

Religious Adolescents, Mental Health, and the Benefits of Private Religious Worship

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*Accepted for Publication on August 17, 2021 at The Religious Educator*

*Prepublication Manuscript*

Over the years, there has been a wealth of research<sup>1</sup> on religious participation among adolescents and their mental health.<sup>2</sup> The impact of public religious behaviors, such as attending church services and participating in church activities has been beneficial to teenagers. However, are there benefits to private religious practices, such as personal prayer and personal scripture study to adolescent mental health? Can private religious practices provide youth with the spiritual strength and fortitude to mediate anxiety or depression? These questions will be explored in our study on adolescent mental health and religion.

## **Introduction**

Research documents an overall decline in religious affiliation and participation among Americans over the past several decades, which not only includes decreasing church attendance and an overall drop in religious affiliation, but also dwindling belief in God, prayer, and scripture reading.<sup>3</sup> For instance, of the silent generation—those born between 1928-1945—85 percent identified as Christians. However, the millennial generation—those born between 1980-1996—only 56 percent affiliate with a Christian religion in the United States.<sup>4</sup> Other researchers have noted “a clear decline in outward religious expression” among young adults,<sup>5</sup> and an overall decline in religious participation among adolescents and they move through the teenage years. The older adolescents become the less religious they appear to be. For example, those in middle school attend religious services more than seniors in High School.<sup>6</sup>

Enter *Generation Z*, or the *iPhone Generation*, those born between 1997 and 2012. This group appears to be less religious than any previous American cohort. “Gen Z” has been categorized as the first “post-Christian” generation, where now the percentage of teens who identify as atheist doubles that of the general population (13% of teens vs. 6% of all adults).<sup>7</sup> Although 58 percent of Generation Z self-identify as Christian, only 43 percent have recently

attended Church, and only one in eleven “is an ‘engaged Christian,’ with beliefs and practices that put faith front-and-center in their lives. “This is a significantly smaller percentage than their grandparents: 14 percent of Boomers are engaged Christians.”<sup>8</sup> With religious affiliation and participation in the United States declining, and adults migrating away from their religious beliefs, their children are sure to follow.

Another prevalent trend is that more American adults and adolescents are identifying as “nones”—a term suggesting *no* religious affiliation. To be clear, a “none” is not an atheist. In fact, *nones* may believe in God, adhere to some religious values, and even attend Church, but they simply do not affiliate with a specific religion. Consider that in the early 1980s, more than 90 percent of High School seniors identified with a religious denomination. In fact, during that time, only 10 percent chose “none” as their religious affiliation. However, more recently, 31 percent of High School seniors now identify religiously as “nones.”<sup>9</sup> Dr. James Emery White explained:

The number of “nones” in the 1930s and 1940s hovered around 5 percent. By 1990, that number had risen to only 8.1 percent, a mere 3 percent rise in over half a century. Between 1990 and 2008—just eighteen years—the number of nones nearly doubled, jumping from 8.1 percent to 15 percent. Then in just four short years, it climbed to nearly 20 percent, representing one out of every five Americans. And for adults under the age of thirty, it increased to one out of every three people.<sup>10</sup>

Dr. White argues that presently, nones are the largest religious group in America, and the fastest growing. “More troubling is that of the 85 percent of American adults who were raised Christian, nearly a quarter of them no longer identify with Christianity. Former Christians now

represent 19.2 percent of the US population overall.”<sup>11</sup> In 2007, 78.4 percent of Americans identified as Christian; by 2014, that percentage was reduced to 70.6 percent—a decrease of 7.8 percent. Meanwhile, in 2007, those who were unaffiliated (nones) made up 16.1 percent of our population; by 2014, that percentage had risen to 22.8 percent—an increase of 6.7 percent.<sup>12</sup> Many from this contemporary generation in homes where there is “no religion whatsoever, [giving them] no experience [and no context] for religion [in their own lives].”<sup>13</sup>

Unfortunately, the decline of religious conviction and faith also affects members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In the landmark Pew Research Center study on the religious landscape of America, 64 percent of adult Latter-day Saints still identify with their childhood faith, implying that 36 percent of those who were Latter-day Saints in their childhood no longer affiliate with the religion.<sup>14</sup> Elder Jeffrey R. Holland observed, “The gap between our faithful young people and the sometimes antagonistic world around them is, at least as an overall generalization, widening with every passing day. That is, of course, ‘a given’ in the prophecies of the latter-days, but that doesn’t make it any more pleasant to address nor any more fun to face.”<sup>15</sup>

### **The Benefits of Religion**

However, even though religious participation is declining, religion still appears to be a positive force in the lives of Americans—especially adolescents. Although there have been many individuals who have believed and professed that religion can be a deterrent to mental health, a wealth of research supports the opposite premise—that religious participation actually enhances

mental health and overall wellbeing. Specifically, many studies have demonstrated that religious affiliation among American teens helps them intellectually, socially, physically, mentally, and of course, spiritually. Consider the following academic studies:

- Attending church services is associated with better mental health for teenagers.<sup>16</sup>
- Adolescents who report higher levels of personal and familial religiosity appear to have greater self-esteem and healthier psychological functioning.<sup>17</sup> In fact, after reviewing 540 studies, Dr. Dan Judd concluded that 51 percent reported that religion was *positively* associated with mental health.<sup>18</sup>
- Within the Jewish faith, those who have high levels of trust in God experience lower levels of depression.<sup>19</sup> Another study demonstrated that religious observance can help individuals cope with life's stressors.<sup>20</sup>
- Studies have shown that when adolescents participate in religion, they experience less conflict with their parents.<sup>21</sup>
- Religion has been a key factor in encouraging adolescents to disassociate from risky behaviors.<sup>22</sup>
- Researchers documented that those who report more spiritual experiences in their lives also experienced greater satisfaction in life.<sup>23</sup>
- Many studies have found that religious affiliation and participation is inversely related to juvenile drug, alcohol, and tobacco use, as well as many other delinquent behaviors.<sup>24</sup> Dr. Harold Koenig, as well as many others, have documented an inverse relationship between religiousness and delinquency.<sup>25</sup>

- Many studies have purported that those adolescents who report higher levels of religiousness also reported lower levels of substance abuse. Similarly, other studies have shown that religious attendance is negatively correlated with substance abuse.<sup>26</sup>
- Studies have shown that religious teens have higher levels of physical and emotional health, effective coping,<sup>27</sup> academic achievement, and well-being in comparison with more secularly oriented teens.<sup>28</sup>

Other research documents many other benefits for adolescents who participate in their religious practices. The purpose of this paper is to determine if some of the same trends are salient among adolescent members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—especially in terms of mental health. Furthermore, many researchers have documented how *public religious participation* affects adolescents. For example, professing an affiliation for a certain faith, or even attending worship services seems to be associated with better mental health outcomes. However, what about *private religious participation*? Can studying the gospel individually, praying privately, and keeping the Sabbath day holy provide LDS adolescents with the positive mental health benefits? It seems that private religious practices should also be considered when it comes to adolescent religious development.

### **Latter-day Saint Youth**

When compared to youth of other denominations, adolescent members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints appear to be more involved in their religion than teens of other faiths. Over 20 years ago, a group of researchers from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill conducted one of the most comprehensive studies of American adolescents and their religious participation. Their research, known as the *National Study of Youth and Religion*, documented that 71 percent LDS youth reported attending Church at least weekly, compared to

40 percent of Catholic teens, and 44 percent of Protestant adolescents. Perhaps even more impressive was the response to the question, “Would you attend Church if it were totally up to you?” Almost 70 percent of Latter-day Saint youth responded, “Yes,” to that query, with 47 percent of Protestant youth, and 40% of Catholic teens responding in the same manner.<sup>29</sup>

In 2010, researcher Kenda Creasy Dean published a book entitled, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church*. In one chapter of her book, affectionately labeled “Mormon Envy,” the author detailed the devotion and commitment of Latter-day Saint adolescents compared to teens of other faiths. For example, Dean explained that more than half of all Latter-day Saint youth (53%) reported giving a presentation in Church during the past six months (fewer than one in seven Southern Baptists, and only one in twenty-five Catholic youth had done the same). Furthermore, almost half (48%) of Latter-day Saint adolescents had attended a meeting during the past six months where they were part of making decisions (compared to one in four Southern Baptists and one in twelve Catholic teens). Moreover, according to the same study, Latter-day Saint youth were more likely than other teens to participate in mission trips (70%), share their beliefs with someone not of their faith (72%), participate in religious youth groups (75%), and speak publicly about their faith in a religious service or meeting (65%).<sup>30</sup> Kenda Creasy Dean concluded,

By intentionally reinforcing the significance of Mormonism’s particular God-story, by immersing young people in a community of belonging, by preparing them for a vocation and by modeling a forward-looking hope, Mormons intentionally and consistently create the conditions for consequential faith—so much so that Mormon teenagers are more likely than teenagers from any other group to fall into the category...called highly devoted.<sup>31</sup>

*The National Study of Youth and Religion* further reported that Latter-day Saint adolescents are more likely than their peers of other faiths to adhere to religious beliefs similar to their parents (73%), attend religious services once a week (43%) and discuss religious matters in their families more than teens from other faiths (80% of LDS youth reported having religious discussions once a week or more). Furthermore, 43 percent of LDS adolescents reported that it was “extremely important” of having their religious faith shape their life daily, and 68 percent reported engaging in practices such as fasting and other forms of self-denial. Compared to youth in other faith traditions, Dean concluded that LDS youth participate in more religious practices and activities. Latter-day Saint youth are also much more articulate in expressing their Church teachings.<sup>32</sup>

No wonder Dean called Latter-day Saint youth the “spiritual athletes” of their generation because of their sacrifice, discipline, and energy. These youth appeared to demonstrate a high level of devotion and commitment to their faith. Her conclusion of Latter-day Saint teens was very positive, explaining:

In nearly every area, using a variety of measures, Mormon teenagers were consistently the most positive, the most healthy, the most hopeful, and the most self-aware teenagers in the study. Mormon young people also showed the highest degree of religious vitality and salience, the greatest degree of understanding of church teaching, and the highest degree of congruence between belief and action.<sup>33</sup>

Has religious participation and involvement among LDS youth changed much over the past twenty-years since this original research was conducted? Are LDS adolescents still the “Spiritual Athletes” of their generation? Our data aligns well with the *National Study of Youth*

*and Religion*—Latter-day Saint youth are still vigorous in participation in their faith. In our recent study, we compared religious activity of Latter-day Saints to those who identified with the following religious groups: Catholic, Protestant, Born-Again Protestant, “Other” religion, of no religion but believe in God, and Atheists/Agnostics. In these estimates we controlled for the child’s age, their family income, the state they live in (Utah, Arizona, or California), whether they were recruited through BYU alumni, and the child’s gender.

Eighty-one percent of Latter-day Saints went to Church weekly followed closely by Born-Again Protestants at 77%. However, the next more frequent Church “attenders” were Protestants with 41% attending weekly, and Catholics with 37% attending weekly. Only 6% of Latter-day Saints did not attend Church at all or only once or twice in the past year, while 7% for Born-Again Protestants did not attend Church at all, or only once or twice the past year. In analyses, Latter-day Saints attended significantly more than all other religions except Born-Again Protestants. Latter-day Saints and Born-Again Protestants were also significantly more likely to pray at least once a day (58% and 52% praying daily, respectively) compared to adolescents of other religions or those who declared no religious affiliation. The closest other religion in terms of daily prayer was Protestants (26%) and Catholics (22%).

We also examined differences in religious salience across religions. Religious salience is the degree to which one’s religion is important to them and influences them in their lives. A five-item scale was used to measure salience. Our scale included asking the participants how important their religion was 1) to their sense of identity, 2) in making important decisions in their lives, 3) in influencing how they thought, felt, and acted daily, 4) in what they wore, ate, and listened to, and 5) in who they spent their time with.

Responses were from 1 (*not at all important*) to 5 (*extremely important*). All the questions were averaged together for a mean score. Latter-day Saints and Born-Again Protestants were, again, significantly higher than other religions with the Latter-day Saint mean at 3.9 and the Born-Again mean at 3.7. Looking at seminary attendance, 84% of Latter-day Saints attended seminary.

Our study also documented that LDS youth pray daily more often (59%, compared to 42% Evangelical Protestant, 26% Mainline Protestant, and 18% Catholic), read the scriptures daily (37%, compared with 22% Evangelical Protestant, 5.6% Catholic, and 3% Mainline Protestant), and attend weekly youth activities (60%, compared to 29% Evangelical Protestant, 16% Mainline Protestant, and 12% Catholic).

When compared to adolescents of other faiths, we still believe that Latter-day Saint youth are the spiritual athletes of a new generation. They are more involved in their religious faith, participate more in religious activities, and believe that their religion is important to them than adolescents from other faiths.

### **Mental Health and Adolescents**

Despite the affluence and incredible opportunities, many contemporary adolescents are more lonely, depressed, and anxious than previous generations. They appear to be less confident, less social, and certainly less happy and content. Researcher Jean Twenge has concluded, “Igen is on the verge of the most severe mental health crisis for young people in decades.”<sup>34</sup> Anxiety and depression rates have escalated the past several years—especially among adolescents and college students.

## *Anxiety*

Anxiety disorders are now the most prevalent mental health disorders among American Adolescents. Researchers estimate a prevalence rate between 10-21 percent of the general population.<sup>35</sup> According to a study cited on the website for the *National Institute of Health*, 25 percent of adolescents between the ages of 13-16 will experience some form of anxiety disorder.<sup>36</sup> The *Center for Disease Control* estimates the anxiety prevalence rate for adolescents higher than previously mentioned studies, at 32 percent.<sup>37</sup> In another study, researchers reported anxiety symptoms in 31 percent of adolescents, with rates from individual disorders like Generalized Anxiety Disorder (2.2%) to specific phobias (19.3%).<sup>38</sup> Similar to depression, anxiety prevalence among adolescents is higher for females (38%) than males (26.1%).<sup>39</sup>

Contemporary adolescents live in a world with high expectations and pressure to be successful, a world that is scary and threatening, and a world with social media influences that other generations have not experienced.<sup>40</sup> No wonder adolescent anxiety rates are higher than they have ever been.

Can private religious practices mediate symptoms of anxiety? If public religious behaviors, such as church attendance and church activities can reduce anxiety symptoms, what can be said of private religious behaviors? Could such religious behaviors positively affect anxiety among LDS teens?

## *Depression*

Most teens who struggle with anxiety also experience symptoms of depression. In fact, one study reported, “Between 16% and 62% of youth with an anxiety disorder also met criteria for depression.”<sup>41</sup> The lifetime prevalence rates among adolescents with major depressive

disorder (MDD) range from 15 to 20 percent.<sup>42</sup> A study in *Pediatrics* reported that in 2005, the prevalence of major depressive episodes among adolescents was at 8.7%, and increased to 11.3% in 2014.<sup>43</sup> One study reported a 56 percent increase in major depressive episode among adolescents, tested between 2010 and 2015.<sup>44</sup> Other experts have estimated that among high school teens, up to 30% have reported episodes of depression.<sup>45</sup> Adolescent girls suffer more from depression than adolescent boys do. One study reported that among adolescents, there is a 2:1 ratio of female to male MDD diagnosis.<sup>46</sup> *The National Survey on Drug Use and Health* (NSDUH) reported that 19.5% of adolescent girls and 5.8% of adolescent boys reported a major depressive episode in 2015.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, depression in teens has been associated with poor social and academic outcomes, including the risk for substance abuse and suicide.<sup>48</sup>

Although there are few studies targeted at depression rates and Latter-day Saint youth, the relationship between religion and mental health has been widely explored. Much of the literature agrees that strong religious beliefs are negatively correlated with depression. For example, a study of Jewish individuals found that Orthodox Jews who view God as benevolent have “elevated happiness and lower levels of anxiety and depression.”<sup>49</sup> It is not the affiliation with religion, but the level of belief that has the ability to lower depression rates.<sup>50</sup>

Can private religious practices mediate symptoms of depression? Part of our research study is designed to expose the intricate relationships between private religious practices and depressive symptomology among Latter-day Saint adolescents.

## **Methods**

The data for this project originated from the *Family Foundations of Youth Development Project*. The *Family Foundations of Faith* (“*Foundations*”) study provides an avenue for researchers to follow Latter-day Saint youth into adulthood to understand when adolescents are

most likely to decrease or increase their religiosity and what factors influence their religious commitment, as they become young adults. Moreover, this study also investigates what family characteristics influence adolescents' patterns of religious activity and religious beliefs.

Begun in 2016, this project has recruited hundreds of families and provided important insights into the experiences of contemporary youth. The study is longitudinal, designed to follow-up with families and teens over a ten-year period, tracking adolescents into early adulthood. The research has a primary emphasis on faith development for youth in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints with comparison groups from other faiths, including no religious affiliation (nones). This particular study surveyed over 600 households in both Utah and Arizona. Data were obtained from households with children between the ages of 12 and 15.

There were 1,263 participants in this study at Wave 2, and 1,116 at Wave 3, yielding an 88 percent retention rate. At Wave 2, 47 percent of the participants were male, and 53 percent were female. The median age of the adolescents who participated at Wave 2 was 14.2 years of age. Over 85 percent of the participants lived in a household with married biological parents. Reflective of the community from which the sample was drawn, adolescents in the sample were primarily White (82%), followed by Hispanic (7%), Black (2%), and Other (9%). Also reflective of the community, over 60 percent of the sample were members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Other faiths represented included Protestant (9%), Catholic (9%), Atheist or Agnostic (7%), and 3 percent affiliated with "other" religious denominations. Interestingly, 8 percent identified as "nones." Geographically, 53 percent of the sample resided in Utah, while 47 percent lived in Arizona. Latter-day Saints were more likely to participate in the survey than those from other faiths.

As with most studies, there are limitations to acknowledge, including that our sample of adolescents were only from two states--Arizona and Utah. Furthermore, most of our participants were from intact, biological families, and most were white. In the future, our study will target other states, peoples, and even countries for a more diverse sample.

## **Measures**

The measures for this study were administered via an online survey. Our measures were used to examine religious involvement, religious salience, anxiety, and depression.

### *The Religious Involvement Measure*

To assess private or personal religious participation, we employed the *Religious Involvement Scale*.<sup>51</sup> Some of the items on this scale include:

- Prayed by yourself
- Practiced spiritual/religious meditation
- Watched or listened to spiritual/religious media by yourself
- Read or listened to scriptures by yourself
- Read or listened to other spiritual/religious information by yourself (books, magazines, lessons, websites)
- Fasted or denied yourself something as a spiritual/religious discipline
- Practiced a day of rest to keep the Sabbath
- Donated money or tithes to your church or religious organization
- Attended religious worship services

In this particular study, we are interested in the private religious behaviors among LDS adolescents. Undoubtedly, public religious behaviors, such as reading the scriptures with your family and attending worship services are beneficial, but are there greater benefits when youth participate in these practices on their own?

### *Religious Salience Scale*

Adolescent religious salience was measured using a scale<sup>52</sup> developed by researchers from the *National Study of Youth and Religion*. Youth who completed this measure rated how important their religious is to them in the following areas:

- Your identity or sense of who you are
- Your feelings of self-worth
- Your views on political and social issues
- Your sense of meaning and purpose in life
- How you know right from wrong
- How you make major life decisions
- What you wear, eat, drink, watch, or listen to
- Who you spend most of your time with
- What social activities you participate in

This scale helps researchers determine how important religion is in the lives of adolescent teens. We are specifically interested in how their religious beliefs affect their identity, their social lives, their practical belief system, and their decision-making processes. This measure can also help us understand how religious participation can shape and mold adolescent behavior and thought processes.

### *Anxiety Scale*

In our study, we used an anxiety scale developed by Spence to measure anxiousness among adolescents.<sup>53</sup> Some of the items on this scale include:

- I worry about things
- I feel afraid
- I worry something bad will happen to me
- When I have a problem, I feel shaky
- When I have a problem, I get a funny feeling in my stomach

Although there may be other anxiety measurements that are more comprehensive, Spence's scale is an adequate measurement of anxiety for the purposes of this study.

### *Depression Scale*

To assess adolescent depression, we utilized a scale developed by Bjorgvinsson and associates.<sup>54</sup> Items on this measure included:

- I was bothered by things that usually don't bother me
- I felt depressed
- I felt everything I did was an effort
- I felt fearful
- My sleep was restless
- I felt lonely
- I could not get "going"
- I had trouble keeping my mind on what I was doing

This scale is more comprehensive than the anxiety measure and was able to provide us the data that we needed to make our conclusions.

Regarding analysis, regression models were specified in Mplus 8.0 with private religious behaviors predicting anxiety and depression at Wave 3. In the models, Wave 2 levels of the dependent variable (depression or anxiety) were controlled for to examine how religiosity variables relate to change in these constructs over time. To reduce measurement error, depression and anxiety were specified as latent variables. Multiple imputation was used to handle missing data with 20 data sets used. Models also controlled for child race, gender, parent income, and whether the participants were from Arizona or Utah. All models had adequate model fit.

### **Major Findings**

The results from our statistical analysis were fascinating. Among Latter-day Saints, there certainly appears to be benefits to their religious involvement, especially when it pertains to their own mental health. Regarding private religious practices, such as personal prayer, scripture reading, attending worship services, and fasting, there were no significant relationships with anxiety (See Table 1).

#### *The Impact of the Sabbath Day on Anxiety Symptoms*

Nevertheless, there was one statistically significant finding as we examined private religious practices and anxiety. In our study, there was a negative correlation with “observing a day of rest” and anxiety. This finding implies that observing the Sabbath is related “lesser” symptoms of anxiety among LDS adolescents. Further research will need to be conducted to learn the intricacies of this relationship; nevertheless, it is fascinating to contemplate.

*Table 1.*

<i>Religious Practice</i>	<i>Anxiety</i>
	$\beta$ (se)
Personal prayer	.01 (.05)
Spiritual meditation (besides prayer)	-.02 (.04)
Viewed or listened to spiritual media alone	.02 (.05)
Read or listened to scriptures by yourself	.00 (.05)
Fasted or denied yourself of something for spiritual/religious purposes	.07 (.04)
Practiced a day of rest to keep the Sabbath	-.12 (.05)*
Attended religious services	.06 (.05)

Now, the critical question becomes, “Why would observance of the Sabbath be associated with lower anxiety symptoms among LDS teens? More research should be devoted to learn more about the relationship between the Sabbath day and anxiety. However, we will present some possibilities to consider as we examine some of the doctrinal principles related to Sabbath day observance.

We know that “The Sabbath is the Lord’s day, set apart each week for rest and worship.”<sup>55</sup> Just as God rested on the seventh day after the creation of the earth, we too, should find time to rest and relax on the Sabbath (Exodus 20:8-11). Church leaders through the ages have taught key principles regarding the Sabbath day and our mental health. For example, President George Q. Cannon taught that those who keep the Sabbath would find enjoyment in their lives, feelings of satisfaction, and “an approval of conscience that gives them greater pleasure.”<sup>56</sup> The Sabbath certainly can provide happiness and peace to those who observe it. On another occasion, President Cannon declared,

It is a great mistake to suppose that the man who goes off riding on Sunday obtains more rest than the man who goes to meeting. There is a refreshing

influence connected with the Spirit of the Lord that brings health and strength and ease to those who receive it, and time spent in meeting, listening to the word of God and partaking of the sacrament is well spent, and both body and spirit are refreshed. Men and women who thus observe the Sabbath day are prepared on Monday morning, with invigorated bodies, enlightened and comforted minds, to enter upon the serious labors of the week and to perform them with ease and pleasure. *While in meeting and under the influence of the Spirit of the Lord troubles and perplexities are cast away, burdens are lifted, anxieties are removed and peace and joy fill the soul.*”<sup>57</sup>

Notice the mental health promises from President Cannon: receiving health and strength, having our spirit and body refreshed, having our minds enlightened and comforted, our troubles and complexities removed, our burdens lifted, our anxieties removed, and peace and joy filling our souls. Observing the Sabbath, according to George Q. Cannon, could be a great antidote for anxiety, fear, and worry. President Joseph Fielding Smith added that as we observe the Sabbath day, we will be “mellowed by thought,” and our minds become centered on the things of God, helping us to become free from the distractions of the world.”<sup>58</sup> President Joseph F. Smith explained that the Sabbath is a day to “rest from doubt, from fear, from apprehension of danger, rest from the religious turmoil of the world.”<sup>59</sup> President Spencer W. Kimball taught that the Sabbath should be a day of rest, but not just physically. He said that Sabbath worship should help our “minds relax and spirits grow.”<sup>60</sup> President Brigham Young promised that as we keep the Sabbath day holy, “Our health and spirits will be better, we will look better, and the things of this world will increase around us more, and we will know better how to enjoy them.”<sup>61</sup>

Church leaders have certainly emphasized the connection between observing the Sabbath day and the reduction of our fears, anxieties, and troubles that surrounds us. Is it possible that adolescents who obey the Sabbath can place their cares and troubles upon the Lord as they seek for peace and disconnect from worldly influences? Can anxiety be reduced in their lives as they are refreshed and renewed in mind and spirit? Our Prophet, President Russell M. Nelson, called the Sabbath “a day for personal healing” and a rest from “the rigors of daily life and an opportunity for spiritual and physical renewal.”<sup>62</sup> By observing the Sabbath, adolescents can be renewed; they can place their problems on hold for a day; they can disconnect from social media; and they can enjoy a day with a slower pace and with more emphasis on the spiritual.

There is also another possibility regarding the connection between Sabbath day observance and anxiety. Those who observe the Sabbath day often engage in personal prayer—a passport to spiritual power.<sup>63</sup> In Philippians 4, the Apostle Paul taught, “... The Lord is at hand. Be careful for nothing; but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:5-7). Although the King James translation reads, “The Lord is at hand. Be careful for nothing,” the Greek translation changes that statement to “Don’t be unduly concerned about anything.” Other translations provide similar perspectives. Consider the following translations:

- “The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything” (*New International Version*).
- “The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything” (*New Revised Standard*).
- “The Lord is very near. There is no need to worry” (*Jerusalem Bible*).
- “The Lord is near; have no anxiety...” (*New English Bible*).

This verse is helpful in explaining the connection between anxiety, prayer, and observing the Sabbath. On the Sabbath day, adolescents can recognize that the Lord is in charge of their lives and that there is no need to fear. They can relax, put their trust in the Lord, and allow him to fight their battles, clear their paths, and provide them the strength of overcome their challenges. The Sabbath can become a day of rejuvenation; we can “reset” our bodies and prepare our minds and hearts to face the world head on. The Sabbath is a wonderful day for adolescents, and adults, to consider what Elder Jeffrey R. Holland once taught. He stated, “It will be okay. Just be faithful. God is in Charge. He knows your name and He knows your need.”<sup>64</sup>

Another possible connection between the Sabbath day and anxiety is meditation—a practice perhaps that too few Latter-day Saints engage in. President David O. McKay explained,

Mediation is one of the most secret, most sacred doors through which we pass into the presence of the Lord. The greatest comfort in this life is the assurance of having a close relationship with God. It has been said that consciousness of God is the highest achievement in human experience and is the supreme goal of human life.<sup>65</sup>

In essence, for Latter-day Saints, the Sabbath is a day for meditation and worship. In fact, President Spencer W. Kimball included meditation as an important aspect of observing the Sabbath.<sup>66</sup> President David O. McKay stressed the importance of meditation by stating,

I think we pay too little attention to the value of meditation, a principle of devotion.... Meditation is the language of the soul. It is defined as a form of private devotion or spiritual exercise, consisting in deep, continued reflection on

some religious theme.... I repeat, the greatest comfort that can come to us in this life is to sense the realization of communion with God.<sup>67</sup>

Meditation is a practice that deeply connects us to God so that we can feel his influence and love more fully and deeply. This process can bring great peace and could counteract symptoms of anxiety. However, what do we mean by meditation? When we consider meditation, we might think about Eastern religions like Zen Buddhism.<sup>68</sup> However, according to Thomas McConkie, the definition of meditation for Latter-day Saints differs.<sup>69</sup> Thomas McConkie has studied and taught meditation for over twenty years. He states, “In Mormonism, you can point to some oft quoted examples of a prophet or leader telling us that we should meditate and usually th[is] connotation of meditation is [that] when you are praying [and] studying scriptures you should ponder very deeply, which is a beautiful form of meditation.”<sup>70</sup> In other words, for Latter-day Saints, meditation can take the form of pondering very deeply while praying, reading the scriptures, singing hymns, partaking the sacrament, and studying the gospel. Adolescents who are truly keeping the Sabbath Day holy are participating in these practices.

*The Guide to the Scriptures* says that “ponder” means to, “meditate and think deeply, often upon the scriptures or other things of God.”<sup>71</sup> Pondering, or meditation, often precedes revelation and renewal (See D&C 138:1-2, 11; I Nephi 11:1; JS-H 1:8-12).<sup>72</sup> In fact, meditation can prepare our minds to receive the Lord’s guidance and direction in our personal lives. In Doctrine and Covenants 76:19, the Prophet Joseph Smith said, “And while we meditated upon these things, the Lord touched the eyes of our understandings and they were opened, and the glory of the Lord shone round about.” There could be many reasons why meditating and worship on the Sabbath Day could reduce symptoms of anxiety in LDS adolescents. Meditation can connect us to God and brings stillness to our mind and spirit.

The benefits of meditation on stress and anxiety have been documented in clinical and academic arenas too. According to the Mayo Clinic, high levels of cortisol are related to stress and long-term exposure to this chemical in our bodies can increase the risk of many health problems, including anxiety.<sup>73</sup> Results in one study found that “Reductions in cortisol were associated with improvements in anxiety.”<sup>74</sup> Many studies have demonstrated that meditation is an effective way to reduce cortisol levels.<sup>75</sup> For example, one study discovered that “[M]indfulness meditation lowers the cortisol levels in the blood suggesting that it can lower stress and decrease the risk of psychiatric disorder.”<sup>76</sup> Additionally, it was found that meditation interventions had significant effects on reducing cortisol in “at risk” patients—especially among those living in stressful life situations.<sup>77</sup> These findings suggest that adolescents living in difficult circumstances could especially benefit from keeping the Sabbath Day holy. If LDS adolescents treat the Sabbath more like a meditation, pondering very deeply during Sabbath worship, they could see a substantial reduction in their anxiety symptoms.

As Latter-day Saint adolescents worship their Father in Heaven, both in meetings and at home, they can feel the peace that comes by centering their lives on Jesus Christ and his gospel. They can feel the influence of the Holy Ghost as they apply the principles of the Sabbath. Peace can come into their lives as they feel safe within the walls of their homes and as they are surrounded by their families and participating in both spiritual activities and family bonding experiences. There are many other possibilities pertaining to why keeping the Sabbath day holy reduces anxiety in the lives of LDS adolescents. More research should be conducted to explore those relationships.

*The Impact of Personal Prayer on Depressive Symptoms*

Another significant finding to mention from our study is the relationship between depression and private religious practices. When it comes to depression among LDS adolescents, private religious practices such as scripture reading, Sabbath day observance, or even attending religious services did not prove to be significant in our study. However, engagement in personal prayer was negatively associated with symptoms of depression (See Table 2).

Table 2.

<i>Religious Practice</i>	<i>Depression</i>
	$\beta$ (se)
Personal prayer	-.09 (.05)***
Spiritual meditation (besides prayer)	-.08 (.04)*
Viewed or listened to spiritual media alone	.00 (.05)
Read or listened to scriptures by yourself	.00 (.06)
Fasted or denied yourself of something for spiritual/religious purposes	.13 (.04)**
Practiced a day of rest to keep the Sabbath	-.08 (.05)
Attended religious services	.07 (.05)

How can personal prayer can reduce symptoms of depression in LDS adolescents? We recognize that more research will be needed in this area to better understand the relationship between prayer and depression. However, as with anxiety, there are some possibilities that could be considered. For example, prayer can provide an individual with great strength, comfort, fortitude, and even deliverance. In the process of prayer, adolescents can share their concerns with their Father in Heaven, and He can relieve their burdens and their distress. Prayer can bring peace to their souls and comfort to their hearts.

President Spencer W. Kimball explained, “Sometimes ideas flood our mind as we listen after our prayers. Sometimes feelings press upon us. A spirit of calmness assures us that all will be well. But always, if we have been honest and earnest [in our prayers] we will experience a

good feeling—a feeling of warmth for our Father in Heaven and a sense of his love for us.”<sup>78</sup> As President Kimball explained, youth who pray can obtain a spirit of calmness, answers to their prayers, and the assurance that their Father in Heaven is with them. These principles can bring peace into their hearts, which could certainly reduce depressive symptoms.

Likewise, President Thomas S. Monson taught, “To those within the sound of my voice who are struggling with challenges and difficulties large and small, prayer is the provider of spiritual strength; it is the passport to peace.”<sup>79</sup> Personal prayer is a time to commune with God, especially in times of trouble when we are most vulnerable to symptoms of depression. One academic study explored the role that prayer plays in coping with personal difficulties. Participants in the study reported that the most effective prayer functions involve expressing gratitude and seeking guidance<sup>80</sup>.

Of course, Divine guidance can help adolescents navigate their way through difficult challenges and significant life decisions. Such guidance can warn individuals, as well as provide answers to their dilemmas. If one is depressed, Divine guidance can provide deliverance, such as the Israelites experienced when Moses parted the Red Sea (Exodus 14:21), or comfort, or peace.

Another possibility to consider is the role that gratitude plays not only in prayer, but in reducing depressive symptomology. Many Latter-day Saints understand the purpose of expressing gratitude, especially during purposeful prayer. The expression of gratitude has the ability to help us enjoy life, to be content, and to have a healthy perspective of both good and bad experiences. Personal prayer increases gratitude and gratitude has substantial effects on reducing depression.

Elder David A. Bednar stated, “The most meaningful and spiritual prayers I have experienced contained many expressions of thanks and few, if any, requests.”<sup>81</sup> Remarkably, one study found that praying was associated with increased gratitude.<sup>82</sup> This relationship held true, even when controlling baseline levels of gratitude and general levels of religiosity.<sup>83</sup> Academic studies have demonstrated that those who are grateful report more resistance to stress, adversity, serious trauma, and suffering.<sup>84</sup> Regarding mental health, those who express gratitude have reported less stress, envy, resentment, regret, depression, and hopelessness.<sup>85</sup> Another study documented that those who express gratitude demonstrate greater amounts of energy, optimism, positive moods, and satisfaction with life.<sup>86</sup> In one study published several years ago, researchers looked at the lifetime risk for psychiatric disorders in nearly 3,000 twin pairs. High levels of gratitude were associated with reduced risk for what researchers referred to as internalizing disorders (depression, anxiety, phobias, and anger) and externalizing behaviors (antisocial behaviors, drug use, and alcohol dependence). Dr. Robert Emmons concluded that gratitude might be a valuable coping tactic for responding to life’s challenges and stresses.<sup>87</sup>

Other notable findings identified the unique outcomes of gratitude when expressed through personal prayer. For instance, in one study, those who expressed gratitude through prayer found even greater effects on well-being compared to others who expressed gratitude audibly to themselves or others.<sup>88</sup> Similarly, a separate study found that religious gratitude predicted well-being over general gratitude.<sup>89</sup> These findings highlight the importance of expressing gratitude specifically through religious prayer. They also demonstrate what Elder Robert D. Hales confirmed, “Gratitude expressed to our Heavenly Father in prayer for what we have brings a calming peace—a peace which allows us to not canker our souls for what we don’t have.”<sup>90</sup>

Gratitude brings us closer to our Father in Heaven and helps us recognize His hand in our lives. Gratitude is also directly associated with our happiness and well-being. Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin summarized, “I believe that many people are unhappy because they have not learned to be grateful.”<sup>91</sup> Another author wrote, “All happy people are grateful, and ungrateful people cannot be happy... Because gratitude is the key to happiness, anything that undermines gratitude must undermine happiness.”<sup>92</sup> David Steindl-Rast, a Benedictine monk, wrote, “The root of joy is gratefulness... It is not joy that makes us grateful; it is gratitude that makes us joyful.”<sup>93</sup> Gratitude and happiness are deeply connected. More research could be conducted to identify the association between expressing gratitude in prayer and the reduction on depression symptoms in adolescents.

Expressing gratitude helps us to focus on the blessings in our lives and discount the troubles that may surround us. Being grateful helps to strip ourselves of selfishness and puts our problems in perspective. Just as doubt and fear cannot exist in the same mind at the same time, neither can gratitude and negativity occupy the same mind at the same time! If we are focused on our blessings and God’s goodness, it is difficult to be full of despair. President Thomas S. Monson explained, “We can lift ourselves, and others as well, when we refuse to remain in the realm of negative thought and cultivate within our hearts an attitude of gratitude.”<sup>94</sup> Elder Robert D. Hales added that gratitude could cleanse us, heal us, and bring peace into our lives “that helps us overcome the pain of adversity and failure.”<sup>95</sup>

There could be many other reasons why personal prayer decreases symptoms of depression, but the benefits of prayer are undeniable. As LDS adolescents pray, they can feel the remarkable blessings that follow and come to know that “God knows the feelings in every human heart. He can soften sorrow and lead when there seems to be no light. Prayer can give

guidance and confidence. It reminds us that no one need be alone in this world. If all else fails, remember: God and one other person can be a family.”<sup>96</sup>

We are not suggesting that simply obeying the Sabbath day or engaging in personal prayer can drastically improve adolescent mental health. For many with these challenges, professional counseling and medications will need to be prescribed. However, there does appear to be a relationship between these gospel practices, and the reduction in symptoms of anxiety and depression. Perhaps a wonderful starting place with LDS adolescents who struggle with anxiety and depression would be with such gospel solutions—keeping the Sabbath day holy, and personal, private prayer. Other professional remedies could also be sought for a balanced approach to these ailments, including individual counseling and medication if necessary.

## **Conclusion**

Religion can have a positive influence on adolescents—especially Latter-day Saints. Our study aligns with many other studies that have shown similar results—religion, and certainly religious practices, are positively related to some aspects of adolescent mental health.<sup>97</sup> The tenants and faith practices of religious youth has a protective effect and can influence them in positive ways that matter. Moreover, religion can provide the answers to some of life’s most difficult challenges. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland taught, “The solutions to life’s problems are always gospel solutions.”<sup>98</sup> Whenever trouble presses down upon us, the gospel of Jesus Christ can be the very first place to turn. Our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ can help us in every battle that life has to offer. More research in this area will be needed to better understand more intricate and complex relationships between private religious practices and adolescent mental health.

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