



Prayer, self-affirmation, and distraction improve recovery from short-term ostracism



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HIGHLIGHTS

- We tested three interventions to aid recovery following ostracism.
- Prayer, affirmation, and distraction aided recovery relative to a control condition
- Commitment to God predicted recovery among participants who prayed
- Reduced rumination mediated the effect of distraction on improvement

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ABSTRACT

Brief episodes of ostracism trigger immediate pain, thwarted needs, and negative affect. Whereas the immediate effects of ostracism tend to be resistant to moderation, people differ in how quickly they recover. Here we investigated three strategies that may promote recovery from ostracism: prayer, self-affirmation, and distraction. In three experiments we found that all three interventions lead to greater recovery of basic needs satisfaction than a control condition in which participants were allowed to naturally ruminate. While all three interventions lead to a similar amount of recovery, only the effects of distraction condition were mediated by reductions in rumination, suggesting that prayer and self-affirmation promote recovery, but do so through mechanisms other than distraction. In addition, we found that religious commitment to God was associated with greater recovery following prayer, but not self-affirmation. Practical and theoretical implications are discussed.

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What does it feel like to be a ghost? Ostracism – being ignored or excluded – offers a taste of what this experience would be like. Not only have ostracized people provided anecdotes about feeling like they were ghosts or like they did not exist (Williams, 2001), many researchers have argued that ostracism can be considered a metaphor for death (Case & Williams, 2004) or a form of social death, both for ancestral humans and also in current tribal settings (Wesselmann, Nairne & Williams, 2012; Williams, 2012). Ostracism is surprisingly powerful in its capacity to simultaneously threaten four basic psychological needs: belonging, control, self-esteem, and meaningful existence (Williams, 2009).

For example, ostracism hurts even when it comes from a despised outgroup (Gonsalkorale & Williams, 2007), or even a computer (Zadro, Williams, & Richardson, 2004). An ostracism experience need not be dramatic or enduring to provoke these responses; simply being denied acknowledgement by a passerby is sufficient (Wesselmann,

Cardoso, Slater & Williams, 2012). Even when people do not receive text messages (Smith & Williams, 2004) or feedback on social networking updates (e.g., Facebook posts; Tobin, Vanman, Verreynne, & Saeri, 2014) they experience reduced feelings of inclusion and threatened psychological needs. Ostracism is clearly a painful experience that people would want to avoid.

Unfortunately, avoiding ostracism is not easily accomplished. Ostracism likely evolved as a social influence mechanism that provided numerous benefits to groups including protection against people who hindered, burdened, or otherwise threatened group functioning (Kurzban & Leary, 2001; Wesselmann, Williams, & Wirth, 2014; Wesselmann, Wirth, Pryor, Reeder, & Williams, 2013; Williams, 2009). Ostracism can be motivated by a number of factors including enforcement of social norms, desire to punish others, and simple inattention to those who are viewed as unimportant (Williams, 2001). It is perhaps not surprising then that people experience ostracism on a daily basis (Nezlek, Wesselmann, Wheeler, & Williams, 2012).

Considering the well-documented negative effects of ostracism, and the frequency with which it occurs, it is important to identify strategies that buffer against its unpleasant consequences. The goal of the present

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research is to test three strategies that may promote recovery following ostracism: prayer, self-affirmation, and distraction. Prayer and self-affirmation are themselves likely to be distracting, so we also explore whether these two strategies provide any psychological benefit above and beyond their role in directing attention away from ostracism, and whether they operate through the same mechanism as distraction.

1. Temporal need–threat model of ostracism

The temporal need–threat model of ostracism (Williams, 2009) informs our predictions regarding effective coping strategies. This model describes reactions to ostracism in stages. First, people in the *reflexive stage* detect that they are being ostracized and experience immediate feelings of pain, negative affect, and psychological need threat. Ostracized individuals are alerted to the potential danger ostracism presents by these automatic negative effects, which motivate them to either seek re-inclusion or alternative avenues for recovering basic need satisfaction. In the *reflective stage*, ostracized people focus their cognitive resources on appraising the event to choose the most appropriate recovery strategy. In this stage there is variability in how quickly people recover, influenced by both situational and individual factors. For example, people are equally sensitive to the *immediate* pain of ostracism regardless of how socially anxious they are, but after a *delay* highly socially anxious people recover significantly less than non-socially anxious people (Zadro, Boland, & Richardson, 2006). Similar patterns have been shown with situational factors. For example, people recovered more quickly when ostracized on the basis of a temporary, rather than permanent group membership (Wirth & Williams, 2009). We note that there is a large literature documenting factors that moderate reflective recovery from ostracism (Wesselmann, Ren, & Williams, 2015). However, this research tends to focus on fixed properties of either the person (e.g., Ren, Wesselmann, & Williams, 2013) or the ostracism event (e.g., Goodwin, Williams, & Carter-Sowell, 2010) that either speed or slow recovery. In contrast, the current investigation is interested in implementable interventions that promote recovery in the wake of an ostracism episode. In other words, given a specific instance of ostracism, what can one do to improve their psychological state?

Of course, the most obvious treatment for ostracism is its antithesis: social inclusion. Indeed, research has shown that inclusion by even one or two people can powerfully reduce aggression and negative affect following ostracism (DeWall, Twenge, Bushman, Im, & Williams, 2010). Likewise, a period of inclusion following ostracism can also help undo the negative effects (Tang & Richardson, 2013). But what if a person is unable to reconnect with others following an acute ostracism episode?

One answer to this question is provided by the Belonging Regulation Model (Gardner, Pickett, & Knowles, 2005), which proposes that just as individuals seek food when hungry, so too do they seek connection when belonging is threatened. When connection is not possible, they may settle for mere reminders of connection, or *social snacks* (e.g., a photo of a loved one), which can help buffer affect in the presence of reminders of exclusion. An initial investigation into a strategy to cope with ostracism found that mindfulness training prior to an ostracism experience produces greater recovery of basic needs (Molet, Macquet, Lefebvre, & Williams, 2013). Similarly, writing about an unconditionally accepting relationship prior to ostracism provided a buffering effect, but only for securely-attached participants (Hermann, Skulborstad, & Wirth, 2014). The purpose of the present investigation is to build on this initial evidence by testing the effectiveness of strategies that are implemented *following* the ostracism event. We suggest that prayer, self-affirmation, and distraction are well suited to address threatened need satisfaction following ostracism.

2. Prayer

There are good reasons to believe that religion in general, and prayer in particular, buffers each of the four basic needs. First, as a communal

act (Spilka & Ladd, 2013), prayer is likely to buffer the need for *belonging*. Prayer can remind people that they are members of a religious community that provides social identity and opportunities for interpersonal connection. Second, religion and prayer can provide *self-esteem*. Religions often teach that each person holds special status and is loved by their deity. Prayer can act as reminder of this status and thereby increase self-esteem. Third, religion can provide feelings of *control* by teaching that one may control the circumstances of their afterlife based on current behaviors and choices. Prayer, especially prayer that makes requests from a deity, can induce a sense of vicarious control by encouraging the belief that a deity is monitoring and controlling life events (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1998; Rothbaum, Weisz, & Snyder, 1982). The effect of prayer on control may not just be metaphorical, but also literal; in recent research people who engaged in prayer, rather than a neutral activity did not show the regular decreases in self-control following a depleting activity (Friese & Wänke, 2014). Additionally, longitudinal research has shown that prayer and religiosity predict greater self-control, which in turn predicts reduced substance use (DeWall et al., 2014). Fourth, religion can provide a sense of *meaningful existence* by offering direct answers to questions about the purpose of life and the nature of existence. Consistent with this idea, daily fluctuations in spirituality have been found to predict feelings of meaning in life (Kashdan & Nezlek, 2012). Additionally, when people are reminded of their mortality, they report greater religious beliefs (Norenzayan & Hansen, 2006). Because ostracism itself arouses mortality salience (C. Steele, Kidd, & Castano, 2015), the sense of meaning that is provided by religion is likely especially valuable to targets of ostracism.

A buffering effect of religion/spirituality on responses to ostracism has been theoretically predicted (Wesselmann & Williams, 2010). Related research has established that people do in fact use religion to cope with ostracism. For example, Aydin, Fischer, and Frey (2010) showed that thinking and writing about a time when one was excluded causes not only increased levels of religious affiliation, but also greater intentions to engage in religious behavior. Likewise, Epley, Akalis, Waytz, and Cacioppo (2008) showed that learning that one would be likely to spend one's life in isolation increased belief in God and other super-natural agents. Also, Laurin, Schumann, and Holmes (2014) showed that threats to close relationships caused people to compensate by indicating greater closeness with God. What these studies have in common is that they tested whether people turn to religion in the face of social exclusion.

In the present investigation we build on this important work by directly testing whether a specific religious-based behavior, *prayer*, can promote recovery from ostracism. Whereas Aydin et al. (2010) primed religion generally by asking participants to write how it is relevant to their lives, we ask participants to write a prayer to their deity. Psychologically, prayer is a faith-based behavior — a personal communication with one's deity (Spilka & Ladd, 2013). Aydin et al. (2010) documented the effects of religiosity on aggressive behavior, but did not assess whether religion is sufficient to reduce psychological distress following exclusion. In the current research we answer this question by measuring psychological need satisfaction (Williams, 2009). We also consider individual differences in religiosity as a predictor of recovery from ostracism among participants who pray. If prayer is indeed an active expression of one's personal faith (Spilka & Ladd, 2013), then individual differences in religiosity should be related to prayer-focused coping, rather than other forms of coping.

3. Religious commitment

Indirect evidence for a relationship between trait religiosity and ostracism recovery is provided by the diary study mentioned earlier; not only does daily spirituality predict self-esteem and meaningfulness, but it does so especially well for those who are high in *trait* spirituality (Kashdan & Nezlek, 2012). We therefore examine the effect of prayer

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