

**BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY**

**The Connection between Spirituality and Meaning in Life  
and Well-Being, Risk Behaviors and Violent Involvement  
among Adolescents in Israel**

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## ABSTRACT

Adolescence is a transitional period between childhood and adulthood characterized by significant changes in the physiological, cognitive and emotional development of youth leading to risk taking on the one hand, but also to shaping lifestyle on the other. During this period, behavior is in the process of shaping and changing before it becomes a permanent and stable pattern. Therefore, at these ages it is easier to improve healthy behaviors and to prevent and change harmful behaviors than older ones. Because of the presence of youth in educational settings, they are available to participate in intervention and prevention programs.

In recent decades, spirituality has been recognized as an important variable for mental well-being among theorists and researchers. In studies among adolescents it has been found that spirituality contributes to the physical and mental health of youth and is even associated with negative behavior and risk behaviors. Frenkel was one of the theoreticians in the first wave of positive psychology together with Maslow and Rogers, who believed in the human potential for personal growth. Frenkel claims that in addition to the physical and mental dimension, man has another dimension, spiritual. The spiritual dimension is related to qualities such as creativity, transcendence, self-awareness, love, values, humor and of course the desire for meaning, unique to man. This dimension in man has the ability to overcome any obstacle or suffering that will appear during life, which is for him, a factor of resilience. Frenkel further claims that modern man suffers from "existential emptiness," a sense of inner emptiness and meaninglessness, whose main symptom is boredom. Frankl argues that when a person feels that his life is meaningful, his chances of surviving difficult life events are greater, whereas in the absence of meaning of life and state of "existential emptiness" he may experience continuous mental tension that will lead to risk, such as depression, addictions and involvement in violence.

Spirituality is a vague concept that is difficult to define. In the research literature there are two approaches to defining spirituality. The first approach relates to the religious aspect of spirituality and faith in God, whereas the second is not religious and is based on secular, humanistic and existential foundations, which views the spirituality of the individual striving for an experience of connection with the essence of life, which includes three dimensions: connection with oneself, "(transcendent). Frenkel's approach is consistent with the approach that religious spirituality must be separated. If a person has a spiritual dimension, then each individual's activity and experience is spiritual. In the present study, the definition of spirituality refers to the second approach, which is detached from religion and sees in spirituality the striving of the individual for an experience of connection with the essence of life, which includes four dimensions: connection with oneself, connection with others, connection with nature and connection with the transcendent.

The objectives of this study are: (1) To examine the distribution of spiritual indices in the various sub-populations among youth in Israel according to sociodemographic background variables such as age, gender, sector and socioeconomic level; (2) to examine the contribution of spirituality to predicting the mental well- Youth, and risk behaviors such as smoking, alcohol and drugs, and involvement in violence. And (3) examine the unique contribution of a sense of meaning to life to adolescents' mental well-being, risk behaviors, and involvement in violence. Therefore, the central research question is: Will adolescents with higher spiritual perceptions present better mental well-being measures, healthier behavior patterns, and lower violence involvement than other youth?

The present study is based on a secondary analysis of the data from the World Health Organization (WHO) -Health Organization (HBSC) survey conducted in Israel in 2014. The survey is carried out once every four, using the same methodological scientific protocol as all partners in the study and The questionnaire is a self-administered questionnaire, anonymous

in a classroom framework. The present study focuses on a sub-sample of 3,547 sixth, eighth, and tenth graders who responded to the questionnaire on the subject of spirituality. The international questionnaire was developed during decades of work by The team of international researchers, who form the core of the researchers involved in this field around the world, includes a wide range of indicators. The daily life of the school, community involvement, recreation patterns, mental distress, victims, and involvement in violence, injuries from accidents and accidents, to behavioral patterns. Such as smoking, drinking alcohol, drug use, sexual activity, and physical activity.

In the present study, the Spiritual Index refers to spiritual well-being, which is a way of being, and involves an awareness of qualities that transcend life experiences, characterized by connection in four areas: (1) connection to self (2) And (4) a connection to something more sublime or a broader meaning of life. The meaning of life index refers to the importance that an individual sees in finding meaning in his life and consists of one question from the spirituality questionnaire.

The findings suggest, that **Spirituality** predict: high life satisfaction, low psychosomatic symptoms, low level of suicidal thoughts, low level of risk behaviors, including cannabis use and low levels of bullying and carrying weapons. **Meaning in life** predict: high life satisfaction, low psychosomatic symptoms, low level of suicidal thoughts, low level of risk behaviors, including cannabis use and low levels of bullying and carrying weapons. Among the sub-indices of spirituality, self-connection, and connection to others were found to have the highest explained variance for predicting high-life satisfaction, low level of risk behaviors, including cannabis use and low levels of weapon carrying.

The research findings are expected to have significant implications on the theoretical, research and practical levels. This study is a pioneering study among youth in Israel that isolates the spiritual index as expressed in the research questionnaire and includes the four



sub-indices of spirituality, connection to self, others, nature and transcendence. The findings of this study teach us a great deal about the influence of the spiritual life of youth in Israel.

Theoretically, it will be possible to delve into and learn more about the role of the spiritual aspect in the fabric of motives, aspirations and decision-making processes. In addition, in light of the findings of the study, we expect that spiritual measures will be introduced in the future into many studies in the field of health and welfare promotion of young and old adolescents, in order to improve the predictability of behavioral and health outcomes. These additional studies will lead to the recommendation to promote and empower spiritual dimensions in various institutions, educational and work institutions, in order to promote the welfare of young people and their students and strive for better achievements. In light of the findings, we recommend implementing a plan to increase the spiritual dimension of the person among the population at risk, in general, and among youth, in particular.