



THE ROLE OF SPIRITUALITY ON SUICIDE PREVENTION AND WELL-BEING: AN EXPLORATORY INQUIRY

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ABSTRACT

In India, the suicide rates among the youth have been growing rapidly. There has also been a significant rise during the Covid-19 pandemic when individuals were isolated, socially distant and felt uncertain about the future. This study aims to explore the role of spirituality on suicide prevention among young adults in India. The recruitment of 50 young adults (18- 25 years) using counselling centres in universities and social media was done. The individuals eligible were then invited for an in-depth interview based on a semi-structured guide with open-ended questions. A phenomenological approach was used to derive the themes and emerging constructs related to suicidal ideation, understanding spirituality and its techniques as well as the effects it has on an individual. Our results show that spirituality does act a buffer against suicidal ideations and helps in improving an individual's well-being. This paper is a humble attempt by the authors to get a deeper understanding of spirituality and its techniques implemented by them to deal with stressful situations and negative thoughts. The implications mention that interventions implementing spirituality or some aspect of it can help people tackle negative thoughts.

Keywords: spirituality, well-being, suicidal thoughts, college students

1. INTRODUCTION

Suicide remains a global issue with over 800,000 people dying from suicide every year (WHO, 2014). It has been found to be one of the leading causes of death among young people. The number of suicides had also witnessed a rise during the Covid-19 pandemic especially in India (National Crime Records Bureau, 2019). Suicidal behaviour which is usually a precursor to suicide is a public health and social cause of concern globally (Kolves & De Leo, 2016). India is reporting a high prevalence of suicidal behaviour among young people, including college students.

WHO in one reports showed that (2020) in India, per 100,000 population there are 0.3 psychiatrists, 0.12 nurses, 0.07 psychologists, and 0.07 social workers, while the desirable number is anything above 3 psychiatrists and psychologists per 100,000 population. There is emphasis in suicide research to understand the risk and protective factors of it due to the lack of mental health professionals in the country. It is of essence therefore that basic and simple strategies be incorporated in one's life to help us tackle problems at an early stage. Spirituality comes under the umbrella of positive psychology (Seligman, 2002) which aims to develop and promote a person's strengths but at the same time be consciously aware of our weaknesses. Positive psychology interventions have been designed in such a way that they are self-reinforcing and therefore can be easily implemented with the help of initial guidance from a professional or an intervention. It is a practice that has been around for centuries and inculcated in the Eastern culture too.

Researches have shown how spirituality can help in promoting overall well-being of an individual and can equip them to tackle with stressors in the future. They have a multi-dimensional effect on various aspects of an individual's life, namely social, psychological, physical, emotional. They have also stated how it can help in the reduction of suicidal behaviour (Colucci 2008, 2009a, 2009b; Colucci and Lester 2013) and promote overall well-being.

Through this study, we aim to understand how spirituality can act as a buffer against suicidal thoughts by interviewing individuals who have incorporated spirituality into their daily lives.

It also helps us understand how spirituality has the potential to prevent suicide and therefore should be incorporated in intervention strategies aiming to reduce suicidal behaviour.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Sample

Informed consent was taken from the participants who were university students from Maharashtra. For the study, a total of 150 participants were screened for suicidal ideations who were 18 years and above. This was a voluntary participation study. They were intimated about this study through the university counselling centres and social media. Out of these 50 students with no suicidal ideations who practise spirituality were contacted by the researcher for an in-depth interview. They were given a brief introduction of the nature of the research after which the consent was taken to conduct the interview.

A qualitative approach was selected for this study as it is crucial to understand the potential of spirituality on reducing suicidal behaviour and improving an individual's well-being. We used this approach to explore how spirituality and its practices can help in overall well-being of a person and be a potential buffer against suicide. (Colucci and Martin 2008).

2.2 Data Collection

The aim of the study was to explore and understand the meaning of spirituality and their effects on university students who have inculcated it into their routine and lives and how it

affects their well-being and if it has the potential to act a buffer against suicide. To get an in-depth understanding into this we used a semi-structured interview procedure to understand the various aspects of it.

2.3 Data Analysis

The interview consisted of open-ended and was recorded and later transcribed. Thereafter the coding of the transcriptions was done verbatim and organised into meaningful primary themes and their sub-themes were generated following the guidelines of Barun and Clarke (2006).

3. RESULTS

TABLE 1
SOCIO DEMOGRAPHIC DETAILS OF THE PARTICIPANTS

		FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
RELIGION	Hinduism	30	60%
	Buddhism	10	10%
	Islam	10	10%
EDUCATION	Undergraduate	25	25%
	Postgraduate	25	25%
SES	Low	5	5%
	Middle	35	35%
	Upper	10	10%
FAMILY STRUCTURE	Nuclear	27	27%
	Joint	13	13%
	Single Parent	10	10%

TABLE 2
THEMES AND SUB-THEMES

S.No.	Themes	Sub Themes
1	Perceived reasons for suicidal ideations	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Equate it with peace 2. Escape from reality 3. Perceived worthlessness, helplessness and hopelessness
2	Understanding of Spirituality	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Calmness 2. Positive emotions 3. Belief in something powerful in the universe 4. Self-awareness
3	Effects of spirituality	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Psychological 2. Physical 3. Cognitive 4. Social
4	Techniques to practice spirituality	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Meditation 2. Mindfulness techniques

3.1 Thematic Analysis: It was done for the generation of themes and sub-themes.

THEME 1- PERCEIVED REASONS FOR SUICIDAL IDEATIONS

The reasons for suicidal ideations differed from individual to individual. It ranged from equating it to peace, few of them said it was an escape from reality and perceived feelings of being worthless, helpless or hopeless. The perceived reasons were mainly seen in these three ways.

1.1- Equate it with peace

The individuals stated that the perceived reasons for suicidal ideations differed in various ways. Most of them had a perception that suicide was the answer to end one's stress, suffering and psychological pain. They felt this was the way out for to be at peace with oneself and end the negativity which was a distortion.

"I think some people feel lost sometimes and think suicide is easier that way sometimes. I feel they are looking for solutions suicide is that solution to all their problems and that gives me peace. That there is some solution to the pain" (21/F, Interview 1).

1.2 – Equate it with escape from reality

It was found that thinking about ending one's life was associated with the perception of escaping the pain. It didn't necessarily mean that a person wants to die, but that they must be feeling so overwhelmed emotionally that suicide seemed like the only plausible solution to their problems. This also gives an insight into how important it is for an individual to have healthy thinking patterns.

"I've seen individuals who want instant relief from their problems and are looking for an easy escape just to ease the pain. More than ending their life they just want to run away or escape from the pain." (24/M, Interview 6).

1.3 – Perceived worthlessness, helplessness and hopelessness

Another reason why individuals experience suicidal thoughts is due to feeling helpless, hopeless or worthless when stressful situations occur. They tend to internalize their pain and experience negative emotions. They may also find it difficult to find healthy coping strategies due to which they feel trapped.

"Feelings of being not being good enough or adequate enough tend to make a person think about ending it all. They tend to view themselves in a very negative manner" (24/M, Interview number 10).

THEME 2- UNDERSTANDING OF SPIRITUALITY

This theme gave us an understanding of how the current generation or youth view and describe spirituality. What does it mean to them and the experiences, emotions associated with their spiritual practices which gives it meaning.

2.1. – Calmness

Spirituality was described as experiencing a sense of calmness, peace and reduced negative thoughts and feelings of fulfilment. The participants realised how spiritual practices made them feel more grounded, less overwhelmed and in control of their thoughts and emotions.

"I equate spirituality to feeling calm and embracing the little things around me which I would earlier take for granted" (22/F, Interview number 2).

2.2. – Positive Emotions

Spirituality was also described as when one experiences positive emotions, like happiness, calmness, hope and optimism about the present and future.

"I started feeling like my life had meaning to it. I enrolled in a course and was also dedicating time to myself so I felt better, more positive, happier and more optimistic for what the future holds." (23/M, Interview number 7).

2.3 – Belief in something powerful in the universe

Another meaning given to spirituality was describing it as a force that one believes in or experiences that comes from the cosmos and universe, something intangible that cannot necessarily be seen or touched but can be felt.

“I feel there is a force which no one can see but just experience and can help bring about positive changes in oneself, if we consciously make an effort to look within ourselves, that for me explains spirituality” (24/F, Interview number 27).

2.4. – Self-awareness

Another way in which spirituality was explained was having an increased sense of self knowledge and awareness. Understanding who they are as a person and their emotions, thoughts. Being conscious about their triggers and how to manage them effectively.

“For me spirituality would mean having an insight and knowledge about yourself, your thoughts, emotions, triggers and actively doing something to help oneself” (23/M, Interview number 31).

THEME 3 – EFFECTS OF SPIRITUALITY

There were many positive effects stated by the participants which affected various domains of their life, namely, psychological, physical, cognitive and social. It was found that spirituality improved the well-being in all these aspects of their lives in varying degrees.

3.1 – Psychological effects

It was found that spirituality has positive effects on the participants psychological and emotional well-being. It was reported that stress levels were reduced and there was an increase in positive emotions.

“You feel this ease and lightness emotionally, meaning there’s no heaviness, I wake up feeling fresh and ready to seize the day” (23/F, Interview number 1).

3.2. – Physical effects

One aspect that was described reduced physical problems like, stomach pains, headaches, profusely sweating during stressful situations due spirituality.

“My digestion has significantly improved, I used to have a lot of problems related to it but after chanting verses on a regular basis, I get relief and feel less drained” (23/M, Interview number 8).

3.3 – Cognitive effects

Another aspect where individuals found significant improvement was in their cognitive abilities like their memory, attention and thinking due to spiritual practises.

“Paying attention, or even concentrating in class seemed like a task, earlier but I’ve noticed a shift in my concentration levels and to be mentally present in the moment. My memory has improved a lot too” (23/M, Interview number 9).

3.4. – Social effects

Spirituality was found to help in reducing feelings of isolation, help promote feelings of belongingness, which is a crucial element to reducing suicidal ideations as described by Joiner (2005).

“Even when I was surrounded by my friends at a party, I still felt extremely alone and distant, like I couldn’t connect with them. But after practising meditation, I experience more positive emotions and feel better about myself which gives me the motivation and confidence to talk to others too” (24/F, Interview number 4).

THEME 4 – TECHNIQUES TO PRACTISE SPIRITUALITY

These talk about the various methods of implementing spirituality in our lives. Simple, basic methods that do not require too many resources to practise but just time and patience to be dedicated to. Some individuals also stated that as they started noticing an improvement in their well-being they automatically made sure to practise their spirituality technique on a regular basis as it helped them achieve their goals.

4.1.- Meditation

One of the most common techniques for practising spirituality as stated by the participants was found to be meditation. They found deep breathing exercises, helped in their attention and concentration and be more present in the moment. It also helped them gain control of their emotions and accept them and finding healthy ways to channel them out or deal with them.

“I joined an online meditation class during the lockdown and it made so much of a difference, I felt more at peace, less isolated and started having a more positive outlook to life and changes around” (25/F, Interview number 11).

4.2. – Mindfulness techniques

Mindfulness is a term gaining popularity among the GenZ or current generation, and the essence of it lies in the fact that it can be implemented at anytime and anywhere. It has been found to be a calming, relaxing technique of helping one understand, recognise and be in control of their emotions or behaviour. Mindfulness can be practised in the form of meditation, cooking, cleaning, or walking.

“Simple things like being aware of what I am doing in the moment, what I’m thinking and feeling helps me feel more in control and less overwhelmed. I love cooking, it’s the time I feel most happy so I enhance on that feeling by consciously being ore present while adding ingredients to the dish and then enjoying the outcome with my family” (24/M, Interview number 39).

4. DISCUSSION

The current study explores the student’s understanding and experience of spirituality, its practices as well as the effects of the spiritual practices in their lives. The responses of the participants revealed important components like perceived reasons for suicide, how spirituality was associated with the meaning of calmness, self-awareness, positive emotions and adding more meaning to life. There were various themes that emerged which showed that spirituality practices helped in reducing feelings of isolation and negative thinking patterns and improve cognitive abilities which have been recognised as protective factors against suicide (Colucci 2008, 2009a; Lenzi et al. 2012; Poll and Smith 2003).Through this section, we will discuss how spirituality can act as a buffer against suicidal behaviour.

Majority of the participants stated that inculcating spiritual practices and mindfulness techniques in their lives enhanced their well-being in various domains of their lives. Improved well-being automatically helps a person have more positive thoughts, emotions and behaviour and in turn can tackle stressors effectively. This acts as a buffer against suicidal behaviour.

There are several theories given by psychologists which highlight the variables and factors that lead to a person in displaying suicidal behaviour or feeling suicidal (Joiner, 2005), lacking the ability to handle stressors in a healthy manner, challenges and emotional difficulties which become difficult to manage cause a person to contemplate about suicide.

It is of absolute essence that a person should learn basic coping strategies to deal with these emotional difficulties so they can develop or build their perseverance. Through this character strength they can learn how to deal with problems in a healthier manner rather than resorting to suicide as the only solution.

One important domain that spirituality impacted for our participants was their social life and support as mentioned by them. During the Covid-19 pandemic, due to restrictions and a lockdown being imposed, many people felt socially isolated. Social isolation has been an indicator of suicidal thoughts (Durkheim [1897] 1951; Van Orden et al. 2010). However, due to

joining online mindfulness classes, meditation or even chanting, it has increased a sense of belongingness to the community, social connectedness and positive emotions of interacting with people who have shared common interests i.e. spiritual practices which act a protective factors against suicidal behaviour (Seybold and Hill 2001).

Previous research has also stated spirituality contributes to the development of positive emotions and well-being (Larson et al, 1998). The participants reported experiencing positive emotions like happiness, perseverance, hope, optimism, calmness, capability about their present and future after practising spirituality for some time. They stated instances where stressful situations which earlier caused unpleasant emotions can now manage the situation in an efficient manner maintaining the positive outlook they have developed.

5. CONCLUSION

The 50 students who took part in this study have actively been practising spirituality in their daily lives in some form or the other. These practices have helped them in tackling negative thoughts and stressful situations that they have encountered or might encounter in the future by building resources and tools to deal with emotions which affects their well-being. In conclusion, because of the positive effect spirituality and its practices have on our mental health, it needs to be incorporated in some form through intervention programs to facilitate suicide prevention which is a rampant social issue. Through the data obtained the authors were able to establish a positive relationship between spirituality and the overall mental health and well-being of an individual. This gives more support to the notion that spirituality can help reduce suicidal behaviour through spiritual therapy or interventions which researchers have been trying to prove since a long time

6. IMPLICATIONS

1. Spirituality can be incorporated in future suicide interventions to reduce suicidal behaviour and enhance overall well-being
2. It can be incorporated in the daily routine of students in schools and universities to deal with stress and help build resilience

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