

The impact of bible use on human flourishing among U.S. Military members

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The impact of Bible use on human flourishing among U.S. military members is detailed by Sung Joon Jang and Byron R. Johnson from Baylor University and Pepperdine University

It has been long recognized that military members, active and retired, and their families often face various challenges associated with military service, particularly, frequent deployment and combat experience. Despite this recognition, evidence-based and cost-effective interventions that can help them meet these challenges tend to be lacking. Religion and spirituality may be worth more attention for this understudied population of individuals with unique needs largely unrecognized by those outside the military community.

The American Bible Society's Military Bible Challenge (MBC)

[\[https://news.americanbible.org/blog/entry/prayer-blog/new-military-bible-challenge-app-brings-hope-to-our-nations-heroes\]](https://news.americanbible.org/blog/entry/prayer-blog/new-military-bible-challenge-app-brings-hope-to-our-nations-heroes) is a scripture engagement program designed not only to address the overlooked needs of the military community, but also to enhance the overall well-being of military personnel, veterans, and their families.

Religiosity and well-being

The positive relationship between religiosity and health (mental and physical) is well established by research from medicine, epidemiology, psychiatry, psychology, and sociology. For example, meta-analyses confirm the salutary effect of religiosity on psychological well-being, found across their different definitions. Also, a systematic review of 850 studies on religion and mental health revealed that religiosity tends to be linked to increasing emotional well-being, while being associated with lower depression and suicidality.

However, prior research tends to rely on measures of public religiosity (e.g., religious service attendance and small group activities) relative to those of its private counterpart. Private religiosity, when examined, is typically measured in terms of devotional practices (e.g., praying or meditating and reading a sacred text) and religious beliefs (e.g., personal beliefs about God or a higher power). Of these measures, religious behavior involving a sacred text has received the least attention from researchers.

Furthermore, previous studies focused on hedonistic well-being, defined in terms of pleasure and subjective experiences (e.g., happiness and health), rather than eudaimonic well-being, which refers to the fulfillment of one's true nature (e.g., practicing virtues) or a

state of basic human needs being realized (e.g., finding a self-transcendent meaning in life). In addition, the eudaimonic view of well-being recognizes the fundamental importance of warm, trusting, and supportive interpersonal relationships for well-being.

The impact of Bible use on human flourishing

To fill these gaps in prior research on religiosity and well-being, we focused on a variety of ways of using the Bible (e.g., reading, listening to, watching, praying with, meditating on, handwriting, etc.) or “Bible use” in a study to assess the effectiveness of the MBC program (Jang et al., 2024).

We examined the program’s effect on well-being, conceptualized from a human flourishing perspective, which expands the concept by including both hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. Specifically, human flourishing was defined as doing or being well in the five domains of human life:

1. Happiness and life satisfaction.
2. Mental and physical health.
3. Meaning and purpose.
4. Character and virtue.
5. Close social relationships.

A longitudinal study

We examined the relationship between Bible use and human flourishing in a quasi-experimental study where MBC participants were invited to complete a self-administered survey online three times: pre-test (before 75-day program participation), post-test (roughly 90 days after the pre-test), and follow-up (about one month after the post-test). Data collection lasted 25 months, from August 2021 to August 2023, while each participant was asked to participate in our study over four months.

One thousand and forty-six adults (18 or older) participated in the pre-test survey. Still, only about one-third returned for the post-test and/or follow-up (33.6%, $n = 351$). Given this high attrition between the pre-test and subsequent surveys, we focused on 158 study participants (15.1% of the pre-test sample) who completed all three surveys.

First, we found that the Bible use and flourishing levels were positively related at the pre-test (i.e., individuals who used the Bible frequently tended to report higher levels of well-being).

Still, their relationship in terms of change was not significant between the pre-test and post-test and between the post-test and follow-up. When we examined the relationship separately for the five domains of human life, we found consistent results except for close social relationships. The relationship may have been found to be not significant only for the domain that has to do with relations with other people because the program was designed for using the Bible in an individual context, thereby not necessarily contributing to close social relationships.

Second, when we added three likely outcomes of Bible use (spiritual engagement, positive beliefs about the Bible, and the behavioral influence of the Bible) to the Bible use-flourishing relationship as mediators, we found all three outcomes to partly explain the relationship at the pre-test. However, the relationships in terms of change were significant only for the behavioral influence of the Bible. Specifically, participants whose Bible use increased during the program participation between the pre-test and post-test reported increased human flourishing partly because their perceived influence of the Bible on their behaviors was enhanced due to its increased use.

Finally, we found the Bible use-flourishing relationship was unidirectional: that is, Bible use tended to enhance human flourishing rather than the other way around.

A caveat: Our study was based on a non-random sample of primarily Christian adults in the military community, and reducing the sample to include participants completing all three surveys in data analysis may have led to a self-selection bias. Thus, the present findings are not generalizable beyond the present sample.

Conclusion

Despite these limitations, our study provides positive, though preliminary, evidence of the salutary relationship between Bible use and human flourishing among members of the U.S. military community.

References

Jang, Sung Joon, Matt Bradshaw, and Byron R. Johnson. 2024. Bible Use and Human Flourishing Among Members of the U.S. Military Community. *Religions* 15:1412. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15121412>

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