

# The relationship between moral disengagement and spiritual well-being in the students of Tehran universities with the mediating role of positive and negative affects

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## Abstract

**Background:** Spiritual well-being is the fundamental dimension of health that integrates the other dimensions (physical, emotional, social, spiritual, and intellectual) and is dynamically reflected in four domains of self, others, environment, and a superior being. The present study aimed to investigate the mediating role of positive and negative affects in the relationships of moral disengagement and spiritual well-being in university students in Tehran.

**Methods:** The statistical population of this descriptive correlational study comprised all students of universities in Tehran in the academic year 2020-2021. A sample of 301 students (199 females and 102 males) was selected via convenience sampling. The research instruments included the Spiritual Well Being Scale (SWBS), the Moral Disengagement Questionnaire, and the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS). Data were analyzed by the Pearson correlation method and path analysis.

**Results:** There was a significant correlation between the components of moral disengagement, positive and negative affects, and the components of spiritual well-being ( $P < 0.001$ ). The findings revealed that the path between negative affects and spiritual well-being was significant and negative, and that between positive affects and spiritual well-being was significant and positive ( $P < 0.001$ ). The total path coefficient between moral disengagement and spiritual well-being was significant and negative, and the indirect path coefficient between moral disengagement and spiritual well-being was significant and negative ( $P < 0.001$ ). Positive and negative affects, therefore, significantly and negatively mediate the relationship between moral disengagement and spiritual well-being ( $P < 0.001$ ).

**Conclusion:** According to the results, spiritual well-being can thus be promoted through training to prevent moral disengagement both directly and as mediated by positive and negative affects.

**Keywords:** Affect; Health; Morals; Spirituality; Students.

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## Introduction

Spirituality and spiritual growth have gained momentum in the past decades among psychologists and mental health specialists. The progress of psychology on the one hand, and the dynamic and complex nature of modern

societies on the other have highlighted the significance of spiritual in contrast to material needs (1).

According to well-grounded theories of spiritual well-being, this concept is not limited to spiritual and religious behaviors

and expectations; rather, according to approaches influenced by folk beliefs, this phenomenon also involves a degree of hope in intra- and interpersonal relationships, as well as the relationship with nature and God (1). Following the World Health Organization (WHO) definition of four dimensions (biological, psychosocial, social, and spiritual) for health, therapies have attempted to pay attention to all these dimensions. Spiritual well-being is the fundamental dimension of health that integrates the other dimensions (physical, emotional, social, spiritual, and intellectual) and is dynamically reflected in four domains of self, others, environment, and a superior being. Today, individuals and communities are going through moral and identity crises due to the increasing pressure of evolutions and transformations (3). In this era, spirituality can confer major advantages for the promotion of meaning formation and social integrity (4). Spirituality is a way of being and experiencing that is formed when people become aware of a non-material dimension. It specifies distinguishable values about oneself, others, nature, life, and anything deemed ultimate (5).

Religious well-being expresses one's relationship with superior power, i.e., God. Existential well-being is a psychosocial element expressing people's feelings about who they are, what they do, why they do it, and where they belong. Spiritual well-being is a state of health that expresses people's positive feelings, behaviors, and cognition of their relationships with themselves, others, nature, and a superior being. It creates integrity and is characterized by stability, peace, harmony, and closeness to oneself, God, society, and the environment. When spiritual well-being is threatened, mental disorders such as a sense of loneliness, depression, and loss of meaning may arise, thereby complicating people's adjustment to life, and especially to the concept of eternal life (6). Spiritual experiences are shown to promote physical and mental health. Spiritual well-being is

also significantly correlated with emotional well-being, life satisfaction, self-esteem, and depression. Students with spiritual well-being follow a healthier lifestyle, are more hopeful, have better mental stability, are satisfied with their lives (7).

As a construct that can influence spiritual well-being, moral disengagement relies on eight cognitive mechanisms that allow people to engage in behaviors that run counter to moral principles. In other words, if people are morally disengaged, they will more easily engage in immoral behaviors (8). Moral disengagement is realized through reconstruction and rationalization of actions (e.g., justification of behaviors as socially acceptable and contrasting them with more damaging behaviors), lack of responsibility for one's actions (e.g., attributing inappropriate actions to other people or causes), and re-framing (e.g., distorting the outcomes through misrepresentation, victim shaming or dehumanizing) (9). As a risk factor of antisocial behavior, moral disengagement is associated with aggression and can predict negative attitudes and behaviors, e.g., bullying, online blackmailing, and immoral attitudes and decisions. This construct is also reported to mediate the incidence of problematic behaviors (10). Ethical disengagement aims to regulate functions and allow students to engage in immoral behaviors, while also managing the ensuing negative emotions (11). According to Qudsyi et al. (12), moral disengagement predicts students' spiritual well-being and is significantly correlated with the pre-disposition to marital infidelity, narcissism, and Machiavellism. Students who are morally disengaged also have trouble recalling social conventions.

Positive and negative affects can mediate spiritual well-being. In different settings, behaviors are influenced by numerous situational, perceptual, and emotional phenomena. As part of our everyday lives, different emotions affect students differently and may facilitate or inhibit

certain cognitive and behavioral functions. Positive affects are part of the facilitatory behavioral system that directs the organism towards enjoyable stimulants, while negative affects are part of the inhibitory system that aims to inhibit behaviors that may lead to unpleasant consequences (13). Students with positive affects tend to seek pleasure, reward, happiness, and the like with an extroverted orientation, whereas those with negative affects are prone to violence, fear, and anxiety (14). Students who are more friendly, open, and responsible experience more positive affects, while those who lack emotional stability and self-esteem experience more negative affects. Positive affects can expand the cognitive environment and influence creative thinking. In other words, they expand flexibility and the scope of interests and confer dynamic benefits such as the improvement of skills and physical, psychological, and social capacities. Many studies have confirmed the relationship between various dimensions of health and positive and negative affects (15, 16).

Based on above considerations, the present study aimed to investigate the mediating role of positive and negative affects in the relationships of moral disengagement and spiritual well-being in university students in Tehran in 2020-21.

## Methods

The statistical population of this descriptive correlational study comprised all students of universities in Tehran in the academic year 2020-2021. A sample of 301 students (199 women and 102 men) was selected through cluster sampling. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and lack of direct access to students, the questionnaires were administered and completed online. The researchers sent the questionnaire to accessible students. The students were asked to complete the questionnaire and forward it to their student groups if they wished so. It is widely assumed that the minimum sample size for structural modeling is 200; thus, the data of 301

participants (199 women and 102 men) were collected in this study.

## Research Instruments

***The Spiritual Well Being Scale (SWBS):*** Paloutzian and Ellison developed this scale in 1982. Of the 20 items, 10 deal with religious well-being and assess one's experience about a satisfactory relationship with God, and 10 items deal with existential well-being and measure a sense of purpose and satisfaction with life. The items are scored on a six-point Likert scale. The scores of each dimension range from 10 to 60, and the sum of the two dimensions' scores yields the total spiritual well-being score ranging from 20 to 120 (17). Pourseyyed Mohammad et al. (18) reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.83 for the scale.

***The Moral Disengagement Questionnaire:*** This 32-item questionnaire was developed to assess the respondent's pre-disposition to moral disengagement. It assesses eight mechanisms of moral justification, euphemistic labeling, advantageous comparison, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, distortion of consequences, dehumanization of victims, and attribution of blame. Each mechanism is measured by four items scored on a Likert scale (19). A high correlation has been reported between this questionnaire and the Moral Judgement Test (MJT). Basharpour and Miri (20), reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.91 for the questionnaire.

***The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS):*** This self-report scale comprises 10 items for positive and 10 for negative affects, and measures two sub-scales of positive and negative affects on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (Very Slightly or Not at all) to 5 (Extremely) (21). Mohammadi et al. (22), reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.88 for the questionnaire.

## Statistical analyses

The measurement model's fit to the data was assessed via confirmatory factor

Table 1. Demographic variables of the students

Demographic variables		n	%
Age (years)	18-24	161	53.49
	24-28	102	33.89
	28-32	38	12.62
Gender	Female	199	66.11
	Male	102	33.88
Education	A.D., B.A./B.Sc. students	188	62.46
	M.A./M.S. students	80	26.58
	Ph.D. students	33	10.96

analysis (CFA) in AMOS 24 and with the maximum likelihood (ML) estimation method.

## Results

According to the results of demographic variables, a total of 301 university students participated in this study (199 females and 102 males). The demographic variables of the students are shown in Table 1.

Table 2 lists the mean and standard deviation (SD) moral disengagement (moral justification, euphemistic labeling, advantageous comparison, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, distortion of consequences, dehumanization of victims, and attribution of blame), positive and negative affects, and spiritual well-being (religious and existential well-being). The kurtosis and skewness of all the variables fell in the -2 to +2 range, suggesting the normal distribution of data. The variance inflation factor (VIF) was <10 and the tolerance

factor was >0.1 for all the predictor variables, confirming the collinearity assumption (Table 2).

The correlation coefficients in Table 3 were in line with the hypothesis and the literature. There was a significant correlation between the components of moral disengagement, positive and negative affects, and the components of spiritual well-being ( $P < 0.001$ ).

Figure 1 displays the structural model by using standard data. The sum of squared multiple correlation coefficients was 0.41 for spiritual well-being, suggesting that moral disengagement and positive and negative affects explain 41% of the variance of spiritual well-being.

Table 4 presents the fitness indices of the measurement and structural models. Except for the CFI, all the fitness indices resulting from CFA confirm the acceptable fit of the measurement model to the data (RMSEA = 0.112). The measurement model was thus

Table 2. Mean, standard deviation (SD), skewness, and kurtosis among the variables

Variables	Mean $\pm$ SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	Tolerance coefficient	Variance inflation factor
Moral justification	11.06 $\pm$ 2.71	-0.87	0.70	0.54	1.85
Euphemistic labeling	7.22 $\pm$ 2.56	0.68	0.86	0.47	2.12
Advantageous comparison	8.03 $\pm$ 2.69	0.37	0.81	0.48	2.05
Displacement of responsibility	9.49 $\pm$ 2.64	-0.05	-0.46	0.50	2.00
Diffusion of responsibility	9.49 $\pm$ 2.64	0.89	1.76	0.63	1.57
Distortion of consequences	10.86 $\pm$ 2.80	0.49	0.26	0.46	2.13
Dehumanization of victims	8.84 $\pm$ 2.41	-0.18	0.36	0.58	1.70
Attribution of blame	9.59 $\pm$ 2.76	-0.28	-0.74	0.72	1.37
Negative affects	24.86 $\pm$ 6.48	-0.03	-0.12	0.23	4.33
Positive affects	32.30 $\pm$ 7.72	-0.16	-0.38	0.23	4.24
Religious well-being	36.73 $\pm$ 6.87	-0.14	-0.71	-	-
Existential well-being	33.37 $\pm$ 6.44	-0.16	0.47	-	-

Table 3. Correlation coefficients between the research variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1- Moral justification	1											
2- Euphemistic labeling	0.28**	1										
3- Advantageous comparison	0.27**	0.61**	1									
4- Displacement of responsibility	0.34**	0.47**	0.54**	1								
5- Diffusion of responsibility	0.33**	0.21**	0.33**	0.41**	1							
6- Distortion of consequences	0.47**	0.54**	0.50**	0.48**	0.46**	1						
7- Dehumanization of victims	0.55**	0.47**	0.49**	0.52**	0.41**	0.52**	1					
8- Attribution of blame	0.47**	0.40**	0.46**	0.50**	0.48**	0.50**	0.60**	1				
9- Negative affects	0.30**	0.29**	0.22**	0.29**	0.24**	0.25**	0.28**	0.26**	1			
10- Positive affects	-0.07	-0.10	-0.04	-0.08	-0.04	-0.01	-0.10	-0.04	-0.16**	1		
11- Religious well-being	-0.17**	-0.33**	-0.29**	-0.38**	-0.10	-0.18**	-0.25**	-0.09	-0.48**	0.40**	1	
12- Existential well-being	-0.14**	-0.30**	-0.27**	-0.33**	-0.12*	-0.18**	-0.24**	-0.12*	-0.44**	0.44**	0.76**	1

\* P<0.05

\*\* P<0.01

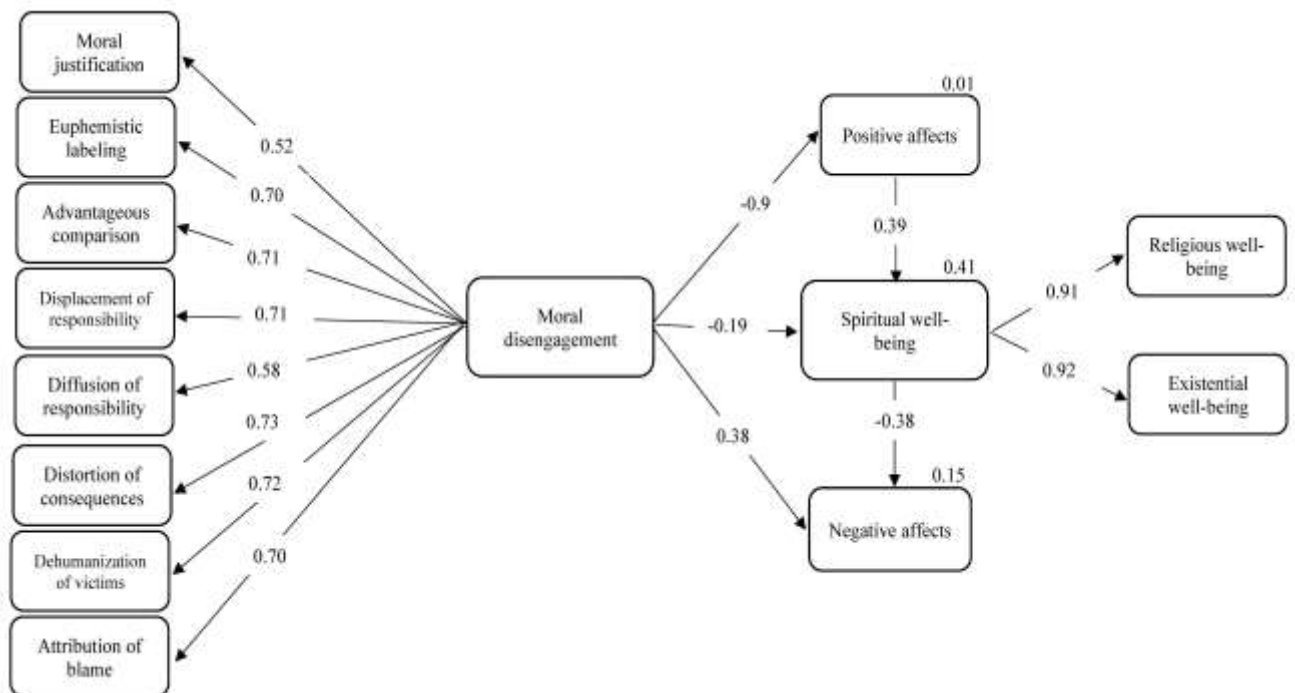


Figure 1. Proposed model pertaining to the mediating role of positive and negative affects in the relationship between moral disengagement and spiritual well-being in students corrected by forming two co-variances between the errors of moral disengagement indicators, and the resulting fitness indices suggested the acceptable fit of the measurement model to the data (RMSEA = 0.008). The highest factor loading belonged

Table 4. Fitting indicators of the measurement and structural models of the study

Fitting indicators	Measurement model		Structural model	Cut-off point
	Initial model	Modified model		
$\chi^2$	162.83	97.28	146.78	-
df	34	32	49	-
( $\chi^2$ /df)	4.79	3.04	2.99	>03.00
GFI	0.89	0.94	0.92	>0.90
AGFI	0.83	0.89	0.87	>0.85
CFI	0.90	0.95	0.93	>0.90
RMSEA	0.112	0.008	0.008	>0.08

to the religious well-being indicator ( $\beta = 0.94$ ), and the smallest to moral justification ( $\beta = 0.51$ ). Thus, all these indicators had sufficient power to measure the latent variables.

The structural model assumed that moral disengagement predicts spiritual well-being both directly and mediated by positive and negative affects. All the fitness indices resulting from the SEM analysis support the fit of the structural model to the data (RMSEA = 0.008) (Table 4). The current structural model, therefore, had an acceptable fit to the collected data.

Table 5 presents the path coefficients among variables in the structural model. Based on Table 4, the path coefficient between negative affects and spiritual well-being was significant and negative ( $\beta = -0.37$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ). The path coefficient between positive affects and spiritual well-being was significant and positive ( $\beta = 0.38$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ). The total path coefficient between moral disengagement and spiritual well-being was significant and negative ( $\beta = -0.37$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ). Furthermore, the indirect path coefficient between moral disengagement and spiritual well-being was significant and negative ( $\beta = -0.18$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ). Positive and negative affects,

therefore, significantly and negatively mediate the relationship between moral disengagement and spiritual well-being. Based on Baron and Kenny's formula, the path coefficient between moral disengagement and spiritual well-being was significant and negative through negative ( $\beta = -0.14$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ) and positive affects ( $\beta = -0.03$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ). Positive and negative affects, therefore, significantly and negatively mediate the relationship between moral disengagement and spiritual well-being.

## Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate the mediating role of positive and negative affects in the relationships of moral disengagement and spiritual well-being in university students. The path coefficient between negative affects and spiritual well-being was significant and negative, while that between positive affects and spiritual well-being was significant and positive. In other words, positive affects significantly enhance spiritual well-being and negative affects significantly diminish it. The results of this study are implicitly consistent with the results of Salami, (14), and Mohammadi et al. (22).

Table 5. Path coefficients between the variables in the structural model of the study

Paths	Path type	B	SE	$\beta$	P
Negative affect to spiritual well-being	Direct	-0.36	0.06	-0.37	<0.001
Positive affect to spiritual well-being	Direct	0.31	0.04	0.38	<0.001
Moral disengagement to negative affect	Direct	1.75	0.31	0.38	<0.001
Moral disengagement to positive affect	Direct	-0.50	0.38	-0.09	0.173
Moral disengagement to spiritual well-being	Direct	-0.84	0.26	-0.19	<0.001
Moral disengagement to spiritual well-being	Indirect	-0.79	0.18	-0.18	<0.001
Moral disengagement to spiritual well-being	Total (direct and indirect)	-1.64	0.33	-0.37	<0.001

Positive and negative affects positively and negatively correlate with various dimensions of health, including spiritual health, respectively. Therefore, experiencing positive affects, e.g., happiness, pleasure, pride, satisfaction, and optimism promote spiritual well-being, i.e., improves one's relationship with oneself, society, nature, and God. People can thus experience a state of health that expresses their positive feelings, behaviors, and cognitions about their intra- and interpersonal relationships, as well as relationships with nature and a superior being. Enhancement of spiritual well-being improves emotional well-being, life satisfaction, and self-esteem; alleviates depression and anxiety; and will lead to a healthier and more hopeful life (14). More positive affects lead to greater creativity, openness, and experiences; less anxiety; and better relationships with oneself, nature, others, and God. On the other hand, negative affects predispose people to violence, fear, anxiety, unpleasant feelings towards oneself, and perception of negative indicators; all this limits social relations because people who experience negative affects evaluate every event as a threat, not an opportunity (22).

In the current study, the total path coefficient between moral disengagement and spiritual well-being was significant and negative, indicating that morally disengaged people have less spiritual well-being. The results of this study are implicitly consistent with the results of Qudsyi et al. (12).

Moral disengagement underpins many antisocial behaviors such as aggression, bullying, crimes, cheating, and dishonesty. Spiritual well-being is characterized by transcendental and existential traits in intra- and interpersonal relations, as well as the relationship with a superior being and the environment (12). Morally disengaged people have trouble in all four dimensions of spiritual well-being. In intra-personal relations, these people engage in self-

serving behaviors that run counter to moral principles, e.g., crime, cheating, and substance abuse, and do not experience the emotions resulting from negative self-evaluation, e.g., a sense of guilt, shame, and remorse (23). In interpersonal relations, morally disengaged people show antisocial and narcissistic traits, do not respect socially acceptable standards, cannot empathize with others, do not feel guilt, and perform immoral actions that harm others. This personality trait also shapes behaviors that harm nature, including the destruction of natural resources and public properties. Morally disengaged people commit more crimes than others. Morally disengaged people do not easily understand moral standards and fail to channel their spontaneous desires into acceptable actions established by people other than themselves (God, social and religious leaders, and social rules); they are, therefore, expected to show problems in their relationship with a superior being (God) as well. All this explains how moral disengagement can diminish spiritual well-being (10).

It was also found that the indirect path coefficient between moral disengagement and spiritual well-being was significant and negative, suggesting that positive and negative affects significantly and negatively mediate the relationship between moral disengagement and spiritual well-being. The results of this study are implicitly consistent with the results of Villani et al. (24) and Soleimani et al. (25). Positive and negative affects are related to health indices in different ways (24, 25). People with positive affects tend to seek pleasure, reward, happiness, and the like with an extroverted orientation.

The results revealed that the path coefficient between moral disengagement and spiritual well-being is significant and negative, both through positive and negative affects. We found no study examining the relationship between moral disengagement and positive and negative affects. Morally disengaged people tend to

engage in criminal actions, express more aggression and antisocial tendencies, and experience lower levels of guilt and empathy. These traits, along with other characteristics of negative affects, including aggression, anger, irritability, helplessness, dissatisfaction, and unpleasant arousal diminish spiritual and other dimensions of health. Morally disengaged people seek pleasure, happiness, pride, and satisfaction (positive affects) through aggression, crimes, antisocial behaviors, and substance use, and justify these actions by using the mechanisms of moral disengagement, e.g., displacement of responsibility, distortion of consequences, and attribution of blame. For instance, people who consume drugs to improve their low mood justify this action by implicating their parents' divorce (displacement of responsibility) or claiming that the substance is not addictive (distortion of consequences) and can be found everywhere (attribution of blame).

This study was limited by some factors. As the universities were closed down, students could not be accessed directly and, therefore, the questionnaires had to be shared online. Accordingly, we could not ensure that all the respondents were students and studied at universities in Tehran. The findings should, therefore, be generalized to other populations with caution. Future studies are recommended to perform random sampling and adopt other research designs, e.g., quasi-experimental, on different samples.

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### ***Author's contribution***

FZA, and HS developed the study concept and design. FZA, and SB acquired the data. FZA, and HS analyzed and interpreted the

data, and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. All authors contributed to the intellectual content, manuscript editing and read and approved the final manuscript. HS, and SB provided administrative support.

### ***Ethical considerations***

The study was approved by the Ethical Committee of Islamic Azad University-Roudehen Branch (code: 950516970).

### ***Conflict of interest***

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interests.

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