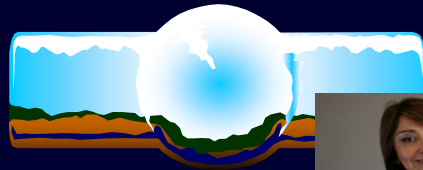


# **Shaken to the Core: Spiritual Struggles along the Pathway to Growth**

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October 19, 2018

My thanks to the John Templeton Foundation and Fetzer Institute for  
their support of this research (JTF #36094, 60971)



# It Takes SPiRiT





# Wrestling with the Angels

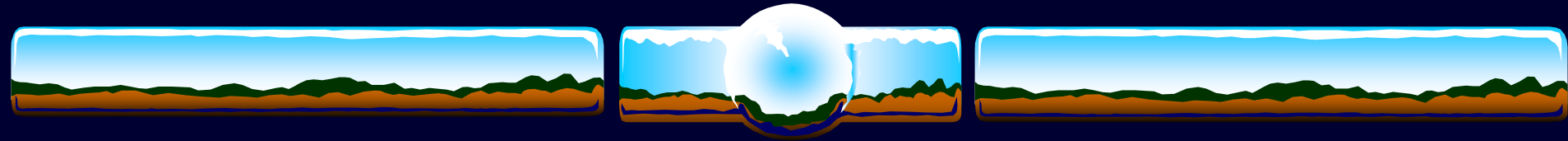
## ❖ The Story of George





# Key Points

- ❖ Spiritual struggles are a natural part of life
- ❖ Spiritual struggles have profound implications for health and well-being
- ❖ Spiritual struggles are a fork in the road
  - ❖ To decline
  - ❖ To growth
- ❖ Spiritual struggles are a vital topic for mental health practice



# A Radical Assumption

“We are spiritual as well as psychological, social, and physical beings.”



# A Definition of Spirituality

(Pargament, 1997)

- ❖ Spirituality is a search for the sacred.



# Reductionism

- ❖ Freud – religion as a means of anxiety reduction
- ❖ Durkheim – religion as a source of social solidarity
- ❖ Geertz – religion as a source of meaning
- ❖ Kirkpatrick – religion as an evolutionary by-product



# Reductionism

“All of this talk about religion and spirituality is fine,  
but isn't religion just a bunch of hormones?”

(immunologist, personal communication)





# Searching for the Sacred at an Early Age

“Dear God,

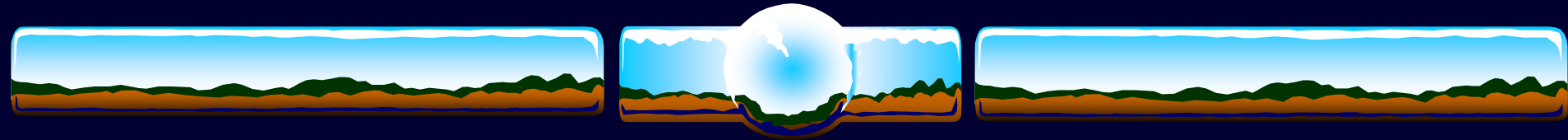
How is it in heaven? How is it being the Big Cheese?”

Young Child (Heller, 1986, p. 31)



# Pathways to the Sacred

- ❖ The Pathway of Knowledge
- ❖ The Pathway of Practice
- ❖ The Pathway of Relationships
- ❖ The Pathway of Emotions
- ❖ The Pathway of Coping



# Why Spirituality is a Potent Force?

- ❖ It deals with matters of deepest significance
- ❖ It helps us come to terms with human limitations, frailty, and finitude
- ❖ It offers an organizing force for life



# A Definition of Spiritual Struggles

- ❖ Spiritual struggles refer to experiences of tension, strain, and conflict about sacred matters within oneself, with others, and with the divine.



# Three Types of Spiritual Struggle

- ❖ Supernatural





# Divine Struggles

- ❖ “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? Why are thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring? O my God, I cry in the daytime, but thou hearest not; and in the night season, and am not silent” (Psalms XXII, 1-2).



# Divine Struggles

- ❖ “I’m suffering, really suffering. My illness is tearing me down, and I’m angry at God for not rescuing me, I mean really setting me free from my mental bondage. I have been dealing with these issues for ten years now and I am only 24 years old. I don’t understand why he keeps lifting me up, just to let me come crashing down again” (undergraduate dealing with bipolar illness).



# Divine Struggle Items (Exline et al., 2014)

Felt as though God had let me down

Felt angry at God

Felt as though God had abandoned me

Felt as though God was punishing me

Questioned God's love for me





# Demonic Items

## (Exline et al., 2014)

Felt tormented by the devil or evil spirits

Worried that the problems I was facing were the work of the devil or evil spirits

Felt attacked by the devil or by evil spirits

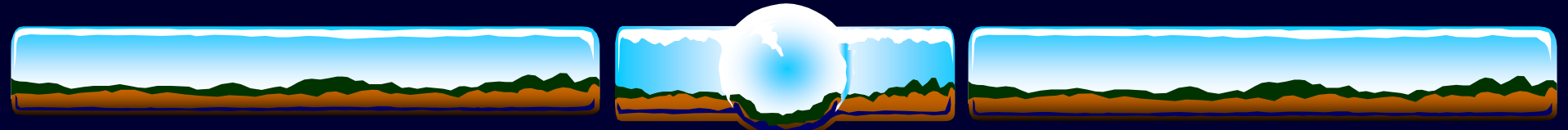
Felt as though the devil (or an evil spirit) was trying to turn me away from what was good



# Three Types of Spiritual Struggle

- ❖ Supernatural
- ❖ Intrapersonal

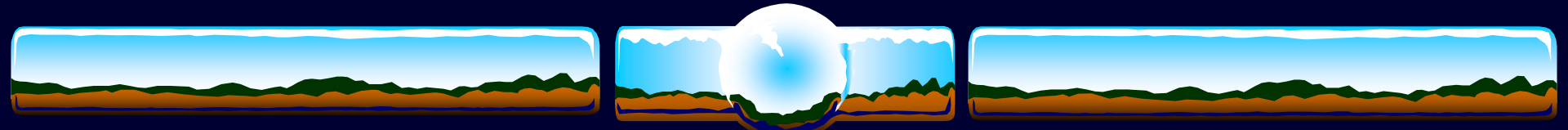




# Intrapersonal R/S Struggles

## Moral Struggles of Peter Moen (1951)

“I must recognize with bitter and painful regret how inexpressibly badly I have lived. I have abused everything: time – money – confidence – ability—Father’s, Mothers’, and Bella’s love. I have reduced to dust all moral and material values” (p. 26). . . “I have prayed God to cast me a rag from the cloak of faith. I want to be sanctified. . . It means for me to reach down to the root of all that is low – dirty – unworthy and worthless in my being and attack it. The word is – sin” (p. 40).



# Moral Struggle Items (Exline et al., 2014)

Wrestled with attempts to follow my moral principles

Worried that my actions were morally or spiritually wrong

Felt torn between what I wanted and what I knew was morally right

Felt guilt for not living up to my moral standards



# Intrapersonal R/S Struggles

## Ultimate Meaning

“Imagine a happy group of morons who are engaged in work. They are carrying bricks in an open field. As soon as they have stacked all the bricks at one end of the field, they proceed to transport them to the opposite end. This continues without stop and everyday of every year. One day one of the morons stops long enough to ask himself what he is doing. He wonders what purpose there is in carrying the bricks. And from that instance on he is not quite as content with his occupation as he had been before. I am the moron who wonders why he is carrying the bricks” (in Yalom, 1980, p. 419, suicide note).



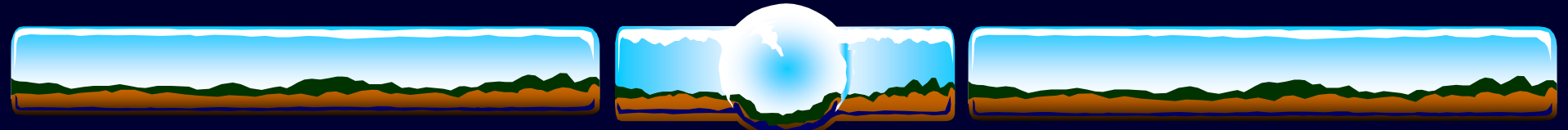
# Ultimate Meaning Struggle Items (Exline et al., 2014)

Questioned whether life really matters

Felt as though my life had no deeper meaning

Questioned whether my life will really make any difference in the world

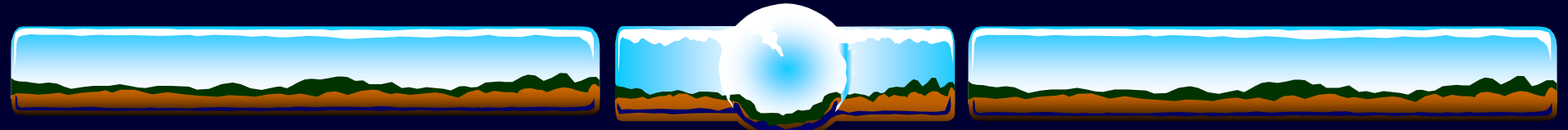
Had concerns about whether there is any ultimate purpose to life or existence



# Intrapersonal R/S Struggles

## R/S Doubt

“Is there a God? Where is God? The other day I was praying over something as I was running, and I ended up saying to God, ‘Look, this is all very well, but isn’t it about time you did something, if you’re there’” (Archibishop of Canterbury, Most Rev. Justin Welby, 2014).



# R/S Doubt Items (Exline et al., 2014)

Struggled to figure out what I really believe about religion/spirituality

Felt confused about my religious/spiritual beliefs

Felt troubled by doubts or questions about religion or spirituality

Worried about whether my beliefs about religion/spirituality were correct





# Three Types of Spiritual Struggle

- ❖ Supernatural
- ❖ Intrapersonal
- ❖ Interpersonal





# Interpersonal R/S Struggles

- ❖ Moses shatters the tablets containing the Ten Commandments after witnessing the people of Israel worshipping the Golden Calf





# Interpersonal R/S Struggles

- ❖ Negative interactions among congregation members:
  - ❖ Gossiping
  - ❖ Cliquishness
  - ❖ Hypocrisy
  - ❖ Disagreements with doctrine
- ❖ “They get off in a corner and talk about you and you’re the one that’s there on Saturday working with their children and washing the dishes on Sunday afternoon. They don’t have the Christian spirit” (Krause et al., 2000).



# Interpersonal Struggle Items (Exline et al., 2014)

Felt hurt, mistreated, or offended by religious/  
spiritual people

Felt rejected or misunderstood by religious/spiritual  
people

Felt as though others were looking down on me  
because of my religious/spiritual beliefs

Had conflicts with other people about  
religious/spiritual matters

Felt angry at organized religion



# Some Points about Struggles

- ❖ Spiritual struggles are not a sign of weak faith



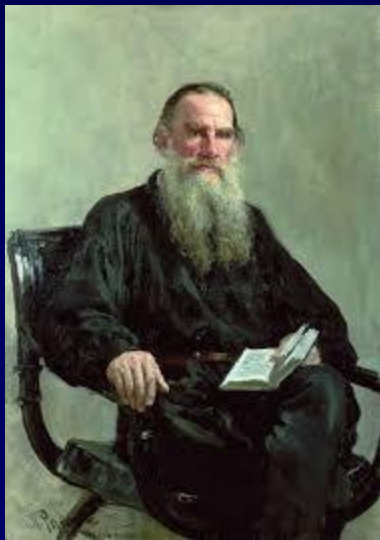
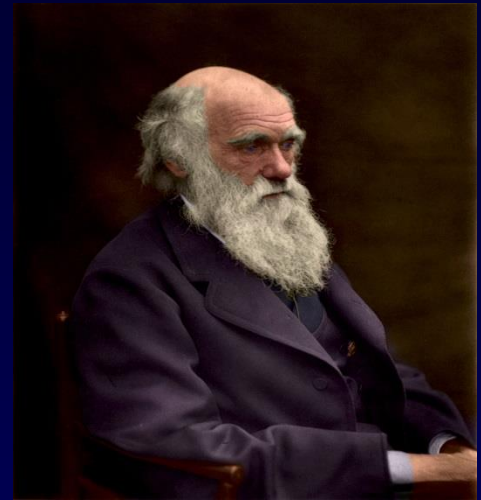
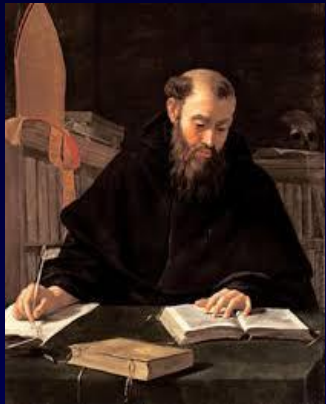
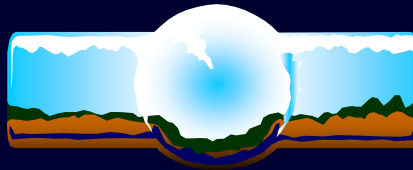
# Guess the Struggler

- ❖ “I am told God lives in me – and yet the reality of darkness and coldness and emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul.”



# Some Points about Struggles

- ❖ Spiritual struggles are not a sign of weak faith
- ❖ Spiritual struggles are not uncommon

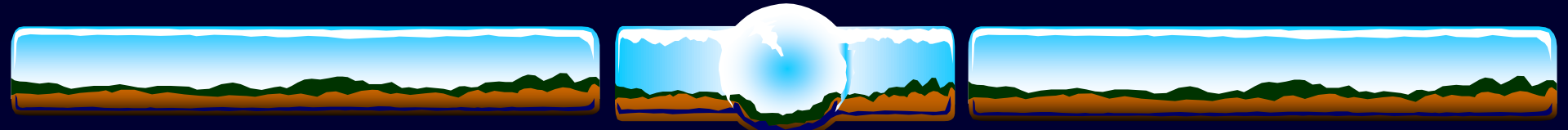






## **R/S Struggles are Not Uncommon (Balboni et al., 2013)**

- ❖ 69 advanced cancer patients
  - ❖ 58% endorsed a spiritual struggle
  - ❖ 30% wondering why God allowed this to happen
  - ❖ 29% wondering whether abandoned by God
  - ❖ 25% angry at God
  - ❖ 25% questioning God's love for them
  - ❖ 22% feeling cancer is punishment from God



# Most Common R/S Struggles among Muslims (Abu Raiya)

- ❖ Felt as though the devil (or an evil spirit) was trying to turn me away from what was good - 40.2%
- ❖ Questioned whether life really matters - 38%%
- ❖ Questioned whether my life will really make any difference in the world - 37.7%
- ❖ Worried that the problems I was facing are the work of the devil or evil spirits - 36.9%
- ❖ Felt as though God was punishing me - 34.4%



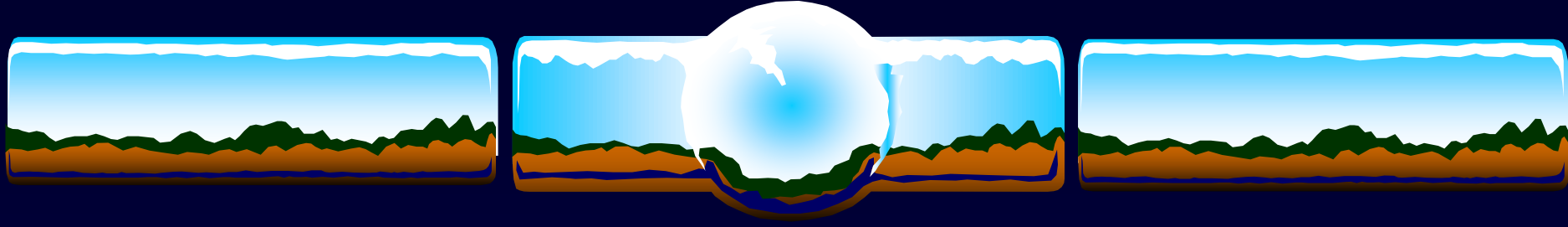
## **Most Common R/S Struggles among Jews (Abu Raiya)**

- ❖ Felt angry at organized religion - 30.5%
- ❖ Had concerns about whether there is any ultimate purpose to life or existence - 28.7%
- ❖ Questioned whether life really matters - 24.5%
- ❖ Felt troubled by doubts or questions about religion or spirituality - 18.9%
- ❖ Questioned whether my life will really make any difference in the world - 17.8%



# Some Points about Struggles

- ❖ Spiritual struggles are not a sign of weak faith
- ❖ Spiritual struggles are not uncommon
- ❖ Spiritual struggles grow out of personal, social, and situational factors



**A MODEL OF R/S  
STRUGGLE**



# Basic Assumptions

- ❖ We are proactive beings, searching for significance
- ❖ Spirituality is a search for the sacred
- ❖ In the search for significance and the sacred, people are guided by an orienting system
- ❖ The orienting system is psychological, social and spiritual
- ❖ Orienting systems vary in their strength
- ❖ All orienting systems are limited

# Socio-Cultural Context

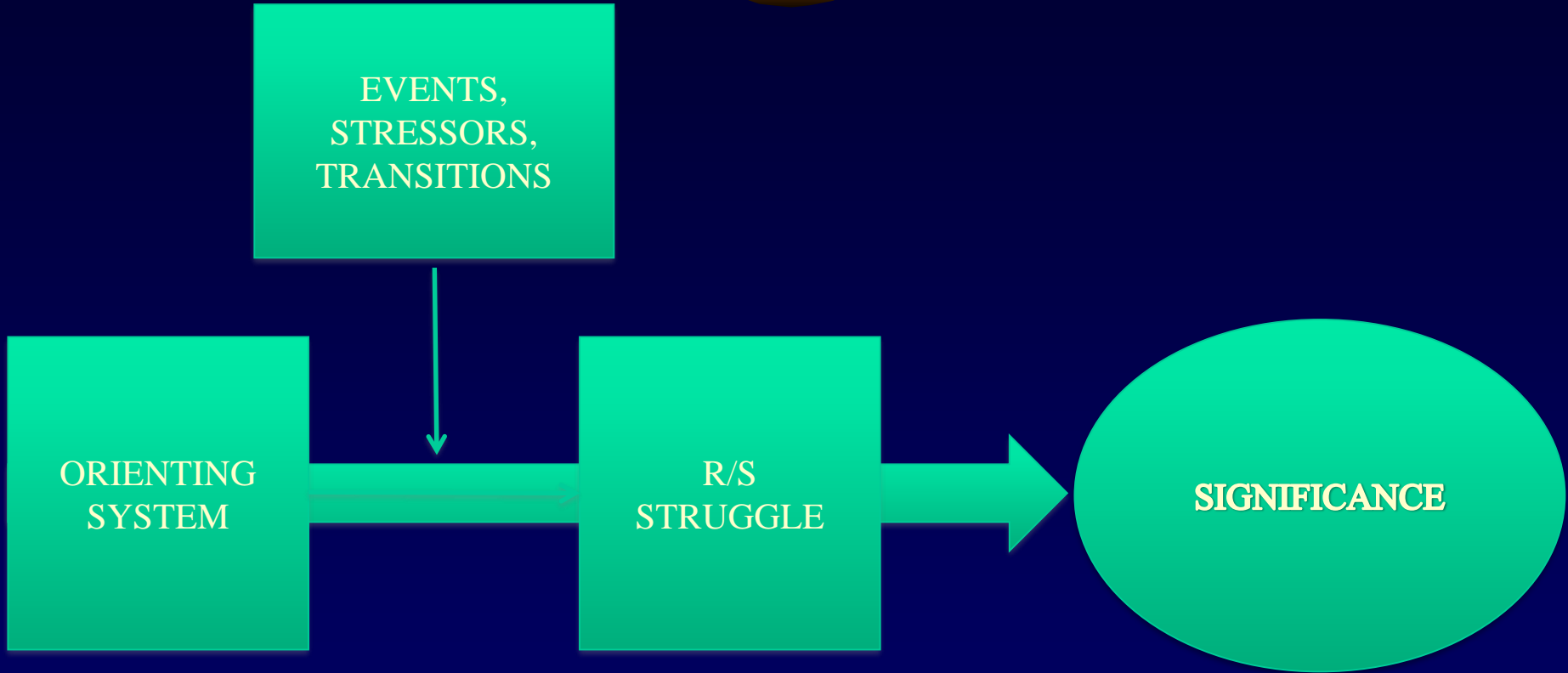
EVENTS,  
STRESSORS,  
TRANSITIONS

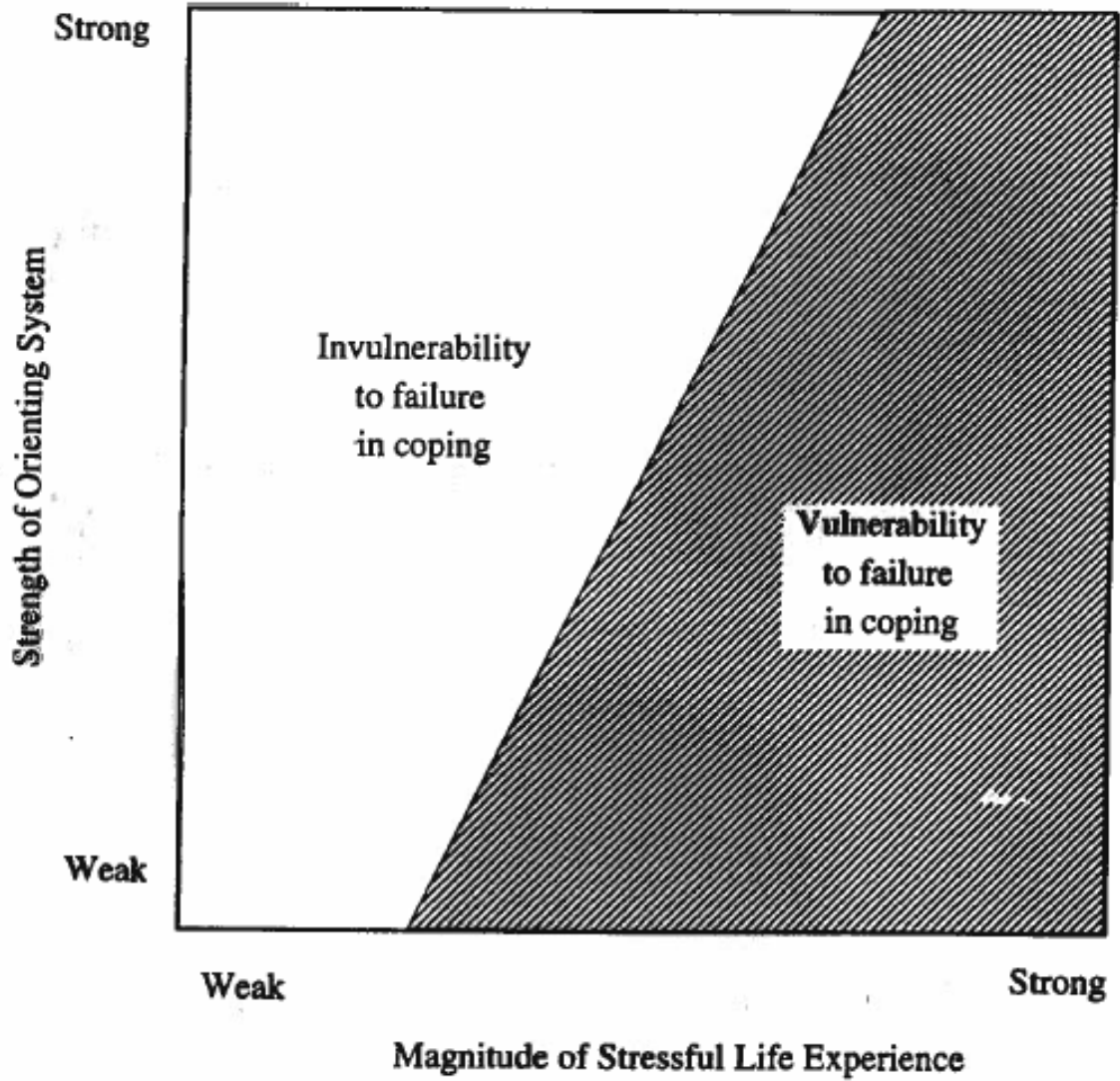
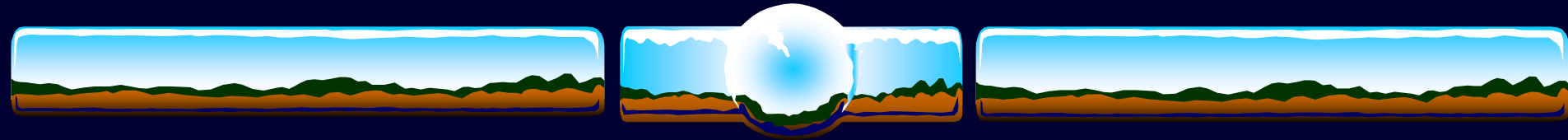
ORIENTING  
SYSTEM

R/S  
STRUGGLE

SIGNIFICANCE

**A MODEL OF R/S  
STRUGGLE**







# Lieutenant Dan in Forrest Gump



# Triggers of Struggle: Illness





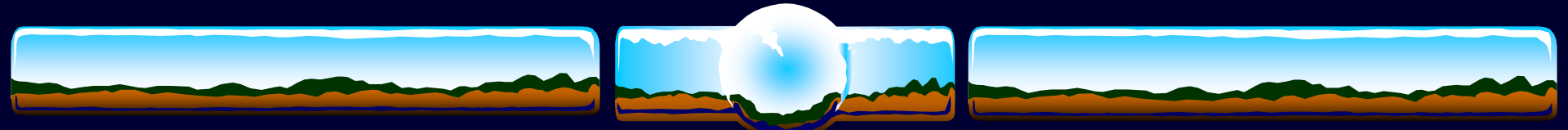
# Triggers of Struggle: Natural Disaster





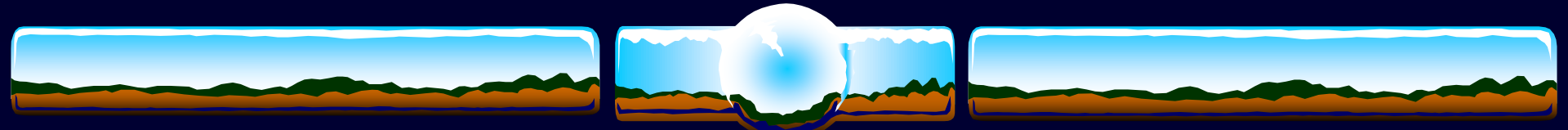
# Triggers of Struggle: Transgressions





# Shaken to the Core (Brenner, 1980)

- ❖ 38% of Holocaust survivors who were observant before the Holocaust became nonobservant after
- ❖ 4% of Holocaust survivors who were nonobservant before the Holocaust became observant after



# Shaken to the Core

## (Brenner, 1980)

“I used to have a very personal, intimate relationship with God. I thought everything I did and every move I made God knew and was right there and He was participating in my every step of the way. . . That’s the kind of person I was . . . Then the Nazis came, and where did He go? God was no longer near me. Disappeared. And I am no longer the person I was”  
(Brenner, 1980)



# Some Points about Struggles

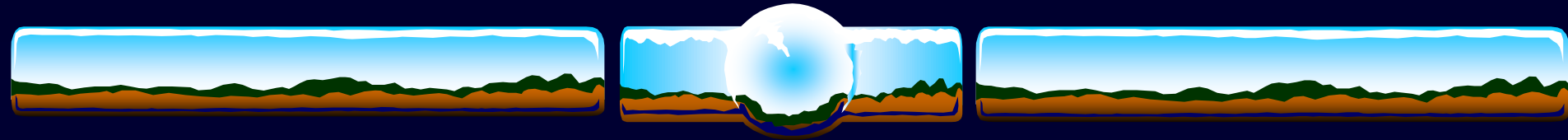
- ❖ Spiritual struggles are not a sign of weak faith
- ❖ Spiritual struggles are not uncommon
- ❖ Spiritual struggles grow out of personal, social, and situational factors
- ❖ Spiritual struggles are a painful but natural part of life



# Intense Pain of R/S Struggle

“ Suddenly without warning. . . I would find myself swimming in a sea of black, my arms and legs heavy and lifeless, tears in my eyes. The frustration of it all swept over me like waves on a beach, pulling me under, upending me in deep water, washing me out away from a firm emotional shore. Day after day, the struggle raged. . . Struggle is never done without cost. Real struggle marks us for life” (Chittister, pp. 4, 81, 91).





# Ano and Vasconcelles Meta-Analysis

(2004, Journal of Clinical Psychology)

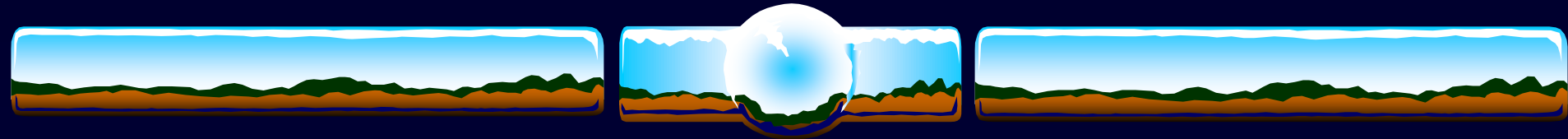
|  | Number of Studies | Cumulative<br>Effect Size | Confidence<br>Interval |
|--|-------------------|---------------------------|------------------------|
|--|-------------------|---------------------------|------------------------|

|                                                         |    |      |            |
|---------------------------------------------------------|----|------|------------|
| Spiritual Struggles<br>with Negative Health<br>Outcomes | 22 | .22* | .19 to .24 |
|---------------------------------------------------------|----|------|------------|



# Landmark Spirituality and Health Study (Abu Raiya et al., 2015)

- ❖ Representative national sample (N = 2200)
- ❖ All types of r/s struggle tied to
  - ❖ Greater depression
  - ❖ Greater anxiety
  - ❖ Less life satisfaction
  - ❖ Less happiness
- ❖ Controls for religious commitment, neuroticism, and social isolation



# Correlates of Spiritual Struggles among Muslims

(Abu-Raiya and Pargament, 2006)

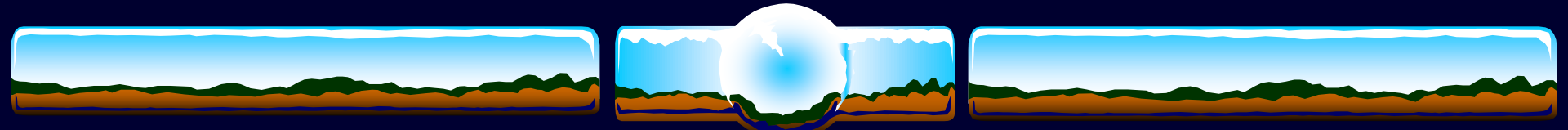
- ❖ Depression  $r = .35$
- ❖ Purpose in Life  $r = -.41$
- ❖ Angry Feelings  $r = .32$
- ❖ Positive Relationships  $r = -.44$
- ❖ Alcohol Use  $r = .62$
- ❖ Poorer Physical Health  $r = .35$



# Correlates of Spiritual Struggles among Hindus

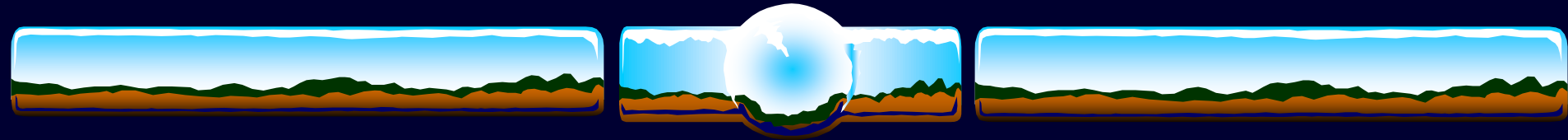
(Tarakeshwar et al., 2003)

- ❖ Depression  $r = .40$
- ❖ Life Satisfaction  $r = -.40$
- ❖ Marital Satisfaction  $r = -.27$



# Correlates of Spiritual Struggles among Jews (Rosmarin, 2008)

- ❖ Depression  $r = .34$
- ❖ Anxiety  $r = .27$
- ❖ Worry  $r = .15$

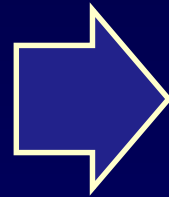


# Are Spiritual Struggles a Cause or Effect of Illness?



# Secondary Struggles

Psychopathology



Struggles



# National Study of Spirituality and Health

(McConnell et al., 2006)

## ❖ Measures

❖ Mental Health: Symptom Assessment-45 Questionnaire (Davison, Bershadsky, Bieber, Silversmith, Maruish, & Kane, 1997)

❖ Anxiety

❖ Depression

❖ Hostility

❖ Interpersonal Sensitivity

❖ Obsess/Compulsive

❖ Paranoid Ideation

❖ Phobic Anxiety

❖ Somatization

❖ Spiritual Struggle: Negative Religious Coping Subscale of Brief RCOPE (Pargament, Koenig, & Perez, 2000)





# Spirituality and Health Study

(McConnell et al., 2006)

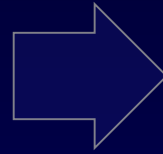
## ❖ Summary

- ❖ Spiritual struggle positively associated with all forms of psychopathology after controlling for demographic variables and social support
- ❖ Relationship between spiritual struggle and psychopathology stronger for individuals with recent illness or injury



# Primary Struggles

Psychopathology



Struggles

Struggles

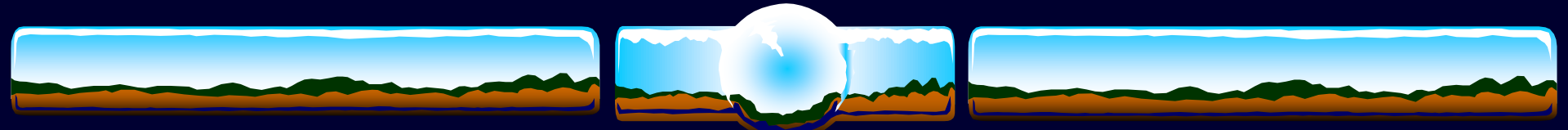


Psychopathology



# Support for Primary Struggles Model

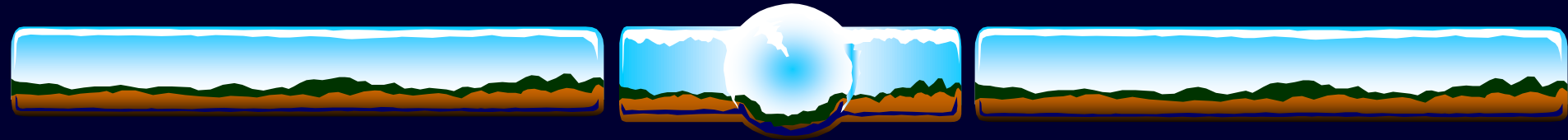
- ❖ Park et al. (2017) longitudinal (2.5) years of African American adults. NRC at baseline predicted greater depression and negative affect 2.5 years later, even after controlling for PRC.
- ❖ Pirutinsky et al. (2011) study of orthodox Jews over two points in time.
  - ❖ Compared primary and secondary struggles models.
  - ❖ The primary RSS model fit the data better with RSS predicting increases in depression over time.
  - ❖ The secondary model didn't fit the data as well with depression predicting changes in RSS over time.



# Religious Coping among Medically Ill Elderly Patients: A Two-Year Longitudinal Study

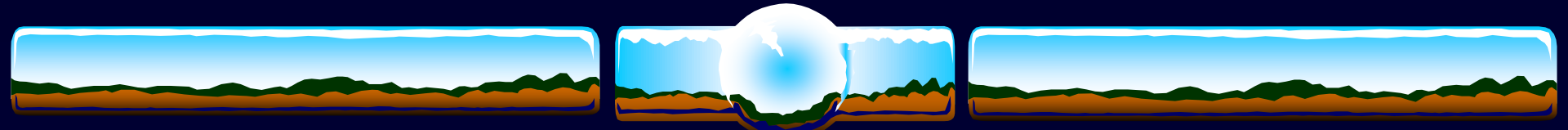
(Pargament, Koenig, Tarakeshwar, & Hahn, 2001, 2004)

- ❖ 596 hospitalized patients over 55
- ❖ Duke University Medical Center
- ❖ Durham VA Medical Center
- ❖ 1996-1997
- ❖ Two year follow-up
- ❖ 176 deceased



# Consequences of Spiritual Struggles

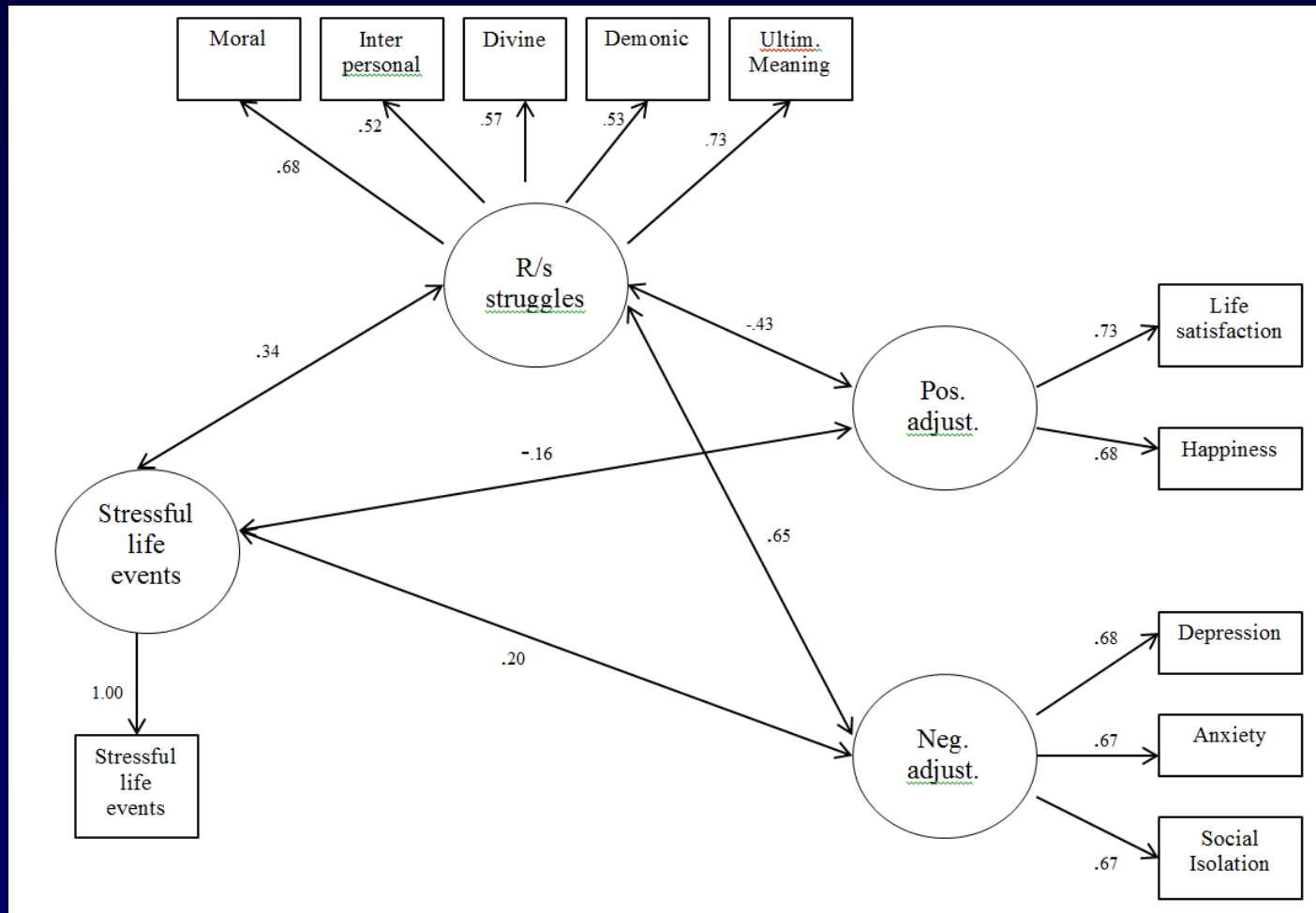
- ❖ Struggles with the divine predicted increases in depressed mood, declines in physical functional status, declines in quality of life after controls
- ❖ Struggles with the divine predicted 22-33% greater risk of mortality after controls



# Specific Spiritual Struggle Predictors of Mortality

- ❖ “Wondered whether God had abandoned me”  
(RR = 1.28)
- ❖ “Questioned God’s love for me” (R = 1.22)
- ❖ “Decided the devil made this happen” (R = 1.19)

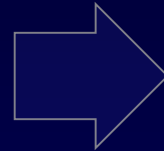
# RS Struggles Mediate the Link between Stressful Life Events and Adjustment





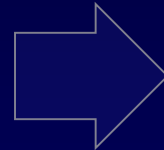
# Complex Struggles

Struggles



Psychopathology

Psychopathology



Struggles

Struggles



Psychopathology





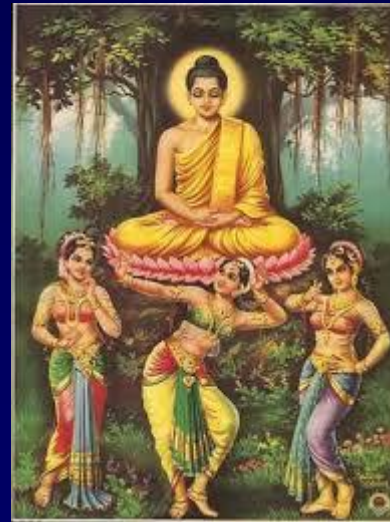


But?

# Can R/S Struggles Lead to Growth?

## ❖ Classic religious exemplars

- ❖ Moses
- ❖ Job
- ❖ Jesus
- ❖ Buddha
- ❖ Mohammad





**But?**

## **Can R/S Struggles Lead to Growth?**

- ❖ Classic religious exemplars
- ❖ Narrative accounts
  - ❖ Spiritual struggle “gives life depth and vision, insight and understanding. It not only transforms us, it makes us transforming as well” (Chittister, 2004, pp. 82, 85)



# Spiritual Struggle as a Dark Night of the Soul

“The Divine assails the soul in order to renew it and thus to make it Divine . . . As a result of this, the soul feels itself to be perishing and melting away, in the presence and sight of its miseries, in a cruel spiritual death. . . For in this sepulcher of dark death it might abide until the spiritual resurrection which it hopes for” (Saint John of the Cross, 1584/1910).



# Frank James III on Struggle and Growth

“I am still trying to make sense of Kelly’s death. I don’t know why God did not rescue Kelly from the cold grip of the mountain. What I do know is that my relationship with God has entered another dimension – more mystifying and more honest. . . There is disappointment, sadness and confusion, but there is no retreat from God. Instead, I find myself drawn to God. Where else can I go with my grief? To be sure God is more mysterious and enigmatic than I thought, but still I can’t shake loose from Him. There seems to be a kind of gravitational pull to God. . . God has manifested himself in my grief. Somehow he is found in the disappointment, the confusion, and the raw emotion. This does not exactly make sense to me and I am quite sure I don’t like it. But I have felt the divine gravity pulling me back toward God, even while I am dumbstruck by his hiddenness. My conception of faith has become Abrahamic, which is to say, I must trust God even though I do not understand him. . . This magnificent promise does not indemnify us from the grief of losing a beloved brother or even disappointment with God. It does, however, take my faith to depths I never fathomed and hope gradually begins to poke through the heartache.”



But?

## Can Spiritual Struggles Lead to Growth?

- ❖ Classic religious exemplars
- ❖ Narrative accounts
- ❖ Empirical research
  - ❖ How are you my dearest, Mozart? (Borowiecki, 2016)





But?

## Can R/S Struggles Lead to Growth?

- ❖ Classic religious exemplars
- ❖ Narrative accounts
- ❖ Empirical research
  - ❖ The bottom line: Studies do not show a consistent link between spiritual struggles and growth



# R/S Struggles as a Fork in the Road to Growth or Decline



The top of the slide features three horizontal panels. The left and right panels show a landscape with green hills and brown ground under a blue sky. The middle panel is identical but has a white globe with blue oceans and green continents centered over the landscape.

**But?**

**Can R/S Struggles Lead to Growth?  
It Depends**

❖ Finding support for the struggle





# Stigma of Spiritual Struggles

- Of African American men in homeless shelters, 46% reported that negative feelings toward God were unacceptable (Smith & Exline, 2002).
- A mother's response to the introduction of evolution into a university's curriculum: "If [my daughter's] faith is shattered or shaken, I'd rather see her dead" (Nesson, 2001).



**But?**

**Can R/S Struggles Lead to Growth?  
It Depends**

- ❖ Finding support for the struggle
- ❖ Being able to find a resolution to the struggle



# R/S Struggle at Two Times

❖ *CHRONIC (High Struggle at Baseline and High Struggle at Follow Up)*

n *ACUTE (Low Struggle at Baseline and High Struggle at Follow Up)*

n *ACUTE (High Struggle at Baseline and Low Struggle at Follow Up)*

n *NONE (Low Struggle at Baseline and Low Struggle at Follow Up)*



But?

# Can R/S Struggles Lead to Growth? It Depends

- ❖ Finding support for struggles
- ❖ Being able to find a resolution to the struggle
- ❖ **Breadth and depth of resources**



# Resources that Predict Growth Post-Struggle

- ❖ Finding meaning in the struggle
- ❖ Religious support for the struggle
- ❖ Religious hope
- ❖ Seeing life as sacred
- ❖ Deeper religious commitment
- ❖ Perceiving a helpful response from God
- ❖ Accepting the struggle
- ❖ Experiencing sacred moments



# Practical Implications

- ❖ Don't change the subject
- ❖ Don't assume you understand
- ❖ Don't judge
- ❖ Don't offer easy answers



# Practical Implications

- ❖ Ask about Spiritual Struggles
  - ❖ Have your problems affected you religiously or spiritually? How?



# Practical Implications

❖ Ask about Spiritual Struggles

❖ Listen to and Normalize Spiritual Struggles





# Normalization

❖ Crying Out to God by George Zornow



A decorative header at the top of the slide features a central white globe with a blue sky and green landmasses. This globe is flanked by two identical rectangular panels, each containing a stylized landscape with green hills, brown earth, and a blue sky. The entire header is set against a dark blue background.

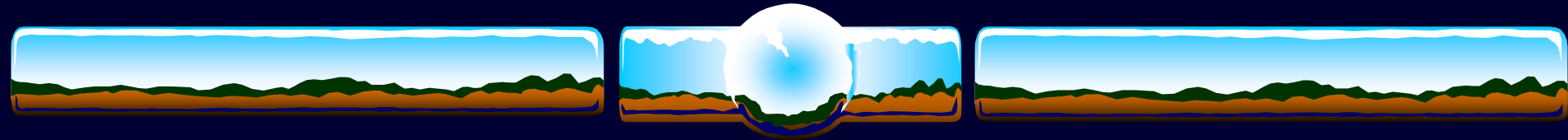
# Practical Implications

- ❖ Ask about Spiritual Struggles
- ❖ Listen to and Normalize Spiritual Struggles
- ❖ **Build Bridges with Religious Communities**



# Practical Implications

- ❖ Ask about Spiritual Struggles
- ❖ Listen to and Normalize Spiritual Struggles
- ❖ Build Bridges with Religious Communities
- ❖ **Develop and Evaluate Interventions to Address Spiritual Struggles**



# Winding Road: Illustrative Activities

- ❖ Write and share spiritual autobiography
- ❖ Share spiritual struggles
- ❖ Visualize ideal older spiritual self
- ❖ Share a sacred object with the group
- ❖ Write a group-lament to God



# Winding Road: Quantitative Results

|                                                    |         |
|----------------------------------------------------|---------|
| Decline in Spiritual Struggles                     | < p. 01 |
| Decline in Negative Affect                         | < p. 05 |
| Decline in Psychological Distress                  | < p. 01 |
| Decrease in Stigmatization                         | < p. 05 |
| Increase in Positive Affect                        | < p. 05 |
| Increase in Behavioral Control                     | < p. 05 |
| Increase in Emotional Control                      | < p. 05 |
| Increase in Religious Value-Behavior<br>Congruence | < p. 05 |
| Increase in Acceptance from God                    | < p. 05 |



# Winding Road: Qualitative Results

## ❖ Greater Acceptance of Struggles

“I’m ok with the fact that I have struggles now. It’s ok for me to be struggling with this. Its ok to not have the answer right now. That’s a little scary but that’s ok. Its ok to be scared, its ok to be confused and just take my time, try to figure it out, and not let anybody else pressure me about things.”



# Practical Implications

- ❖ Ask about Spiritual Struggles
- ❖ Listen to and Normalize Spiritual Struggles
- ❖ Build Bridges with Religious Communities
- ❖ Develop and Evaluate Interventions to Address Spiritual Struggles
- ❖ **Help People Anticipate Spiritual Struggles before They Occur**



# Conclusions

- ❖ Spiritual struggles are a natural part of life
- ❖ They can be a source of great distress, but they can also be a source of growth and transformation
- ❖ Mental health professionals can help clients and patients respond to spiritual struggles in ways that lead to greater wholeness and growth