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Applying Grace to Increase Positive Mental Health for Young Adults

by Megan Gale

Many young adults may use a variety of resources to help them heal from mental illness. Such resources may include therapy, medication, lifestyle coaching, and religion. Simple actions and simple beliefs may make a big difference in how they feel about and heal from mental illness.

Can simple religious beliefs help relieve some of the mental health challenges that young adults experience? A recent study conducted at Brigham Young University (BYU) found that young adults' belief in grace impacts their mental health more than they may realize.¹

Grace is a religious belief held by those of many faiths: Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and others. For many different religions, grace is a benevolent or divine influence acting upon individuals to give "spiritual enrichment or purity, to inspire virtue, or to give strength to endure trial and resist temptation." Christians specifically believe grace is a direct gift from God given through Jesus Christ that is "bestowed freely and without regard to merit ... which manifests in the giving of blessings and granting of salvation."

The opposite of grace may be viewed as legalism. Legalism is a "strict, literal, or excessive conformity to the law or to a religious or moral code." When someone believes in legalism, they may place their good works above the grace that is provided by God or divine influence.¹ While many religious faiths require good works and grace for salvation, religions often have their own interpretations of this principle.

Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints believe that grace refers "to the divine help and strength [they] receive through the Atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ." They oftentimes think of the scripture recorded in *The Book of Mormon* taught by an ancient prophet:

"For we know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do."

To accomplish 'all we can do,' young adults in the Church may feel like they are constantly trying to accomplish that mandate by doing good works: doing their best to work hard in their employment, staying on top of their educational goals, keeping their social life alive, and being active in clubs or extracurricular activities. Indeed, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, like many other religions, strive to attend to many religious duties: attending church, teaching the gospel, fulfilling responsibilities, and serving others.

Grace Impacts Mental Health

The religious scholars—who conducted the study at BYU—found that religious young adults experience better or poorer mental health as it connects to their belief in grace or in legalism. They surveyed 566 young adults at BYU (most of whom are members of the Church of Jesus Christ) and found that when these young adults believe more in grace and less in legalism, they experience less anxiety, depression, shame, religious guilt, and perfectionism. They also found the opposite: When young adults have a more legalistic view of God, they experience poorer mental health "because it interrupts [their] ability to experience grace."

It may be detrimental to young adults' mental health if their belief in grace is more founded upon individual good works (or legalism) than on grace they receive from God.

Believe in Grace

These new findings suggest some religious young adults may not properly separate grace from legalism or the phrase "after all we can do."

Young adults may feel that they are to do all that they can in order for God's grace to be implemented in their lives. However, they may be too

focused on doing good things to be saved, instead of Jesus Christ who gives them strength through His grace. [Brad Wilcox](#), a religious professor at BYU taught, "Jesus doesn't make up the difference. Jesus makes all the difference. Grace is not about filling gaps. It is about filling us."

To further explain the importance of grace, [Elder M. Russell Ballard](#), a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in the Church of Jesus Christ, taught, "No matter how hard we work, no matter how much we obey, no matter how many good things we do in this life, it would not be enough were it not for Jesus Christ and His loving grace. On our own we cannot earn the kingdom of God, no matter what we do. Unfortunately, there are some within the Church who have become so preoccupied with performing good works that they forget that those works—as good as they may be—are hollow unless they are accompanied by a complete dependence on Christ."

Young adults from many different religious traditions may believe that grace is able to give them hope. They may believe that grace is sufficient to save them. They may believe that grace helps them accomplish all the good works required of them, but it appears to also play a crucial role in their mental health since beliefs influence how young adults feel mentally.

There is hope for mental health healing by believing in grace. In fact, young adults don't have to experience so much anxiety, depression, shame, religious guilt, and perfectionism when they strive to believe in grace.

And, they may help others believe in grace. They may be a teacher, friend, or mentor to help those around them experience better mental health as they strengthen their belief in the grace that comes from God.

Study conducted by Daniel K. Judd, W. Justin Dyer, and Justin B. Top, appeared in Psychology of Religion and Spirituality, June 2018.