

The Mental Health Benefits and Costs of Sabbath Observance Among Orthodox Jews

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Abstract This study aimed to examine the perceived psychological costs and benefits of Sabbath (*Shabbos*) observance among 13 practising Jews, 9 UK residents and 4 US residents. Emerging themes were as follows: Shabbos as a special day, giving time to contemplate on profound issues, withdrawal and rest from mundane concerns, and deepening relationships. These aspects can potentially improve feelings of mental well-being, and were indeed often said to do so. Some difficulties were described: some found they were prone to worry more on Shabbos because of the freedom from distractions, and there were reports of the difficulties of explaining to non-Jewish work colleagues the religious need to be free from work commitments. These findings were related to the literature on religious ritual observance and generally accord with other work in anthropology and psychology of religion examining the psychological impact of ritual. Work on the mental health implications of ritual observance needs to be expanded. It has received only limited attention, and understanding has been constrained by a misleading confusion between ritual and

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obsessionality. Other impacts of religion on mental health are better documented and understood, and religious ritual and its impact needs further documentation and attention.

Introduction

There is by now a large literature, suggesting that religious involvement positively impacts upon mental health and well-being and that religion and spirituality may serve as psychological and social resources for coping with stress (Koenig et al. 2001, 2012). A preponderance of studies indicates that church attendance and level of religious belief predict better mental health outcomes. In the past few years, the literature has broadened and has moved beyond general indices of religious observance and belief to focus upon religious coping. Pargament (1997) differentiates two types of religious coping. Positive religious coping which involves a supportive confiding relationship with God is generally related to positive mental health. In contrast, negative religious coping involving religious struggle, doubt and anger towards God may be detrimental to mental health. Compared to studies of religious belief, observance and coping, the area of religious experience and mental health has received relatively less attention (Dein 2011). As Hill and Pargament (2003) note, the current literature on religion and health is characterised by a limited conceptualisation of religious variables, and the role of specific religious practices and experiences such as ritual, symbol and prayer in mediating this link has received relatively less academic attention. Furthermore, as Poloma and Hoelter (1998) note, although discussions of religious ritual are frequently linked to beliefs and myths (in line with the psychology and sociology of religion emphasis on cognition), ritual may be better described through the study of somatic activity and emotional responses.

The Mental Health Impact of Ritual

There is a dearth of research examining the impact of ritual in the mental health literature. Despite Freud's (1907) assertion that the rituals of religion resemble those found in obsessive–compulsive disorder (Lewis 1998), there is some evidence that the performance of ritual is conducive to better mental health (Schumaker 1992). Beyond affirming faith, ritual, worship and prayer invoke aid and comfort by a deity when the supplicant is unable to exercise mastery, power and control over the everyday world. From a psychological point of view, rituals reduce anxiety and uncertainty (Benson and Stark 1996; Hinde 1999; Pruyser 1968), create meaning in life, foster personal identity and overcome ambivalence and ambiguity (Erikson 1950). Furthermore, ritual has a communicative role and binds people together, hence enhancing social organisation and sense of community. Pruyser (1968) argues that ritual is adaptive and creates a structure for emotional expression.

Jacobs (1992) notes that ritual appears to counter mental disturbance through its cathartic effects and its potential to create emotional distancing. Drawing on cross-cultural evidence, he demonstrates that ritual can be an outlet for a wide range of emotions. Similarly, Victor Turner (1975) sees ritual as a social drama that assists 'actors' in the pursuit of resolving conflicts and restoring psychic and social equilibrium. The ritual of confession common to many religious traditions is recognised as an effective way of

achieving catharsis (Pennebaker 1997). Finally, as Moore and Meyerhoff (1977) point out, ritual convinces participants of the truth of cultural constructions of reality.

From a religious point of view, the ‘aim’ of rituals is to connect to the sacred, for the believer the social and psychological ‘benefits’ are of secondary importance. They are literally ways of ‘reactualising sacred history that keep people close to the gods—that is, in the real and the significant’ (Eliade 1957). Thus, rituals may have significant mental health benefits and are potentially effective coping strategies. Through their emotion regulating and control functions, they facilitate self-control and counter disordered thinking.

This project specifically focuses on one Jewish ritual—Sabbath observance and its mental health implications. The Sabbath is the weekly day of rest and observance in Judaism as prescribed in the fourth Commandment. It is ushered in by lighting candles just before sunset and is a time for contemplation, study and prayer with an emphasis on family gathering through the Sabbath meal. For those who observe it Shabbat, is a precious gift from God, a day of great joy eagerly awaited throughout the week, a time when we can set aside all of our weekday concerns and devote ourselves to higher pursuits rather than a day of restrictions. In the Jewish literature, poetry and music, Shabbat is described as a bride or queen, as in the popular Shabbat hymn *Lecha Dodi Likrat Kallah* (come, my beloved, to meet the [Sabbath] bride).

The Sabbath: Implications for Mental Health

Kushner (1989: 209) comments that without the ability to make ‘some days and some hours special’, we would live in a ‘flat, monochromatic world, a world without colour, or texture, a world in which all days would be the same’. Goldberg (1986) points out that the Sabbath has been recognised as central symbol of Jewish faith. ‘Six days you shall labour and do all your work but the seventh day is a Sabbath of the Lord, your God. You shall not do any work’ (Ex20:9–10). He suggests that there are many potential mental health benefits. The Sabbath provides opportunities to rest from both physical and mental stresses and introduces a rhythm into the cycle of everyday life. Non-work time is considered holy and provides the possibility of deepening relationships, expressing the emotional dimensions of our being and enjoying the here and now. It detracts from the quotidian struggle for survival emphasising contemplation, meaningful conversation and freedom from mundane and practical concerns. The Friday night meal allows individuals to interact on a deeper level with their families, providing social emotional support, identity, meaning and security from these relationships and facilitating religious coping strategies for responding to emotionally and physically debilitating situations. Finally, it is the weekly disengagement from everyday tasks and concerns that facilitates the conviction that one can control thought, action and emotion, thus enhancing a sense of self-efficacy. Although there has been no empirical work examining the impact of Sabbath observance on mental health, Pargament (2007) provides an example of one woman suffering from depression whose mood lifted following increased Sabbath observance.

Aims

This study examined the perceived benefits of Sabbath observance among Orthodox Jews in the UK and the USA. ($M = 7$, $F = 6$).

Ethics

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the Psychology Department at Royal Holloway, University of London.

Sampling and Methods

The research was designed to employ qualitative analysis, and the number of participants sought was guided by the aim of achieving conceptual saturation (not by statistical power considerations) (e.g. Elliott et al. 1999). A purposive sample of 13 orthodox Jews was recruited in London, UK ($n = 9$), and New York, USA ($n = 4$), 7 men and 6 women, of whom 5 were now-married, 6 single and 2 widowed. The criteria for inclusion were that participants should be adult (over 18), Jewish and self-defined as orthodox and Sabbath observant. Interviews were semi-structured and lasted approximately 1 h. Participants were offered the options of face-to-face interviews (chosen by 7), or if preferred, by telephone or written responses (chosen by 6: 3 written and 3 telephone). Eight interviews were conducted by a male interviewer and 5 by a female interviewer. The age range was 20–81 (mean 44.2).

Questions were the following:

- a. Age, sex, occupation,
- b. How long have you been an observant Jew?
- c. Tell me about your experience of observing the Sabbath
- d. Describe a 'typical' Sabbath. What do you do?
- e. In what ways does the Sabbath differ from the other days of the week?
- f. Do you feel differently during the Sabbath compared to the other weekdays? In what way(s)?
- g. Do you feel the Sabbath has benefits for your well-being? What are these?
- h. Does the Sabbath influence your relationship with other people? How?
- i. What aspects of observing the Sabbath make you feel good?
- j. Are there any negative effects of observing the Sabbath?

Analysis

A thematic analysis was made. Interviews were read by two researchers, and a preliminary identification of themes was made. Thematic reliability was established by the selection of illustrative quotes by one researcher, and where their placement under a thematic heading could not be agreed by both researchers, the list of themes was revised (Elliott et al. 1999; Braun and Clarke 2006).

In the quotations given below, some of the information given was regarded as somewhat personal, and to protect anonymity, we have omitted identifying details. The participants generally used the Ashkenazi pronunciation 'Shabbos' rather than 'Shabbat' and this has been preserved in the quotations below.

Results

Shabbos is Different from Other Days of the Week

Participants described the observance of Shabbos (by not doing weekday work, handling money, using telephone, computing or transport and other forbidden activities) as offering not only rest and relaxation, but also a powerful sense of freedom, enhanced spirituality and the opportunity to reflect on ultimate values. Mood is generally reported as better than on a weekday.

Shabbos is different from other days of the week. I completely unplug from the rest of the world. I shut down electronically. It's a spiritual day. I focus on what matters most, reflect on the week, take a step back from the roles of real life. Spend time with family and friends.

The material and spiritual are normally completely at loggerheads, but on Shabbos just something like sitting at the table and eating chicken soup is spiritual activity.

Shabbos is withdrawal, disengagement from the mundane and the pursuit of the spiritual plane. On Shabbos I am not trying to expand my empire. I am stepping back, appreciating what I have. On Shabbos we have a safety barrier or buffer zone protecting us from mundane deadlines, material worries, exams, bills, etc.

Shabbos is a safe haven. We step away from our worries and involvement with worldly activities. One is innately aware of an elevated atmosphere.

I am not sure if I feel more hopeful, maybe sometimes, but I do feel more separate or disconnected from these worries. Even if I do not feel more hopeful, I do feel better because Shabbos seems to have an elevating effect. Also the community comes together so there is a warm atmosphere in the home and at Shul. This creates a healthier mind frame. Sometimes in the week when they feel in despair, depending on what goes wrong. On Shabbos one feels positive in general even if not simply about the worry.

I would like to think there is a natural order of things whereby things are cyclic. Shabbos is part of that cycle. It is a sort of healing section of that cycle which helps us to face the next challenge. I think it is good to have a break to re-evaluate where one is before returning to face one's life burdens.

Shabbos is a completely different experience to every other working day of the week. It provides a weekly focus and important things in life and not on the ephemeral. One does not have to deal with daily stresses and strains and with the difficulties that throws up every day. We are taught that we are obligated to feel happy on Shabbos so although on Friday nights it can be more challenging set aside in one's mind whatever serious concerns one may be dealing with usually by Shabbos day it is easier not to focus on them so much and a break is a very healthy one. Of course it has tremendous benefits. Too many to list here but just separating oneself from every day serious issues and deadlines I do believe the break has health and constitutional benefits. For me it helps to put the passage of life into perspective.

I feel more relaxed. I do not worry about school work. When it is over the chaos of the real world is back. If you forget to do something there is nothing you can do on Shabbos so your worries are irrelevant. Sometimes because you cannot do anything

about them. However, since you cannot get distracted by electronics you have more time to think about things so bad thoughts tend to escalate.

Shabbos Preparation Fills the Week

It was said that the idea of Shabbos was perpetually present during the week, as something to be anticipated (normally with pleasure and relief), and as something for which practical and sometimes spiritual preparations were to be made well in advance, often on a daily basis.

I suppose in a way Shabbos really starts on a Wednesday morning. In the psalm of the day 94 (for Wednesday) at the end we add “add on” a couple of verses from the next psalm 95 which happen to be the opening verses of Kabbalos Shabbos which we say as a Shabbos begins on Friday evening. This sort of gives us an impression or hint we are counting down to Shabbos which is fast approaching. Then we carry on with Wednesday, Thursday...

It takes the focus of the whole week, though often (it's in the) background, submerged by weekday concerns. But each day I do a bit for Shabbos, shopping, baking, cooking so that it is not too much of a last minute rush.

I look forward to Shabbos to get away from things just when bored your mind tends to wander. Stressed out week, cannot wait for Shabbos.

Shabbos can be Paradoxical. There are Positive Psychological Benefits but Sometimes Worries Worsen

Nevertheless, the freedom from work and weekday concerns was said by some to create a vacuum into which worries and preoccupations may rush, accompanied by a sense of being helpless to take action.

Although you may feel better because of lack of distractions you actually feel more depressed because you think of every day thoughts but you cannot do very much about it.

If you forget to do something there is nothing you can do on Shabbos so your worries are irrelevant. Sometimes because you cannot do anything about them. However, since you cannot get distracted by electronics you have more time to think about things so bad thoughts tend to escalate.

When I am really depressed, God forbid, Shabbos may exacerbate it. If someone was ill would feel more pain on Shabbos, also more time to worry and also the contrast with the non-relaxing Shabbos and depends if something bad has happened already less concern if it might happen but otherwise normally with lesser things worry less.

I am not sure if I feel more hopeful, maybe sometimes, but I do feel more separate or disconnected from these worries. Even if I do not feel more hopeful, I do feel better because Shabbos seems to have an elevating effect. Also the community comes together so there is a warm atmosphere in the home and at Shul. This creates a healthier mind frame. Sometimes in the week when they feel in despair, depending on what goes wrong. On Shabbos one feels positive in general even if not simply about the worry.

Deepening Relationships

The freedom from work and weekday commitments, and the involvement in celebratory meals with family and/or friends was said by many to improve and deepen the quality of family and other social relationships.

I have made lots of friends in Shabbos. Although I said earlier the Shabbos is to the six days of thought to speech does not mean we only think on Shabbos we do not speak to each other. In fact it tends to be that we interact more with friends and family on Shabbos and in the week. Also the nature of the interaction is different in that in the week often we speak to achieve physical and operational goals “did you buy laundry detergent?” On Shabbos we actually communicate and discuss where we are in life and stock take. It is not rigid though. There are obviously moments in Shabbos where we also might ask mundane questions. There are also moments in the week when we may discuss life changing topics. But the theme of six days is Monday and the theme of Shabbos is holy. It usually arrives from additional family and became religious at university.

There is a feeling of wellbeing gathering. The family sit down, talk together, sing and enjoy. The kids come from school excited asking “when is Shabbos?” They bring things from school: drawings, stories, divrei torah (stories, parables and other material based on biblical and rabbinic sources). I learn with them on Shabbos.

I can finally talk to people for hours on end without the usual hustle and bustle of the work week, which normally get in the way.

It allows us to speak without technology blocking our pathway.

It is time to share with one’s family, children, friends and to enjoy the company of guests. There are no phone calls, e-mails, daily grind. It helps one to remember the inevitability of one’s mortality so I would hope with help one to be better, kinder and more tolerant person.

Problems Observing Shabbos

Shabbos observance, even in a relatively tolerant multicultural society, can sometimes be difficult. It is necessary to leave work on Friday in time to reach home well before sunset, and especially in winter, this can mean having to leave work very early. Communication with managers and colleagues was sometimes reported to be difficult.

The only negative effects observing Shabbos - it is a little challenging to explain to others especially in the work place. The only time it gets in the way is when comes to nitty-gritty aspects of Halacha and exists because of ancient things no longer relevant.

I used to explain to colleagues about not being able to teach or attend meetings, or do other work on Friday afternoon and in winter etc. I have always been fortunate in having colleagues who are respectful and understanding. I have always tried not to exploit their good nature and always tried to pull my weight, do my fair share of work, making sure I do some of the horrible chores, if necessary working through some or even all of Saturday night.

Discussion

There has been a dearth of research specifically addressing the mental health benefits of ritual. This semi-structured interview study has examined the mental health implications of the Jewish Sabbath. Although based on a relatively small sample (13), saturation of themes was obtained. While we deployed both face-to-face and written and telephonic interviews, all three methods appeared to produce rich data; i.e. there did not appear to be any difference in the quality of data obtained. Furthermore, in this specific study, the gender of the researcher did not impact upon the quality of data. Although we assumed that this factor might be problematic when interviewing Orthodox Jews, this was not obviously the case in our study.

Many of our findings concur with an earlier study, Goldberg (1986), cited above: a special day, time to contemplate, withdrawal and rest from mundane concerns and deepening relationships. These aspects can potentially improve feelings of mental well-being.

First, in our study, respondents typically asserted that the Sabbath was a special time during which observers could disengage from the mundane world and focus on the sacred. From a religious point of view, the ‘aim’ of rituals is to connect to the sacred, for the believer the social and psychological ‘benefits’ are of secondary importance. They are literally ways of ‘reactualising sacred history that keep people close to the gods—that is, in the real and the significant’ (Eliade 1957: 202). The Sabbath is a time when the distinction between the physical and spiritual collapses.

Respondents noted how its observance gave them time for contemplation; this process was facilitated by the fact that there were no electronic distractions. They could think about deeper matters than during the rest of the week. Although the Shabbos period is clearly defined in Judaism (according to *halakha*, Shabbat is observed from a few minutes before sunset on Friday evening until the appearance of three stars in the sky on Saturday night), individuals prepared for it early in the week and it provided a focus for them to look forward to. But as a few respondents noted, there could be problems working with non-Jewish colleagues who might not be aware of the implications of its observance.

Second, although the majority considered the Sabbath to improve well-being, three individuals pointed out a paradoxical aspect of Sabbath observance. Mundane worries may actually worsen because of lack of distraction. Furthermore, a few assert there is nothing that a person can do about their problems during this period. This lack of control may exacerbate their anxiety and be detrimental to well-being.

Third, the Sabbath is associated with a deepening of relationships. Friends and relative come together join together for meaningful discourse concerning important life issues and it is a focus for emotional expression. They share the here and now. As Pruyser (1968) notes, ritual is adaptive and creates a structure for emotional expression. Furthermore, the Sabbath ritual serves as a form of communication and binds people together, hence enhancing social organisation and sense of community. It is a time for social bonding, not only with friends but between parents and their children as well.

What are the implications for future research? Compared to studies examining religious attendance, belief and coping and their mental health associations, studies of specific religious experiences are rare in the literature. This should be a focus for future research. There is a need for detailed phenomenological studies focusing upon the experiences engendered through ritual performance. For example, within Christianity, the Holy Communion is a widely practised rite, yet we know very little of its emotional associations and their effects on mental well-being. In particular, we require detailed understanding of the processes through which rituals result in affective changes, their impact upon specific

cognitions how this leads to changes in mental health. Beyond a theoretical understanding, this area of research has clinical implications. Pargament (2007) has discussed how rituals are deployed therapeutically in spiritually integrated psychotherapy. This should also be a focus for future research.

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