 2006). It offers a framework for interpreting suffering, regaining a sense of control, and fostering existential security, allowing individuals to navigate uncertainty with greater psychological stability (Binder, 2024). The Religiosity and Spirituality Scale (RSS) effectively measured participants' spiritual beliefs and practices, revealing that those with a stronger spiritual foundation experienced significantly lower levels of suicidal ideation and uncertainty, underscoring the importance of integrating spiritual resources into psychosocial interventions for this vulnerable population.

Moreover, the findings indicate that spirituality not only mitigates suicidal ideation and life uncertainty but also functions as a vital coping mechanism in the face of prolonged displacement and chronic stress (Michael, 2000). Afghan refugees frequently encounter challenges such as social loss, instability, and restricted access to mental health resources, which can heighten feelings of hopelessness. In this context, spirituality provides meaning, purpose, and a sense of control, allowing individuals to reinterpret adversity and maintain emotional equilibrium (Ellison & Burdette, 2012). By fostering hope, resilience, and interconnectedness, spiritual beliefs facilitate adaptive coping and reduce existential distress (Van Uden & Zondag, 2016). These results underscore the importance of integrating spiritual dimensions into psychosocial interventions, as doing so may enhance psychological well-being and lower suicide risk (sisask et al, 2008). Aligned with existential theory, this study highlights that addressing existential concerns through spiritual frameworks can be particularly protective for trauma-exposed populations. The Religiosity and Spirituality Scale (RSS) confirmed that participants with stronger spiritual foundations consistently reported lower suicidal ideation and life uncertainty, reinforcing spirituality's role as a stabilizing and protective factor in the mental health of Afghan refugees (Alemi et al, 2018).

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTION

This study has certain limitations that need to be considered. To begin with, the findings are based on self-reported information, which may be influenced by social desirability or fear of judgment—especially given the sensitive nature of issues like suicide. Moreover, the sample may not fully capture the diversity within the wider Afghan refugee community, as participants' cultural, religious, and regional backgrounds can differ considerably. The cross-sectional design of the research also restricts the ability to establish causal links or to explore outcomes over time. Lastly, spirituality is often shaped by one's immediate life situation, which makes it difficult to assess it as a stable or enduring factor.

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