

Effects of Dhikr (Repetition of Holy Names) on Stress: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

Background and Objective: Dhikr (holy names repetition) is one of the Quranic methods that is used to cope with anxiety. Numerous studies have investigated the effectiveness of dhikr in reducing human stress. Stress is one of the biggest problems in humans that lead to burnout, anxiety, weakened immune system, and organ damage. Therefore, the current study intended to critically review the literature and line of research on the effects of holy name repetition on reducing stress.

Methods: In so doing, a systematic review was conducted. The data were collected through well-known English and Persian databases, including ScienceDirect, PubMed, Magiran, SID, Proquest, Eric, Psychinfo, Springer, Ebsco, and Noormags. Altogether, 39 studies were found and ultimately, 12 studies met the inclusion criteria and were included in the investigation. The authors have not reported any conflicts of interest.

Results: According to the sample populations investigated, those studies were classified into four categories: studies on ordinary people (one study), veterans (six studies), family members and caregivers of patients (four studies), and patients with HIV (one study). Eleven studies (92 percent) demonstrated that remembrance of God significantly reduced the stress. Most of the studies have been conducted in the United States and on the veterans.

Conclusion: Modern human, surrounded by many stressors, may resort to dhikr as a reliable strategy to find peace. Future researchers are suggested to systematically review the studies investigating the effectiveness of holy name repetition in alleviating other psychological problems such as depression and aggression.

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Summary

Background and Objective

Recently, cultural and religious teachings have been employed in psychotherapeutic interventions. Dhikr is the repetition of sacred sentences or words that reduce annoying thoughts, create peace and reduce stress (1). Zikr can have various consequences, one of which is setting the mind free from fixation on objects, ideas, concepts and daily activities. Repeating dhikr is

associated with activities on the left side of the frontal lobe of the brain -where it plays a key role in generating positive emotions- which in turn increases positive emotional states (2). Some positive characteristics have been assigned to dhikr; some of them are as follows: a) It is always available; b) It does not impose any cost; c) It is not limited to place and time; d) It does not have any negative side effects (3).

Numerous studies have investigated the effectiveness of dhikr in reducing human stress (4, 5). Stress is one of the biggest problems in

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humans that lead to burnout, anxiety, weakened immune system and damage to organs (6). Considering the deficiencies caused by stress and the costs of treating these diseases (7), the importance of expanding knowledge in the field of dhikr and its effect on reducing stress is well clarified. Although researchers have recently shown the positive effects of dhikr on psychological stress, no comprehensive study has systematically reviewed previous studies in this field. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to critically and analytically summarize the line of research on the effect of dhikr on stress reduction and then to present the results of research and gaps in studies. The research question addressed in the present study is "What effects does dhikr focused intervention have on psychological stress?"

Methods

The current study employed a systematic review design. The data were collected through well-known English and Persian databases, including Scencedirect, PubMed, Magiran, SID, Proquest, Eric, Psychinfo, Springer, Ebsco, and Noormags. Only the studies with experimental research designs (interventions/clinical trials) were considered and the following keywords were sought: Mantra, mantram, zikr, dhikr, Mantram repetition, Mantram repetition program, remembrance of Allah, remembrance of God, holy name repetition, sacred word repetition, stress, and stress management. Searching the databases, we found altogether 39 studies, of which 27 were discarded and ultimately 12 studies meeting the inclusion criteria were selected and included in the investigation. The inclusion criteria were as follows: being thematically related to the keywords; being published by a scientific journal from 2000 to 2019; being reported in English or Persian; employing experimental research designs to examine the interventional effects of dhikr on stress.

Results

Considering the sample investigated in studies, they were classified into four categories: studies on ordinary people (one study), veterans (six studies), family members and caregivers of patients (four studies), and patients with HIV (one study). Eleven studies (92 percent) demonstrated that remembrance of God significantly reduced the stress. Most of the studies have been conducted on the veterans. Another finding was that most of the studies have recruited middle aged and elderly participants, and little research

has been done on adolescents and young people. Moreover, all the studies have been conducted in the United States (10 studies) and Iran (two studies). Eight out of the 10 American studies have reported the effect size of their interventions; however, none of the two Iranian studies have reported this measure. We found that Jill Bormann, Clinical Professor in the Hahn School of Nursing, and Health Science at the University of San Diego, has been the most productive researcher in the field. She has developed Mantram Repetition Program (MRP). Additionally, we found that nine (75 percent) out of the studies have used Mantram Repetition Program as the intervention. Maha Mantra (a Hindu zikr) has been also utilized in one study. Also, one research has employed Salawat (salutation upon the prophet of Islam) and another study has included the Islamic recitation "lā 'ilāha 'illā -llāh" (There is no god but Allah) in its interventional package.

Conclusion

Modern human, surrounded by many stressors, may resort to dhikr as a free and reliable strategy to find peace. Despite the benefits of dhikr, unfortunately it has not yet been integrated into the lifestyle of human beings and this may be one of the factors mediating the daily ruminations and mental tensions (8, 9). Cultural and indigenous psychology, considering cultural heritage, religious teachings, and spiritual rituals, may provide us with novel remedies for human sufferings (10, 11). Remembering God not only implies an intimate relationship with One who not only listens well and knows everything, but also creates a reassuring awareness of a supreme power who can change negative situations and grant patience and peace (12, 13).

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Conflict of interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

Authors' contribution

Initial idea: first and second authors; Data collection and drafting the paper: third and fourth authors; Data analysis and interpretation: third author; Text revision and supervision of the project: first and second authors.

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