



## Research Paper:

# The Predictive Role of Spiritual Wellbeing in Social Anxiety of Al-Zahra University Students, Iran, 2019



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## ABSTRACT

**Background and Objectives:** Social anxiety disorder is one of the most common anxiety disorders. It presents with a persistent fear of one or more social or functional situations and is highly prevalent. This study aimed to investigate the predictive role of spiritual wellbeing in social anxiety.

**Methods:** The method of research was descriptive correlational. The study population included all students of Al-Zahra University in the 2018-2019 academic year. The cluster random sampling method was used to recruit 290 samples. Data collection tools included social phobia inventory and spiritual wellbeing. A correlation and multivariate regression test was used to analyze the data.

**Results:** The results showed that the dimensions of spiritual wellbeing have a negative relationship with social anxiety. Based on these results, the correlation coefficient ( $r=0.157$ ) between the total score of spiritual wellbeing and social anxiety is significant ( $P<0.01$ ). Also, the results showed that the spiritual wellbeing variable explains 10% of the changes in social anxiety.

**Conclusion:** According to these findings, planning, and teaching to promote students' spiritual wellbeing are essential in reducing their social anxiety.

## Introduction

Social anxiety is one of the most common and chronic anxiety disorders. Its prevalence rate is about 8% to 13% [1]. People with this disorder have a strong and significant fear of presence in social or functional situations [2]. These fears predominantly are the fear of embarrass-

ment or shame, rejection or humiliation, stupidity, and clumsiness, being the center of attention, or negatively evaluated by others [3]. The most common triggers for fear include meeting new people, talking in public, talking to peers, presenting in class, social activities, and interacting with others [4]. Because they have negative and distorted thoughts and images of themselves in front of people [5]. They try to avoid social places and situa-

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tions that put them at risk of being reviewed, humiliated, or negatively evaluated by others [4].

The prevalence of social anxiety is high, especially among young people [6]. In one study, the prevalence of this disorder in the Iranian community (Golestan City) was reported at 10% [7].

This disorder starts in 80% of cases from the beginning of adolescence to the second decade of life (youth) [8]. So students are at risk of this condition. Experiencing social anxiety as a student, along with other stresses in life, negatively affects different aspects of life, especially since this period is a prelude to starting adult life and career decision-making. About 85% of students with social anxiety experience problems with their academic and professional performance due to poor communication skills, interpersonal relationships, and social needs [9].

Social anxiety is associated with several variables, and influential factors lead to creating or coping with it. However, after the emergence of positive psychology in recent years, many tried to clarify concepts such as spiritual and mental wellbeing and other positive psychological structures. In recent years, spirituality and religious confrontation have come to the attention of many psychologists and counselors as effective strategies for dealing with confusion and distress [10]. Much research supports the hypothesis that spiritual wellbeing can enhance psychological functioning and adaptability. Religion can positively affect mental health by participating people in social activities and creating social support [11]. In this regard, the results of studies showed that spirituality has a significant effect on interpersonal relationships so that spirituality can strengthen the psychological function of adaptation [12, 13]. However, contradictory findings have been found in this regard, which adds to the need for the present study [14, 15]. So far, studies have focused on the pathology of social anxiety, but factors on the occurrence and severity of this disorder have received less attention. Spiritual health is one of the factors that play a role in effective psychological function today. Therefore, the present study aims to answer whether spiritual wellbeing is related to students' social anxiety.

## Methods

This research is a descriptive correlational study. The study population included all students of Al-Zahra University in the 2018-2019 academic year. Using Krejcie and Morgan table, the sample size was estimated at 300. The samples were recruited by cluster random sampling method. First, out of ten faculties, four faculties were selected

by lot. Then, three courses were chosen randomly from each faculty. These courses are considered in each university year, and students from all years participated in the research. In the end, all individuals in the selected fields completed the questionnaires. The age range of the participants was 18 to 33 years. Due to incomplete completion of the questionnaire by the 10 participants, 290 completed questionnaires were used for final analysis. Also, the participants' written informed consent was obtained.

Data collection tools included the Spiritual Wellbeing questionnaire (SWB) and Social Phobia Inventory (SPIN). The spiritual wellbeing questionnaire was developed by Dehshiri et al. among students of Tehran universities. It includes 40 questions scored on a 5-point Likert scale from "strongly agree" to "completely disagree" [16]. This questionnaire has four subscales of "connection with God", "connection with self", "connection with nature", and "connection with others". By adding scores of 40 questions, the total score of spiritual wellbeing is obtained. The minimum and maximum scores that a person can receive in this questionnaire are 40 and 200, respectively. The Cronbach  $\alpha$  coefficient of the whole questionnaire was 0.94, and its  $\alpha$  subscale coefficients were 0.93, 0.92, 0.91, and 0.85. Also, the reliability coefficient of retesting the questionnaire was 0.86, and its subscales were 0.81, 0.89, 0.81, and 0.80, respectively [17].

Another tool for collecting information was the Social Phobia Inventory (SPIN). The questionnaire measures three clinical areas of social anxiety, namely physiological signs, avoidance, and fear. This questionnaire has advantages such as shortness and simplicity of scoring and can be used in large populations such as students. This tool is scored on a 5-point Likert scale from 4=very high to 3=high, 2=somewhat, 1=low, and 0=not at all [18]. Based on the results obtained to interpret the scores, the 40 point cutoff point with 80% accuracy detection efficiency and the 50 point cutoff point with 89% efficiency distinguishes people with social phobia from those who are not. This questionnaire has high reliability and validity. Its reliability by retesting method in groups diagnosed with a social anxiety disorder was 0.78 to 0.89, and its internal consistency coefficient (the Cronbach  $\alpha$ ) was reported to be 0.94 in the normal group [19]. In this study, the Cronbach  $\alpha$  coefficients to investigate the internal consistency of the questionnaire were found for the whole scale and subscales of physiological signs, avoidance, and fear as 0.89, 0.83, 0.82, and 0.80, respectively.

The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (Mean $\pm$ SD), and to examine the correlation between spiritual wellbeing and social anxiety used the Pearson

correlation coefficient was used in this study. Furthermore, the effect of the predictive variable was investigated using regression analysis.

## Results

Based on the study's findings, 235 participants were in the age range of 17 to 28 years (81%), and 30 were in the age group of 29 years and above (10.3%). About 44.8% of the participants were undergraduates, and 55.2% were graduates. Table 1 presents a summary of the descriptive findings of the research variables. Table 2 presents the correlation matrix with research variables.

The results show a significant negative correlation between all subscales of spiritual wellbeing and social anxiety with a confidence level of 0.99. This correlation was not significant only in the subscales of connection with others with physiological signs. Based on these results, the correlation coefficient between the total score of spiritual wellbeing and social anxiety (0.157) is significant ( $P < 0.01$ ). These results mean that spiritual wellbeing is inversely related to social anxiety, and higher spiritual wellbeing is associated with lower social anxiety.

Table 3 shows the results of regression analysis of spiritual wellbeing for predicting social anxiety. The statistical test results of multivariate regression between spiritual wellbeing and social anxiety showed that the determination coefficient was 0.102. Therefore 10% of the social anxiety variance is explained by spiritual wellbeing. In other words, 10% of the changes in social anxiety are due to the variable of spiritual wellbeing.

## Discussion

The results of the present study showed a correlation between social anxiety and spiritual wellbeing. Spiritual wellbeing negatively predicted social anxiety. The relationship of subscales in both variables is also significant. Only the relationship of "communication with others" with "physiological signs" is not significant. These findings are consistent with the results of several other studies [4, 6, 7]. In line with the present findings, a study showed that spiritual intelligence has a significant negative relationship with perceived stress, anxiety, and depression. Increasing spiritual intelligence decreases perceived stress, anxiety, and depression in students [20] and old adults [21]. Some studies were inconsistent with the present study [11, 14]. When people have a high spiritual feeling, they have a meaningful relationship with themselves, others, the world, and God, which significantly reduces their fear and thus reduces the amount of avoidance. The person feels confident and takes action to do what they are afraid of.

Regarding the physiological signs and lack of relationship with the subscale of communication with others, it can be said that this variable depends on physiological changes in the body. Besides, several physical factors are involved in its experience. Also, communication with oneself, the world, and God can be the basis of communication with others and, as a result, have a strong relationship with all variables of social anxiety. In addition, in explaining the lack of relationship between communication with others and physiological signs, it can be said that people with social anxiety in front of others experience

**Table 1.** Mean $\pm$ SD of spiritual wellbeing and social anxiety

Variables	Mean $\pm$ SD
Spiritual Wellbeing	174.37 $\pm$ 17.62
Connection with God	44.91 $\pm$ 5.28
Connection with self	42.43 $\pm$ 6.11
Connection with nature	44.21 $\pm$ 5.06
Connection with others	43.78 $\pm$ 4.39
Social phobia	16.09 $\pm$ 11.17
Fear	5.58 $\pm$ 4.11
Avoidance	6.73 $\pm$ 4.83
Physiological signs	3.83 $\pm$ 3.17

**Table 2.** Correlation matrix between spiritual wellbeing and social anxiety

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1- Connection with God	1						
2- Connection with self	0.605*	1					
3- Connection with nature	0.496*	0.602*	1				
4- Connection with others	0.599*	0.633*	0.690*	1			
5- Fear	-0.195*	-0.40*	-0.201*	-0.217*	1		
6- Avoidance	-0.176*	-0.324*	-0.192*	-0.224*	0.807*	1	
7- Physiological signs	-0.120*	-0.120*	-0.112*	-0.099	0.806*	0.704*	1

\* P&lt;0.01.

more excitement, shame, embarrassment, and sometimes anger. As a result, they experience less anxiety in the form of physical symptoms and experience other emotions and symptoms more than anxiety [5]. Experiencing emotions such as shame and embarrassment can also be due to one's fundamental thoughts. Because according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, people with social anxiety in front of others think they are going to be ridiculed or embarrassed.

A positive connection with God means a connection to a powerful resource that can give a person a sense of control. Having a sense of control leads to increased mental health and adaptability, and positive interaction with others. In addition, people who feel supported can relax when they experience anxiety [8]. High spirituality in individuals or high spiritual experience also leads to a good connection with others [4]. Because spirituality emphasizes a good connection with others. The presence of a spiritual sense reduces the level of social anxiety in people. Good connection with others creates positive emotions that reduce anxiety [14]. A person with a good connection with others has a source of support and a sense of worth and confidence. Another study found that spiritual intelligence leads to increased autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive communication, purposefulness in life, and self-acceptance [22].

From these findings, the correlation between spiritual wellbeing and social anxiety can be understood. Promoting personal growth, a sense of autonomy, positive communication, purposefulness, and self-acceptance can all affect a person's relationship with themselves and others, thus reducing their anxiety about dealing with others. People with social anxiety are afraid of judging by others, and when the components mentioned above are high, people's fear of judgment and, consequently, their level of social anxiety decreases [23]. There is also a correlation between spiritual wellbeing and effective coping styles and reducing high-risk behaviors in adolescents [24]. Thus, it can be said that spiritual wellbeing can help people to deal with their anxiety by influencing coping styles. In this regard, Koenig also states that people's spiritual beliefs provide rules for guiding and confronting them with problems and enable them to cope [25].

Another study showed a correlation between spiritual wellbeing and hope and student satisfaction [26]. The same results are also found in the elderly group [27] and linked to reduced death anxiety [28, 29]. In another study, there was a relationship between spiritual intelligence and religious orientation with psychological wellbeing and students' existential anxiety [30]. Low spiritual intelligence also predicted high social anxiety in students [31]. Peltzer and Koenig studied a large sample

**Table 3.** Regression analysis of spiritual wellbeing to predict social anxiety

Model	B	Standard Error	$\beta$	t	R	R Squared	F	P
Constant	51.77	6.681		7.749				
Spiritual wellbeing	-0.205	0.038	-0.320	-5.370	0.320	0.102	28.837	0.0001

of black students in South Africa. They found that some religiosity variables were positively associated with mental health, while others were inversely related or unrelated [14]. Some of the mechanisms were proposed in the background of religion and optimal health behaviors (substance abuse, diet), social and sensory support of the meaning of life [32, 33], as another mechanism for how religion and health work, religion and spirituality are essential factors in a person's life and pursuit of their daily goals. A person's connection with a supernatural force may be called God, spirit, nature, or the force of unity. A relatively significant amount of research has shown that the general population, who identify themselves as religious and spiritual, have less psychological distress, more life satisfaction, and more success in their life goals [34]. The inconsistency of some studies' results [11, 14] with the present finding could be due to differences in the samples and the tools used in the research.

## Conclusion

The present study showed a relationship between spiritual wellbeing and its relations with social anxiety. When spiritual wellbeing is high, a person has lower social anxiety. This finding can be used for educational programs to reduce student anxiety. Teaching and promoting spiritual wellbeing can result in increased mental health. Communicating with others and the community is a prerequisite for students' success, so reducing their social anxiety can increase efficiency.

The study had some limitations. The sample was only female students. It is also suggested for future studies that other psychological variables in the relationship between spirituality and social anxiety be examined using the structural equation method.

## Ethical Considerations

### Compliance with ethical guidelines

In this article, ethical principles including informed consent and confidentiality of information have been observed. The study was confirmed by the Research Center Faculty of Educational Sciences and Psychology of Alzahra University (IR.ALZAHRA.REC.1398.3245).

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## Authors' contributions

All authors equally contributed to preparing this article.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

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