

Religion, Mindfulness, and Resilience as Strategies to Cope With Anxiety

Kristen Watson, Hailey Upton, Sara Warner & Merry Sleigh Ph.D.
Winthrop University

Introduction

Anxiety is a common experience for college students (January et al., 2018), resulting in young adults employing a variety of efforts to cope. Research-based evidence suggests that mindfulness, or being focused on the current experience, is one strategy that reduces anxiety (Schneider et al., 2019). A second documented strategy to manage anxiety is religion or spirituality. In general, spiritual well-being predicts better physical and mental health (Haney & Rollock, 2018; Oxhandler, Narendort & Moffatt, 2018). Frederick and White (2015) investigated these strategies in conjunction, reporting that mindfulness was a particularly beneficial way for Christians to cope with anxiety. In general, researchers have tended to view religious individuals as a homogenous group; however, many churches now teach more liberal tenets (Haskell et al., 2016), raising the question of how different levels of adherence to conservative church theology relate to anxiety levels and mindfulness.

We added to the existing literature by examining mindfulness, resilience, and anxiety in adults adhering to either traditional or progressive, more flexible faith beliefs. Because having doubts about God has been linked to poorer mental health (Haney & Rollock, 2018), we hypothesized that college students who adhered to traditional versus progressive religious beliefs would experience lower levels of anxiety. We also hypothesized that lower levels of anxiety would relate to higher levels of mindfulness and higher levels of resilience.

Methodology

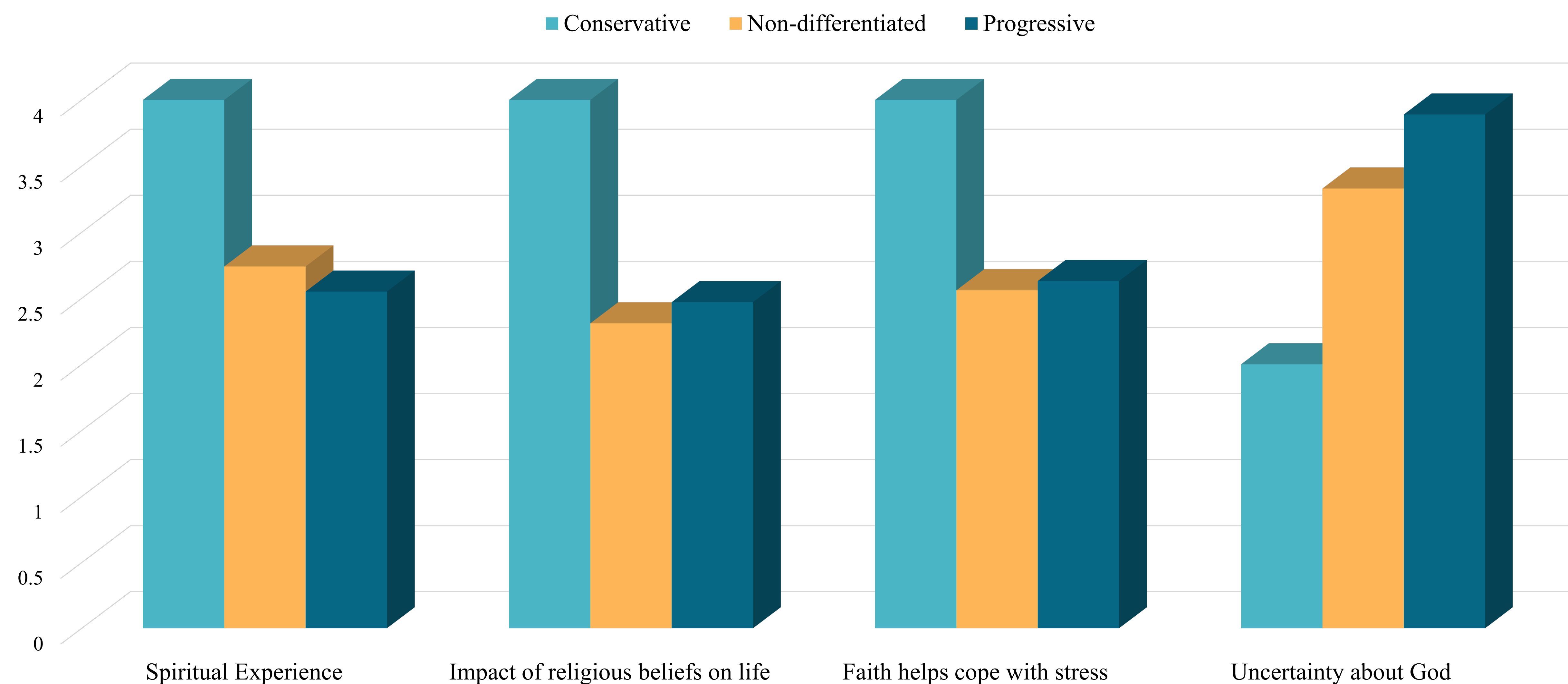
Participants

Participants ($n = 98$) were college students (64% Caucasian; 85% women) with a mean age of 21.78 ($SD = 5.44$). Twenty-nine percent had previously received a diagnosis of anxiety.

Materials

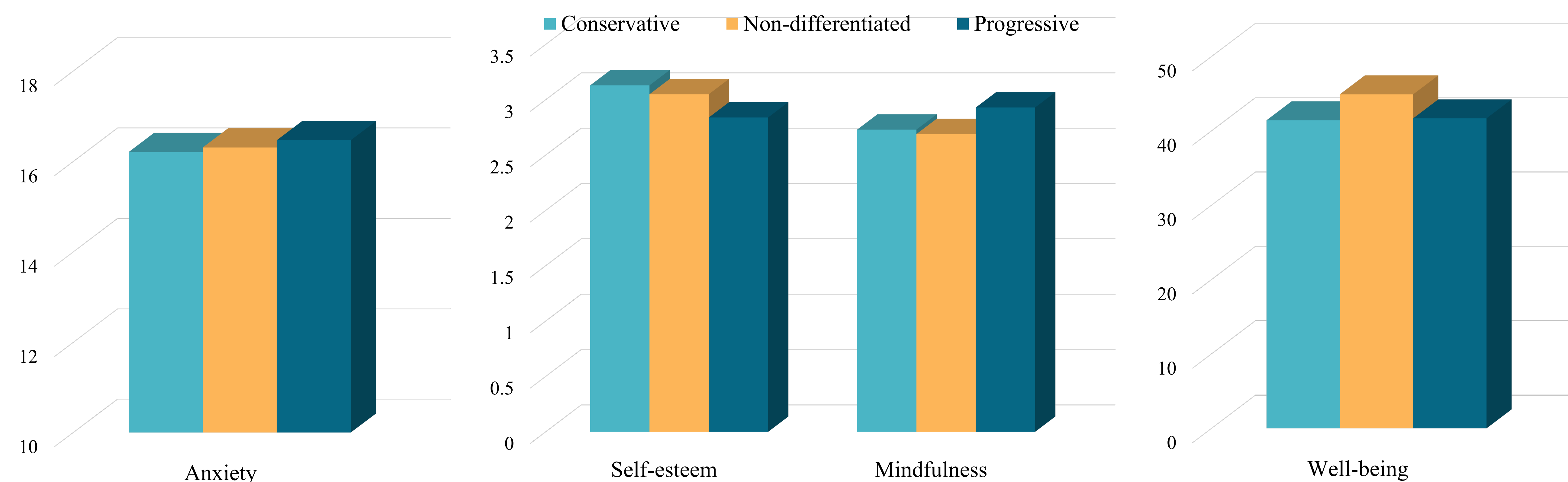
Participants responded to the following scales: Generalized Anxiety Disorder (Kroenke & Lowe, 2006), Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being (Tennant et al., 2007), Mindfulness Attention Awareness (Brown & Ryan, 2003), Spiritual Experience Index (Genia, 1991), and Brief Resilience (Smith et al., 2008). Additionally, we asked participants their level of agreement with religious tenets in order to categorize participants as having traditional, progressive, or non-differentiated religious beliefs

Religious Reliance Variations



We categorized participants as having traditional, progressive, or non-differentiated religious beliefs. We then compared these categories using a MANOVA and LSD post-hoc tests. In all cases, the adults who held traditional religious beliefs differed from adults with progressive and non-differentiated religious beliefs. In other words, adults with more liberal beliefs were similar to adults with vague religious beliefs. Compared to progressive and non-differentiated religious adults, traditional minded adults reported being more spiritually engaged in their faith [$F(2, 95) = 25.11, p < .001$], that their faith influenced their life to a greater extent [$F(2, 95) = 30.17, p < .001$], that their spirituality helped them cope with stress [$F(2, 95) = 24.06, p < .001$], and that they were more sure of God [$F(2, 95) = 12.71, p < .001$].

Emotional State Similarities



Participants in our three religious categories did not differ on their anxiety levels [$F(2, 95) = .012, p > .05$], overall well-being [$F(2, 95) = 1.75, p > .05$], self-esteem [$F(2, 95) = .33, p > .05$], or mindfulness [$F(2, 95) = 1.02, p > .05$].

Anxiety Predictors

The lower participants' mindfulness:

- the higher their anxiety, $r(98) = -.46, p < .001$
- the higher their well-being, $r(98) = -.39, p < .001$
- the higher their self-esteem, $r(98) = -.32, p = .002$
- the lower their narcissism, $r(98) = .31, p = .002$
- the less miserable they were, $r(98) = .28, p = .006$

The higher participants' resilience:

- the lower their anxiety, $r(98) = -.41, p < .001$
- the higher their well-being, $r(98) = .51, p < .001$
- the lower their narcissism, $r(98) = -.27, p = .007$
- the higher their self-esteem, $r(98) = .44, p < .001$
- the less miserable they were, $r(98) = -.37, p < .001$
- the less sensitive they were to criticism, $r(98) = -.26, p = .009$

The higher participants' narcissism:

- the higher their anxiety, $r(98) = .41, p < .001$
- the lower their well-being, $r(98) = -.40, p < .001$
- the lower their self-esteem, $r(98) = -.23, p = .025$
- the more miserable they were, $r(98) = .38, p < .001$

Conclusion

We hypothesized that the more conservative adults' religious beliefs were, the less anxiety and the more resilience they would experience. This hypothesis was not supported. Instead of our hypothesized outcome, we found that conservative religious beliefs predicted individual's reliance on religion and a perception that their faith helped them manage stress. This latter perception is interesting, because anxiety levels were not predicted by type of religious beliefs. We hypothesized that higher levels of mindfulness would predict lower levels of anxiety and higher levels of resilience. This hypothesis was not supported.

In sum, we found that mindfulness and resilience emerged as more useful strategies for dealing with anxiety than did religion alone. Conservatively religious adults reported using religion to cope with stress; however, they were no more or less anxious than other adults. These findings might be useful for advising college students on effective strategies to cope with stress and anxiety.