

Letter to the Editor

Role of Religious Beliefs in Preventing Suicide Attempts in Iran**Dear Editor,**

We have read with great interest the article entitled “Risk and protective factors for suicide attempt in Iran: A matched case-control study” by Akbari, et al. which was published in the recent issue of AIM. According to authors, recent stressful life events, general health conditions and being problem-focused mentality can increase the risk for suicide attempts. On the other hand, intrinsic religious beliefs and close social networks were considered as preventive factors.¹

Results indicate the rate of suicide and attempted suicide is elevated during the last decades in Iran.² However, there are many factors, such as religion that play a critical role in suicide prevention.¹ Religious affiliation and religious activity appear to protect against suicide.³ In fact, the moral imperatives of religious beliefs protect against suicidal behavior. Several studies show that the rate of suicide among religious groups is less than non-religious groups. Also, intrinsic religious beliefs and practices can provide potent sources of hope, meaning and comfort for individuals with mental illness.^{4,5} Effect of religion on suicide attempts is mediated by social support. In fact, in religious communities, individuals with higher levels of religious beliefs may be supported more by family, friends and social groups.^{1,6}

According to the lower suicide rate among religious people and positive efficacy of religion on mental health, it seems that religion and spirituality may play an important role in prevention of suicide attempt, especially in religious countries like Iran. Therefore, it is necessary to control the increasing rate of suicide attempt among Iranian people by religious interventions and social support.

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Author's Reply

In response to our recent published paper entitled: “Risk and Protective Factors for Suicide Attempt in Iran: A Matched Case-Control Study”¹ Zamani, et al. wrote a letter to highlight the impact of religious beliefs on health and suicide attempt. Their main message was not very compatible with our conclusion; however, we would like to elaborate this issue.

There is relatively strong evidence in the literature that support the positive impact of spirituality on health.^{2,3} Although, by definition, spirituality and religious belief are not exactly the same, their overlap is considerable, particularly in a community like Iran with more than 99.6 % Muslim population, and 0.4% population from other religions who are practicing in some degrees.

However, appraising all published papers and from the methodological point of view, we suggest that researchers should pay special attention to the following considerations to improve the quality of new evidences in this field:

1) Exploring the casual association between spirituality/religious beliefs and health in cross-sectional studies is prone to difference biases and errors, such as the effect of reverse causality. Therefore, we need to explore this issue in longitudinal studies. Based on the findings of cohort studies, we are also able to check the temporal fluctuation of beliefs in different aspects of health.

2) It is necessary to distinguish “internalized religion and structuralized religion”. These two are different concepts, for example the former is related to positive attitudes such as tolerance and lack of prejudice while the latter one is “linked with prejudice”.⁴ However, many studies fail to check the impact of different types of view of religion on health. Therefore, studies, which measure the practice of religion with little attention to internalization of religion, might give a different view of influences of religion in mental health. It seems that other factors such as cultural and social norms, as well as gender and socio-economic status of subjects might modify this association. Therefore, exploring the impact of religion on health that has classified by these factors creates a more comprehensive picture.

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