

CHAPTER 6

God Attachment

“How precious to me are your thoughts, God! How vast is the sum of them!
Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand—
when I awake, I am still with you.”

—*Psalm 139:17-18*

Returning to the research literature on attachment to God, a theme that stood out was the idea that if a participant indicated a perceived relationship with God, this may be associated with a decrease in distress (Counted, 2016). This aforementioned speculative conclusion from the peer-reviewed research is very encouraging because it provides hope to speculate or hypothesize that people can embrace a relationship with God as a pathway to find healing from the distress of attachment injuries or insensitive/unavailable attachment figures. Research reveals that when people relate to God as “paraclete” (Counted, 2016, p. 336) which is frequently substituted for a Hebrew word “naham”. The Hebrew word “naham” (Counted, 2016, p. 336) is said to mean sympathy and this focus on one of God’s attributes, his kindness and compassion (see Psalm, 135:13–14) has been associated as a way of relating to God that helps one to find meaning and healing in experiences.

Let’s consider what some scientist practitioners have found in the way of physical evidence that this finding (that relationship with God can be a pathway to healing) is true. Neuroscientists and psychiatrists using Single-Photon Emission Computed Tomography (referred to as SPECT for short) imaging have found manifestations of this in the brain imaging work they have seen! You may be wondering what SPECT imaging is. A full psychiatric evaluation that includes a SPECT is typically not reimbursed by insurance. SPECT is similar to an FMRI in that it provides an image of what is going on inside of the brain, but the patient does not have to go into as narrow of a machine, so people struggling with symptoms of claustrophobia may be more comfortable with

this. The Amen Clinics boast over 100,000 SPECTs from over 111 countries (September, 2017 from <http://www.amenclinics.com/faq/>) and they report that the SPECT illustrates areas of the brain that work well, areas of the brain that do not work well, and areas of the brain that work too hard. The Amen clinics report that they opt to use SPECT rather than fMRIs because they are less costly. All Amen physicians have been trained personally by Dr. Daniel Amen who has been conducting this research for over 26 years and has written or co-authored with colleagues in more than 70 peer-reviewed research studies!

One of my colleagues that works at Amen clinics shared that if a client with PTSD would participate in meditation, then it would calm down areas of the brain associated with the PTSD (D. Kalyanapu, personal communication, June 2, 2015). I asked her if this would be the same if this could be adapted for our Christian clients, perhaps, if a Christian wanted to do this and wanted to participate in prayer. She smiled and shared, "It depends on what type of prayer. If it is the type where you are talking to God, then no." I asked, "What about contemplative prayer?"

She said, "What is that?"

I said, "It involves being still and quiet, and meditating on a phrase, word or scripture (like Jesus, peace, love, etc.) and quieting the mind and contemplating that and listening."

She said, "That would be helpful in changing the brain if you are quiet and meditating on the phrase." Amen clinics have the largest collection of SPECT's (recall SPECTs are brain images) of any medical facility and Amen doctors know what to look for and what has led to changes in the brain based on their research and imaging work. Therefore, this was exciting to hear. We will talk more about contemplative prayer later.

In the "Journal of Religion and Health", an article was published that was entitled, "Spirituality and Religiosity and its Role in Health and Diseases" in August of 2017 by Shri Mishra and colleagues. In this article the authors state that religiosity (when conceptualized as multidimensional in nature) is associated with "protection against diseases and overall better quality of life" (Mishra, Togneri, Tripathi, & Trikamji, 2017, p. 1282). Mishra and colleagues indicate that many studies have confirmed that religiosity plays a role in health outcomes (Mishra, Tongenri, Tripathi, & Trikamji, 2017, p. 1282; Greely and Hout, 2006; Haslan et al. 2009; Ironson, et al, 2002, Hummer et al., 1999). There is even a new and emerging field that specifically explores the correlation between religious practices and changes in the brain. It is called Neuroethology (Newberg, 2014). Newberg utilized SPECT imaging (the same neural imaging procedure that the Amen clinics use), to evaluate the impact of centering prayer on three nuns and found less blood flow in what was referred to as the "orientation area" (Mishra, Togneri, Tripathi, & Trikamji, 2017, p. 1282; Newberg, 2011). This is the area located in the temporal lobe that is involved in a human's sense of self and his or her surroundings. In addition, they report physical health benefits between spirituality and a number of health benefits such as reduced blood pressure (Hixson et al., 1998), decreases in occurrences of psychiatric disorders, and substance abuse problems in more religious participants.

Even the link between spirituality and mental and physical health has been established, more work needs to be done to specify more about the mechanisms of change and researchers recommend double blind studies.

Kirkpatrick (2005) has been a key player in the literature on spirituality, specifically God attachment. His work supports the idea of God (the Christian God) as an attachment figure. In the next chapter we will discuss more about some of the themes that have emerged throughout the God attachment literature.

CHAPTER 6 SUMMARY

This chapter deals with the idea that if a person has a perceived relationship with God and spiritual disciplines such as meditation and prayer, this may be associated with a healing pathway that leads to a decrease in distress. This is tangibly shown in experiment using SPECT used by doctors such as Dr. Daniel Amen of the Amen clinics. Although, the link between spirituality and mental and physical health has been established, more work needs to be done to specify more about the mechanisms of change. Researchers recommend double blind studies for this.

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