

Lived Experiences of Spirituality Among University Students Facing Psychosocial Challenges: A Phenomenological Study*

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Abstract

Introduction: Mental health research increasingly highlights internal meaning-making resources, including spirituality, in coping with challenges. This study explores the lived experience of spirituality among university students facing psychosocial difficulties.

Method: A qualitative descriptive phenomenological design was used. Participants were 16 undergraduates from a non-profit university in Qom (2023–2024), selected via criterion-based purposive sampling. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to saturation. Data were analyzed using Colaizzi's method and MAXQDA.20.

Findings: Three main themes emerged: (1) spirituality as psychological resilience—subthemes included spiritual hope, inner peace, and redefining crises; (2) spirituality in relationships and social support, highlighting spiritual dialogue, empathy, belonging, and stress reduction; (3) spirituality as meaning-making, encompassing search for meaning, value reassessment, restoring balance, positive reframing, and post-traumatic growth.

Conclusion: Spirituality, beyond religious practice, serves as a meaning-making and supportive framework for students. These findings can inform mental health interventions and university support programs.

Keywords: Lived experience, Spirituality, Psychosocial challenges.

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Introduction

Today's students face extensive challenges that are not limited to academic issues but also include numerous psychological and social pressures. These challenges encompass academic pressures, economic problems, identity crises, and uncertainty about the future¹. In many cases, students experience feelings of social isolation, loneliness, and diminished psychological health.² These negative experiences can affect academic performance, social relationships, and overall quality of life. Research evidence indicates that students experience significant levels of depression, anxiety, and stress during this period, and the transition to university, new social relationships, academic competition, and economic insecurity can seriously threaten their mental health³.

Research demonstrates that some students possess the ability to overcome these challenges. One important source of resilience and mental health promotion is the inclination toward spirituality. Spirituality can act as an internal resource for individuals, helping them face adversities and hardships⁴. Spirituality is a dimension of human experience related to the search for meaning, connection with the transcendent, and a sense of connectedness with oneself, others, and the world⁵. Recent research has shown that Islamic spirituality and self-efficacy significantly influence students' subjective well-being, and individuals with high levels of spirituality and self-efficacy experience higher levels of well-being. Research by Leung & Pong⁶ and Gonzales-Wong & Harris⁷ has shown that spiritual well-being is associated with reduced symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress among students, with the personal-social dimensions of spirituality being the strongest predictors of lower psychological distress. Furthermore, the sense of meaning in life mediates the relationship between spirituality and

¹ Rina Susanti, Ikhwanisifa Ikhwanisifa, and Ira Damayanti, "Subjective Well-Being in Muslim Students: The Role of Islamic Spirituality and Self-Efficacy," *Psikis: Jurnal Psikologi Islami* 11, no. 1 (2025): 32–47, <https://doi.org/10.19109/psikis.v11i1.25363>.

² A. J. B. Palisoc and A. K. H. Sito, "Combating Social Isolation and Loneliness in Online Distance Learning: Lived Experiences of College Students," *Philippine Social Science Journal* 7, no. 2 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.52006/main.v7i2.930>.

³ Hellen Otanga et al., "Exploring College Students' Biopsychosocial Spiritual Wellbeing and Problems during COVID-19 through a Contextual and Comprehensive Framework," *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction* 20 (2021): 619–638.

⁴ Joseph W. Hayman et al., "Spirituality among College Freshmen: Relationships to Self-Esteem, Body Image, and Stress," *Counseling and Values* 52 (2007): 55–70.

⁵ Omar I. Alorani and Majed T. F. Alradaydeh, "Spiritual Well-Being, Perceived Social Support, and Life Satisfaction among University Students," *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth* 23, no. 3 (2018): 291–298, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2017.1352522>.

⁶ Chi-Hung Leung and H. Pong, "Cross-Sectional Study of the Relationship between the Spiritual Wellbeing and Psychological Health among University Students," *PLoS ONE* 16 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0249702>.

⁷ Gonzales-Wong and Harris, "Sacred Space: Student Supervisees' Experiences of Spiritual Issues."

reduced psychological distress and can act as a protective factor in the university context¹. In positive psychology models, spirituality, along with psychological capital and resilience, helps increase positive emotions and happiness among students².

Alongside these quantitative findings, qualitative and phenomenological studies have shown that spirituality is present within the lived experience of students facing crises and challenges, both as a source of support and meaning and as "spiritual struggle." For example, international students have described religion/spirituality as a central tool for coping with acculturation stress and enhancing their cognitive, psychological, and social functioning³. In another phenomenological study, students' "spiritual suffering" was articulated in terms of encountering conflicts between the ideal self and the real self, the explicit and the implicit, and between self and others. It was shown that these struggles play a significant role in the process of meaning-making and identity formation. Spiritual experiences in the context of crises, such as the⁴ COVID-19 pandemic, have also helped students cope with and even grow through anxieties and psychological isolation by "finding family, finding faith, and finding meaning"⁵.

On the other hand, research in diverse cultural and religious contexts shows that students use spiritual coping strategies, such as prayer, dhikr (remembrance of God), supplication, participation in religious rituals, and reflection on fate, to manage academic stress and role conflicts. These strategies are linked to inner peace, greater resilience, and better adjustment⁶.

Spirituality not only acts as a source of solace and hope but also plays a role in constructing the meaning of gratitude, identity formation, and redefining challenges as opportunities for growth⁷. However, some of the literature also points to "spiritual suffering and tensions"; students who experience feelings of being judged, misunderstood, or silence surrounding their

¹ Aqsa Hira, Fiza Kanwal, and Ayesha Majeed, "The Role of Spirituality against Psychological Distress in University Students: A Focus on Meaning in Life," *Research Journal of Psychology* 3, no. 1 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.59075/rjs.v3i1.52>.

² Palisoc and Sito, "Combating Social Isolation and Loneliness in Online Distance Learning: Lived Experiences of College Students."

³ Sarah Philip et al., "The Impact of Religion/Spirituality on Acculturative Stress Among International Students," *Journal of College Counseling* (2019).

⁴ Rockenbach, Walker, and Luzader, "A Phenomenological Analysis of College Students' Spiritual Struggles," 55–75.

⁵ Niño Asiones, "COVID-19 and the Mental Health Crisis Faced by Students From a Private University in the Philippines: A Phenomenological Study," *The Family Journal* (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1177/10664807231157036>.

⁶ Hellen Otanga et al., "Exploring College Students' Biopsychosocial Spiritual Wellbeing and Problems during COVID-19 through a Contextual and Comprehensive Framework," *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction* 20 (2021): 619–638.

⁷ Ria Marselina, "Phenomenological Study of Spiritual Experience in Individuals Experiencing Identity Crisis," *Acta Psychologia* 3, no. 3 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.35335/psychologia.v3i3.66>.

spiritual beliefs in educational environments have reported a type of isolation and disconnection that can itself affect mental health¹.

Despite the expansion of quantitative and qualitative research on the relationship between spirituality and student mental health, an in-depth understanding of students' own lived experience of spirituality within the context of everyday psychosocial challenges remains limited. Most studies have measured spirituality through questionnaire scores and have paid less attention to how students, in their daily life narratives, experience, interpret, and employ spirituality when facing personal, academic, and social crises². In this regard, a phenomenological approach allows for exploring the subtle dimensions of spirituality—from peace and hope to doubt, conflict, and spiritual transformation—from the first-person perspective of students, clarifying how these dimensions intertwine with psychosocial adjustment³. The present phenomenological study, focusing on students lived experience of spirituality in facing psychosocial challenges, seeks to fill this gap and provide a richer, more contextualized picture of the role of spirituality in student life. At the theoretical level, a deeper understanding is gained of how spirituality functions as a supportive resource for resilience and transforms psychological pressures into opportunities for personal growth. At the practical level, it provides guidance for psychology professionals, academic counselors, and university organizations to make better decisions regarding support programs and psychological interventions for students. Therefore, this research seeks to answer the question: How do students use spirituality in facing psychosocial challenges?

Method

The method of the present study is qualitative, of the descriptive phenomenological type. The phenomenological method is among the most suitable approaches for investigating individuals' experiences in various fields⁴. The research field of this study included undergraduate students at a non-profit university (Toloo-e Mehr) in Qom city during the academic year 2023-2024. Criterion-based purposive sampling was used to select the sample, and 16 individuals were included in the study. Purposive sampling refers to the selection of study units according to specific criteria determined by the researcher. In criterion-based purposive sampling, it is necessary that individuals be selected based on a particular criterion, such as having experienced

¹ Christine Gonzales-Wong and J. Harris, "Sacred Space: Student Supervisees' Experiences of Spiritual Issues,"

² Philip et al., "The Impact of Religion/Spirituality on Acculturative Stress Among International Students."

³ Alyssa Bryant Rockenbach, C. Walker, and J. Luzader, "A Phenomenological Analysis of College Students' Spiritual Struggles," *Journal of College Student Development* 53 (2012): 55–75, <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2012.0000>.

⁴ Brian E. Neubauer, Catherine T. Witkop, and Lara Varpio, "How Phenomenology Can Help Us Learn from the Experiences of Others," *Perspectives on Medical Education* 8 (2019): 90–97.

a specific phenomenon¹. To minimize heterogeneity among the participants, inclusion criteria were established, which included: 1) willingness to participate in the study, 2) currently enrolled at the university, 3) undergraduate level, 4) no history of chronic physical or mental illness, 5) residing in Qom city. Exclusion criteria for the study were also considered, which included: 1) a history of chronic physical illness, 2) enrollment in master's or doctoral programs, 3) unavailability for the interview.

A semi-structured interview method, which is an exploratory interview, was used for data collection. Semi-structured interviews, by creating space for further exploration of topics with additional and impromptu questions, allow for a better discovery of the subject matter². Following the acquisition of informed consent, confidentiality issues were also explained. Subsequently, basic information including age, education, gender, etc., was obtained. During the interview, questions were posed based on those designed according to the literature, and alongside audio recording, note-taking was also conducted. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour. Sampling and interviewing continued until data saturation, and to ensure this, three additional interviews were conducted, which yielded no new themes. Furthermore, pseudonyms were used in this study to maintain confidentiality.

According to Creswell³, in qualitative research, to analyze the findings, data are first transcribed from oral and written words into typed files, and then data analysis is performed manually or by computer. In this study, data analysis was conducted using Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step strategy, which includes the following stages: familiarization with the data, identifying significant statements, formulating meanings, clustering themes, developing an exhaustive description, producing the fundamental structure, and verifying the fundamental structure.

To assess the credibility and trustworthiness of the research data, the four judgment criteria proposed by Guba and Lincoln⁴, namely credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, were used. To ensure credibility, there was sustained engagement with the subject and the research data. Faculty opinions were utilized regarding the interview process and its analysis. To examine dependability, expert peer review was used, and interview transcripts were provided to colleagues for more precise scrutiny of the coding. To achieve transferability, efforts were made to include students with diverse spiritual perspectives.

¹ Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2014).

² Danielle Magaldi and Michelle Berler, "Semi-Structured Interviews," in *Encyclopedia of Personality and Individual Differences*, ed. Virgil Zeigler-Hill and Todd K. Shackelford (Cham: Springer, 2020), 4825–4830

³ John W. Creswell, *Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research* (Boston, MA: Pearson, 2012).

⁴ Egon G. Guba and Yvonna S. Lincoln, "Competing Paradigms in Qualitative Research," in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994), 109–112.

Furthermore, to ensure confirmability, researchers attempted not to involve their own judgments and biases in the work as much as possible and contributed to guaranteeing the confirmability of this study by documenting all the steps of the process and the resulting data, and maintaining records throughout all stages of the research.

Findings

Regarding demographic information, the mean age of the participants in this study was 21.6 years; 10 participants were female and 6 were male. In terms of academic discipline, all participants were from the humanities. The following is an analysis of the data obtained from interviews with the participants.

Table 1. *Main Themes, Sub-Themes, and Initial Concepts of Students' Lived Experience of Spirituality in Facing Psychosocial Challenges*

Main Themes	Sub-Themes	Initial Concepts
Spirituality as a Source of Psychological Resilience	Spiritual Hope	Belief in the support of a higher power
		Spiritually optimistic view of the future
		Trust in God (Tawakkul)
	Sense of Inner Peace	Inner peace resulting from prayer
		Meditation and worship
		Reduction of anxiety through focusing on spiritual matters
Spirituality within the Context of Relationships and Social Support	Redefining Life Crises	Perceiving challenges as a test
		Opportunity for growth
	Spiritual Interactions	Participation in religious group ceremonies
		Presence in spiritual spaces
	Purposeful Dialogues	Exchanging views on existential issues
		Discussing values
	Empathy	Feeling understood by individuals with a similar worldview
		Receiving emotional support
Spirituality as a Mechanism for Meaning-Making of Difficult Experiences	Sense of Social Belonging in Reducing Psychological Pressures	Membership in spiritual groups
		Feeling of collective support
	Search for Meaning	Active questioning about the causes of challenges
		Exploration to find a hidden message
	Reassessment of Personal Values	Reviewing life priorities
		Emphasis on non-material values
	Restoration of Balance	Finding a new equilibrium point in life after a crisis
		Re-adaptation
	Positive Interpretation of Difficult Events	Viewing crisis as a turning point
	Psychological Growth Following Adversity	Increased self-awareness
		Increased appreciation for life
		Feeling of inner strength

As shown in Table 1, the analysis of the interviews yielded 3 main themes, 12 sub-themes, and 26 initial concepts. The following presents direct quotations from the participants.

Based on the analysis of the students lived experiences, the main and sub-themes can be presented textually using participants' quotations as follows:

First Main Theme: Spirituality as a Source of Psychological Resilience

Students describe their experience of spirituality as a resource for enduring and overcoming challenges.

a) **Spiritual Hope:** Many, relying on their beliefs, develop a positive outlook on the future. One participant stated: "When I couldn't succeed in the master's entrance exam, only the thought that God is behind me and will open a way for me made me get up again... This hope was not of the kind you read about in books." This optimistic perspective is based on trust in God (Tawakkul) and belief in the support of a higher power.

b) **Sense of Inner Peace:** Spiritual activities such as prayer or meditation serve as a source of calm when facing anxiety. A student expressed: "On exam nights when stress consumed my entire being, I would go to a corner for ten minutes and recite dhikr [remembrance of God]. It was as if a great burden was lifted from my shoulders. I would find an incredible peace."

c) **Redefining Life Crises:** Spirituality helps them offer a new interpretation of problems. For example, one of them said regarding their father's illness: "At first, I was very angry. But then gradually I saw that we were becoming closer to each other... It was as if this crisis was a great lesson for my future life." In this view, the challenge is redefined as a test or an opportunity for growth.

Second Main Theme: Spirituality within the Context of Relationships and Social Support

The experience of spirituality for students often gains meaning in interaction with others and within social networks.

a) **Spiritual Interactions:** Being present in congregational gatherings has a profound impact. "When I participate in prayer ceremonies or spiritual gatherings at the university, I feel I am not alone. The collective energy... gives me strength."

b) **Purposeful Dialogues:** In-depth discussions about existential issues provide emotional support. One student explained: "With my close friend, we talk for hours about the purpose behind all this academic pressure... These conversations are like a refuge."

c) **Empathy:** Receiving support from individuals with shared values is very soothing. "My friend told me: 'Everyone makes mistakes; what matters is that you learn from it...' That statement was an approach based on understanding and kindness."

d) **Sense of Social Belonging:** Joining like-minded groups reduces feelings of loneliness and alienation. "Joining student charity groups... gave me a sense of belonging. It was as if I became part of a larger family."

Third Main Theme: Spirituality as a Mechanism for Meaning-Making of Difficult Experiences

Students use spirituality as a framework for finding meaning and reconstructing the self after hardships.

a) Search for Meaning: They actively seek a lesson or hidden message in negative events: "What does God want to teach me through this failure?" This question moved me from pure despair toward a constructive search."

b) Reassessment of Personal Values: Crises lead to a review of priorities. "Now I appreciate health, family, and helping others more. It seems the problem reorganized my priorities."

c) Restoration of Balance: Spirituality helps in finding a new balance between effort and tranquility: "I learned to strive but leave the result to God. This attitude has created a healthy balance for me."

d) Positive Interpretation: Difficult events are interpreted as a turning point for renewed awakening: "It was as if that ending was the beginning of a more real life for me."

e) Post-Traumatic Psychological Growth: Many reported feeling personal growth after overcoming a crisis: "After emerging from that severe depression, I felt like a different person. I am more patient... Pain made me a deeper human being." This growth includes increased appreciation, a sense of inner strength, and deeper relationships.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that spirituality in students lived experience is not a peripheral matter but rather a central resource for psychological resilience when facing psychosocial challenges. The first main theme, spirituality as a source of psychological resilience with its dimensions of spiritual hope, sense of inner peace, and redefinition of life crises, aligns with the existing literature on resilience and spirituality. Various studies have shown that belief in a higher power, trust in God (Tawakkul), and a spiritually optimistic view of the future are associated with reduced depression and anxiety and increased hope in students¹. Within the framework of Pargament's (1997) theory of religious coping, these findings can be interpreted as positive religious coping styles, in which the individual, by relying on God/a higher power, experiences an increased sense of control, meaning, and support. The sub-themes related to the sense of inner peace are consistent with research showing that religious rituals and meditative practices can reduce stress through emotion regulation and promote psychological balance².

¹ Kenneth I. Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping: Theory, Research, Practice* (New York: Guilford Press, 1997).

² Susanti, Ikhwanisifa Ikhwanisifa, and Ira Damayanti, "Subjective Well-Being in Muslim Students: The Role of Islamic Spirituality and Self-Efficacy, 32–47.

These findings are also interpretable in light of emotion regulation theory; turning to prayer, dhikr (remembrance of God), and meditation provides strategies for refocusing attention, cognitive reappraisal, and creating a sense of inner security. The theme of redefining life crises also aligns with the meaning-making theory of Park and Folkman¹ and post-traumatic growth². In light of spiritual frameworks, students interpret difficult events not merely as threats but as opportunities for maturation, self-awareness, and the reexamination of goals and priorities. This spiritual interpretation of suffering leads to a reduction in cognitive dissonance, an increased sense of purpose, and consequently, enhanced resilience.

The second main theme, spirituality within the context of relationships and social support, emphasizes that spirituality is not merely an internal, individual experience; rather, it is developed and strengthened through interpersonal interactions, participation in religious ceremonies, presence in spiritual spaces, purposeful dialogues about values, and empathy with individuals who share a similar worldview. Research in this area has shown that belonging to religious/spiritual communities is associated with stronger social support networks, a sense of belonging and collective identity, and better mental health in adolescents and students³. Concepts such as feeling understood, receiving emotional support, and feeling collective support indicate that spiritual groups provide a kind of support reservoir for students; that is, social support reduces the impact of life stress on mental health.

The third main theme, spirituality as a mechanism for meaning-making of difficult experiences, reveals a deeper dimension of the role of spirituality. The active search for meaning, questioning the causes of challenges, and exploring to find a hidden message are consistent with meaning-centered coping models. The reassessment of personal values and emphasis on non-material values show that encountering a crisis, mediated by a spiritual framework, leads to a reorganization of the value and identity system. This process subsequently leads to the restoration of balance, re-adaptation, and finding a new equilibrium point in life, which aligns with concepts of post-traumatic growth. Concepts such as positive interpretation of difficult events, viewing crisis as a turning point, increased self-awareness, increased appreciation for life, and feeling of inner strength correspond well with the components of psychological growth following adversity reported in the research of Tedeschi and Calhoun⁵.

¹ Crystal L. Park and Susan Folkman, "Meaning in the Context of Stress and Coping," *Review of General Psychology* 1, no. 2 (1997): 130–135

² Lawrence G. Calhoun and Richard G. Tedeschi, *Handbook of Posttraumatic Growth: Research and Practice* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2014).

³ Harold G. Koenig, "Religion, Spirituality, and Health: The Research and Clinical Implications," *ISRN Psychiatry* 2012 (2012): 278730

⁴ M. Wills, "Connection, Action and Hope, An Invasion to Relation the Spiritual in Health Care," *Journal of Religion and Health* 8, no. 18 (2007): 11-14.

⁵ Calhoun and Tedeschi, *Handbook of Posttraumatic Growth: Research and Practice*

Within this framework, spirituality provides a context for the individual to move beyond mere suffering, engage in redefining the self, relationships, and life, and experience a greater sense of agency and internal efficacy.

Conclusion

Overall, the structure of the themes indicates that for students, spirituality simultaneously has three fundamental functions: 1) an emotional and cognitive source of resilience (hope, peace, redefinition of crisis), 2) a social context for support (spiritual relationships, sense of belonging), and 3) a meaning-making framework for interpreting and integrating difficult experiences. This overlap with theories of resilience, meaning-making, religious coping, and post-traumatic growth provides significant theoretical support for the findings.

Every scientific study faces limitations that should be considered when interpreting and generalizing the findings. This study was conducted with a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews. Although this method is highly suitable for the in-depth exploration of participants lived experiences, its findings are not statistically generalizable to the broader student population. The sample of this study consisted of 16 students selected through purposive sampling. It is possible that the experiences of students who were willing to participate in such studies differ from those who declined to participate. Therefore, the full spectrum of lived experience may not be reflected in this study.

The findings of this phenomenological study indicate that spirituality plays a central role in students lived experience when facing psychosocial challenges, such that it not only helps reduce anxiety and stress and maintain psychological balance but also facilitates the process of psychological growth and development. Through hope and trust in God (Tawakkul), prayer and meditation, spiritual redefinition of crises, and reliance on spiritual support networks, students experience a multidimensional resilience that aligns with existing research and theories in the field of spirituality and mental health. Accordingly, it can be suggested that attending to the spiritual dimensions of students' lives is essential in university mental health promotion programs. Designing interventions that provide opportunities for spiritual dialogue, strengthening meaning and hope, and creating safe spaces for spiritual experience and reflection can lead to increased resilience and reduced negative consequences of psychosocial challenges in this population. Furthermore, the findings highlight the necessity of considering cultural and religious context in policies related to student mental health and lay the groundwork for future research on spirituality-based interventions in university settings.

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