

## A Qualitative Exploration of Spirituality in Relapse Prevention among Recovering Individuals with Substance Use Disorder

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### **Abstract**

Substance use disorder (SUD) is a significant public health challenge with multifaceted etiologies and limited effective relapse prevention strategies. For individuals recovering from substance use disorder, spirituality has been identified as a powerful tool in achieving and maintaining recovery. However, the role of spirituality in addiction treatment remains underexplored, with limited awareness and practical application of how spiritual practices and involvement can be integrated into recovery programs and relapse prevention particularly in the context of substance use disorder. This qualitative study explored the role of spirituality as a complementary resource for recovery in substance use disorder, especially in the cultural context of Pakistan. This study explore the experiences of 12 individuals who have maintained recovery from substance use disorder ranging from two to five years. These participants were selected from Islamabad and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Through in-depth interviews, and thematic analysis of (Braun and Clark 2012 model) participants shared their perspectives and experiences that how spiritual and religious practices such as prayer, recitation of Qur'an, gratitude, and self-reflection and realization of drugs from evil and about hereafter provided motivation to quit substance use, sustain recovery, and achieve inner peace and self-respect. The findings highlight spirituality as an essential resource for relapse prevention, even in rural and under-served settings where conventional healthcare for substance use disorders may be inaccessible. The study also underscores the potential of spiritually based interventions as complementary approaches to addiction treatment and relapse prevention offering valuable insights into the development of culturally and contextually relevant recovery strategies.

**Keywords:** *Spirituality, Religious Practices, Relapse Prevention, Substance Use Disorder, Thematic Analysis*

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## 1. Introduction

Addiction is defined as a repeated and dysfunctional practice of substance use that causes significant impairment and trouble, typically over a 12-month period (Batool et al., 2017). Substance abuse is defined as the persistent, obsessive use of drugs or alcohol despite the bad consequences for different aspects of one's life, including job, relationships, legal concerns, and general physical and mental health. Individuals with this disease lose control of their substance use, even when they are aware of the adverse consequences (Swimmer & Sandelich, 2024). According to the World Health Organization (WHO), over 35 million individuals worldwide suffer from drug-associated diseases. Pakistan has a serious drug addiction problem, with around 6.7 million people using illicit drugs each year. Cannabis is the most widely used drug, with an annual prevalence of 3.6%, followed by opioids at 2.4% (Javed et al., 2020). Drug addiction has been recognized as a chronic relapsing disorder, with over 80% of people relapsing within a year of their first attempts to quit (Carroll, 2021). In Pakistan, relapse rates tend to be high, with 70-90% of drug users getting back to substance use across a year of detoxification (Javed et al., 2020). Both family involvement and spiritual practices provide individuals in recovery with emotional support, practical resources, and a sense of purpose, all of which are essential in preventing relapse (Kelly et al., 2015).

Spirituality presents an alternative approach to managing substance use disorders, often expanding treatment options in settings where traditional options are limited (Beraldo & Gil, 2019). Individuals struggling with addiction explain spirituality as providing a broader perspective on life, enhancing their dignity, and promoting hope and comfort (Brekke et al. 2017). Religion and spirituality are frequently viewed as protective factors against drug abuse (Zerbetto, 2017). According to Burkhardt (2011), spirituality is the discovery of meaning and purpose in life through personal unity and recognition of a higher power (Dr. Basit & Dr. Ahmad Ali, 2022). Research conducted among Muslim populations suggests that religiosity plays a crucial role in enhancing mental health, with followers often turning to religious values as an alternative to substance use (Hisham, 2011; Lynne, 2012). Self-transcendence is a key aspect of spirituality, and associated with life meaning, which has been linked to lower severity of drug and alcohol use and minimize risk of relapse (Sørensen & Lien, 2022). Although spirituality may not benefit all groups, such as those with crack cocaine or cannabis use disorders, it remains a significant factor in recovery for many recovered drug addicts (Beraldo & Gil, 2019). Robinson et al. (2016) classified spirituality into 12 dimensions, finding that factors like positive religious coping and a sense of purpose significantly reduced alcohol consumption, even without Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) affiliation. Religion and spirituality have been found to influence numerous aspects of a person's life, including their well-being and overall life satisfaction (Garssen, Visser, & Pool, 2020). According to Frunza et al. (2019), spirituality is a fundamental part of the human experience, encompassing physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual elements. Shahim (2023) identified four key themes in how integrating spirituality and religion in counseling helps individuals, including giving meaning to life, fostering self-reliance, and strengthening relationships with others and with God. Spiritual-based interventions are particularly valuable in rural areas where conventional treatment facilities may not be readily available. These interventions can complement traditional healthcare services, offering an effective alternative (Beraldo & Gil, 2019). The sense of meaningfulness derived from spirituality, as described by Martela and Steger (2016), is fundamental to recovery. Studies have found that individuals with a strong sense of life purpose are less likely to engage

in substance abuse and more likely to avoid relapse (Csabonyi & Phillips, 2020; Roos et al., 2015). Hai et al. (2019) concluded in a meta-analysis that interventions incorporating spiritual and religious elements are generally more effective than those without them. Spirituality also helps address socio-cultural factors like family relationships and community reintegration, which are essential for long-term recovery (Roos et al., 2015). Spiritual practices have been found to promote alcohol abstinence and are strongly associated with AA involvement (Beraldo & Gil, 2019). Local culture and spirituality play critical roles in influencing recovery trajectories, with historical and religious contexts shaping attitudes toward substance use (Beraldo & Gil, 2019). Survey data indicates that a significant proportion of respondents, 72% believe spiritual healing is essential in rehabilitation, while 65% associate strong religious beliefs with preventing drug use (Dr. Basit Ali & Dr. Ahmad Ali, 2022). Various religious and spiritual practices are often included in relapse prevention strategies, such as prayer, meditation, and reading sacred texts (Appiah et al., 2018). However, modern trends suggest a shift away from formal religious affiliations toward more personal forms of spirituality, defined by individual beliefs and connections to the sacred (Repstad, 2020). 12-Step groups, such as AA, emphasize surrendering to a higher power, which has been shown to improve recovery outcomes (Kelly & Greene, 2014).

Relapse prevention in addiction recovery remains under-explored, particularly within Pakistan's socio-religious context. No attempt has been made yet to explore relapse prevention in an in depth way through exploratory research (Malik et al., 2023 and Nadeem et al., 2023). This study addresses this gap by exploring spirituality as a protective factor against relapse among recovering addicts in Pakistan.

Given the deep integration of spirituality in Pakistani culture, this research explores how religious practices foster emotional resilience, stress management, and meaning in life, aiding long-term recovery. Through qualitative analysis, it identifies culturally relevant spiritual strategies that enhance relapse prevention. By bridging this gap, the study contributes to a holistic, culturally embedded approach to addiction treatment and relapse prevention.

Furthermore, understanding spirituality's role in recovery can inform the development of tailored interventions that align with individuals' beliefs and values. This research highlights how spiritual coping mechanisms provide structure, motivation, and a sense of purpose, reinforcing commitment to a drug-free life. The findings can guide clinicians, policymakers, and rehabilitation centers in integrating culturally sensitive spiritual practices into addiction treatment programs.

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Research Design

Design of the present study was exploratory and qualitative approach of thematic analysis by Braun and Clark 2012 was used to analyze the findings.

### 2.2 Sample

Sample of the present study was recovered individuals (N=12) who were in the journey of in relapse prevention and being recovered since one and half to five years and they are being functional in their lives. These recovered individuals with substance use disorder were from different cities such as Islamabad and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Homogeneous purposive sampling technique was used according to the need of the study.

### 2.3 Instruments

The semi structured interview guide focusing on substance use disorder and the role of spirituality in relapse prevention was

developed on the detail discussion with the supervisor through brainstorming session and creative process keeping in mind all the aspects of the study.

#### 2.4 Procedure

Participants were briefed on the study's aim and outcomes, and informed consent was obtained. They were assured of their right to withdraw at any time and guaranteed confidentiality. Interviews were audio recorded on a smartphone or laptop, with participants assigned fake names for anonymity. Ice-breaking was conducted to ensure their comfort and minimize stress. All participants were cooperative, and expressions of guilt, sadness, and gratitude for recovery were observed.

### 3. Result

**Table 1**

**Demographic characteristics of the sample (N=12)**

Demographics	F	%
Marital Status		
Married	12	100
Gender		
Male	12	100
Duration of drug use		
1 - 5 years	12	100
Duration of Rehab		
3 - 5 months	6	50
6 - 10 months	6	50
Duration after rehab		
1 - 3 years	8	66
4 - 5 years	4	33.33
Types of drugs		
Cannabis	12	100
Ice	8	66

#### Analysis

Result of the study using thematic analysis shown four main themes of spirituality and that are playing the important role in relapse prevention among recovering individuals with drug addiction. The first theme is spirituality, the second is the role of Religion in recovery, the third is Drugs in religion and the fourth is the role of faith in relapse prevention.

#### Spirituality

Spirituality fosters a strong connection with Allah, motivating individuals to resist drug addiction. Seeking divine guidance, engaging in repentance, and striving to please Allah help in relapse prevention. Faith provides emotional resilience, build a sense of gratitude, and promotes self-discipline, ensuring a stable recovery journey.

*You think no I cannot take drugs anymore as my Allah save myself from Drugs' Spirituality mean that having thought in your heart that we as a human communicate the same we can communicate with Allah through prayer and can asked dua to keep us on sera-ti*

*mustaqeem. When you repent and asked Allah to forgive you thus you feel peace and after good deeds you make dua That Allah help me to stay away from drugs.*

#### The role of Religion in recovery

Religion plays a crucial role in self-realization and addiction recovery. Awareness of the hereafter, consistent prayers, and religious reflections reinforce discipline and provide peace. Engaging in religious activities such as reciting the Qur'an and witnessing funerals strengthens the resolve to stay drug-free.

*Those practical acts that prevent me from drugs was performing prayer and reminding to self that Allah is watching me.*

*When I was going for drugs, so on the way I was reciting darood and asking Allah help, I did it constantly for one year.*

*The first benefit of quitting drugs is you move toward Allah and not more rebellious toward Allah.*

#### Drugs in Religion

Islam strictly prohibits drugs, considering them harmful and influenced by evil. Drug addiction disrupts religious duties, distancing individuals from spirituality. Neglecting prayers weakens moral consciousness, deepening addiction. Recognizing drugs as a sin fosters a sense of self-respect and determination to quit.

*If I die while in addiction and it is Haram in Islam so I will go to Hell. leave drugs and get respect in this world and hereafter.*

*Drugs is from evil that why after taking drugs you don't want to go to masjid, or perform prayer. If a person not performing prayers so he did not feel or realize his drugs habit and go deeply in addiction.*

#### The Role of Faith in Relapse Prevention

Faith acts as a powerful tool in overcoming addiction, offering strength and direction. A drug-free life is perceived as a divine blessing, and hardships are seen as tests that enhance faith. The fear of divine judgment develop moral accountability, while Islamic teachings provide a comprehensive framework for maintaining recovery.

*When I came abroad here was no business and many hurdles came but I realized that Allah said if no one is with you so I am with you, and for you, and I am agree the more hurdles you face the more you get closed to Allah.*

*Spiritually meaning is that human being have a purpose and I believe it has 100% role in every part of life.*

*When I start participate in other person funeral it build a sense of realization in my heart that this person was okay, healthy yesterday living his life and today he died and see the grave will build the realization, like this one day I will also be die like him and after death the examination will be also done with me and think of about hereafter thus the individual will not just leave drugs as it's a small sin but will leave major then it.*

#### 4. Discussion

The study result highlights four main themes of spirituality and religious in relapse prevention. The themes are Spirituality, Role of religion in addiction, Drug in Religion and the role of faith in relapse prevention.

Table 2

Thematic Table (12)

Main Themes	Sub Themes	Description
Spirituality	Personal connection with Allah, Pleasing Allah, Repentance and guidance from Allah, Believing and being hopeful of Allah help	Strengthening bond with Allah fosters resilience, seeking divine guidance, engaging in repentance, striving to please Allah, and having faith in divine support reinforce self-control and motivation to stay drug-free.
The role of Religion in recovery	Realization of hereafter , Continuous prayer and recitation of Qur'an , Peace in prayer , Self-realization through funeral	Religion enhances self-awareness and addiction recovery. Awareness of the hereafter, regular worship, and witnessing death instill discipline, provide peace, and reinforce the resolve to remain drug-free.
Drugs in religion	Drugs from evil, Missing religious activities due to drugs, Neglecting prayer leads to severe addiction	Islam prohibits drugs as they lead to spiritual downfall. Addiction disrupts religious duties, weakens faith, and moral neglect fosters deeper addiction. Recognizing drugs as sinful strengthens determination to quit.
The role of faith in relapse prevention.	Drug free life is blessing, Hardship enhance faith, Fear of judgement, Islam provide a whole life	Faith serves as a tool for resilience. A drug-free life is seen as a divine blessing, hardships strengthen faith, fear of divine accountability fosters self-discipline, and Islamic teachings provide a holistic recovery framework.

The trans-formative role of spirituality in preventing relapse among individuals recovering from drug addiction. Study shown both family involvement and spiritual practices provide individuals in recovery with emotional support, practical resources, and a sense of purpose, all of which are essential in preventing relapse (Kelly et al., 2015). Spirituality also played a key role in restoring familial trust and relationships. Participants noted how spiritual transformation fostered forgiveness and strengthened bonds within their families. Shared spiritual practices, such as attending religious gatherings or praying together, enhanced recovery by intertwining familial support with spiritual accountability. These insights mirror earlier studies highlighting the sociolect-cultural dimensions of spirituality in fostering community and family reintegration (Roos et al., 2015; Sørensen & Lien, 2022). This is also supported by the study of Individuals struggling with addiction describe spirituality as offering a broader perspective on life, enhancing their dignity, and fostering hope and comfort (Brekke et al., 2017)

Spirituality offers an alternative approach to managing substance use disorders, often expanding treatment possibilities in contexts where conventional options are limited (Beraldo & Gil, 2019) According to the study one of the participant reported We all should follow religion, our religion Islam provide principles for whole life, which can bring happiness in this world and hereafter.

Spiritual practices such as prayer, Quran recitation, and zikr served as both coping mechanisms and guiding principles, offering participant's peace and emotional stability during their recovery journey. The narratives reflect the ability of spirituality to foster resilience by encouraging gratitude, repentance, and a personal connection with the divine. These findings align with research emphasizing the link between spiritual engagement and reduced substance use severity (Sørensen & Lien, 2022; Krentzman et al., 2010). This is also align to the findings of ( Zerbetto 2017) That religiosity and spirituality are often seen as protective factors against drug abuse.

The integration of spirituality into broader relapse prevention strategies further underscored its multidimensional role. Practices like Ayatul Kursi recitation and other culturally rooted rituals helped participants maintain recovery and provided a sense of continuity and identity. The findings support research advocating for culturally relevant spiritual interventions in addiction recovery (Gone, 2011; Hai et al., 2019).

However, spirituality's impact was not uniform. For some participants, addiction initially distanced them from religious practices, highlighting the complex and cyclical relationship between spiritual neglect and substance use. Additionally, a shift from institutional religion to personalized spirituality reflected a modern recovery trend, where individual spiritual experiences take precedence over communal or formal rituals. This shift aligns with broader observations of evolving spiritual paradigms in recovery contexts (Repstad, 2020).

#### Limitation and Suggestion

The present study was conducted exclusively on male drug addicts due to the unavailability of a female sample. Future research should include female participants to avoid gender bias. Additionally, data collection was limited to Muslim participants, highlighting the need for future studies to explore how spirituality influences relapse prevention among non-Muslims. Another limitation was the small sample size (N=12), which calls for larger-scale quantitative research to examine the role of spirituality in relapse prevention more comprehensively. Furthermore, the study focused only on participants from Rawalpindi, Islamabad, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, potentially limiting the contextual understanding of the phenomenon. Future research should include data from additional cities to explore how family support, spirituality, and self-help strategies contribute to relapse prevention across different regions of Pakistan.

#### Clinical Implication

The findings of the current study have important implications for drug addiction treatment within Pakistan's cultural context. Spiritual practices can be effectively integrated into relapse prevention strategies for individuals struggling with substance use. Additionally, this research holds clinical significance for mental health professionals, researchers, drug addicts, and their families, providing insights that can aid in recovery and support. Exploring spirituality can help individuals find deeper meaning and purpose in life beyond their addiction. Moreover, the study highlights the need for therapists to guide drug addicts in rebuilding a strong connection with a higher power and fostering hope for a better future.

#### Conclusion

Spirituality serves as a critical element in relapse prevention, offering both emotional and practical support. When integrated with family involvement and culturally relevant practices, spirituality

provides a robust framework for sustaining recovery and preventing relapse. These findings advocate for incorporating spiritual elements into comprehensive addiction treatment programs.

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