

## **Religious, spiritual practices and its association with mental health in middle-aged schoolteachers in Colombo, Sri Lanka**

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Mental health disorders are rising globally and in Sri Lanka, with depression peaking between ages 55 and 74 years. Schoolteachers face unique professional and socioeconomic stressors including heavy workload, classroom management and pressure to meet standards, making their mental health crucial. Religious and spiritual practices have long served as coping mechanisms in Sri Lanka. Exploring their role in teachers' mental health could inform interventions and policies, strengthening the educational workforce. An analytical cross-sectional study was conducted among 121 randomly selected schoolteachers using a two-stage cluster sampling technique where schoolteachers aged 45-60 years were included from three randomly selected national schools and one AB Provincial school in Colombo educational zone. A self-administered questionnaire was used to collect sociodemographic data and information on religious and spiritual practices. A composite religiosity, spirituality score was calculated based on responses. Mental health status was assessed using the validated General Health Questionnaire-30 (GHQ-30). GHQ-30 scores were categorized into high and low levels of psychological distress using a cutoff value validated for the Sri Lankan population in a previous study. As the composite religiosity, spirituality score demonstrated an approximately normal distribution, an independent samples t-test was used to compare mean scores between participants with high vs. low psychological distress. Additionally, a chi-squared test was performed to assess the association between categorized religiosity, spirituality level (dichotomized around the mean) and GHQ-30 category. Each individual's religious or spiritual practice assessed in the questionnaire was also dichotomized into high and low levels, and their associations with psychological distress categories were examined using chi-squared tests. All 121 selected teachers responded (response rate: 100%). The majority were female (n = 97; 80.2%) and Buddhist (n = 116; 95.9%). Among Buddhists, common practices included daily offering of flowers to the Buddha (n = 80; 69.0%) and monthly temple visits (n = 71; 61.2%). Psychological distress (GHQ-30) was present in 23 participants (19.0%). No statistically significant associations were found between religious or spiritual practices and psychological distress ( $p > 0.05$ ). Differences in religious, spiritual practices showed no significant association on teachers' mental health. The high psychological distress among middle-aged schoolteachers calls for evidence-based interventions to reduce stress and promote well-being in the educational sector, beyond reliance on informal or traditional coping mechanisms.

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