Using Prayer and Scripture in a Christian-based Stress-coping Support Group for Church Attendances: Implications for Professionals

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This study explored the participants' perceptions of using prayer and Scripture in a Christian-based stress-coping support group (CSCSG). Twenty-eight church attendances were recruited from a Presbyterian church in Taiwan. Based on the finding from qualitative analyses using a modified grounded theory approach, four themes related to the participants' learning experiences emerged. The four themes identified were stressful life events, stress-coping experiences, integration of Christian faith with life, and spiritual connection. A follow-up survey indicated that the participants perceived the experiences gained from the CSCSG as appropriate, important, functional, and constructive in coping with stress. Research questions and implications for church professionals are discussed.

Keywords: Christian; prayer; church attendance; Scripture; stress-coping support group

As the recent American “financial tsunami” hit Asia, increased personal stress has become a part of Asian life. Various stressors such as financial crisis, increasing unemployment rate, and rising marital stress have become common. Many research studies reveal that stressors resulting from life events triggers physical problems such as headache, insidious sensitization processes, and a myriad of other health problems (Martin, Lae, & Reece, 2007). Previous research has confirmed that stress-coping interventions play a moderating role in the quality of health and life (Iwasaki, Mactavish, & Mackay, 2005; Wu, Kim, & Shiu, 1991). The need for more focus on stress-coping interventions for helping professionals is clear (Rafnsson, Jonsson, & Windle, 2006).

Chang (2005) pointed out that the use of prayer and Scripture in Christian psychological services is effective and constructive for community well-being. Previous studies have supported the theory that Christians’ receptivity to God can be central to their recovery from stressful situations (Fabricatore, Handal, & Fenzel, 2000;
Loewenthal, MacLeod, Goldblatt, Lubitsh, & Valentine, 2000; Pargament, Smith, Koenic, & Perez, 1998; Tan, 2007). These studies also suggest that Christian spirituality has more direct and powerful effects on well-being and can moderate the relationship between stress and life satisfaction. These studies were conducted primarily in the setting of Western Christian culture. To date, Christians’ understanding of stress coping in Taiwan seems to lag behind their understanding of prayer and Scripture. Although stress coping has long been practiced in the field of clinical psychology, it has rarely been investigated empirically from Asian Christian perspectives.

Previous research suggests that a personal relationship with God can enhance the positive effects on a Christian’s stress reactivity and promote a more positive outlook on life (Pargament et al., 1998). This study hypothesizes that the use of prayer and Scripture in an Asian Christian stress-coping support group (CSCSG) may be helpful and effective for church attendees living in a modern, stress-ridden society. This study was conducted to explore Christians’ perceptions of a CSCSG in a Taiwanese church.

Participants’ perspectives about their learning experiences in the CSCSG offer a promising possibility for a deeper understanding of the overall nature and style of the group. More importantly, exploring participants’ learning experiences related to perceptions, affections, awareness, and attitudes regarding group participation may be able to reflect participants’ authentic voice and learned knowledge from the group more fully. The importance of using the participants' perceptions of their learning experiences became clear since perceptions often differed from those of the counselor or the group leader (Elliott & James, 1989; Paulson, Truscott, & Stuart, 1999).

In providing increased attention to the potential adverse effects of stress, counselors, psychologists, social workers, and pastoral professionals have become increasingly interested in the identification and treatment of stress (O'Connor, Cobb, & O'Connor, 2003). Siegel, Anderman, and Schrimshaw (2001) found that some aspects of religion are consistently associated with adjustment to illness suggesting that religious practice might serve as both a stress buffer and a deterrent. These studies indicated that religion can: (a) provide an interpretive framework or cognitive schema, (b) enhance coping resources, and (c) facilitate access to social support, which in turn may have implications for adjustment to illness.

Religious coping has been utilized effectively to address a variety of painful life situations including stress, illness, victimization, and the loss of a loved one (Tan, 2007). Such positive coping consists of seeking spiritual support, collaborative religious coping, spiritual connection, and benevolent religious reappraisal, in opposition to a negative pattern noted by spiritual discontent, interpersonal religious discontent, and reappraisal of personal beliefs (Pargament et al., 1998).

Spiritual resources, such as Scripture and prayer, are now more acceptable in clinical counseling and psychotherapy. Weld and Eriksen (2007) examined Christian clients’ expectations regarding prayer in counseling and found that: (a) 82% of clients desired audible prayer in counseling, (b) they preferred that therapists introduce the subject of prayer, and (c) they had strong expectations that prayer would be included in counseling. Tan (2007) illustrated how prayer and Scripture can be explicitly used in Christian cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT). Intercessory prayer, defined as praying for oneself and others, had the strongest effects on the cognitive symptoms of depression (Weld & Eriksen, 2007).

Nevertheless, prayer and Scripture can be misused or abused in therapy (Tan, 2007). Even though the appropriate and ethical use of prayer or Scriptures by a sensitive
and prayerful therapist can be of significant help to Christian clients, they can also be risky (Garzon, 2005; Tan, 2007). Monroe (2007), in a brief review of how Christian counseling uses Scripture effectively, proposed a basic guideline for more thoughtful use of prayer and Scripture by paying close attention to matters of purpose, contextualization, and client-counselor rapport. Scripture was used in CSCSG for the purposes of comfort, clarification, cleansing, conviction, and cure. Cognitive restructuring of dysfunctional and irrational thinking was also utilized in the CSCSG (Seaward, 2005; Wu et al., 1991). Since many Christians are more comfortable about sharing their faith within a fellowship or group that they trust (Chang, 2005), the CSCSG was developed on the basis of cognitive reconstruction with the use of prayer and Scripture in a supportive group setting.

The primary purpose of this study was to explore the participants' perceptions of a CSCSG that uses prayer and Scripture. Secondarily, this study was used as a fulcrum to generate questions and implications for church professionals to consider in the management of their congregants stress.

Method

This study employed qualitative research methods with a follow-up survey of the CSCSG experience to explore the participants' perceptions of the CSCSG.

Participants

The participants were recruited from the Sunday Bulletin of a Presbyterian church. Volunteer subjects were prescreened in a 40-minute group interview during which the purpose and sponsorship of the research, the expected duration and procedures, the scope of reporting on the findings of the research, and the right to withdraw from the research project were discussed. All participants who took part in this program met the following criteria: (a) evidence of having a sense of stress in daily life, (b) willingness to accept prayer and Scripture in and outside the CSCSG session, and (3) voluntary participation in the study. Twenty-eight church attendances enrolled in the CSCSG after completing a consent form. Ten men (36%) and 18 (64%) women comprised the study cohort. They ranged in age from 26 to 56 years (M = 40, SD = 5.6); 69% were full-time workers (n = 23), 6% (n = 2) were retired, and 12% (n = 3) were household workers. Seventy-five percent of the participants were baptized Christians (n = 21); the rest were non-baptized believers (n = 7). Thirty-one percent (n = 9) of the participants had postgraduate qualification, 62% (n = 17) had a college degree, and 6% (n = 2) completed high school education. Sixty-nine percent (n = 19) of the participants were married, 19% (n = 6) were single, and 12% (n = 2) were divorced or separated.

Researchers

Researchers' roles in data collection and analysis in are essential (Creswell, 1994) in qualitative studies. Since qualitative research is interpretative, researchers' judgments, values, and biases need to be clearly stated (Creswell, 1994). The primary researcher served as a nonparticipating observer in the weekly group sessions and used techniques that were designed to maintain theoretical sensitivity throughout the data analysis. Techniques were incorporated with the use of: (a) questioning; analyzing a word, phrase, or sentence; (b) conducting further analysis through comparisons; (c) exploring related areas from phenomena; and (d) looking out for elements in the data which were adopted following the theoretical framework of qualitative research (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The other three researchers in the current study were mainly responsible for in-depth interviews, data transcription, and data analysis.

Outline of the CSCSG
The CSCSG consisted of 10 one-and-a-half-hour sessions. It was designed to incorporate prayer and Scripture with psychological lecture to help members learn cognitive and behavioral skills, as well as to provide remediation of stress-caused problem behaviors. The CSCSG was a group-based intervention included cognitive, affective, behavioral, and systematic intervention strategies.

The main theme throughout the 10 sessions was a religious lesson regarding inspirational verses from the Holy Bible, particularly Psalm 17 (“A Prayer of David”) and Psalm 90 (“A Prayer of Moses”). The participants shared their reflections on Psalms 17 and 90 in the first 10-minute group discussion prior to each session. Each session began with a cognitive introduction to stress, stressors, and social support networks. Additionally, stress-coping strategies, including breathing techniques, spiritual meditation, and choosing an exercise program, were incorporated in the group process. The CSCSG rigorously followed eight steps that made use of prayer and Scripture:

Begin with a prayer of thanks to the Lord and ask for the power of the Holy Spirit to fill the entire session.

Invite members to share with other group members their reflections and feelings regarding Psalms 17 and 90.

Facilitate members’ self-disclosure related to stress, stressor(s), life event(s), or stress-coping experiences in the last week.

Encourage members to take turns praying for other members silently during the session as the leader prays for each member aloud.

Apply Scripture appropriately for members as an alternative spiritual intervention.

Give a lecture and lead a discussion related to stress, stressor(s), life event(s), or stress-coping strategies.

Invite members to discuss in groups through self-reflection and feedback.

Close with a prayer asking for the Lord’s blessing and guidance in the process of stress coping.

Data Collection

Qualitative research is interested in processes and meanings rather than outcomes and products (Creswell, 1994). In the current study, a modified grounded theory approach firstly revised by Linton (2003) was selected to gather information and construct theoretical conceptualizations. Data on the participants’ perceptions and experiences were collected through a focus group interview (FGI), weekly written notes (WWN), and the primary researcher’s field notes (RFN). The letters of the alphabet in a pair of parentheses indicate where data came from. Participants provided a weekly written note consisting of their reactions and comments to the CSCSG experience. Moreover, the primary researcher used direct observations weekly of each group session for additional data collection. These observations highlighted the members’ reactions, behaviors, and interactions in the course of their CSCSG experiences. Finally, questions that arose in the focus group interview were developed and presented to a senior qualitative researcher for his advisory suggestions. To increase the credibility, this study utilized the peer debriefing known as collegial challenge. This model refers to the process whereby the researcher consults with peers or scholars to discuss various aspects of the study including the emerging categories, coding process, and any methodological concerns that may arise. The focus group interview was conducted two weeks after the termination of the CSCSG. The questions developed as a framework for the focus group interview were:

• How would you describe stress, stress coping, and the Christian faith life?
• Are stresses negative or positive factors in your life? If so, why?
• How would you describe your learning experiences in the CSCSG?
• What are your perceptions of the use of Scripture and prayer in the CSCSG?
• In what ways do you think it is helpful to your stress coping and faith life?
• How have you received and used feedback that has challenged your stress coping and your perceptions of yourself as a Christian?

A follow-up survey was conducted one month after the group sessions to further examine the learning experiences from the CSCSG. It was assumed that the participants’ responses to the follow-up survey might be able to provide valuable and reliable data. The follow-up survey was based on four statements indicating levels of appropriateness, importance, function, and construction of the CSCSG. The follow-up survey used a 10-point Likert-type measure ranging from 1 (the least agreement) to 10 (the most agreement). For example, one item asked: “To what extent do you identify your perceptions and experiences of the CSCSG in coping with stress as appropriate?” The follow-up scale served as the basis for implementing and supplementing the data used in this study.

Procedures for Collecting and Analyzing Data

Following Corbin and Strauss’s (2008) guidelines, we used three stages to analyze the data:

Stage one. We first read all of the participants’ responses, including their weekly written notes and focus group interview replies, to provide us a general sense of their contents. Then, each participant’s responses were anonymized and transcribed. Two researchers read and analyzed the data together in terms of common reactions, concepts, and themes among all the participants’ responses to each question. Open coding was completed by identifying, labeling, and categorizing the data by means of general themes. Based on the participants’ responses, a theme surrounding “life events as stressors” was developed in the open coding. We then grouped all information that seemed to relate to “life events as stressors” into one large group named “stressful life events.” We used the participants’ responses to build properties and to provide characteristics within the domain to help describe it. For example, as the participants responded to the interview questions and shared their perceptions, we identified affect, cognition, behavior, and attitude as four interrelated properties characterizing “stressful life events.” Following these procedures, four categories emerged from the significant learning experiences generated from the participants.

Stage two. We used axial coding to reconnect the data and highlight relations among categories and subcategories. We explored those aspects that seemed to contribute to the participants’ “stressful life events,” specifically, those events the participants perceived and identified as having caused stress, and cited examples of exercises and skills that they could use to manage stress. In order to do this amalgamation, all information attained through previous data analyses was integrated and used to develop a clearer, more concrete explanation and description of the themes as well as relations that emerged in the research. For this purpose, the data were reexamined for changes in conditions that influenced actions, interactions, and the participants’ responses over time. As a result, we sought to ensure full consideration of occurrences or full immersion into phenomena for all categories in order to understand them as completely, comprehensively, and thoroughly as possible. Hence, redundancies and duplication of similar ideas, meanings, experiences, and descriptions occur from informants so that no more information is forthcoming (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).
Stage three. We used triangulation and prolonged engagement to enhance the credibility of the research findings in this study (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Multiple data sources, including WWN, FGI, and RFN were used in this study. Moreover, the prolonged engagement involved the researcher’s presence in a 30-minute group interview, which served as a venue for final clarification and verification.

To analyze quantitative data, descriptive statistics were used to calculate the means and standard deviations of the four items in the follow-up survey.

Results

Data analyses yielded 45 meaning units or open codes which were then grouped together meaningfully to form 12 axial categories. In turn, these were grouped together to form four selective categories. At the conclusion of the data analysis, one main theme referred to learning experiences in the CSCSG; four primary categories, including stressful life events, stress-coping experiences, integration of Christian faith with life, and spiritual connection, emerged as prominent and consistent themes in the CSCSG.

Learning experiences in the CSCSG

Based on the RFN, “It was found to be beneficial to meet with other Christian members with the same stressful problems.” Following the group sessions, 18 participants noted that having a chance to talk about their experiences and to acknowledge their situations was valuable. These themes were echoed by several participants’ WWN in which they expressed: “Mutual support in the group is valuable because you know that somebody is always accompanying you, step by step.”

Most of the participants indicated that receiving feedback from members in a warm, supportive, and constructive environment was helpful. One of the participants said: “Receiving feedback from other members is a regular part of the group dynamics. It offers me a great time to see myself during the time of stress. It is great to put a whole new light together” (FGI).

Twenty of the participants interviewed noted that the use of prayer and Scripture in the CSCSG helped them to try out different ways of coping with stress and to learn to depend more on God in their subsequent daily lives. This general theme was reflected in such statements as: “Although life gives us more stress than we can handle, we’re not alone! Prayer and Scripture helps us to save the day and enrich our life!”; and “What we have already known is that prayer and Scripture can help us find hope, guidance, and knowledge to live with stressful events” (WWN).

The sharing of knowledge on stress-coping techniques was also useful and effective. Many responses indicated that stress-coping strategies such as breathing techniques, thought stopping, or choosing an exercise program were useful. A number of participants’ statements indicated: “If they have had this stress-coping knowledge earlier, they would have capabilities to deal with life’s stresses and have avoided stress-caused damage. Particularly, the rehearsal of stress-coping skills in the group was impressive and reproductive” (WWN). However, two of the participants suggested: “The practice of stress-coping skills needs to be strengthened because the more practice we do in group, the more the effects of stress-coping in real life” (FGI).

Finally, the use of WWN was one of the useful techniques for stress reduction. This theme was reflected in the following statements based on the participants’ notes: “A particular emotion-laden feedback and the observation of others were the most commonly cited events in the CSCSG that yielded insights and sense of connectedness for me” (WWN); and “Writing is an expressive and creative way which offers a medium through which emotion is understood and clarified in a personal way” (WWN).
Stressful life events

Based on the first set of WWN, stressful life events were quite common. Of the 28 participants, 22 encountered a variety of stressors in their occupational settings and indicated that: "It was getting worse and worse since the ‘financial tsunami’ happened in the US" (WWN). This theme was reflected in one young secretary’s statement: “I am almost overwhelmed with my boss’ requirements. The worst situation is that I am scared of being laid off because of the financial crisis resulting from export recession” (WWN).

Seven of the 28 participants interviewed stated that unexpected life events caused a lot of pressure on them. One experienced assistant wrote: “My job is pleasurable and I have been employed in the same department for 8 years. I have become comfortable interacting with my fellow workers. Unfortunately, the economy has taken a turn for the worse. Credit has become tight and loan interest rates are rising” (WWN). A middle-aged husband expressed his sense of loss, and a young man was suffering from a recent separation.

The RFN from the group sessions described: “When participants shared with other members in the initial group sessions, participants felt sort of frustrated, desperate, and anxiety.” At that point, inviting the members to take turns praying for other members silently during the CSCSG session seemed to be more appropriate than to have the leaders pray for each member audibly and publicly. In addition, almost all the participants expressed the thought that: “Sharing with other members at the beginning of the session about reflections of Psalm 17 and Psalm 90 is helpful and useful for those who are suffering from burdens and stresses” (WWN).

Stress-coping experiences

Stress-coping experiences were related to personal religious coping and psychological adjustment to stress in daily life. A number of participants expressed their feelings about encountering membership after the congregation by saying, “I am willing to pray for you privately” (FGI). The advice to read more Scripture was another major suggestion made by most of the priests or pastors. One of the participants stated: “I was frequently frustrated when I heard a similar response related to read more Scriptures on my time schedule” (FGI). In addition, a number of young parents interviewed reported that they feel a lot of pressure in their raising their children. This theme was reflected in one mother’s statement: “It is all right to raise kids, but it is hard for me to limit my expectations for my kids’ success. I know that over expectations always lead to disappointments” (FGI).

In contrast, some participants reported successful stress-coping experiences. One young mother noted: “My reactions to this situation are that it’s good to get fired because I do need a rest, and I can spend more time with my children.” An elderly woman implied the importance of selective perception, in which she perceived things according to her beliefs more than as they really are, by saying, “It is good to start again in Christ” (FGI). All the participants indicated the importance of spiritual meditation: “The spiritual meditation is great for me. In terms of spiritual meditation, my energy can be strengthened and my mind can be opened” (WWN).

Several participants indicated their palliative coping experiences from the social, leisure, and physical points of view. This theme was reflected in the FGI in the following statements: “Almost all my work is done in front of my computer. I am always sitting. So I like to jog every morning before breakfast.”; “Getting together with friends, going out to eat, or watching a movie takes my mind off things.”; and “Attending volunteer service in the church is a different but an effective option for coping with stress.”
Integration of Christian faith with life

Many participants agreed with the following statement: “If a Christian has a mental breakdown, there must be something wrong with his faith” (FGI). Many participants expressed their anxiety, doubtfulness, and self-blame in their WWN: “There must be something wrong with me. So many unpleasant things happened to me”; “I learned several times to become more acquainted with God’s will in my struggling with pains and stressors. However, I have not gotten an answer yet”; and “The most important thing I have learned in the CSCSG is to know how to keep my religious faith in such a stressful life.”

During the transition phase of stress coping, the participants explored possible resources and began to form their own faith identities. A sense of who one is and what he or she can do can be hindered by stress, resulting in confusion about personal and Christian roles. Eleven participants stated that the reminding of their Christian role in the time of traumatic stress is important: “It’s good to know that the God who cares for us never loses track of us during the time of stress. Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows” (WWN). This in turn resulted in a positive view of Christian faith and the self. A positive reorientation or an assertive self-image was rebuilt from stress-inducing situations. The use of prayer and Scripture in the CSCSG seemed to provide a way to facilitate the integration of the Christian faith with a stressful life among all participants from the Christian point of view. An integration of Christian faith with life became evident as participants struggled with stressful life events successfully through spiritual intervention, a positive, healthy, and generative way to see Christian role and faith.

Spiritual connection

More than half of the participants described their experiences of personal spiritual connection as follows: “When I feel stressed or discouraged, I would attend the prayer meeting on the weekday. It is great to know that some of your sisters and brothers in Christ support you and share your burdens”; and “I believe that even if anything happens to me, I should not stop giving thanks to our Lord. The Lord is able to do immeasurable deeds and give us everything we ask for or can imagine, according to His power” (FGI).

Based on the field notes, a number of participants also talked about the importance of spiritual daily bread, family life, and perceived emotional support. This theme was reflected in the statement of one woman who noted: “One thing I have learned from my faith is to focus on who I really am, my role, my strength, and my weakness from God’s perspective. The inspirational words of Psalm 17 and Psalm 90 renew my life and strengthen me every day. I am sure that the best way for me to restore and maintain inner peace is experiencing an intimate relationship with God” (FGI).

Ten of the participants interviewed stated that sustaining one’s spirit when facing an illness is a challenge for family members and caregivers. A number of participants’ statements fully reflected the dilemma with this family stressor by saying: “Although it is an endless stress, taking care of my sick parents is a privilege. In Chinese families, we are always struggling with the tensions between obedience and disobedience, immediacy and longevity, as well as responsibility and irresponsibility resulted from family of origin problems. Without God’s leading, I cannot stand any longer” (FGI).

However, quite a few participants expressed different authentic voices: “This is my first step forward to Christian faith. The Scripture I learned in the CSCSG is valuable but ineffective for my coping stress while the Bible is used as an answer book. I cannot see the connections. I have difficulty in using the Bible in meaningful ways later in other
contexts” (FGI).

Results of the follow-up survey

Table 1 presents the means and deviations for four statements used to indicate the levels of appropriateness, importance, function, and construction, respectively, based on the follow-up survey.

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<th>Categories</th>
<th>Appropriate</th>
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<td>1.26</td>
<td>8.81</td>
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The results show that the participants perceived their experiences in the CSCSG as appropriate, important, functional, and constructive in coping with stress. The means ranged from 7.81 to 8.81, and it is evident that the participants perceived their experiences in the CSCSG as positive and fairly good. Hence, the experiences gained from the CSCSG were highly valued by the participants.

Discussion

Based on the participants' perceptions, the results of this research indicate positive feelings about the learning experiences, a greater understanding of stress-coping strategies, and an enlargement of inner and external resources in dealing with stress. Also, the participants highlighted the benefits of peer support through the CSCSG. Finally, the participants highly valued the practice of the Christian faith in coping with life stresses.

According to the participants' perceptions, stressful life events resulted from financial pressure, occupation, raising children, job uncertainty, retirement, and a sense of loss. The inner resources for coping with stress included being loved and cared, praying, cultivating a relationship with God, spiritual meditation, selective perception, obedience, thinking about inspirational words, and positive attribution. The external resources for coping with stress included peer support, setting up a roadblock, physical exercises, and volunteer services. Consistent with Seaward’s (2005) findings, stress-coping experiences that included external and internal resources were useful and helpful. Although the findings on external and internal resources seemed to be similar to those of Iwasaki et al. (2005), the content of the resources was somewhat different. The internal resources proposed by Iwasaki et al. (2005) seemed to depend mostly on psychological stress-coping strategies without spiritual resources. In contrast, this study found that spiritual resources are an extremely important factor in Christians’ stress coping, hence supporting earlier findings (Pargament et al., 1998; Schnittker, 2001; Siegel et al., 2001).

One important finding from this study is that all the participants appeared to increase their sense of being cared and loved in the group. This is congruent with the finding of Siegel et al. (2001) that religion is able to provide an access to social support and to promote coping resources. As a result, the learning experience in the CSCSG was highlighted by the sense of caring and mutual support. In this context, a sense of universality that things existed everywhere is experienced when one group member realizes that he or she is neither alone nor so different from others. The awareness of universality that members gained from the group discussions and from observing others is a particular strength of the group format and may help to promote a sense of hope.
Based on Yalom’s (2005) assumptions, the awareness of universality originating from peer support has various meanings, including empathetic understanding, role identity, and a ‘we’-feeling. Although the CSCSG was education-based and focused on here-and-now interaction, the therapeutic factor of universality was generated when prayer and Scripture were used properly and ethically in the group (Tan, 2007).

The results of this study suggested an additional question: “What is the effect of private prayer on stressful events?” Findings seem to be consistent with the observations from previous studies that people often turn to religious activities for comfort and support when faced with stressors including threatening events (Fabricatore et al., 2000; Iwasaki et al., 2005; Pargament et al., 1998). The strengths of using prayer and Scripture in the CSCSG included achieving valued meanings socially, spiritually, cognitively, behaviorally, and affectively. As previously noted, a number of the participants emphasized the importance of gaining meaningful support, cognitive construction, a sense of being cared for, and connection with God. Moreover, the use of Scripture and prayer in the CSCSG seems to act as a stress buffer and deterrent; it can provide an interpretive framework or cognitive schema that enables or enhance coping resources (Schnittker, 2001; Siegel et al., 2001). Finally, the participants valued the practice of the Christian faith in life highly; a spiritual connection was correlated with the research experience. Similar to Schnittker’s (2001) findings, use of Scripture and prayer empowered participants to cope with stress.

Previous studies (Martin et al., 2007; Wu et al., 1991) indicated that people struggling with stress for a period of time often find themselves overwhelmed by the possibilities of disaster or failure lurking around every corner of their lives. The study intervention for these anxiety-based stressors included exploring feelings and core beliefs that operate below the surface along with teaching skills to fight repetitive anxiety-provoking thoughts. Based on our observation, informing participants about Scripture at the time of stress and jumping to a conclusion (e.g., God will take care of you so do not fear; God will provide so do not be discouraged) without understanding what burdens they suffer causes them to become deeply frustrated and disappointed. The outcome of treatment becomes of little value; instead of encouraging people to read the Bible for its potential positive effects, the Bible may be viewed only as an answer book (Monroe, 2007). The use of Scripture must meet the participants’ needs in their present affliction in order to invite them to become engaged in a religious topic rather than just receive it in an object and processed manner. Misusing Scripture to direct people to where they should be if only they could be more mature (Monroe, 2007) can be dangerous or even harmful.

Study results relating to the importance of spiritual connection are congruent with Pargament et al.’s findings (1998) that suggested that use of Scripture and prayer in the group process would result in relationship rebuilding, reassuring the Christian faith, and recovering trust in God. Based on the participants’ statements, a connection between the Christian faith and life in terms of identifying the Christian role and faith, reassurance, thinking about inspirational words, and self-worth was helpful in enhancing personal spiritual growth. This finding is also consistent with Pargament et al.’s (1998) conclusion that caring more for other people, developing more responsible interpersonal relationships, developing a positive sense of self, and developing trust in others are related to an enhanced spiritual connection among members.

The issue of family stress resulting from filial piety, obedience, and responsibility
needs to be re-examined; it is a common but serious problem in the Taiwanese society. Family stress should be treated not only as a moral dilemma; it also constitutes a significant stressor and is related to issues of psychological health. A number of participants reported that living in three-generation homes, a common occurrence for many traditional Chinese families, is difficult as young parents struggle between generations (grandparents and children). Filial piety, including obedience and responsibility, thus extends to “no boundaries”; it is increasingly more controversial in today’s Taiwanese society. Family stress causes a lot of pressures and invisible burdens. Our findings are congruent with previous observations that the use of social support, prayer, thinking about inspirational words of God, and gaining empowerment from God appear to be useful coping strategies for handling family stressors better (Garzon, 2005; Tan, 2007). The issue of family stress is of high importance and deserves further consideration and study.

The results also support earlier findings about group process considerations including: (a) a combination of psycho-educational and counseling group formats provides an opportunity to learn through both participation and observation; (b) a leader should assume both instruction and facilitation roles in the group; and (c) a balance between cognitive construction and affective rapport is important (Schnittker, 2001; Siegel et al., 2001). Obviously, the findings from both this qualitative study and the follow-up survey indicated that, based on the participants’ perceptions, the experiences in the CSCSG were appropriate, important, functional, and constructive in coping with stress.

Some participants were less satisfied with aspects of the CSCSG. They would have liked more time with the group or more sessions. They also expressed a desire for more opportunities to practice stress-coping skills. These points match with those of Wu et al.’s findings (1991)

The experiences reported by individual participants in the CSCSG were intended to generate an understanding about what occurs in such a group effort, and to provide a conceptual framework for further research. Accordingly, the following research questions are raised: What are the stressors and corresponding reactivity in the dynamic stress-coping system? Does any mediator or mediating factor exist in the process of reciprocal cause and effect in this model? What are the relationships between stressful life events and stress-coping strategies, Christian faith and daily stress, and spiritual growth, respectively? What are the impacts of spiritual growth, which acts as a powerful stress-coping mechanism?

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The results of this pilot study have also generated several questions for further research, the results should be interpreted with caution. First, a single-subject (one group) design was chosen in the CSCSG. Although this design provided the clearest means to deeply explore the group’s learning experiences, the data collected from one group may be deficient and limited. This restricted cohort studied may limit relevance of these findings suggesting the need for more expansive research in this area. Second, the retrospective nature of and the reliance upon participants’ self-report may not reflect nuances of changing experiences over time; a number of details might be forgotten or misremembered. Third, all participants were from a Presbyterian church. The homogeneity of the members may have an impact on the participants’ perceptions of the CSCSG thwarting the ability to generalize these findings populations that attend other Christian and non-Christian congregations. Fourth, the length of the support group
sessions may limit the participants’ perceptions. Future research might benefit by increasing the number of group sessions to more than ten in order to collect more in-depth data.

Implications for Church Professionals

Stress is a risk factor for all peoples in all cultures. The use of prayer and scripture in the CSCSG seems to be helpful in addressing and managing stress. Seminary based pre- and in-service training programs utilizing the CSCSG may help religious leaders and counselors to address stress issues in their respective religious communities. Because religiosity affects the ways people think about stressful situations, awareness of the socio-cultural context and the use of prayer and Scripture may help clients see stressful situations differently (Tan, 2007). Church professionals' familiarity with their clients' cultural backgrounds may lead to optimal therapeutic outcomes (Iwasaki et al., 2005).

Although this study's several constraints limited conclusions, the results are encouraging and stimulate future empirical investigations. Based upon our findings and as Tan's (2007) suggestions, we developed the following modified pattern of the CSCSG for professional church workers dealing with Christians undergoing stress:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A modified pattern of CSCSG</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Duration</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Purpose</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Dimension</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Religious lesson</strong></td>
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References


