Anxiety and Spirituality among Substance Abusers: A Review Study

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Abstract: Substance abuse is a widespread global problem affecting people from all backgrounds, often driven by peer pressure, curiosity, or the need to cope with life's pressures. It poses significant challenges to society, leading to various issues like psychological distress, financial hardship, social isolation, and severe health problems. This burden extends not only to the users but also to their families. Those caught in substance abuse often grapple with anxiety, emptiness, distress, and loneliness, sometimes even contemplating suicide. The concept of spirituality, deeply rooted in history, has garnered interest in the realm of psychology, particularly concerning its potential relevance to individuals facing substance abuse. This literature review explores the relationship between anxiety and spirituality in substance abusers and investigates spirituality's effectiveness as an intervention in the recovery process. Examining these aspects can offer valuable insights into how spirituality might aid individuals in overcoming the challenges of substance abuse and finding a path to healing.

Keywords: Substance abuse, spirituality, anxiety, interventions

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Substance abuse involves the harmful overuse of a drug, leading to negative effects on oneself and society. It encompasses both physical and psychological dependence. Physical dependence arises from prolonged drug use, causing withdrawal symptoms when stopped. On the other hand, psychological dependence is an intense urge to keep taking the drug, even without physical dependency (H Kenneth Walker et al., 1990).

Substance abuse creates social and economic impacts on nations. In India, where the healthcare system already faces challenges, the rising issue of substance use disorder, particularly among youth, worsens the situation. Changing substance use estimates are influenced by various factors like availability, cost, laws, social attitudes, peer pressure, and socio-cultural aspects (Nischal et.al, 2013).

Substance use disorder is seen as a family illness, impacting both the user and their family members. It can lead to behaviours that enable continued substance use. However, families can also provide vital support in the treatment process. Understanding these dynamics aids in better tackling the issue and planning appropriate services (Roth, 2010); (Kumpfer et.al, 2003; Hurcom et.al, 2000; Mattoo et.al, 2015).

Research with young adults has revealed that close peer networks can have both selection and influence effects on marijuana use. Additionally, peer substance involvement amplifies the negative impact of genetic influences on young adult substance use. When young adults are close to substance-using peers, they tend to have higher and more persistent alcohol use, while being close to low-substance-using peers is associated with significantly lower alcohol use (Pinchevsky et al., 2011; Agrawal et al., 2010; Cruz et al., 2012).

Regular cannabis use may raise anxiety or depression risk. Stronger cannabis can link to psychosis or schizophrenia. Stimulants like cocaine cause depression, anxiety, and paranoia. They may trigger mental health issues. Hallucinogenic drugs worsen mental health problems, cause detachment, and flashbacks. Mixing drugs or alcohol can be dangerous, even fatal with medication. Losing control and needing more may indicate addiction, linked to mental health problems (Mental Health Foundation, 2021).

According to a survey conducted in the year 2018 in India, it was found that between the age group of 10-75 years, 14.6% people were Alcohol users, 2.8% people were cannabis users and 2.1% people were found to be opiates users (Drug Addiction, n.d.).

Anxiety
Anxiety is the uneasy anticipation of a vague threat, causing tension and uneasy suspense. It is a negative feeling often used interchangeably with fear due to their close relation (Rachman, 2019). The fear of what is not understood is known as anxiety, which is the body's natural reaction to stress (Rehman et al., 2020). While anxiety is a common occurrence, it may be diagnosed as a mental disorder when it becomes chronic and significantly impacts daily functioning (Hoehn-Saric et al., 2004). Due to psychological and physiological changes, the adolescent age group is prone to various mental disorders (Dickstein, 2011). Substance abuse, prevalent among this age group, has the potential to trigger diverse anxiety disorders (Lander et al., 2013).

Common risk factors for anxiety include experiencing shyness or distress in new situations during childhood, facing stressful life events, and having a family history of anxiety or other mental disorders. Additionally, anxiety symptoms may be
influenced by certain physical health issues like thyroid problems or heart arrhythmia, as well as the consumption of substances like caffeine or certain medications (NIMH, 2022).

Some anxiety disorders like phobias and PTSD, as well as addiction, involve abnormal and lasting emotional memories of fear or drug-related stimuli. These cues can trigger symptoms or their return even after treatment, indicating the limited success of current psychological and pharmacological therapies in preventing long-term symptom relapse (Lee et al., 2017).

**Spirituality**

Spirituality refers to the essence of being connected to religious matters or broader moral, existential, and metaphysical questions, even extending beyond religious beliefs to encompass one's understanding of self, the meaning of life, and the nature of consciousness, including the idea of immortality (Spirituality | Human Quality, n.d.). Spirituality encompasses a blend of experiences, thoughts, and actions. It involves profound beliefs and experiences that are challenging to define precisely, as they are connected to divine or meaningful aspects of life, including emotions, sensations, and perceptions (Lyons, 2012). Philip Sheldrake, a professor of applied theology at the University of Durham, explains that the word “spiritual” comes from Latin (spiritualis), which has roots in the Greek word “pneumatikos” found in Paul's letters to the Romans and Corinthians. Originally, a spiritual person was associated with having the Spirit of God, often referring to the clergy. However, in modern times, the term “spirituality” in healthcare has a broader meaning than its original context (Koenig, 2009).

In Indian context, incorporating spirituality involves various practices, including Satsangs, Raj Yoga, Naam simran, singing, chanting, listening to religious discourses, hatha yoga, mindfulness meditation, pilgrimages, and temple visits (Singh et al., 2019). The definition of spirituality lacks consensus. In academic research, spirituality is frequently intertwined with religious orientation, religiosity, and religious coping, making it a complex and multifaceted concept (Brome et al., 2000). In order to differentiate between the two, Pegoraro (2022) explained that generally, spirituality encompasses a feeling of being linked to a greater entity beyond our individual selves and often entails a quest to find significance in life. On the other hand, religion consists of a collection of beliefs, emotions, doctrines, and rituals that establish the connection between humans and the sacred or divine.

Extensively studied over the past decades, the influence of spirituality and religion (S/R) on substance use and abuse has drawn considerable attention, potentially driven by the achievements of programs like Alcoholics Anonymous (Kelly et al., 2020). S/R has been identified as a protective factor against the development of substance use disorders and could aid in the recovery from these issues (Walton-Moss et al., 2013).

**Literature Review**

Buckner et al., (2006) in their study claimed that socially anxious people might turn to substances to manage their fear of judgment. Those with higher social anxiety tend to use alcohol when feeling negative emotions, and this usage links social anxiety to alcohol-related issues. Moreover, frequent cannabis use relates to social anxiety disorder severity and suicide risk, while cannabis use disorder shows weaker associations (Patel et al., 2023). According to Watson et al., (2012) individuals with heightened social anxiety who used cannabis tended to rely on it as a coping mechanism in social settings. Despite individuals claiming reduced anxiety as their reason for using cannabis, acute anxiety is a prevalent negative outcome of cannabis use. It is paradoxical because cannabis use and anxiety symptoms often coincide (Crippa et al., 2009). Karila et al., (2014) claimed through their study that cannabis often produces adverse effects in users, especially when certain demographic and psychosocial factors come into play. These effects can manifest as hyperemesis syndrome, impaired coordination, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, and psychotic symptoms. A study by Ramo et al., (2013) have sampled the general population which show a positive correlation between the use of designer drugs and the presence of anxiety symptoms. Researches reveal strong evidence suggesting that the brain's opioid system influences anxiety across various types of clinical anxiety. Preclinical studies also support this idea, showing that animals treated with opioid blockers or lacking genes for certain opioids exhibit anxiety-related behavior (Colasanti et al., 2010). In a similar light, a study done by Yang et al., (2021) on Chinese drug users found that drug use characteristics significantly influenced anxiety symptoms and Synthetic drug users exhibited a higher likelihood of experiencing anxiety symptoms.

Various anxiety disorders such as generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder have shown connections with substance use. People with an anxiety disorder have a notably increased risk of developing nicotine dependence. (Brady et al., 2013). Anxiety disorders and substance use are strongly linked. Studies show high associations with various substances (alcohol, tobacco, cannabis, sedatives, opioids, and cocaine). The relationship can be both self-medication and causal (Vorspan et al., 2015).

Falade et al., (2022) found that respondents abusing psychoactive substances had lower levels of religiosity and spirituality compared to non-users. Spirituality is positively associated with favourable outcomes, as higher levels of spirituality are linked to lower levels of substance use. (Geppert et al., 2007). Spiritually active youths, involved in a faith community and maintaining a prayerful relationship with their God, have a lower tendency to use drugs, abuse alcohol, or get involved in related criminal activities, according to evidence-based studies (Johnson et al., 2015, Lee et al., 2014). A Polish study by Chrost & Chrost (2023) revealed that higher levels of spirituality among students are associated with reduced psychoactive substance use, indicating that spirituality acts as a protective factor. To reduce the risk of substance abuse, we should focus on developing and reinforcing these protective factors.

In contrast to this, Pillion et al., (2011) found that women, on average, scored lower in spirituality than men. Students with low-risk alcohol use also had lower spirituality levels, suggesting that spirituality might not act as a protective factor against alcohol use. Moreover, spirituality didn't show a significant link to recent cigarette or alcohol use, indicating it may only influence intentions, not actual behavior. It also didn't impact how adolescents perceived the risks of using cigarettes or alcohol (Pokhrel et al., 2012). Some studies don’t support the idea that spirituality protects against substance use. (Bazargan et al., 2004).

Similarly, a study by Miller et al. (2008) described that substance abuse treatment have no significant connections between spiritual...
practices and substance use outcomes. Moreover, certain aspects of spirituality might be linked to a higher risk of substance abuse and even child abuse, as indicated by some studies (Stewart & Mezzich, 2007).

Spirituality has shown its potential to contribute positively to successful treatment outcomes. It has been observed to enhance treatment success, for instance, by promoting program completion and reducing substance use (Conner et al., 2008, Brown et al., 2007, Heinz et al., 2007). Spirituality plays a crucial role in how individuals perceive themselves and can provide meaning and inner strength during tough times. However, the application of spirituality/religion interventions in treating Substance Use lacks clear articulation in evidence-based care (Connery & Devido, 2020). A study by Dermatis & Galanter (2015) on individuals participating in 12-step programs has revealed several spiritual and religious characteristics that tend to increase after achieving sobriety. These characteristics are also linked to particular aspects of program involvement, play a partial role in connecting program participation to drinking-related results, and can predict clinical outcomes relevant to the risk of relapse. A short preliminary evaluation can be done to gauge clients' spiritual interest and its significance in treatment. If suitable, a more detailed assessment of clients' spiritual strengths and resources can be conducted. After identifying these assets, practitioners and clients can collaborate to integrate them into relevant therapeutic approaches (Lietz & Hodge, 2013).

Spirituality serves as an inner strength when clients rely on their beliefs to make decisions and find positivity in challenging experiences. It can also act as an outer strength by fostering social connection and support through faith community membership, which is crucial for substance misuse treatment (Koenig et al., 2012). Spirituality is positively associated with favourable outcomes, as higher levels of spirituality are linked to lower levels of substance use (Geppert et al., 2007). Additionally, Jalali et al., (2019) found group spiritual intervention to be a beneficial approach, enhancing self-esteem and happiness in individuals undergoing methadone maintenance treatment. This intervention can serve as a complementary therapy alongside methadone treatment, reducing the risk of relapse in addicted individuals.

Conclusion

There have been done multiple studies done on anxiety and spirituality in terms of substance abuse, however, out of the selected and reviewed literature it can be concluded that several researches consistently demonstrate a strong connection between anxiety disorders and substance use. Socially anxious individuals may turn to substances like alcohol and cannabis to cope with their fear of judgment, which can lead to alcohol-related issues and exacerbate social anxiety disorder. While some individuals may use cannabis as a coping mechanism in social settings, acute anxiety can be a prevalent negative outcome of cannabis use. Furthermore, the brain's opioid system has been found to influence anxiety, and drug use characteristics can significantly impact anxiety symptoms in drug users. Moreover, various anxiety disorders, such as generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder, are associated with substance use, particularly nicotine dependence. The relationship between anxiety disorders and substance use can be both self-medication and causal, with high associations across various substances. It is important to understand and address these connections to develop effective interventions and support for individuals struggling with both anxiety and substance use.

While some researches indicate that spirituality and religiosity can play a significant role in preventing substance abuse and enhancing treatment outcomes. Studies have shown that higher levels of spirituality are associated with reduced substance use, particularly in youths and students. However, some findings suggest that spirituality may not act as a protective factor against alcohol use and might only influence intentions rather than actual behavior. Nevertheless, spirituality has shown promise in improving treatment success, promoting program completion, and reducing substance use. Integrating clients' spiritual strengths into therapeutic approaches can be beneficial, but clear articulation in evidence-based care is lacking. Group spiritual interventions have also been found to enhance self-esteem and happiness, providing a potential complementary therapy for those undergoing substance misuse treatment. Overall, understanding and utilizing spirituality effectively may contribute positively to addressing substance abuse issues.

Future Recommendations

There is a need for longitudinal studies in order to investigate the effectiveness of spiritual intervention to substance abuse in long term. Especially in Indian context, despite numerous studies and data available on substance abuse, further researches could be done on spiritual intervention programmes with respect to substance abuse. Appreciating the work of Rentala et al., (2020) done on alcohol dependent individuals, future studies could be carried out with spiritual interventions considering both the genders. Keeping in mind the social and genetic factors, the effectiveness of such interventions shall be explored.

References


