



2019

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Recommended Citation

Christensen, Madeline R. (2019) "Scrupulosity and Latter-day Saints: The Potential Benefits of Tolerating Uncertainty," *Intuition: The BYU Undergraduate Journal of Psychology*. Vol. 14 : Iss. 2 , Article 4.
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/intuition/vol14/iss2/4>

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Scrupulosity and Latter-day Saints: The Potential Benefits of Tolerating Uncertainty

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Abstract

Many religious individuals, including members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS individuals), suffer from a manifestation of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) known as scrupulosity. Scrupulosity is characterized by a cycle of anxiety-producing fear of sinful or immoral behavior and compulsive attempts to soothe that anxiety through religious means. While several therapeutic methods have proven effective for various dimensions of OCD, treatment of individuals with scrupulosity has been less successful. Increasing amounts of research indicate that an intolerance of uncertainty (IU) may play an important role in many psychological disorders, including OCD and, potentially, scrupulosity. IU may be especially problematic for religious individuals, because religion deals heavily with matters of faith that typically cannot be ascertained in ways that many secular phenomena or theories can. Individual IU regarding topics of morality, salvation, and perfection could motivate some religious individuals to develop specific beliefs or maladaptive ways of thinking and living that might lead them to experience scrupulosity. Additional research should further examine the relationship between IU and scrupulosity to help develop more successful methods of treatment for individuals struggling with scrupulosity.

Keywords: scrupulosity, maladaptive religiosity, intolerance of uncertainty, Latter-day Saints, obsessive-compulsive disorder, intrusive thoughts, grace

Henry sits in a pew, quietly watching members of his congregation file in for today's religious service. A woman who Henry does not recognize enters and walks by. He notices that her shirt is low cut, and his gaze unconsciously wanders from her face down to her chest. After a fraction of a second, Henry catches himself and jerks his eyes away, feeling anxious and embarrassed. *Why do I let my eyes wander? How sick and perverted.* During the entire sermon, he finds it hard to focus; he feels ashamed and, quite frankly, disgusted with himself. He assumes that God must be disgusted with him, too. Lost in his spinning thoughts, he hardly notices when the sermon comes to an end. Standing up, he moves toward the back of the room, staying as far away from the woman as he can. As he passes familiar faces, he feels as if they can perceive his filth. He guiltily avoids making eye contact and exits the building. Immediately after arriving at home, he kneels down and pleads with God to forgive him. He expects to feel better, but no relief comes. After passing the day in torment, he goes to bed, hoping to sleep his worries off. But things only get worse as he continues to ruminate. Doom settles in his chest as he forces thoughts from similar circumstances away. *I'm a pig. God must be so disappointed in me.* He resolves to go see his pastor—even though he had met with him only a few weeks before—and tell him everything, hoping that this might finally help him heal.

Faith-based mental anguish is very common (Antony, Downie, & Swinson, 1998). For many people, spirituality is an essential part of life; it can influence personal identity and well-being in diverse ways, as well as introduce unique difficulties. Psychologists, recognizing this, have come to regard individual religiosity and spirituality as increasingly important consideration when treating patients (Masters, 2010). As research examining the relationship between mental health and religion has increased, controversy has surfaced over whether religion is harmful or helpful to mental health. Recent studies, such as one done by Allen and Wang (2014), have found religious devotion to be positively correlated with good mental health and stability. However, despite the positive effects religious involvement can have on well-being, some religious individuals still experience

poor mental health. One mental disorder that may be found among religious individuals is obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD).

OCD is a disorder characterized by a constant interplay between persistent, intrusive thoughts or urges (obsessions) that evoke anxiety and consequent behaviors (compulsions) meant to neutralize or soothe that anxiety (McIngvale, Rufino, Ehlers, & Hart, 2017; Siev, Huppert, & Zuckerman, 2017; Summers & Sinnott-Armstrong, 2015). Among religious individuals, OCD often takes the form of scrupulosity, a manifestation of the disorder in which obsessions and compulsions are centered on religious or moral themes (Allen, Wang, & Stokes, 2015; Summers & Sinnott-Armstrong, 2015). Religiously scrupulous individuals often experience inordinate concern with sin and constant fear that their thoughts or actions are in violation of moral or religious laws (Abramowitz & Jacoby, 2014, Buchholz et al., 2019; McIngvale et al., 2017). Religious obsessions differ among individuals but may include any of the following: intrusive blasphemous images and thoughts, fear of potential sin or moral transgression, fear of making mistakes while performing religious customs, worries about falling short or not being faithful, and excessive concern with being punished by God (Buchholz et al., 2019; McIngvale et al., 2017). Common compulsions include rumination, unnecessary or repeated confession, seeking validation and reassurance from religious leaders, and excessive prayer (Buchholz et al., 2019; McIngvale et al., 2017; Siev et al., 2017; Summers & Sinnott-Armstrong, 2015). Thus, scrupulosity can become an all-consuming nuisance in the life of religious individuals, stripping religious worship of the peace and spiritual growth it is meant to provide and transforming it into an anxiety-producing burden.

Although many dimensions of OCD have been studied extensively and resulting methods of treatment have proven effective for helping suffering clients (Siev et al., 2017), scrupulosity has proven to be a more challenging and less understood manifestation of OCD, about which much remains to be learned (Abramowitz & Jacoby, 2014; Buchholz et al., 2019). Consequently, treatment of scrupulosity has shown to be relatively less successful compared to treatment of other forms of OCD (Huppert & Siev, 2010). This is problematic, because

scrupulosity is estimated to affect over one-fourth of all individuals diagnosed with OCD (Antony et al., 1998). To address this disparity, researchers have begun to examine scrupulosity more closely (Fergus & Rowatt, 2015; Grayson, 2010; Summers & Sinnott-Armstrong, 2015). A central feature of OCD and, consequently, scrupulosity, is the experience of chronic doubt and difficulty tolerating uncertainty (Grayson, 2010; Summers & Sinnott-Armstrong, 2015).

Researchers have identified two types of uncertainty that may play important roles in an individual's psychological functioning: informational uncertainty and personal uncertainty. Informational uncertainty is the state of not having enough information to be sure about a conclusion or judgment, and personal uncertainty is characterized by internal feelings of doubt about oneself or one's relationship to or standing in the world (Fergus & Rowatt, 2014; Van den Bos, 2009). These types of uncertainty are pervasive and can inevitably be found in nearly every facet and stage of life. Most people are accustomed to uncertainty, and may use a variety of sources to ignore, reduce, or eliminate it, so that they can continue on with their lives. However, for some people, tolerating uncertainty may seem impossible, and can have crippling effects (Grayson, 2010). Researchers have identified such people as having an intolerance of uncertainty (IU); Grayson (2010) postulated that this intolerance lies at the heart of many mental disorders, especially OCD. Understanding IU as it affects those with scrupulosity may be beneficial and provide insight about what can be done to better help suffering individuals.

Scrupulosity is an understudied form of OCD that plagues many religiously devout people. One religion whose members may suffer from scrupulosity is the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. While Latter-day Saint doctrines can provide comfort concerning struggles and salvation to its members, religious beliefs typically involve faith on the part of the individual and often cannot be proven beyond doubt. Those who find uncertainty and ambiguity hard to bear may consequently experience problems. Accordingly, Abramowitz and Jacoby (2014) have observed a relationship between IU and scrupulosity, supporting the idea that individuals who are not willing to tolerate uncertainty, especially concerning religious

matters, may develop an obsessional fear of sin that affects their way of thinking and their behavior in harmful ways. Thus, although humans tend to crave and seek certainty in most aspects of their lives, devout members of the Latter-day Saint faith who struggle with scrupulosity should focus on learning to tolerate uncertainty instead of striving to avoid it. This approach of toleration will likely reduce the cognitive appraisal of intrusive thoughts, promote an adaptive focus on perfection, and strengthen faith in grace, thereby reducing scrupulosity.

Reducing the Cognitive Appraisal of Intrusive Thoughts

The presence of intrusive thoughts in individuals suffering from scrupulosity is a significant factor that has led researchers and psychologists to classify scrupulosity as a form of OCD. Intrusive thoughts are repeated, unwanted, and often disturbing thoughts or mental images that can cause distress in the person experiencing them (Summers & Sinnott-Armstrong, 2015). Having such thoughts on occasion is common even for those without significant mental disorder, and most people assign such thoughts little importance; this disregard on the part of the individual allows the thought to leave as easily as it came. However, Abramowitz and Jacoby (2014) explained that some people may amplify the significance of thoughts and allow themselves to be greatly perturbed and lost in rumination about the thought's potential meanings. This amplification is what ultimately turns a common thought into an obsession. The individual may feel extreme distress each time the threatening thought arrives and may go to great lengths to eradicate it and avoid situations that may trigger its return (Siev et al., 2017). This behavior often provides relief temporarily, but ultimately tends to promote re-emergence of the thought in the near future, reinforcing a vicious cycle of compulsive behavior (Abramowitz & Jacoby, 2014). Intrusive thoughts can have a variety of themes, but for a person who struggles with scrupulosity, they are often violent, sexual, or blasphemous in nature (McIngvale et al., 2017). Thus, the disturbing effects of intrusive thoughts may be worse in individuals who struggle with the religious manifestation of OCD (scrupulosity), because the contents of those

thoughts may likely be considered blasphemous and overtly contrary to the individual's religious beliefs.

Latter-day Saint doctrines place great emphasis on thoughts; this is evidenced in both the words Jesus shared in his Sermon on the Mount and a well-known verse of modern Latter-day Saint scripture. In the sermon, Jesus takes the familiar commandment "thou shalt not commit adultery" a step further by teaching the people that they should not even look upon or lust for others, because, if they do, they have "committed adultery . . . already in [their hearts]" (Matthew 5: 27-28, King James Version). Furthermore, another verse of modern Latter-day Saint scripture known well by members is "let virtue garnish thy thoughts unceasingly; then shall thy confidence wax strong in the presence of God" (Doctrine & Covenants 121:45). Individual interpretations of these scriptures could affect the way members of the Latter-day Saint church understand their thoughts.

Scrupulous individuals tend to interpret intrusive thoughts in at least two problematic ways. Summers and Sinnott-Armstrong (2015) labeled these as (1) moral thought-action fusion (MTAF) and (2) likelihood thought-action fusion (LTAF). MTAF is characterized by the person worrying or assuming that their thoughts are truthful clues about their actual desires and character, even if those thoughts were unintentional; a scrupulous person engaged in MTAF is likely to believe that thinking something inappropriate is the equivalent of actually doing something wrong (Summers & Sinnott-Armstrong, 2015). In other words, they may unconsciously adopt the mentality that what they think determines who they are. Individuals who naturally use LTAF are typically overly concerned that the occurrence of certain thoughts may increase the likelihood that a related outcome will transpire in real life (Summers & Sinnott-Armstrong, 2015). Latter-day Saints who place great importance on controlling their thoughts and who engage in MTAF or LTAF could cause unnecessary distress for themselves by exaggerating the effects that experiencing impure thoughts can have in their lives.

Despite the overly rigid ways that some individuals interpret intrusive concerns, thoughts are often inherently ambiguous. It is difficult to be certain about whether or not the intrusive thoughts do

count as sinful, speak to a person's nature or character, or increase the likelihood of an undesired or repulsive outcome. Uncertainty also exists concerning the extent to which one should be able to exercise control over their thoughts. Belief in a great ability or necessity to control the frequency and content of thoughts could take a chance occurrence and turn it into the sole responsibility of the thinker. In their cognitive-behavioral model of scrupulosity, Abramowitz and Jacoby (2014) suggested that individuals who were unable to tolerate this uncertainty and who engaged in either form of thought-action fusion were more likely to develop obsessional fears of sin and God. Consequently, such individuals may engage in unceasing, internal evaluation and relentlessly seek out evidence or assurance with the goal to prove that their worst fears are ungrounded and incorrect, or, wishing to escape discomfort, they may accept their thoughts as accurate portrayals of reality and carry out compulsions aimed at soothing their anxiety (see Figure 1). Because absolute proof regarding thoughts is largely unattainable, it may be healthier for individuals with scrupulosity to understand and accept the natural ambiguity of their thoughts and the disconnect that often exists between thought and reality.

Promoting an Adaptive Focus on Perfection

A scripture well known and often discussed by Latter-day Saint church members is the New Testament verse teaching, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:48, King James Version). This command given by Jesus encourages an exceptionally high moral standard of conduct. Many Latter-day Saints have wondered what this command means for their lives when individual perfection seems all but impossible.

Perfectionism can be defined as holding unrealistically high standards for oneself and engaging in hypercritical self-evaluations when those standards are not met (Curran & Hill, 2019). As research on perfectionism has increased, controversy has arisen over whether perfectionism is always harmful or whether it can be healthy; consequently, researchers have found many ways to conceptualize perfectionism. Some, assuming perfectionism to be maladaptive in

every case, have divided the psychological construct into self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially-prescribed categories—the difference between these categories being the orientation and directionality of the perfectionistic expectations (Curran & Hill, 2019). Other researchers have argued that perfectionism is not always harmful and have made a distinction between adaptive and maladaptive perfectionists. According to Rice and Ashby (2007), for example, both of these groups have reported having higher personal standards than those of non-perfectionists, but they have differed from one another in the way they view their mistakes and how they allow those mistakes to affect their sense of self-worth. Typically, maladaptive perfectionists are overly concerned with falling short and experience self-loathing and intense feelings of inadequacy when they do. These differences suggest that high standards are not the issue when examining the effect of perfectionism on mental health and well-being. On the contrary, it appears to be how an individual reacts to the possibility of falling short (or perceives the discrepancy between their behaviors and their standards) that makes the difference.

Researchers have only recently begun to study perfectionism in the context of religion, and, to date, a relatively meager amount of research exists examining the relationship between perfectionism and its psychological outcomes among Latter-day Saints. In Allen and Wang's (2014) study, adaptive perfectionists reported higher levels of self-esteem and satisfaction with life than non-perfectionists. In the same study, maladaptive perfectionists reported significantly less satisfaction with life, more anxiety and depression, and lower self-esteem. Additionally, a positive relationship was found between maladaptive perfectionism and scrupulosity (Allen & Wang, 2014). These findings may suggest that being overly concerned with perfection and allowing oneself to feel worthless and inadequate when one's standards are not met could lead to an obsessional fear of sin.

An inability to tolerate uncertainty may exacerbate maladaptive tendencies of perfectionism, which have been associated with scrupulosity. Although empirical research has not yet been done on the relationship between IU and perfectionism, Crosby, Bates, and

Twohig (2011) studied the effects of psychological inflexibility (a related construct) on perfectionism. They described psychological inflexibility as a rigid, unwilling, and unforgiving way of responding to difficult or undesired experiences; uncertainty could therefore be considered an undesirable state for many people, and intolerance may be classified as a rigid and unwilling response to uncertainty (Crosby et al., 2011). Other researchers have asserted that psychological inflexibility, such as IU, plays a central role in many negative mental health outcomes, including depression, anxiety, phobias, and poor physical health (Hayes, Luoma, Bond, Masuda, & Lillis, 2016). Crosby et al. (2011) further showed that psychological inflexibility mediated the relationship between extrinsic religiosity and maladaptive perfectionism. While recognizing that psychological inflexibility and IU are slightly different constructs, IU could be considered a type of psychological inflexibility and may provide useful insight. An inability to tolerate uncertainty may be what leads some religious individuals to adopt “all-or-nothing” attitudes regarding their adherence to religious standards, which attitudes may then put increased pressure on being perfect. Those who put increased pressure on being perfect may then catastrophize the possible effects or consequences of falling short and become preoccupied with their potential sinfulness and overall standing before God.

Strengthening Faith in Grace

Like many Christian denominations, the Latter-day Saint church teaches that salvation is only possible through the Atonement of Jesus Christ and through His divine grace. Judd, Dyer, and Top (2018) have defined grace as an enabling power, mediated through Jesus Christ, which aids and strengthens those striving for righteousness and eternal salvation. Bassett (2013) added that grace is an individual’s ability to recognize and feel that even though they have sinned, God’s love for them endures. Grace is a curious phenomenon because, although it seems to have a profound impact in the lives of countless people, it remains largely unstudied empirically. However, initial studies on the relationship between grace and psychological well-being have been instructive (Allen et al., 2015; Bassett, 2013; Edgington, 2004; Judd et

al., 2018). Research has shown that individuals who experience divine grace will likely report less depression and more self-compassion (Bassett, 2013; Watson, Chen, & Sisemore, 2011). Judd et al. (2018) also reported that an individual's ability to experience grace is associated with lower measures of shame, perfectionism, and scrupulosity. If the salvific benefits that grace provides were not enough, these findings suggest that grace may also be valuable to the mental and emotional health of the individual.

Despite its benefits, individual acceptance of divine grace is not without its fair share of challenges. Grace can be further described in the words of another well-known Latter-day Saint scripture: "believe in Christ, and . . . be reconciled to God; for we know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do" (2 Nephi 25:23, Book of Mormon). This verse could be somewhat puzzling to people of the Latter-day Saint faith, because, while it clarifies that it is the grace of God, not individual merit, that does the saving, the qualifying words *after all we can do* hint that works are still important given that, to some degree, they are prerequisite to receiving grace. Additionally, because the power of grace is primarily felt and not seen, members of the church must trust that they will receive it if they are striving to do their part. The often-confusing interplay between grace and works and the individual responsibility to have faith in an intangible, conditional power could be spiritually or emotionally problematic for many religious individuals.

Accepting the role of grace in one's life could be especially hard for people who find themselves unable to tolerate uncertainty. They may wonder exactly how much they must do on their own in order for grace to take effect. They might question how much lies within their responsibility and how much they can metaphorically give to God. They may be concerned with unintentionally relying too much on God, becoming negligent and disqualifying themselves for grace. The uncertainty surrounding the balance between grace and works could be problematic. Individuals may consequently perceive grace as risky and unreliable and seek what appears to be a safer path to salvation: individual perfection. This idea is somewhat related to legalism, which is characterized by excessive concern with strict,

literal adherence to religious or moral code (Judd et al., 2018). An individual with legalistic views may also believe that they must earn God's love and approval (Bassett, 2013). In other words, an individual who adopts legalism transfers the saving responsibility from God to themselves. Allen et al. (2015), for example, found a positive linear relationship between legalism and scrupulosity and postulated that being overly concerned with earning love and acceptance from God through strict obedience can lead to extreme fear of potential sin. Judd et al. (2018) also studied the relationship between legalism and scrupulosity and made note of an interesting 3-step relationship: As measures of individual belief in legalism increased, reported experience of grace decreased. Subsequently, as reported experience of grace decreased, levels of scrupulosity increased. Believing that one is solely responsible for one's own salvation may put considerable pressure on the individual to completely eradicate sin from their life.

For Latter-day Saints, it may be an inability to tolerate uncertainty that causes some to turn to legalism instead of embracing the doctrine of grace or even permitting themselves the experience of grace. Latter-day Saint teachings encourage members to strive for a high standard of personal righteousness while also humbly recognizing that, ultimately, they cannot be saved solely through their own efforts and must rely on the grace of God (Judd et al., 2018). The necessity of both personal righteousness and grace could be confusing for many Latter-day Saints, leaving them uncertain about how to go about striving for salvation. Abramowitz and Jacoby (2014) asserted that many religious individuals may be especially resilient in the face of doubt and uncertainty because of their dedication to faith or their willingness to trust instead of requiring absolute truth. For Latter-day Saints, this may look like an individual having faith that the power of the grace of God can help them be better and obtain salvation, even when their works have fallen short or they have sinned. However, Abramowitz and Jacoby (2014) also noted that if the individual is unable to tolerate the uncertainty that can present itself when grace is in play, they may desire absolute truth and turn instead to legalism. Essentially, the individual's inability to tolerate the conundrum of doctrine and the perceived uncertainty of grace could motivate them

to trust more in legalism and overemphasize the importance of their own works and conduct in their journey to salvation. Thus, increasing an individual's ability to tolerate uncertainty may help them to more willingly have faith in and rely on the power of grace.

Conclusion

An individual who is unable to tolerate uncertainty may encounter a host of problems in making coherent sense of their religious experiences and commitments. They may question the significance and importance of their thoughts or deliberate internally about their relationship with God, a being whom they cannot see (Fergus & Rowatt, 2014). Being unsure about the importance of thoughts could also lead them to strive to perfect their thoughts so that, whether or not the thoughts have meaning or implications in their life, they will not be at fault. Many, uncertain about their standing with God, may resolve to be perfect so that, whether or not God is a punitive or merciful being, they have no reason to be punished (Crosby et al., 2011). Others may have difficulty understanding the balance between grace and works. Unable to deal with the uncertainty that arises when trying to balance qualifying for God's grace while simultaneously relying on grace to save them, some individuals may take their salvation into their own hands, adopting legalistic attitudes and leaving God behind (Allen et al., 2015; Bassett, 2013; Edgington, 2004; Judd et al., 2018). These attitudes would likely heighten the perceived necessity of total, unflinching perfection on the part of the individual and could lead to an excessive concern with sin (Abramowitz & Jacoby, 2014; Summers & Sinnott-Armstrong, 2015). Reflecting on Henry's experience with obsessional worries about his sins, one might now be able to understand why he reacted the way he did to what may have seemed like a normal human occurrence.

Helping individuals with scrupulosity improve their ability to tolerate uncertainty instead of avoiding it may have a profound effect in their lives, creating a more peaceful, faith-building, and growth-promoting religious experience. Although it may, at first, seem undesirable, uncertainty can be beneficial and does not have to be viewed negatively. Individuals who are able to recognize the inherent

ambiguity of their thoughts will likely be more capable of coping with undesired (but normal) intrusive thoughts and continue on with their lives (Abramowitz & Jacoby, 2014). Additionally, accepting the possibility of personal error will presumably lead them to be more understanding of their imperfections while retaining their moral and religious ideals (Allen & Wang, 2014; Edgington, 2004). And finally, understanding the inability to obtain absolute proof concerning matters of faith, namely the nature of God and one's progress on the path to salvation, may compel individuals to trust in God and more confidently rely on grace (Fergus & Rowatt, 2014; Van den Bos, 2009). Thus, individuals who learn to tolerate uncertainty may thereby overcome their struggles with scrupulosity, becoming free, as most religious people are, to reap the benefits of a positive religious experience.

Much remains to be discovered about scrupulosity. Existing studies on scrupulosity are not without limitations. Most studies done among Latter-day Saints had restricted age ranges (Allen & Wang, 2014; Allen et al., 2015; Judd et al., 2018). The reported mean ages of participants in these studies were typically in the mid-20s. Thus, results may have been influenced by factors specific to this age group and may not be generalizable to all Latter-day Saints. Additionally, many of the studies were cross-sectional; thus, causal relationships cannot be inferred (Allen et al., 2015; Buchholz et al., 2019; Judd et al., 2018). Finally, the results of many of the studies mentioned were based on self-report measures, which, while informative, are subject to biases such as social desirability (Allen & Wang, 2014; Buchholz et al., 2019). Future studies could benefit from including older age ranges, being experimental in nature, or utilizing other modes of measurement.

Treating individuals who suffer from this religious dimension of OCD may be especially difficult for a variety of reasons. Clinicians may have difficulty differentiating between the compulsive behaviors associated with scrupulosity and normal religious behavior (Summers & Sinnott-Armstrong, 2015). Additionally, Abramowitz and Jacoby (2014) noted that religious behaviors (some of which may be compulsive or maladaptive) are often integral in the lives of

religious individuals and cannot be completely discontinued in the way that behaviors associated with other types of OCD often can. Consequently, continued participation in some religious activities may unintentionally reinforce the destructive cycle of thinking and behaving that is common to those with OCD (Abramowitz & Jacoby, 2014). Thus, treatment of individuals with religious OCD (scrupulosity) may need to be distinct from customary treatments of OCD, requiring further research. Additional research could lead to more effective methods of treating Latter-day Saints with scrupulosity and help transform their religious experience from a source of anguish to a source of strength and enrichment.

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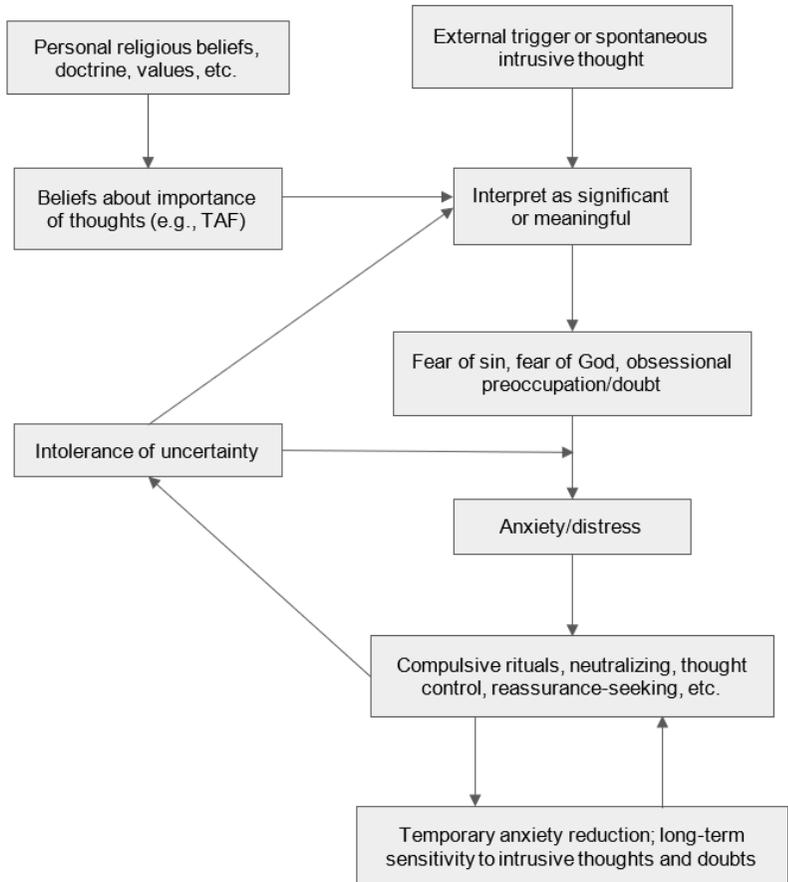
Appendix

Figure 1. A cognitive-behavioral model of scrupulosity. A conceptualization of the interaction between personal beliefs about religiosity, beliefs about the importance of thoughts, and intolerance of uncertainty. Adapted from “Scrupulosity: A cognitive-behavioral analysis and implications for treatment,” by J. Abramowitz and R. Jacoby, 2014, *Journal of Obsessive-Compulsive and Related Disorders*, p. 143.