The influence of guilt on wellbeing

Purpose: To examine the influence of guilt on wellbeing of evangelical Christians especially associated with adherence and knowledge of their faith.

Methods: A prospective survey analysis of a church-based cohort. Subjects were asked questions that appear in Scripture relating to: wellbeing; activities or held Biblical beliefs that help guide the Christian faith; and guilt.

Results: There were 319 participants. The best scores for wellbeing were associated with 'feeling accepted by God' and knowing that 'God cares about them' (P<0.001), but participants generally reported high levels of contentment, peace, joy, purpose, sense of freedom and limited guilt. Between subjects who felt some level of guilt versus those who did not there was a statistical difference in wellbeing questions (P<0.0001) except 'God cares about me' (P=0.18).

Conclusion: Christians who adhere to basic activities and beliefs of their faith are likely to demonstrate improved wellbeing and less guilt.

RESULTS

In total, 319 subjects participated in the survey. Seven subjects were excluded due to completing <50% of the survey. Subject characteristics are shown in Table 1. The population was predominantly Caucasian, female and self-described "born-again" Christians. The average survey scores for all subjects for each question are found in Table 2. The best mean scores for wellbeing were found with 'feeling accepted by God' (0.6 [scale 0-6]) and knowing that 'God cares about them' (0.7) (P<0.001). When scores were divided between those who felt some level of guilt (score ≥1.0) and those who did not (score <1.0), there was a highly statistical difference with all questions (<0.0001) except 'God cares about me' (P=0.18). Of the 224 who responded they felt some level of guilt, the most common reason was that although they had confidence in their salvation, they 'feared that they had not performed enough good works to gain God's ongoing satisfaction' (mean guilt score=2.1). However, the best mean guilt score was with those who 'feared that their past sins had not really been forgiven' (1.5). A statistical difference was not found, however, between all responses (P=0.07). All reasons for guilt are shown in Table 3. The most common response to guilt by participants was anxiety (mean guilt score=2.5) followed closely by a desire for complete acceptance by God (2.3). The worst ranking for guilt among participants by response was in those who feared they might lose their salvation (3.2). A statistical difference was not found between all responses (P=0.07). The reactions to guilt are found in Table 4. Table 5 compares the eight wellbeing rankings to adherence questions. Those who ranked highest on the adherence questions, following the modified Bonferroni correction, scored statistically greater in many wellbeing measures, especially in participants who most often performed Bible study or praised God (P<0.001).

Table 1: Respondent characteristics (N=319)

Characteristic	Detail	Subjects	Percentage
Age	46.3 +/- 16.9 years		
Race	White	286	90%
	African American	9	3%
	Asian	4	1%
	Hispanic	3	1%
	Native American	14	4%
Gender	Female	181	57%
	Male	134	42%
Religion (definitions below)	Cultural Christian	52	16%
	Born-again Christian	247	77%
	Christian Seeker	9	3%
	Non-Christian	1	0%
Employment	Full-time employed/self-employed	168	53%
	Part-time employed/self-employed	16	5%
	Full-time student	23	7%
	Retired	49	15%
	Part-time homemaker/employed	11	3%
	Full-time homemaker	39	12%

Part- or full-time student and part-time employed	2	1%	

Blank answers were excluded. Cultural = identify with Christian society while not necessarily being religious; Born-again = religious Christians who trust in Christ by faith for forgiveness of sins and salvation; Seeker = seeking answers to their questions about the Christian faith

Table 2: Wellbeing questions self-rankings
(Scale 0-6, 0 being strongest agreement)

Survey Question	Average score (N=319)	P-value	Average score no guilt (N=94)	Average score guilt (N=224)	P-value
1. I am content with life	1.5 ± 1.2		0.9 ± 1.1	1.7 ± 1.2	<0.0001
2. I have peace	1.4 ± 1.2		0.8 ± 1.1	1.7 ± 1.2	<0.0001
3. I am joyful	1.5 ± 1.2		0.9 ± 1.1	1.7 ± 1.1	<0.0001
4. I have purpose	1.3 ± 1.3	<0.0001	0.8 ± 1.2	1.5 ± 1.3	<0.0001
5. God cares about me	0.7 ± 3.3		0.4 ± 1.1	0.9 ± 3.8	0.18
6. I feel accepted by God	0.6 ± 1.1		0.2 ± 0.7	0.8 ± 1.2	<0.0001
7. I am free	1.0 ± 1.2		0.3 ± 0.8	1.2 ± 1.3	<0.0001
8. I feel guilty	1.5 ± 1.4		NA	2.1 ± 1.2	NA

N=Subjects

Table 3: Reason for guilt and additional effects for those expressing feeling of guilt

Question	Subjects	%	Average guilt score	P-value
God has never forgiven me for my sins	4	2%	1.5	
I think I have been forgiven through faith in Christ but I am unsure if all my past sins really are forgiven	11	5%	2.7	
I am forgiven my sins through faith in Christ, but I have committed sins since, and I am not sure they are forgiven	11	5%	2.6	
I am forgiven my sins through faith in Christ, but I have committed sins for which I really do not want to stop	30	13%	2.6	0.07
I am forgiven my sins through faith in Christ, but I have committed sins since, and I fear God is angry...	11	5%	2.4	
I am forgiven my sins through faith in Christ, but I am unsure if my current good works are enough...	92	41%	2.1	

N=Subjects
Blank answers were excluded

Table 4: Reaction for those expressing feeling of guilt (more than one answer allowed)

Question	Subjects	%	Average guilt score	P-value
Feel anxious	72	32%	2.5	
Feel angry	35	16%	2.7	
Fear punishment	19	8%	3.0	
Fear I might lose my salvation	13	6%	3.2	0.07
Desire complete confidence of His acceptance	56	25%	2.3	
Jealous of those who are confident of His acceptance	20	9%	2.6	
No other effect	28	12%	1.8	
Feel regret	8	4%	2.3	

N=Subjects
Blank answers were excluded

Table 5: Wellbeing rankings (left vertical column) versus yes/no responses to adherence to basic practices and believes of Christianity (top horizontal row)

Survey Question	Go to heaven		P-value	Lose salvation		P-value	Fellowship		P-value	Study Bible		P-value
	Y	N		Y	N		Y	N		Y	N	
1. I am content with life	1.5	1.8	0.54	1.5	1.3	0.09	1.4	1.5	0.16	1.2	1.7	0.006*
2. I have peace	1.4	1.9	0.21	1.4	1.3	0.24	1.3	1.5	0.16	1.2	1.6	0.006*
3. I am joyful	1.5	1.6	0.67	1.5	1.3	0.14	1.4	1.6	0.16	1.3	1.6	0.03
4. I have purpose	1.3	1.7	0.58	1.3	1.3	0.52	1.2	1.4	0.43	1.1	1.5	0.01
5. God cares about me	0.7	0.7	0.95	0.7	0.6	0.54	0.9	0.6	0.68	0.5	0.9	0.50
6. I feel accepted by God	0.6	1.0	0.42	0.5	0.8	0.001*	0.6	0.7	0.64	0.5	0.7	0.09
7. I am free	0.9	1.6	0.09	0.9	1.1	0.01	0.8	1.1	0.02	0.7	1.1	0.01
8. I feel guilty	1.4	2.3	0.03	1.4	1.8	0.04	1.3	1.6	0.23	1.1	1.7	<0.001*

Survey Question	Pray to God		P-value	Praise God		P-value	Teach		P-value	Share verbally		P-value
	Y	N		Y	N		Y	N		Y	N	
1. I am content with life	1.4	1.6	0.18	1.4	1.7	0.07	1.5	1.3	0.48	1.5	1.2	0.66
2. I have peace	1.4	1.6	0.35	1.3	1.7	0.006*	1.5	1.4	0.15	1.5	1.4	0.73
3. I am joyful	1.5	1.5	1.0	1.3	1.8	0.006*	1.5	1.7	0.47	1.5	1.2	0.72
4. I have purpose	1.3	1.4	0.34	1.2	1.5	0.36	1.5	1.6	0.04	1.4	1.0	0.51
5. God cares about me	0.8	0.6	0.88	0.8	0.6	0.82	0.8	0.4	0.77	0.6	0.5	0.37
6. I feel accepted by God	0.6	0.8	0.29	0.6	0.7	0.44	0.7	0.7	0.30	0.7	0.5	0.86
7. I am free	0.8	1.3	0.002*	0.8	1.2	0.05	1.1	1.2	0.20	1.0	1.0	0.51
8. I feel guilty	1.4	1.7	0.12	1.2	1.8	0.004*	1.7	1.5	0.006*	1.6	1.7	0.04

Statistical difference between yes/no respondents following Bonferroni correction
Y=yes, N=no