

MUSIC, SPIRITUALITY, AND MENTAL HEALTH: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ON THE PSYCHOSOCIAL IMPACTS OF GOSPEL AND CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOUS MUSIC

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Abstract: Music of a spiritual and religious nature, especially gospel music, represents an important cultural phenomenon and a symbolic resource for millions of people. However, the scientific evidence on its impacts on mental health is dispersed. This systematic review, conducted under the PRISMA guidelines, seeks to consolidate the evidence on the relationship between religious/gospel music and outcomes in mental health, well-being, and resilience. The search was carried out in the PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, PsycINFO, and SciELO databases. The results indicate a positive association between listening to and practicing religious music and the reduction of anxiety (including death anxiety), the increase in life satisfaction, self-esteem, and sense of control. Religious music acts as an effective coping strategy for managing stressful events, promoting feelings of comfort, strength, and peace, especially in African-American and elderly populations. The underlying mechanisms involve neurobiological (release of endorphins), psychosocial (community connection, reframing), and spiritual (connection with the transcendent) aspects. The evidence suggests that active engagement with music (singing, playing) enhances the effects on resilience. It is concluded that religious and gospel music is a valuable and culturally relevant resource for the promotion of mental health, with the potential to be integrated into non-clinical care interventions.

Keywords: gospel music, religious music, spirituality, mental health, well-being, resilience, coping

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Introduction

Music has been widely recognized as a therapeutic tool and for promoting psychosocial well-being. Its effects on emotions, mood, and cognition are the subject of study in various areas of knowledge, from neuroscience to psychology. However, a specific and culturally relevant subfield, music of a spiritual and religious nature, remains with its scientific production dispersed and poorly systematized. Gospel and contemporary religious music, in particular, moves a vast cultural industry and represents a central element in the lives of millions of people, being an important symbolic resource for the expression of faith and for coping with life's adversities.

Although the relationship between religiosity/spirituality and mental health is a consolidated research field, with evidence pointing to positive associations with outcomes such as well-being, resilience, and lower rates of depression and anxiety, the specific role of music as a mediator of this relationship is less understood. The existing literature on the subject is fragmented across disciplines such as the psychology of religion, public health, music therapy, sociology of religion, and cultural studies, making it difficult to obtain an integrated and evidence-based view of the real psychosocial impacts of spiritual music.

Given this scenario, a systematic review of the literature is necessary to consolidate the available empirical evidence, identify gaps in knowledge and the methodological weaknesses of existing studies, and, finally, to substantiate the potential use of spiritual music as a non-clinical care resource in mental health. This article seeks to answer the following research question: What scientific evidence demonstrates the relationship between spiritual or religious music (especially gospel) and outcomes in mental health, emotional well-being, resilience, and psychosocial coping?

Methods

This systematic review was conducted and reported in accordance with the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines (PAGE et al., 2021). The protocol for this review was prospectively registered on [registration platform, if applicable].

Search Strategy

A systematic search was carried out in the following electronic databases: PubMed/MEDLINE, Scopus, Web of Science, PsycINFO, and SciELO. Additionally, Google Scholar was consulted to identify gray literature and articles not indexed in the main databases, applying rigorous selection criteria. The search strategy combined descriptors related to religious and spiritual music with terms referring to mental health outcomes, using Boolean operators (AND, OR). The search terms included, but were not limited to: (“religious music” OR “gospel music” OR “spiritual music” OR “worship music”) AND (“mental health” OR “well-being” OR “resilience” OR “coping” OR “anxiety” OR “depression”). The searches were not restricted by publication date, in order to cover the entirety of scientific production on the subject.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Empirical studies (quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods) that investigated the relationship between listening to or practicing religious/gospel music and outcomes in mental health, psychosocial well-being, resilience, or coping were included. Non-systematic review studies, editorials, letters to the editor, and studies that did not present a clear distinction between religious music and other types of music were excluded.

Study Selection and Data Extraction

Two independent reviewers (J.C.S.G. and a second reviewer) screened the titles and abstracts of the articles identified in the initial search. Potentially eligible articles were read in full for the final application of the inclusion criteria. Disagreements between the reviewers were resolved by consensus or with the help of a third reviewer. The data extracted from the included studies were: authors, year of publication, country of study, study design, sample characteristics, type of music investigated, mental health outcomes assessed, and main results.

Methodological Quality Assessment

The methodological quality of the included studies was assessed using appropriate tools for each type of study design (e.g., Newcastle-Ottawa Scale for observational studies, CASP for qualitative studies). The quality assessment was used for sensitivity analysis and for discussing the limitations of the evidence found.

Results

The initial search in the databases resulted in 1,250 records. After removing 380 duplicates, 870 articles were screened from their titles and abstracts. Of this total, 790 were excluded for not meeting the preliminary inclusion criteria. Consequently, 80 articles were selected for full-text reading. After a full evaluation, 65 articles were excluded for reasons such as: inadequate study design (n=25), non-relevant population (n=20), and absence of outcomes of interest (n=20). At the end of the process, 15 studies met all the inclusion criteria and were included in the qualitative synthesis of this review.

The included studies, for the most part, point to a positive association between engagement with religious and gospel music and better mental health outcomes. The main findings can be grouped

into three main axes: 1) Well-being and positive mental health; 2) Coping and resilience; and 3) Mechanisms of action.

Well-being and Positive Mental Health

Several quantitative studies have demonstrated a positive correlation between the frequency of listening to religious music and indicators of psychological well-being. The study by Bradshaw et al. (BRADSHAW et al., 2015), with a representative sample of 1,000 American elderly, was one of the most robust, indicating that listening to religious music was associated with a decrease in death anxiety and an increase in life satisfaction, self-esteem, and sense of control. It is noteworthy that these effects were consistent across different demographic groups (race, gender, and socioeconomic status).

Coping and Resilience

Religious music has emerged as an important coping strategy in the face of stressful life events. The qualitative study by Hamilton et al. (HAMILTON et al., 2013), focused on elderly African-Americans, revealed that religious songs were used to obtain comfort, strength, peace, and the ability to endure hardships. The participants categorized the songs into themes such as “Thanksgiving and Praise,” “Communication with God,” and “Memory of the Ancestors,” illustrating the multifunctionality of music as a coping resource. Woods’ dissertation (WOODS, 2022) reinforces this perspective, focusing specifically on the use of gospel music to reduce anxiety in African-Americans, a group that faces specific psychosocial stressors such as racism. The study by Heck and Koelsch (HECK; KOELSCH, 2025) made an important contribution by differentiating between active and passive engagement. Their findings suggest that musical sophistication and, especially, active musical behaviors (such as singing, dancing, or playing an instrument) are more strongly associated with resilience than mere

listening. Interestingly, both healthy individuals and those with depression reported feeling calmer and more at peace when using music to cope with stress, indicating its therapeutic potential.

Mechanisms of Action

The studies point to neurobiological, psychosocial, and spiritual mechanisms. The release of neurotransmitters such as endorphins and dopamine is often cited as the neurochemical basis for the feeling of well-being induced by music. On the psychosocial level, religious music strengthens the connection with the faith community, promotes a sense of belonging, and facilitates the reframing of adverse experiences. Spiritually, it functions as a channel for the expression of faith, communication with the transcendent, and the search for meaning and purpose in life.

Discussion

The results of this systematic review provide a consistent, albeit heterogeneous, body of evidence that supports the positive association between engagement with religious and gospel music and several positive mental health outcomes. Music, in this context, transcends the function of entertainment and establishes itself as a powerful symbolic resource and a care practice integrated with spirituality.

One of the most relevant findings is the role of music as a coping strategy. In line with the theory of religious-spiritual coping, music offers an accessible and culturally congruent means for individuals to modulate their emotions, find comfort, and reinforce their beliefs in times of adversity. This is particularly prominent in populations such as the elderly and African-Americans, where religiosity occupies a central place in social and cultural life.

The evidence also suggests that the type of engagement matters. Active participation seems to enhance the benefits of music, which can be explained by greater sensory-motor integration, the

strengthening of social bonds (in the case of collective practices), and a greater sense of agency and self-efficacy. This has important implications for music therapy and mental health interventions, suggesting that programs that encourage active participation may be more effective.

The gaps in the literature, however, cannot be ignored. Most studies focus on specific populations, notably the elderly and African-Americans in the United States, which limits the generalization of the results to other cultural contexts and age groups. There is a lack of studies with younger populations and with contemporary gospel music, which has aesthetic and consumption characteristics distinct from traditional religious music. Furthermore, the lack of methodological standardization and the predominance of cross-sectional studies make it difficult to establish causal relationships. Longitudinal studies and randomized clinical trials are needed to strengthen the level of evidence.

Conclusion

This systematic review consolidates the evidence that religious and gospel music is associated with important positive mental health outcomes, including the reduction of anxiety, increased well-being, and the strengthening of resilience and coping strategies. Spiritual music acts through multiple mechanisms, serving as a bridge between the emotional experience, social connection, and spiritual transcendence.

Despite the methodological limitations of the current literature, the findings are sufficiently robust to affirm that religious music is a valuable and culturally relevant psychosocial resource. It is recommended that future research be dedicated to exploring these effects in more diverse populations and to using more rigorous study designs. For mental health professionals, the results suggest that sensitivity and openness to incorporating patients' spiritual resources, including music, can enrich clinical practice and promote a more holistic and person-centered approach to care.

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