Praying Couples and Marriage Satisfaction

With an Overview of Integrating Adlerian Theory

A Research Paper

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Abstract

Religious faith and practices have played an integral part in the lives of many individuals. Since prayer has been viewed as valuable in many religions and is worthy of empirical investigation, (Finch, Lambert, & Beach, 2010, p.650) this study examines the influence of religious activity such as prayer on marital satisfaction. This qualitative research has drawn from the phenomenological methodology for analysis (Adler Graduate School Workbook, 2012). It was found through this study that marital satisfaction is determined by a myriad of factors and varies among couples and affiliation. Integration of Adlerian concepts regarding social interest, spirituality, and forgiveness will be addressed. Consideration to incorporate prayer into the therapeutic process will be discussed.
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Dedication

In loving memory of my Dad,

Gary A. Beck (October 5, 1943 - July 15, 2012).

You are loved and missed. Thank you for your

example of faith and prayer.
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Praying Couples and Marriage Satisfaction

The institution of marriage has played an important role in our society. However, divorce and unfulfilled marriages have plagued our nation (Smith, 2010). While faith denominations vary, prayer has been the cornerstone of many religious practices (Ladd & Spilka, 2002). This current study will address the question, “How does prayer impact marital satisfaction in Christian couples?” This study will focus on three cognitive aspects of prayer inward, outward, and upward dimensions (Ladd & Spilka, 2002) as well as quality of life experienced through prayer (Poloma & Pendleton, 2989). The analysis from this work will provide data measuring marital satisfaction in areas of communication (Sokolski & Hendrick, 1999; Worthington, 1999), trust (Larzelere & Huston, 1980), forgiveness (Gordon, Hughes, Tomcik, Dixon, & Litzinger, 2009) and conflict resolution (Butler, Stout, & Gardner, 2002). Three Christian denominations will be discussed including Pentecostal, Lutheran, and Catholic groups (Gruner, 1985).

Through the four stages of Adlerian counseling, Adler believed that given the proper tools, quality of life could be improved through relationship building. There are similarities between biblical based Christian spirituality, Individual psychology, and Adlerian psychotherapy pertaining to relationship building. These commonalities allow the integration of Adlerian concepts and Christian spirituality to be jointly applied in marital therapy. It is also this writer’s position that prayer engenders trust through communication and forgiveness between the divine and personal relationships. Further, when integrating spiritual interventions such as prayer, a therapist must closely adhere to a professional code of ethics. The results of this study may provide information for therapists and couples on the effectiveness of prayer on marital satisfaction.
Reliability of the Bible

Because Christians turn to the Bible for instruction on relational living, it is important to know if the Bible is reliable and a trusted source. According to Slick (n.d.) original works of the Bible have been lost. However, many copies were documented from the original writings. These copies were written by people who were very dedicated to preserving the authenticity of the scripture. They copied the original scriptures with precision and accuracy to preserve God’s Word. The copying measures are so precise that 99.5% of the New Testament is thought to be textually pure. There is reportedly only one half of 1% variation among the 6000 Greek copies and the additional 21,000 copies in other languages. Slick (n.d.) has claimed that these “typos” are easily corrected by comparing other copies of the text. Copying mistakes are characterized by word repetition, spelling, or missing content. Nonetheless, the variants are very small and do not affect doctrinal truth.

Further, the Bible exceeds the measurement of accuracy. The science of studying accuracy of transposing ancient writing is called historicity. The Bible’s accuracy of copies from the original work far exceeds any other ancient writing. If the Bible was viewed as unreliable, then Homer, Plato, and Aristotle would be discredited because the Bible has a higher transcribed accuracy than these writings. The Bible is from God (NIV Matthew 15:4) and represents historical events. The New Testament was written by men who personally knew Jesus or worked with those who walked with Christ (Slick, n.d).

Prayer

The heart of Biblical belief is the practice of prayer (Ladd & Spilka, 2002, p. 475). Prayer is a formulation of thoughts communicated by an individual who is in a relationship with God (Prostrednik, 2007, p. 437). People rely on different types of prayer, depending upon
different factors, including coping with life stressors. There are three separate, yet intertwining directions for prayer; inward, outward, and upward (Laird, Snyder, Rapoff, & Green, 2004, p. 252).

**Inward Prayer**

According to Ladd and Spilka, (2002) inward prayers focus on self-examination of one’s flaws in conjunction with seeking personal formation by willfully entering into a covenant with the divine. The authors conducted a study of 368 traditional and nontraditional students from undergraduate courses at a Midwestern state university with various religious affiliations to rate what they “thought about” while praying. They found that when participants engaged in inward prayer, tears of misery, sadness, and grieving were experienced revealing a more emotional experience than cognitive (p.479). Results, also, indicated forty-nine percent of the participants attended faith-based events at least once per week and fifty-one percent prayed at least once a week.

**Outward Prayer**

According to Ladd and Spilka, (2002) the second orientation of prayer includes the physical world by engaging in outward praying. The authors have argued that outward prayers concentrate on strengthening human to human connections (p. 477). From the same study of 368 Midwestern state university students, the authors have analyzed outward prayers as including petitionary praying that asks for personal help, intercessory prayers that asks for others to be helped, praying in suffering through empathy with others, and radical prayers, which attempts to transform individuals, institutions, and societies (Ladd & Spilka, 2002, p. 478). According to Prostrednik, (2007) intercessory prayer moves an individual from a limited, self-focused stance to active concern for others (p. 440).
Upward Prayer

The third direction of prayer, according to Ladd and Spilka, (2002) involves adoration of the divine, called upward prayer. These prayers include resting in the prayerful moment and mediation of the divine-human connection. The authors have claimed that upward prayers are prayers of the heart and express intimacy, love, and tenderness toward the divine. Sacramental praying such as engaging in rituals and traditions also fall into this category (Ladd & Spilka, 2002, p. 478). These prayers have also been described by Calkins (1910) as reverent contemplation of adoration on the completeness and greatness of the divine, rather than falling on human need, weakness, or satisfaction (p. 492).

Results from the study of students (n = 368) from a Midwestern state university, Ladd and Spilka (2002) have identified a connection between components of inward examination and aspects of outward intercession and suffering. The authors have claimed that prayer can serve as a cognitive expression of caring for others, while simultaneously encouraging self-awareness (p. 479). They have also linked a connection between inward tears with upward rest and sacramental components. The authors have suggested when inward expression of sadness exists, individuals may cognitively redirect prayer from self, to upward prayers in search of rest and solace (Ladd & Spilka, 2002, p. 480). While these findings explain what an individual may think about during prayer, what people do when they pray adds another element to the experience.

In another study conducted by Poloma and Pendleton (1989), the authors surveyed perceptions of quality of life, measurements of frequency of prayer, and types of prayer activities (p. 46). The annual Akron Area Survey (AAS) interviewed 560 respondents living in Akron. The respondents were randomly selected for a telephone interview conducted by trained undergraduate and graduate students. The authors have indentified four different types of prayer.
PRAYING COUPLES

They have suggested that meditative prayer is described as less verbal and consists of adoring thoughts about the divine. The other three, ritualistic (reciting prepared prayers), petitionary (requesting prayer for self and others), and colloquial prayer (asking God for guidance, blessings, and forgiveness) are described as more active, verbal, or intercessional types of prayer (pp. 47-48). The study included five types of quality of life (life satisfaction, existential well-being, happiness, negative affect, and religious satisfaction), four types of prayer, the frequency of prayer, and prayer experiences to determine the existence of patterns (Poloma & Pendleton, 1989, p. 49).

The authors have argued that findings from the survey on the types of prayer and quality of life have indicated that prayer experiences are better predictors of quality of life than any one of the four prayer types alone. Meditative prayer showed a moderate, although significant, relationship with the existential dimension of quality of life and religious satisfaction. Ritual prayer showed a positive relation with negative effect. Colloquial prayer demonstrated the only predictor of happiness. Frequency of prayer appeared to be a weak predictor of quality of life. Those who reported higher happiness scores did not pray as frequently as those who reported lower happiness scores (Poloma & Pendleton, 1989, pp. 49-50). According to Dudley and Kosinski (1990) prayer may help couples to be more other-centered, loving and forgiving, respectful, and resolve conflict. (p. 82). In a study by Lambert and Dollahite (2006), couples reported that prayer was one of the religious practices that helped in resolving marital issues.

Summary

In summary, prayer, communication with God (Prostrednik, 2007, p. 437), can take on many forms. According to Ladd and Spilka (2002), inward, outward, and upward prayer represents different perspectives. Inward prayer focuses on the personal examination of self,
outward prayer focuses on relational needs of others and external needs of self, and upward prayer focuses on intimate connection of the divine. Results indicated while outward prayer increased empathy and upward prayer increased connection to the divine through stillness and quietude, inward prayer increased sadness and grief.

Further, Poloma and Pendleton (1989) reported findings that the type of prayer (meditative, ritualistic, petitionary, and colloquial) was not as significant to life satisfaction as the experience of prayer, itself. Frequency of prayer, however, was not a predictor of happiness. In fact, those who prayed more had lower scores in experiencing happiness. Prayer is just one of the elements that may lead to marital satisfaction.

Marital Satisfaction

There are many factors that impact satisfaction in marital relationships (McCabe, 2006). According to Worthington (1999) the root of all communication problems are linked to a lack of love. Further, the author has also argued that poor communication styles suggest that individuals think more highly of their own agenda than others. Consequently, the partner receiving the message feels devalued, unimportant, and unloved. The author has also claimed that partners who do not practice loving communication try to control their marriages (p. 66). Results from a study of 160 married couples indicated that love and commitment were predictors of marital satisfaction from qualitative responses. Although communication was not supported as a statistically significant aspect of marital satisfaction, an open ended question revealed communication ranked highest in frequency of importance (Sokolski & Hendrick, 1999 p. 44).

Self-Disclosure

In the same study (n = 160), Sokolski and Hendrick (1999) showed a positive relationship between the interpersonal variables of self-disclosure and intimacy to marital satisfaction in both
husbands and wives. Communication, especially in the form of self-disclosure has been identified as an important aspect of relationships and martial satisfaction (p. 45). The authors also have suggested that self-disclosure, an important aspect of communication, has been described as a person’s willingness to disclose personal information to another person. Results from another study of 195 dating and 127 married couples, have concluded trust as having a consistent correlation to love and depth of self-disclosure (Larzelere & Huston, 1980). The authors have argued that a positive correlation between trust and self-disclosure increases intimacy and strengthens relationship commitment (p. 601).

Trust

Trust has been defined as the belief that a partner in a relationship will behave in a reliable, predictable manner (Lambert, Fincham, LaValle, & Brantley, 2012, p. 1). According to Larzelere and Huston (1980) the establishment of trust in relationship is a predictor of love and self-disclosure. Trust has also been linked with love and commitment as a cornerstone of healthy relationships (p. 601-602). Personal marital commitment has been described as dedication to the continuation of a relationship. This includes, attraction to the relationship and partner, self-definition regarding one’s role in the relationship, and a moral obligation (Larson & Goltz, 1989, p. 388). According to a study conducted by Lambert and Dollahite (2006), couples have reported their commitment permanence increased because of their religious beliefs. Comments such as “God hates divorce” or “marriage is forever” were common phrases from the participants. The authors have argued that this commitment has produced a desire to work things out and reconcile during difficult times (p. 445).
Conflict Resolution

Butler, Stout, and Gardner (2002) developed a study to measure the influence of prayer on conflict resolution. A sample of 217 religious spouses responded to a 102-item questionnaire assessing how they experienced prayer as it pertains to relational repair. Three primary areas were developed in the questionnaire: relationship, neutrality, and responsibility. Prayer was found to significantly enhance other centeredness by decreasing feelings of contempt and hostility as well as emotional reactivity. This decrease of negative feelings and reactions increased empathy and willingness to communicate. Further, it increased positive self-change by increasing both personal responsibility and couples responsibility for reconciliation and problem solving.

Forgiveness

According to Gordon et al. (2009) trust mediated the relationship between forgiveness and marital satisfaction. Forgiveness has been referred to as the extent a person would let go of a particular transgression and offense (Vasiliauskas & McMinn, 2013, p. 25). Religious practice has been thought to contribute to forgiveness. The authors have concluded from their study that surveyed 411 undergraduates from 12 private Christian colleges across the United States that some religious activities, such as prayer and devotional attention groups showed a greater reduction in unforgiveness than those in the control group. Also, Vasiliauskas and McMinn (2013) have argued that those in the prayer group showed the greatest increase on empathy toward their offender (p. 30).

According to Worthington (1999) empathy is the key to forgiveness. The author has claimed that forgiveness is an altruistic act of doing something nice for someone who does not deserve it. Worthington (1999) has also argued that forgiveness is where justice and mercy join
together (p. 130). One of Christianity’s central principles is forgiveness. Because Christians believe that God sent Jesus to bring salvation and forgiveness, Christians have been encouraged to forgive others as Christ has offered forgiveness to the world (Batson & Shwalb, 2006, p. 119).

**Summary**

In summary, communication through increased self-disclosure, trust and forgiveness, is considered to be highly important aspects of marital satisfaction (Sokolski & Hendrick, 1999, p. 44). In fact, love and increased self-disclosure, increase relational intimacy (Larzelere & Huston, 1980). Conversely, communication that is not driven by love for the other person is perceived as selfish and, as a result makes the partner feel controlled, devalued and unloved (Worthington, 1999).

Trust is also a major factor in marital satisfaction as it pertains to communication and commitment. For example, trust in relationship is a predictor of love and increased self-disclosure (Lambert, Fincham, LaValle, & Brantley, 2012, p. 1) as well as increased commitment (Larzelere & Huston, 1980). Further, a study by Lambert and Dollahite, (2006) indicates that when religious beliefs about the institution of marriage are held, commitment is increased.

Trust has also contributed to an increase in forgiveness as it relates to marital satisfaction. A study by Gordon et al., 2009 also shows that religious activity including prayer and devotionals increase forgiveness. Further, prayer increases empathy, a key element in forgiveness (Worthington, 1999) thus increasing forgiveness toward the offender (Vasiliauskas & McMinn, 2013). Finally, forgiveness toward others is considered one of the cornerstones of the all Christian affiliations and, therefore, is a motivator to forgive by people of faith (Batson & Shwalb, 2006, p. 119).
Christian Couples

Christian marriage has been described as a symbol of God’s covenantal faithfulness to his people (Regnerus, 2009, p. 27). Faith has been defined as a belief in a higher power that offers meaning and purpose which is demonstrated through prayer and attending services (Edwards, Lapp-Rincker, Magyar-Moe, Rehfeldt, Ryder, Brown, & Lopez, 2002, p. 148). Along with faith and prayer, proclaiming the Word of God by offering love and respect to all human beings is an essential element of Christianity (Anonymous, 2011). Although there are a large number of denominations, there are three primary Christian affiliations; sects, liberal groups, and institutional-authoritarian groups.

Pentecostal Group

The religious affiliation described as the sects, adhere to those congregations commonly called Pentecostal. The Assemblies of God has been known as the largest member in this group. These groups are described by emotional participation and emphasis on the supernatural. Common practices of this group include an emotional conversion experience. Often another experience would involve the “Baptism of the Holy Spirit.” This group adheres to informality of worship, supernatural otherworldly experiences, and literal acceptance of the scripture. Private prayer and tarrying until one hears from God and Bible reading are highly emphasized (Gruner, 1985, p. 49).

Liberal Groups

Denominations such as United Church of Christ, United Methodist and American Lutheran are defined as more liberal in nature. These groups are known for their less rigid adherence to the Bible or church activities as the only source of truth. Conversion is more of an intellectual experience. The belief system has been formed through the Bible, tradition, human
reason, and science. Reading the Bible is not stressed and private prayer is limited (Gruner, 1985, p. 49).

The founder of the Lutheran faith, Martin Luther, has drawn from the first marriage in the Bible, Adam and Eve, to demonstrate God’s creation and man’s fall. Luther explained that God made a helper for Adam because man should not be alone. Luther argued that couples need the blessing of God and common prayer to repair broken marriages. He also claimed there would be difficulties in marriage and there would be no guarantees. However, Luther proclaimed that when couples embrace forgiveness there is abundant hope for the relationship (Strohl, 2008, pp. 137-138). Present day Protestants have adopted a combination of stands about divorce. These including forbidding divorce completely, allowing divorce in cases of adultery, granting divorce on grounds of adultery and abandonment, and accepting divorce for various reasons other than adultery and abandonment. Protestants have permitted divorce with less restrictions than Catholics (Smith, 2010, p. 65).

**Catholic Group**

The institutional-authoritarian group is comprised of the Roman Catholic churches. This group strongly emphasis creeds and rituals. This group tends to be legalistic and dogmatic, however, liberalism in participating in worldly pleasures are common practice. Prayer is mainly confined to mass or utilized through repetitious recited prayers. Bible reading is less common in the Catholic community (Gruner, 1985, p. 49).

This group has followed the teaching of Augustine, which has regarded marriage as a sacrament through faith in Jesus and resulting in God’s gift of salvation. Augustine stressed Jesus’ command that man cannot break apart what God has brought together through marriage. He took the Biblical stand that declares the only exception for remarriage is death of the partner.
The Catholic denomination has the lowest divorce rate than seven major religious traditions (Smith, 2010, p. 64). According to Bosio (2009) couples have an opportunity to bond during mass as they pray for forgiveness and thanksgiving (p. 56).

Interviews with an Orthodox Christian couple and a Pentecostal Christian couple both reported that praying together strengthened their communication between one another after a disagreement. For these couples, prayer decreased marital conflict and improved communication. Other couples of Christian faith from the study reported that their religious beliefs increased their commitment to relationship permanence and forgiveness. These religious couples had an increased willingness to forgive because of God’s forgiveness for them. The authors have claimed that religious beliefs influence religious practices, which influence communication, commitment to permanence, and forgiveness (Lambert & Dollahite, 2006, pp. 443-446).

Summary

In summary, Christian marriage is a covenant agreement with God established through faith in the divine. Religious affiliations are divided roughly between three groups. The sects group which encompasses the Pentecostal movement adheres to a more emotional experience in worship along with personal responsibility toward prayer and Bible reading. Sect groups such as the Assemblies of God believe in a more informal approach to the supernatural (Gruner, 1985, p. 49). Conversely, liberal groups such as the American Lutheran have a more intellectual and scientific view toward Biblical teachings and traditions.

The basic premise of the Lutheran teaching of marriage is that although marriage will have difficulties, communication to God through prayer and His blessings along with forgiveness can restore a marital relationship (Strohl, 2008, pp. 137-138). Divorce for the protestant community including evangelical Christians is allowable if there has been infidelity. Finally, the
institutional-authorization group represented by the Catholic Church has a very structured, legalistic and ritualistic approach. Marriage conflict is understood to be repaired through the bonding afforded to them through prayers of forgiveness and gratitude. Further, marriage is looked at as a sacrament ending only in death of the partner (Gruner, 1985, p. 49).

**Integration of Christianity and Secular Psychotherapy**

According to Daalen (2012) secular psychotherapy denies God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as a reality and excludes the supernatural as a healing agent in therapy. However, the author argues that secular psychotherapy may be valuable because the Holy Spirit may bestow blessings via therapy through common grace. Because of sin in the world, the Triune God offers reconciliation with Him through the redemptive work of His Son, Jesus. God draws people to Himself and helps them experience His goodness through the Holy Spirit and common grace. Believers and non-believers benefit from common grace. Originally, God had said that physical death would be the consequence for disobedience. However, He offered undeserved grace allowing mankind to live until sin would be destroyed forever. The author claims that this same common grace may serve several purposes in human living including secular psychotherapy. The gift of common grace allows the world to live, be saved, and love God and others (Daalen, 2012).

While believers adhere to the promises of God, secular people perceive the world through the lens of science with a naturalistic point of view. This stand often conflicts with God’s design for human life. According to Daalen (2012) there are specific blessings that the Holy Spirit brings through common grace in secular Psychotherapy. First, the Holy Spirit is the one who offers the blessing of life for humans and animals. These physical blessings are expressed
through shelter, food, agriculture, rain, and kindness. The author claims that it is in this realm that psychotherapy can even exist (Daalen, 2012).

Second, God’s common grace is seen through evidence that most people have the ability to understand truth and possess levels of wisdom and knowledge. The Bible teaches that man’s ability to understand and to reason comes from God (Exodus 31:3 and Job 12:20 and 24). The author explains that the Holy Spirit may work in psychotherapy when God’s grace provides clients with understanding and insight. This may be accomplished through the examination of clients’ early recollections. Therapeutic exploration of early childhood experiences may help clients understand the reason behind their thinking, behavior, and relationship patterns (Daalen, 2012).

Next, God gives grace in the moral realm. Daalen (2012) has claimed that God’s grace protects people from the full reign of sin. This provides a level of God-conscience for people to attain moral living. The author argues that psychotherapy may provide an outlet for the Holy Spirit to work in clients’ lives by offering good moral judgment and restraint from sinfully activity. Destructive problems such as chemical and physical abuse may decrease as psychotherapists help clients improve their thoughts, feelings, and behavior. Therefore, psychotherapy may play an important role in promoting moral living while improving family relationships and society. Finally, the spiritual realm is another example where common grace is at work. Secular psychotherapy has recently made movement toward incorporating spirituality into the therapeutic process. Therefore, the Holy Spirit may utilize secular psychotherapy by exposing truth and knowledge and ultimately drawing clients to a closer relationship with God (Daalen, 2012).
In summary, the Holy Spirit offers common grace through the gift of God’s redemption plan and an everlasting relationship with Him (Luke 19:10). Conversely, anything that is not in accordance with God’s salvation plan, or does not follow His direction for Christian living, denies the Holy Spirit’s blessing of common grace (Daalen, 2012). Therefore, the author argues that the Holy Spirit may work twofold in secular therapy. First, secular therapy may be an avenue for common grace to help Christians become closer to Christ. Second, common grace may be seen in secular therapy by providing unbelievers assistance in their faith journey leading to Christ (Roman 1:19-20).

**Individual Psychology**

**Alfred Adler**

Alfred Adler was a physician, teacher, author, and practical philosopher. He advocated for social justice, children, and women. He was born in Vienna, Austria on February 7, 1870. Adler was the second child out of six and had many health problems as a youngster. Because he was a poor student, he compensated for his learning limitations. He became head of his class and pursued medicine to fight against pain and disease. While practicing medicine, he began to study ophthalmology and neurology. His interest in how people view the world flowed into other passions such as philosophy and politics (Mosak, & Maniacci, 1999; Carlson, Watts, & Maniacci, 2005). He drew from influences including the work of Kant, Shakespeare, and the Bible (Mosak, & Maniacci, 1999).

Adler married Raissa Epstien and had four children. His wife was an active feminist and had a major influence on Alfred’s life. Adler was more of a humanist than a socialist of his time. He supported the rights of the poor and advocated for better living conditions, education, and skill training. Adler focused on building relationships between parents, teachers, and children. It
was his position that the entire society would change if these relationships were improved. He taught people that negative behaviors limit life’s possibilities and provided tools for an improved quality of life (Mosak, & Maniacci, 1999; Carlson, Watts, & Maniacci, 2005).

**The Four Stages of Adlerian Counseling**

There are four stages of Adlerian counseling to aid therapists through the therapeutic process. The four stages of treatment include: Establishing and maintaining the relationship, assessing and uncovering the dynamics of the client through lifestyle, goals, and how these dynamics affect a client’s life movement, interpretation and insight, and reorientation. Within these stages, the therapist demonstrates and utilizes several skills to move clients toward healthier thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Mosak & Maniacci, 1999; Carlson, Watts, & Maniacci, 2005)

The therapeutic relationship is based on mutual trust and respect (Dinkmeyer & Sperry, 2000). The therapist demonstrates empathy for the presenting problems. Counseling is a collaborative process in developing goals for therapy (Corey, 2009). Active listening skills help to engage and connect with clients. Proper body language demonstrates genuine interest in clients and subject. Building and maintaining a therapeutic relationship should be an ongoing process throughout the term of therapy. The therapist can connect with clients by showing authentic concern through active listening and appropriate body language (Dinkmeyer & Sperry, 2000). The use of limited, appropriate self disclosure can build rapport. Also, it is important to differentiate encouragement and praise as encouragement separates the deeds from the doer and praise is only given when one achieves “good” results.

The assessment stage of therapy involves understanding the client’s current situation and identifying problems and symptoms. A lifestyle may be conducted to uncover hunches about the
client’s convictions of self, others, life and ethics, and mistaken beliefs (Shulman & Mosak, 1995). According to Carlson, Watts, & Maniacci (2005) Adlerian therapists also uncovers themes or patterns to understand the client’s fictive goal, which gives them a feeling of significance, safety, security, and a sense of belonging. The Adlerian model has identified the unity of personality, relationships, and goal directedness. This approach has explained that people are motivated by social interest and create goals to give purpose and meaning to life.

Understanding a person’s striving for significance and superiority, lifestyle, and family constellation can uncover patterns and mistaken beliefs as the therapist focuses on the concept of the life tasks; love/sex, work/occupation, community/friendship, self-care, and spirituality (Mosak & Maniacci, 1999; Dinkmeyer & Sperry, 2000). Goal setting is important and should be a collaborative process throughout the course of therapy (Carlson, Watts, & Maniacci, 2005). Asking “the question” also helps provide direction for goal setting. After clients explain what life would look like without their problem, the therapist and client can work on goals to improve their situation (Carlson, Watts, & Maniacci, 2005; Corey, 2009).

According to Dinkmeyer & Sperry (2000) Adlerian therapists help reveal new insight regarding the client’s private logic by explaining why the client has been behaving in a certain manner. The client’s mistaken beliefs and behaviors toward their fictive goal are exposed and challenged to make healthier changes. Therapists identify client’s strengths and promote social interest. Feelings of inadequacy are uncovered and reoriented. Several techniques can be applied during a therapeutic session. The push-button technique is a powerful illustration of how easily individuals can turn on and off feelings by changing their thinking (Carlson, Watts, & Maniacci, 2005). Also, information is gained through Socratic questioning by asking questions from the client’s responses.
This stage involves teaching, educating, and correcting the client’s interfering beliefs. The therapist addresses behaviors that are contributing to client’s presenting problems. Clients are encouraged to embrace new, alternative ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving. Social interest is encouraged and feelings of inferiority or worthlessness are challenged during this phase of therapy (Corey, 2009). Confronting the client about choices that may have contributed to current issues helps the client to realize they are not a victim and may foster hope in the ability to make healthy, life changes. It is also important for therapists to assist the client in separating worth from behavior. A husband being controlling is not a bad individual; a controller is someone behaving poorly. According to Mosak & Maniaci (1999) the “As If” technique is an effective tool in getting people to change their behaviors and thoughts by acting or thinking about a futuristic event in a more productive, healthier way. For example, a therapist may assign homework to a couple by request them to act ‘as if’ they were feeling connected to each other and suggest they pray for each other. Lastly, the empty chair technique helps the client to examine different options to problems by physically moving from one chair to another. The two different chairs represent an alternative point of view and opens up new doors for healing and positive change (Carlson, Watts, & Maniaci, 2005).

In summary, the four stages of Adlerian therapy promote relationship building, assessments, insight, and reorientation. Each stage encourages the client to think, feel, and behave in a different, healthier manner. Goals for therapy should include a decrease in inferiority feelings and an increase in social interest. Finally, it is important to separate clients’ behavior from their worth.
Integration of Adlerian Concepts in Marital Therapy

Pew (1989) offers insight into common therapeutic techniques from an Adlerian perspective. The attitudes and assumptions from this theory conclude that marriage is not seen as a state of being, but rather as a task set for two. Further, according to Adlerian psychology, each individual operates according to the guidelines of their own basic convictions, intentions, and expectations. Each is striving to achieve their place in life, while simultaneously striving to build a life together. To assist couples in finding new solutions to ongoing issues, Adlerian therapy focuses on four aspects: a) establishing a proper working relationship, b) assessment, c) interpretation, d) reorientation and reeducation (Dinkmeyer & Sperry, 2000).

In addition to incorporating ERs and family constellation (Corey, 2009) information, Pew has suggested teaching couples skills in communication, conflict resolution, and cooperation, which are reinforced through homework assignments and specific exercises. Pew explained that she teaches couples listening techniques, requiring each spouse to listen carefully and then paraphrase what was said to the other. She also recommended couples having a “marriage conference” which involves a scheduled appointment for the couple to have uninterrupted dialog. Further, couples journal thoughts and feelings to be shared either in session or with each other. Pew has also assigned encouraging and fun activities for the couples to reconnect. For example, the couple may participate in a “daily appreciation” time, where each spouse says something they like or value in the other partner.

In addition to communication and cooperation skills, Pew has also incorporated conflict resolution methods in brief psychotherapy. The process involved include: 1) creating mutual respect (Dinkmeyer & Sperry, 2000), 2) pinpointing the real issue, 3) reaching a new agreement with accountability, 4) mutually participating in decision making and responsibility. Another
recommended method for conflict resolution is the use of the therapeutic paradox. The couple is asked to purposely continue their problematic behaviors and then report how it worked at the next session. Commonly, couples come back laughing about their absurd behavior and are unable to reenact the scenario without laughing. Consequently, the behavior has been changed.

Dinkmeyer (1984) explained marital therapy techniques of Richard Stuart. Similarly to the Adlerian approach, Stuart’s initial interview heavily focuses on the positive: what the clients like about themselves, what they like about their current relationship, and what they like about their spouse. Stuart argues that 80 percent of therapy outcome depends upon the first twenty minutes of the first session. He also emphasizes a great deal on encouragement in all counseling and has developed a technique called “Caring Days.” Couples list things they would like the other partner to say and do as evidence of caring. Stuart’s approach builds on five sets of skills with couples: commitment, communication, contracting, conflict resolution (Carlson, Watts, Maniacci, 2005), and the containing of conflicts. He tries to move the marriage relationship from a 50-50 orientation to a 100-100 relationship balance. Stuart encourages couples to talk less about what their partner lacks or how the other person needs to change and more about what they want in the relationship. He believes in the “change first” principle: Be the first one to change and your partner will follow.

Dinkmeyer (1984) also added Stuart’s claim to techniques that defuse emotions of hurt and anger, which include: 1) normalize the hurt, help them to see that other people have also experienced similar hurt. 2) use humor (Carlson, Watts, & Maniacci, 2005) or irony. 3) use a reasonable amount of self-reference. He believes self-disclosure may help clients realize that they are not alone in feeling hurt. 4) help a couple reframe or re-label their method of thinking, therefore their thoughts and feelings may change. 5) Stuart often turns toward the partner and
away from the person raising the issue. 6) then, he turns to the issue-raiser and requests a commitment to change. Stuart argues that clients determine the issues and the therapist determines the stage of therapy and the process.

**Life Tasks**

Adlerian therapists adhere to the idea that people are holistically designed and psychological neurosis will occur when disturbances arise within a person’s circle of work, friendship, love (Corey, 2009), self-care, and spirituality (Hawes & Blanchard, 1993). Adler explained that all life problems involve problems of human cooperation (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964). The work or occupation tie explains a person’s vocation. People benefit and grow in their community when they are highly cooperative with others (Mosak & Maniaci, 1999). According to Hawes and Blanchard (1993) individuals get a feeling of usefulness and worth when they contribute to society.

The social task represents how an individual relates to other members of society. Marital selection, roles, and adjustment may be influenced by the social task (Hawes & Blanchard, 1993). According to Ansbacher and Ansbacher (1964) problems in the social task are best solved by friendship, community feeling, and cooperation. The love task describes an intimate relationship between two people of the other sex (Mosak & Maniaci, 1999). Adler was an advocate for equality, cooperation, mutual responsibility, and communication and problem solving skills in intimate relationships. The love task involves an extension of self to meet the needs of the other partner (Hawes & Blanchard, 1993).

The life tasks of self-care and spirituality have been added to Adler’s original three communal ties. Self-care relates to how an individual relates to self in four subgroups, survival, body image, opinion, and evaluation (Mosak & Maniaci, 1999). The authors also claim that the
spiritual life task involves five subgroups, relationship to God, religion, relationship to the universe, metaphysical issues, and meaning of life. Hawes and Blanchard (1993) argue that utilizing life tasks in the assessment stage of marital therapy helps to measure mental health and evaluate the couple’s marriage and other areas of their lives. When addressing the spiritual task, these authors claim that individuals often feel unfulfilled spiritually when they avoid discussing their spirituality. This information would be valuable to therapists when determining whether prayer should be incorporated into the therapeutic process.

**Christian Spirituality and Adlerian Psychotherapy**

According to McBrien (2004), forgiveness is reinforced when levels of social interest are high. The word Gemeinschaftsgefühl was originally used by Adler to describe social interest (Carlson, Watts, & Maniaci, 2005). This has been described as an extension of empathy and describes a person who is interested in the wellbeing of others. Adler described the level of community feeling as “cosmic” (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964). Social interest is a byproduct of a spiritual experience (McBrian, 2004). Goals in Adlerian therapy may be to encourage forgiveness by helping the client to become more understanding, compassionate, and empathic toward the offender. The author argues that this would encompass the cosmic expression of living with social interest.

McBrien (2004) also suggests a three step counseling technique to guide clients toward wholeness in Christ through forgiveness. This technique is similar to a guiding imagery exercise. First, the client thinks about someone who has provided love and support. Once they experience loving feeling from the memory, they send prayers to that person. Then, the client thinks of a natural person (e.g., a bank teller). Once they experience warm feeling from the image, prayers are offered. Lastly, the process is repeated, except the client recalls images of the offender,
thinks of loving feelings and prayers are offered. The author argues that individuals who choose forgiveness through social interest may share in the belief of the Golden Rule. Therefore, therapist may want to encourage clients to consider forgiveness when increased spirituality is sought.

While most systems of psychology ignore religion and spirituality, Individual Psychology and Adlerian psychotherapy have been more accepting of these issues than other approaches (Watts, 2000). The author argues that biblically based Christian spirituality and Individual Psychology and Adlerian psychotherapy have vast commonality. Similarities between them involve the value of humankind and relationships. Both consider humans as creative, holistic, and social (Mosak & Maniaci, 1999; Watts, 2000; Carlson, Watts, & Maniaci, 2005). The strongest area of common ground between Christian spirituality and Individual Psychology according to Watts (2000) involves a relational viewpoint. According to Individual Psychology, social interest is described as a key component for healthy living (Mosak & Maniaci, 1999; Carlson, Watts, & Maniaci, 2005). Christian spirituality consists of a relationship with God, others, and themselves (Watts, 2000).

Christian spirituality draws from teachings of the Bible. According to Watts (2000) the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17) depict God’s instruction for relational living. The first four commandments provide instruction for a relationship with God and the last six explain how to be other-centered. When Jesus was asked which commandment was most important, He answered, “Love the Lord God with all your heart and with all you soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37-39 NIV). This scripture explains God’s plan for relational communion with Him, others, and self.
While the Bible may not be seen as a textbook for psychotherapy, Watts (2000) argues that Adlerian principles compliment Biblical guidelines for relational living. The author claims that clients holding a biblically based spirituality viewpoint will appreciate information from the therapist regarding the common ground between Biblical and Adlerian perspective. This knowledge will assist in building the therapeutic alliance by increasing the client’s confidence that the counseling process will be compatible with their beliefs. Of the four stages in Adlerian psychotherapy, according to Watts, (2000) most Adlerians view the first stage, relationship building, the most significant stage. Because psychotherapy works within a relational context, Adlerian therapists foster respectful, collaborative relationships with their clients (Mosak & Maniacci, 1999).

Goals for Adlerian therapy include helping clients eliminate inferiority feelings and promote social interest. Further, Adlerians work collaboratively with their clients on goal setting in the areas of changing behaviors, feelings, symptoms, and how they see themselves, the world and others (Mosak & Maniacci, 1999). The Adlerian model works to identify the unity of a client’s personality, relationships, and goal directedness. This approach has explained that people are motivated by social interest and create goals to give purpose and meaning to life (Cory, 2009). Finally, both the Bible and Adlerian psychotherapy emphasize the importance of insight on the influence of lifestyle convictions on a person’s thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. They both address the importance of replacing negative thoughts with healthy thoughts and behaviors. Last, they both stress the value of relationships and social interest for guiding mental wellness.

Furthermore, individual Psychology and Christian spirituality both stress the importance of encouragement. Adlerian therapists offer encouragement to foster growth and development in
their clients (Watts, 2000). According to Corey (2009) encouragement brings about cognitive
and behavioral change. Encouragement is demonstrated by showing clients genuine concern
through active listening and empathy, respectful communication, focusing on strengths, and
helping clients discover healthy self-concepts. Encouragement is the personification of social
interest (Mosak & Maniacci, 1999; Carlson, Watts, & Maniacci, 2005). The Bible also
emphasizes the importance of encouraging others. However, these instructions are often termed
differently. Biblical words such as affirm, build up, edify, and strengthen are common
terminology to describe encouragement (Watts, 2000).

In summary, Adlerian psychotherapists’ techniques compliment and work within the
belief system of Christian clients. Because there are several common threads between biblically
based Christian spirituality and Individual Psychology, the two offer a common language to
strengthen the therapeutic relationship. Instructional goals for relationship building, enhancing
social interest, and encouraging others support common language between the two systems.
When working with Christian clients, it may be advantageous for Adlerians to become more
familiar with literature integrating theology and spirituality with psychotherapy. Lastly, it is
important to be aware of a professional specializing in the area of conservative Christian
spirituality for consultation or referral (Watts, 2000).

**Therapy with Christian Couples**

An observational study of Christian couple therapy has shown that Christian couple
therapy commonly results in a positive outcome for most couples (Hook, Worthington, Riley,
& Davis, 2011). These authors define Christian couple therapy by four criteria: (1) therapy by a
professing Christian clinician that (2) involves both partners (3) who claim to be Christians and
also that (4) refers to Christian values or issues explicitly at least one time during therapy.
Marital therapy practices may differ in highly religious couples from therapy with other types of couples. Therefore, it is important that clinicians understand the influence of religion on clients’ therapeutic preferences. Religious based marital interventions often draw from Christian tradition. Many religious therapists incorporate religious practices such as prayer into treatment and include interventions that integrate religious values, beliefs, and behaviors. Religious people differ within subgroups, religious beliefs, which are characterized as theologically conservative or liberal, and values, which are described as high versus moderate or low value placed on religion (Ripley, Worthington, & Berry, 2001). The authors claim that religious beliefs are measured by an individual’s agreement with orthodox religious statements and values are statements individuals consider important in life. Highly religious individuals rate their religiosity as very valuable, often engage in religious behavior, and adhere to well-defined religious beliefs (Ripley, Worthington, & Berry, 2001).

Because most Christians highly value marriage and have strong beliefs about marriage, it is important to understand Christian couples’ response to explicitly Christian or secular marriage therapy (Ripley, Worthington, & Berry, 2001). The authors have identified two subgroups to inform marital therapists about potential clients from a study of 162 Christian, married university students from six denominations. The subgroups include highly religious Christians and Christians who are in a low-to-moderate religiosity group. The study showed that therapy with a Christian or non-Christian therapist did not matter to couples of low-moderate religiosity. Further, this group was not concerned whether a therapist utilized interventions consistent with Christian practices (Ripley, Worthington, & Berry, 2001).

Conversely, the survey showed that highly religious Christians made a strong distinction in marital therapy preference. While this group did not intentionally seek out highly religious
Christian therapists, they rejected marital therapists with differing religion and who seemed uninterested in their religion. They strongly objected to a non-Christian therapist who was not willing to utilize Christian technique, despite the therapist’s assurance to respect their religious values. However, these clients seemed satisfied when a non-Christian therapist agreed to incorporate some Christian interventions in therapy (Ripley, Worthington, & Berry, 2001).

Regardless of outcomes, potential clients are more likely to schedule and keep appointments when their expectation of efficacy in therapy is high. Moderately or nonreligious therapists may have limited interaction with highly religious clients because this group often (a) seeks therapy through their church or religious community, (b) seeks services from an explicitly like-religious professional, or (c) do not seek therapy even when it is needed (Ripley, Worthington, Berry, 2001). The authors also claim that highly religious Christians believe religion and marriage are interconnected. Because many Christian couples view their marriage as an extension of their faith, they adhere to a permanent, covenant commitment to each other. Conversely, contractual social relationships are bound by a mutual contract fulfillment. While covenant commitments tend to be permanent, contractual social relationships are often more temporary and are based on an obligation performance (Ripley, Worthington, Bromley, & Keper, 2005). If Christian couples adhere to a covenant commitment for their marriage and perceive their therapist adhering to contractual marital values, then clients might not perceive their therapist as working in unison with their goals. Therefore, highly committed married Christian couples would most likely seek therapy from a therapist with similar values to their own (Ripley, Worthington, Berry, 2001).

Implications for marital therapy vary among religious and non-religious therapists. A Christian therapist that adheres to the Christian faith will most likely attract highly religious
Christian clients over moderate-to-less religious Christian clients (Ripley, Worthington, Berry, 2001). The authors argue that similarly to other cultural groups, clients from the Christian religion may prefer their beliefs and values to be integrated in marital therapy. Clients’ needs may be met when therapists are willing to incorporate clients’ Christian beliefs and values into the therapeutic process. However, should non-religious therapists incorporate religious interventions by praying in session or referring to Scripture when they may not be qualified or believe? The authors claim that just because a clinician can pray with a client when requested does not mean the clinician should pray, particularly when they do not share common religious beliefs and values. Professional ethics may play an integral part whether therapists feel comfortable and competent utilizing prayer and other religious intervention in therapy (Ripley, Worthington, Berry, 2001).

Integration of Prayer into Marital Interventions

Ethical Implications and Personal Codes of Professional Ethics

When a group of therapists were asked about ethics, 71% reported that they considered spiritual issues ethical to address in therapy (Carlson, Kirkpatrick, Hecker, & Killmer (2002). One of the criteria in creating a personal code of professional ethics involves the therapist knowing themselves. This may be accomplishing by answering a series of questions. For example, what do you believe to be true? Why do you believe what you believe? The answers to these questions should reveal moral and ethical lines that you will not cross even if it means losing your job. Therapists’ upbringing, religion, and personality type may contribute to ethical decision making. Further, a faith-based therapist needs to be very clear to the client as to beliefs about such topics as the sanctity of marriage between one man and one woman and gay and lesbian issues. A therapist may adhere to and utilize the American Association for Marriage and
Family Therapy (AAMFT) Code of Ethics to develop a personal code of ethics including Adlerian concepts. A faith-based therapist often aspires to not only uphold the law and ethics codes, but to expand those standards to include a moral duty (deontology) to protect.

**Counselor Self-Awareness**

Most ethical violations are unintentional. Therefore, it is important for therapists to practice good self-care. This consists of actively cultivating one’s wellness on many levels, including nurturing the body, mind, and spirit (Corey, Corey, & Callanan, 2011). The Minnesota statutes for licensed marriage and family therapists, 5300.0350, section (J) reads, therapists should seek professional assistance for their own personal problems that may impair their clinical judgment. When examining the relevant ethics code regarding professional impairment, the AAMFT, 3.3, states that therapists should seek professional help for their personal problems that may impair their work or clinical judgment (Corey, Corey, & Callanan, 2011). Self-awareness is of great importance in many professions, but especially as it relates to therapists. Therapists have an opportunity to do their own work with an analysis, didactic instructor, and/or spiritual mentor to prepare for clinical work and protect their clients from counter transference or other client harm.

**Competence**

Another topic for therapists to heed comes in the area of therapist competence. The Minnesota statute, (I), states that therapists must understand areas of competence for their field and act accordingly. The 2001 AAMFT ethics codes for professional competence, (3.11) states that therapists should not diagnose or treat problems beyond their training or abilities. Also, they should not engage in counseling techniques unless they have received appropriate training (Corey, Corey, & Callanan, 2011). Nonmaleficence fits well with professional competence,
which includes refraining from behaviors that risk hurting the client. Sullivan and Karney (2008) warn against the possibility of undo pressure from clients to incorporate religion and spirituality into marriage therapy, which may fall outside of the therapist’s scope of practice and training.

**Informed Consent**

Informing clients about expectations and the therapeutic relationship is both a legal and ethical obligation. Code of Ethics, Principle I Responsibility to Clients 1.2, states that clients have the right to information regarding the treatment process and procedures, and therapeutic risks and benefits. The Rights of Clients and Informed Consent Ethics Codes states that marriage and family counselors should be open and honest about goals, limits and confidentiality, risks and benefits with specific techniques. Veracity is the moral principle that explains that psychologists should promote accuracy and honesty in their practice (Corey, Corey, & Callanan, 2011). Additionally, a faith-based therapist might add an individual disclosure adding statements pertaining to religious parameters. In fact, Christian ethics require potential clients be fully informed regarding the use of prayer or other spiritual interventions and that informed consent be obtained by all parties in the counseling session (Decker, 2001).

**Supervision**

According to a study among marital and family therapists, 60% of the respondents agreed that supervision and training was important in spiritual issues (Carlson, Kirkpatrick, Hecker, & Killmer, 2002). Supervision is an integral part of a therapists training in improving competencies in the helping profession. A supervisor oversees trainees in four areas; growth and development, protection of the welfare of the client, serving as a gatekeeper for the profession, and empowering supervisee to self-supervise. There are multiple roles of a clinical supervisor, which include teacher, mentor, consultant, counselor, adviser, and evaluator. The Supervisee’s
Bill of Rights states that a supervisee can expect the supervisor to serve as a positive role model and lead the supervisee in developing a professional identity (Corey, Corey, & Callanan, 2011). The 2001 AAMFT Code of Ethics, 4.5 reads that therapists should take reasonable measures to ensure that the services provided by the supervisees are professional. When incorporating religious practices such as prayer, clients may confuse the therapist in a ministerial role and possibly create a dual relationship (Sullivan & Karney, 2008). This type of situation should be discussed in supervision.

**Social Interest**

Alfred Adler associated ethics with an emphasis on social interest. Adler stressed the importance of embracing the well-being of the community by showing love and truth to others. Adler stated, “We want equal, independent and responsible people working in the service of culture.” (Adler Course Manual). In sum, ethical topics should be approached through a holistic framework. Therapists may draw from Minnesota statutes, AAMFT Code of Ethics, and Adlerian concepts such as social interest to guide their ethical decisions. It is important for therapists to be open and honest with clients about biases on marriage and faith. Being forthright about competencies and expectations are essential ethical discussions in therapy. Lastly, it is important in ethical decision-making to approach ethical matters as a fluid subject by serving the individual needs of each client.

**Culturally Appropriate Prayer-Based Alternative**

When culturally appropriate, prayer can serve as an intervention when combined with other skill-based approaches in marital therapy (Beach, Fincham, Hurt, Mcnair, & Stanley, 2008). While many therapists agree that spirituality is important, they may be hesitant to incorporate spiritual practices into therapy. Data from a survey among marital and family
therapists, 96% reported they believed there was a relationship between spirituality and mental health. While 50% of the respondents agreed prayer for the client was appropriate, only 17% agreed that it was appropriate for the therapist and client to pray together. Over half of the therapists reported that they were interested in learning more about integrating spirituality into their practice (Carlson, Kirkpatrick, Hecker, & Killmer, 2002).

Therapists should not necessarily replace skills training when utilizing prayer in therapy. Prayer should be utilized as an alternative for reaching certain client populations. The prayer-based alternative in Table 1 provides a comparison that meets some of objectives in couple’s emotion regulation skill training (Beach, et al. 2008). Since couples who typically pray tend to utilize prayer during stressful periods (McCullough & Larson, 1999), the prayer-based alternative may be a positive intervention (Beach, et al. 2008). Therapists can encourage couples to engage in meditative or colloquial prayer to assist in conflict or anger management (Lambert & Dollahite, 2006). The benefits in utilizing a prayer-based alternative includes, a) new insight and perspective taking, b) shifting partners focus toward improving the relationship, c) relaxation techniques, and d) providing a quick way to “take a timeout” from the other partner (Beach, et al., 2008).

TABLE 1. Relationship Skills and Corresponding Prayer Objectives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill Training Objective</th>
<th>Prayer-Based Alternative</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Regain perspective</td>
<td>1. Meditative prayer: reflection on divine love and its extension to partners and their relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Break negative though cycle</td>
<td>2. Prayer that interrupts grievance, rehearsal by focusing on love, compassion, and understanding</td>
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According to Beach et al. (2008) when couples pray for each other, they may regain perspective on their core values, love, compassion, and understanding. These authors argue that prayer helps couples to think about their connection to each other. Consequently, the couple will reevaluate their values of commitment and work toward protecting their marriage. Prayers may also broaden empathy (Worthington, 1999). This can be accomplished as prayer may improve awareness about the other partner’s viewpoint. Praying for the other spouse engenders other-centeredness. Listening skills may improve when a partner assumes an “other-centered” position in combination with mediation on God’s love for the other spouse (Beach, et al., 2008; Prostrednick, 2007).

Prayer can be affective in breaking negative thought cycles. Because marital conflict often produces negative thoughts, couples need time only to regroup and reflect. Rather than couples taking a “timeout” and focusing on grievances, prayer may reduce negative thoughts about their partner. Consequently, prayer may be a better alternative than “timeouts” for culturally appropriate couples. Not only can prayers assist in disrupting repeated cycles of negative cognition, it can also promote attention on divine love and forgiveness (Beach, et al., 2008). Conversely, according to Sullivan and Karney (2008) while prayer might be beneficial in many cases, some couples’ problems cannot be resolved by words, alone. For example, when there are significant problems (e.g., substance abuse and violence) that threaten the safety of the other spouse and children, clinicians should approach promoting tolerance and forgiveness through prayer with caution.

While “timeouts” have been common practice in marital conflict management, relaxation techniques have also been recommended. Sullivan and Karney (2008) have claimed that therapists should consider prayer as a self-soothing technique when each partner is already
utilizing prayer to self-sooth. According to Beach, et al. (2008), when culturally appropriate, prayer may be a rewarding and meaningful alternative to promote a relaxation response. These authors claim that couples may achieve a sense of composure when they mediate on a higher power, concentrate on being in the presence of God, and quietly meditate on reading Holy Scripture. The authors also argue that colloquial prayer may be an alternative for couples when they need dialogue with a supportive other. The immediacy of talking with God provides support when others are not available (Beach, et al., 2008).

Discussion about colloquial prayer may serve as an assessment tool to determine self-monitoring function. If clients are unable to participate in colloquial prayer by requesting good things for their partner, this type of prayer should be postponed. Then, the therapist should initiate more individual work by discussing the client’s motives and spiritual state (Beach, et al., 2008). The process of working through forgiveness may play an important role in therapy when couples are unmotivated to pray for one another. According to Beach, et al. (2008) couples who engage in meditative prayer for divine forgiveness in injunction with forgiveness of the spouse would reduce repetitive negative thoughts about their partner. The authors also argue that meditative prayer that focuses on God’s faithfulness may change a couple’s commitment level toward each other. Further, incorporating prayer may encourage couples to focus less on their own desires for the betterment of the relationship. Therefore, because prayer activity could increase levels of forgiveness, commitment (Lambert & Dollahite, 2006), and sacrifice, couples should be better equipped to break negative thought cycles and respond adaptively during stressful times (Beach, et al., 2008).

Therapist should take caution when incorporating prayer into the therapeutic process. Sullivan and Karney (2008) have argued that it is important that therapists do not focus more
attention on the desire to incorporate prayer that the real challenges that the couples face gets
neglect. Beach, et al. (2008) has claimed that therapists should approach prayer as a marital
intervention with thoughtful consideration and sensitivity. These authors have warned about the
potential risks in couples praying out loud, together. They argue that couples could possibly use
prayer as a way to manipulate the other partner. However, when both partners comfortably
engage in prayer individually, then joint prayer might be a natural progression and have a greater
impact on the relationship. Therapists should also have some reservation in suggesting that
prayer could have psychological and marital benefit to avoid coming across as judging. Further,
because prayer is accepted as an activity that focuses on ultimate concerns, prayer for producing
results may be seen as trivializing prayer. This may also suggest that the therapist lacks
understanding about prayer and may utilize prayer in therapy to manipulate the couple (Beach, et
al., 2008).

Therefore, according to Sullivan and Karney, (2008) therapists should delicately
approach prayer as a therapeutic intervention by matching religious activity, such as prayer, to
individual couples. These authors claim that if therapists pray, or talk about religious beliefs and
practices that differ from the clients’, this could negatively impact the therapeutic relationship
and interventions. According to Beach et al. (2008) when therapists are working with religious
committed couples, they should be mindful about referring to “value of spirituality” in vague
terms. This population may not appreciate general references regarding their religious beliefs
and activities. The authors claim that similarly to all other forms of psychological interventions,
therapists should often incorporate the couples’ own language and encourage them to utilize their
own religious practices. Therapists should first inquire about the couples religious beliefs and
activities, and then, explore with the couple, using their spiritual terminology, whether they are
interested in including prayer as they work on their relationship. This conversation would be particularly important during the assessment stage of therapy. Further, it would be useful for therapists to acquire instructional material to combine marital skills training and examples of prayer (Beach, et al., 2008).

In summary, it has been suggested that therapists consider a prayer-based alternative combined with other skills training in marital therapy. Prayer may provide couples support when others are not available. When prayer focuses on core values such as love, compassion, and understanding, negative thoughts about the other spouse diminish and promote conflict resolution. Meditative and colloquial prayer with God focused on forgiveness and faithfulness may improve marital forgiveness and commitment levels, thereby improving marital satisfaction over time (Lambert & Dollahite, 2006). Therapists should assess couples beliefs and religious activities and inquire whether prayer should be implemented while working on their marriage. Lastly, therapists should obtain instructions and examples to incorporate prayer into marriage therapy (Beach, et al., 2008).

An Instructional Model to Teach Couples to Pray Together

The Bible, research, and psychological disciplines provide data in creating a model on prayer in marital therapy (Decker, 2001). James 5:13-16 (NIV) states that forgiveness through prayer should be offered in faith and that people should confess their sins to each other and prayer for each other to be healed. According to Gruner (1985) research showed that religious practice such as prayer predicts positive marital adjustment. Also, work by Richard Stuart, called social learning-cognitive marital therapy, has provided an instructional model for marriage therapy. This approach suggests that each partner should commit to “changing first” thereby building relationship trust (as sited in Decker, 2001; Dinkmeyer, 1984). Although Christians
may be hesitant to utilize this humanistic philosophy, Decker (2001) has claimed that it simply describes humans’ capacity to change and formulate a vision for the future and their relationship.

According to Beach et al. (2008) the role of the therapist is not to impose what beliefs, or scripture, or activities to accept or exclude, rather to work with the couple’s existing repertoire of resources to improve their marriage relationship. Sullivan and Karney (2008) claim that when couples initiate utilizing prayer for comfort, therapists should consider exploring prayer as an intervention when engaged in conflict. During the initial interview, therapists should assess the couple’s level of distress and commitment. Although a couple may share in their Christian belief and value prayer, marital discord occurs when erosion threatens those values that were once a source of marital satisfaction. Consequently hurt, anger, and disappointment may lead to shift in the ratio of positive-to-negative interactions (Gottman, 1999; as cited in Decker, 2001). As a result, the couple’s physical and spiritual attraction frequently suffers. When this occurs, the couples shared belief system no longer is sufficient for positive interactions and may become more of a source of contention. Couples should also be fully informed regarding the use of prayer as an intervention and stated in the informed consent provided to both partners (Decker, 2001).

Preliminary instructions need to be established when teaching couples to pray as an intervention. Once agreed upon, therapists should contract with both partners to commit to each other and to the process of utilizing prayer. However, first, the couple’s emotional acceptance of each other should be established and strengthened (Decker, 2001). Occasionally, couples use their relationship in a destructive manner. Coalition, alliance, displacement, and deferring couple-God triangulation can all contribute to marital discord and should be assessed before including prayer which impacts couples’ interpretation of God for marriage outcomes (Butler,
Stout, & Gardner, 2002). Consequently, changing the ratio of positive-to-negative interactions may take several therapy sessions. Once the couple’s conflict subsides and their emotional connection is strengthened, the couple is ready to be taught to pray together (Decker, 2001). According to the author, instructions for utilizing pray in therapy should be explained to the couples both in written and oral form. Providing different forms of instructions is important for two reasons. First, it gives the couples an opportunity to obtain the information by reading and listening, thereby increasing the level of comprehension. Second, couples may obtain a copy of instructions to review at a later time. This increases the level of compliance to pray together as homework (Decker, 2001).

While the frequency of prayer does not predict personal happiness, (Poloma & Pendleton, 1989; McCullough & Larson, 1999) it has been positively related to marital adjustment (Gruner, 1985). Decker (2001) claims that therapists should inform their clients about the time requirements for the intervention of prayer. Some couples do not have the luxury of spending long periods of time with each other. However, when couples experience positive change from therapy, they are more motivated to participate in short periods of highly focused prayer. The author claims that couples have reported that the model of prayer outlined below takes approximately five minutes. Conversely, Worthington (2008) claims that while negative feedback cycles and self controlling thoughts might be affected by prayer; he argues that this takes considerable amount of time, effort, and motivation to pray over time rather than utilizing prayer as an easy intervention. Both the therapist and couple should discuss where and when the prayer should take place. Some couples pray at the front door, at the dinner table, or at bedtime. Regardless of the time of day or location, prayer is about the heart and mind of the person (Decker, 2001).
Since petitionary prayer (Ladd & Spilka, 2002) has been related to individuals with the worst adjustment to stressful life circumstances, other types of prayer are recommended in psychotherapy, including meditative, colloquial and intercessory prayer (McCullough & Larson, 1999). Because prayer involves the attitude of the couples heart and mind, Decker (2001) argues that it is essential for therapists to stress the need for the couple to be specific in prayer. The author claims that when couples pray for specific needs it implies thoughtfulness and intentionality, which creates a greater possibility for success. Couples are encouraged to touch in some fashion during prayer. This should be a safe approach through holding hands or embracing (Decker, 2001). Specifically, safe touch should be established and agreed upon by the couple. Some couples may simply touch knees to knees for connection while praying. The author also argues that it is also important in helping couples to establish how often they would initially like to pray together. Instead of suggesting that they pray together daily, therapists should encourage couples to agree upon a number of days before the next session to pray together. This control of the process helps couples to view their prayer activity as a shared investment rather than a homework assignment from the therapist (Decker, 2001).

The prayer model for teaching couples to pray together, according to Decker, (2002) involves subsequent steps. The author claims that couples should first thank God for something specific about their partner. Scripture reads, “Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thessalonians 5: 16-18, NIV). When partners begin prayer with an offering of thanksgiving, not only does that fulfill Biblically instruction, it also increases positive interactions, which aligns with disciplines from behavioral marriage counseling. Further, requesting couples to thank God for each other naming something specific during each prayer fosters new insight about the other partner. This step encourages the
couple to focus on positive attributes about the other rather than focus on negative attributes that result in ruminating negative thoughts (Decker, 2002).

Next, both partners should pray for something specific that is important to their spouse (Decker, 2002). This type of prayer promotes other-centeredness and compels each partner to be attentive to the others external situations, thoughts, and feels (Dudley & Kosinski, 1990). Vocalizing this awareness helps change their perspective of each other (McCullough & Larson, 1999). As the partner praying becomes more sensitive to the spouse, the listener becomes equally affected by noticing the change in the attitude in the partner. This change by one partner may increase positive interactions and lead to further acceptance and empathy for each other (Decker, 2002).

The last step of the prayer model instructs each partner to pray for something specific about themselves that is important to their spouse (Decker, 2002). Prayer in this capacity is an important step in reconciliation (Butler, Stout, & Gardner, 2002). Partners may be more willing to unity when they hear their spouse praying for change in themselves about something that has been important to the other. Finally, once the prayer model has been introduced, therapists should ask each partner to verbalize understanding of the exercise. This will give the therapist an opportunity to clarify any misunderstanding. The author also claims that the therapist should follow up during subsequent sessions to verify how often the couple is praying and following instructions. Couples need encouragement to remain faithful to the prayer process (McCullough & Larson, 1999) as well as a reminder why prayer is important. Therapists should also focus on the positive prayer interactions reported by the couple and build on what is working rather than what is not working (Decker, 2002).
In summary, teaching couples to pray together as a therapeutic intervention requires an assessment of the couple’s initial levels of distress and commitment to the marriage (Decker, 2001; Sullivan & Karney, 2008). Both partners should be provided the informed consent and be fully informed about prayer as a therapeutic technique. After the assessment the therapist and clients should determine if utilizing prayer as an intervention would be suitable, as prayer is not appropriate for every couple (Decker, 2001; Beach et. al., 2008; Sullivan & Karney, 2008). Couples should engage in emotional acceptance of the other partner and full participate in the therapeutic process by jointly changing the level of positive-to-negative interaction. Each partner should take personal responsibility for changing first and trust that the spouse will respond accordingly. Therapists should instruct couples to pray for small, specific, positive things, as well as offering safe touch during prayer together. While this prayer model compliments other therapeutic principles that help change marital satisfaction and increase relational efficacy, prayer, alone, offers couples a renewed sense of intimacy and grace from God (Decker, 2001).

Discussion

In summary, it is this writer’s opinion that there is a multidimensional aspect to this literature review. First, the research supports a positive relationship between marital satisfaction and communication, self-disclosure, trust and commitment. Further, there also appears to be a positive relationship between marital satisfaction and religious beliefs and practices. Finally, the combination of the religious beliefs and practices such as prayer and forgiveness increase communication, trust, self-disclosure, and commitment.

Communication in the form of self-disclosure can lead to increased marital satisfaction (Sokolski & Hendrick, 1999). However, according to Worthington (1999), communication that is self-centered and unloving can hinder connection. The establishment of trust in relationship is a
predictor of increased love and self-disclosure. Trust has been linked to love and marital commitment (Larzelere & Huston, 1980). Therefore, it is this writer’s view that communication through the use of self-disclosure appears to be beneficial to the marriage relationship in that it increases trust. Increased trust further increases self-disclosure and intimacy which in turn solidifies marital commitment. However, self-disclosure needs to be expressed in a loving and relational manner to promote a more trusting and committed relationship.

Through the examination of inward, outward, and upward prayer, it was concluded that inward prayer leads to sadness and grief. Ladd and Spilka (2002) suggest that inward prayer which causes this discomfort leads to upward prayer to God for comfort and forgiveness. The inward prayer in the study referred to ritualistic prayer. In the study by Gruner (1985), the Catholic Church is reported to be affiliated with a more ritualistic approach to God.

Poloma and Pendleton (1989) suggest that the type of prayer, including ritualistic prayer, isn’t as important to life satisfaction as the actual experience of praying. However, a study by Smith (2010) documented that Catholics, as a group, have the lowest divorce rate of seven major religious traditions. This might suggest that more formal and ritualistic prayer may increase marital satisfaction.

Additionally, it is this writer’s opinion that the increase of sadness and grief in inward, ritualistic prayer may not only increase the need for upward comfort and connection to the divine but may also increase the need for human relational comfort, as well, thereby strengthening the marital relationship. For example, sadness of self may lead one to seek out the spouse for comfort through more open communication. This form of self-disclosure may increase trust, intimacy and connection.
The Catholic Church looks at prayer in marriage as a bonding mechanism to repair relationship through forgiveness and gratitude which reflects their use of outward prayer. Furthermore, they see marriage as a sacrament that is broken only in death. It is this writer’s view that seeing marriage as a holy sacrament rather than a contractual bond may be another reason for the low divorce rate in the Catholic community. This perspective is supported by a study by Lambert and Dollahite (2006) which indicates that religious beliefs about the institution of marriage can increase commitment in the relationship.

Unlike the more ritualistic prayers of the Catholic Church, Sects, such as the Assemblies of God, put more emphasis on emotionality and free expression along with extreme emphasis on private prayer and tarrying until God answers the petition (Gruner, 1985). Prayer, therefore, tends to be more frequent, longer and more personal in nature. According to Poloma and Pendleton (1989), while the experience of prayer, itself, leads to more life satisfaction, frequency of prayer does not predict personal happiness. Although this study reflects the connection to personal life satisfaction and experiencing prayer, it does not support the benefit to marital satisfaction and experienced prayer.

Outward prayer focuses on the relational needs of others (Prostrednick, 2007). According to Worthington (1999), prayer increases empathy which is a key component of forgiveness. Forgiveness toward others is a cornerstone of all Christian affiliations (Shwalb, 2006). It appears that when people enter in to outward prayer it increases empathy toward others leading to a more forgiving position. Therefore, it is this writer’s opinion that prayer as it pertains to increased forgiveness and other-centeredness would be beneficial in increasing marital satisfaction and connectedness.
There are commonalities between individual psychology and Christian spirituality. Although secular psychology excludes the supernatural (Daalen, 2012), the Holy Spirit can still be a healing agent through the reflection of common grace through the understanding of truth and the imparting of wisdom and knowledge as well as moral judgment and restraint of harmful activities. Through the first stage of relationship building, the therapist would establish a rapport through mutual respect and trust. Through the second stage of the four stages of Adlerian counseling, Christian spirituality can be used as part of the assessment phase of therapy to determine the level of spirituality the couple would like intergraded into the session. The third stage reveals insight into the client’s private logic including strengths and social interest, as well as mistaken beliefs. Finally, stage four involves the teaching, educating stage which allows the client to create alternative ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving. It is in this fourth stage that the therapist could teach the couple how to pray together to promote relationship building.

The integration of Adlerian concepts in marital therapy within the Christian framework includes a variety of techniques. Early recollections and family constellations (Corey, 2009) could be used as well as increasing communication skills and conflict resolution through teaching listening skills and encouraging marriage conferences and daily appreciation time (Pew, 1989). Dinkmeyer (1984) advocated the use of encouragement in couples work as each spouse focuses on the positive aspects of the relationship. Life tasks can be expanded to include social tasks such as marital selection and love task. Finally, the spiritual task can examine beliefs and assess level of spiritual interventions into therapy including prayer and forgiveness.

Prayer-based interventions can have very positive affects in the marital relationship. Prayer can increase insight, make a positive shift in the clients toward reconciliation, provide an alternative to a time out, and create a more relaxed atmosphere. However, the therapist must be
cautious when introducing prayer in therapy in that there are potential risks. For example, prayer could be used as a manipulative tool to get compliance (Sullivan & Karney, 2008). Further, care must be given so that the use of prayer doesn’t appear judgmental and shaming (Beach, et al. 2008).

The therapist may use an instructional model to integrate prayer into the marital therapy. It is important to assess the couples beliefs, religious activities and interest in the use of incorporating prayer in therapy. Such considerations as time spent in prayer (Worthington, 2008) and types of prayer need to be considered. A prayer model that teaches the couple to offer prayers of thanks, specific, other centered prayer for the spouse, and prayer for self reflection and change may be helpful in building martial satisfaction (Decker, 2002).

Conclusion

In conclusion, Christian marriage has been described as a symbol of God’s covenantal faithfulness to his people (Regnerus, 2009, p. 27). According to Dudley and Kosinski (1990), prayer may help couples to be more loving, forgiving, and respectful (p. 82). Further, prayer increases other-centeredness which aids in conflict resolution. In a study by Lambert and Dollahite (2006) couples reported that prayer was one of the religious practices that helped in resolving marital issues. Prayer was reported to decrease marital conflict and improved communication. The study also revealed that their religious beliefs increased their commitment to relationship permanence and forgiveness. Finally, the authors have claimed that religious beliefs influence religious practices, which influence communication, commitment to permanence, and forgiveness (pp. 443-446).

There is a natural interweave between Individual psychology and Christian counseling in working with couples. These commonalities allow the therapist to take into consideration the
clients’ beliefs and values as they relate to the marriage relationship. Prayer, when culturally appropriate, can be effective in increasing positive interactions. Ethical considerations need to be addressed to include couple readiness and level of spirituality.

Although the findings of this paper conclude that marital satisfaction is enhanced through such religious practices as prayer and forgiveness, further study needs to be done. Such questions remain concerning the connection between religious practices and the increase of communication and self-disclosure in marital satisfaction. Types of self-disclosure and methods of communication while self-disclosing would be helpful to the mental health community in assisting how couples build trust and intimacy. Further, questions remain unanswered around couples who differ in their spiritual beliefs as to the impact of personal prayer of the believing spouse on the relationship.

There are several limitations to this literature review. The restriction of references through the Adler Graduate School’s electronic database has resulted in limitations in collecting data for this project. Further, the writer’s Christian bias may influence the direction of the study. Finally, only fifteen of the fifty-two references are reported as research studies.
References


DEAR LORD,

We come to you because you love us. We know you care deeply about the two of us and our relationship to each other. We look to you for a perspective that can let us see with new eyes and hear with new ears. We understand that if we see each other from your perspective we will make better choices and cement our relationship to a foundation that will not be shaken. We know that you are the rightful ruler of life and we pledge to treat each other with love in accordance with your will and your example.

When opportunities arise for us to express our love for each other we will be ready to make that opportunity a reality, not a missed chance. We will set our intentions so that we identify ahead of time the different ways we can be the vehicle of your love. We will practice your deep acceptance and perfect it in our actions toward each other.

We will engage in prayer for each other on a regular basis and each will ask for good things for the other. We will also ask for the strength, patience, forgiveness, and love we need to be good to each other—now and in the long run.

We know we are not perfect. Our flaws are often all too painfully clear. Help us forgive and be forgiven. We know there is no power greater than the power of repentance followed by forgiveness.

We will seek your strength as a shield against temptations large and small. We ask you to protect and watch over the trust in our relationship so that it can grow as we work to support and sustain each other.
When difficult times come, please help us listen and support each other. With your help we can be delivered from impulses that might lead us to harm. Help us reach out and touch each other in love—never in anger.

We know it is in your power to make each of us a source of your love. We know that you can help us show love more fully than we have before.

Let our marriage be a testament to your love and power to transform the world. Forever.

AMEN