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**Attachment to God as a Source of Struggle and Strength:
Exploring the Association Between Christians' Relationship with God
and Their Emotional Wellbeing**

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the degree of**

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Abstract

Research has highlighted the significant implications of spirituality for mental health and therapy. However, a key facet of spirituality yet to receive adequate research attention is people's experience of their relationship with God. One useful theoretical framework recently applied to this relationship is attachment theory. Research suggests that many people experience their relationship with God as an attachment bond, and that styles of attachment to God (ATG) may have implications for mental health similar to human attachment. However, few studies have directly investigated the relationship between ATG and mental health, and limitations of these studies make it difficult to draw conclusions. The present study provides a more rigorous exploration of this relationship through the use of a cross-lagged research design, advanced statistical modelling, and investigation of potential moderators (gender and negative events). A convenience sample of 531 Christian adults was surveyed at two time points approximately four months apart. ATG was measured on two dimensions: ATG-avoidance (avoidance of intimacy with/dependence on God) and ATG-anxiety (preoccupations and fears regarding God's rejection). Higher levels of baseline ATG-anxiety predicted poorer emotional wellbeing at Time 2, after controlling for baseline emotional wellbeing. This effect was stronger amongst participants experiencing a high level of negative events. Findings also indicate a potential mechanism for this effect. Specifically, ATG-anxiety was associated with a tendency to appraise negative events as indicating God's abandonment/punishment. These appraisals mediated the relationship between ATG-anxiety and emotional wellbeing. In contrast, low levels of ATG-anxiety buffered the effects of negative events. The effects of ATG-anxiety were significant only amongst males, contrary to hypotheses. ATG-avoidance did not show hypothesised effects on emotional wellbeing in either gender. Possible limitations of the ATG-avoidance measure were noted, and may have influenced findings. Suggestions were made as to how future studies might address this potential measurement issue and other limitations of the study. Findings indicate that ATG theory may have useful therapeutic applications, as proposed by previous researchers. Specifically, the ATG framework may be useful for conceptualising clients' relationship with God and its effects on mental health, although establishing this will ultimately require testing in clinical samples.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Table of Contents	iv
List of Figures	xi
List of Tables	xii
SECTION I: INTRODUCTION	1
Chapter One	1
Aims of the present study	5
Significance of the present study	5
Rationale for the use of a Christian sample	7
SECTION II: LITERATURE REVIEW	11
Chapter Two: The Relationship Between Religion/Spirituality and Mental Health	11
Reasons for the current interest in the spiritual domain	12
The significance of spirituality in therapeutic practice	13
Research findings on the relationship between spirituality and mental health	15
The broad picture: Reviews of the literature	15
A more in-depth picture: The positive and negative effects of spirituality	17
Summary and implications	19
Chapter Three: The Importance of People’s Experience of Their Relationship with God	22
Reasons to focus on people’s experience of their relationship with God	23
The heart of spirituality: Relationship with God	23
Evidence suggesting ERG affects mental health	25
Empirical comparisons of the effects of ERG versus generalised indicators of spirituality	27
Summary and implications	28
Chapter Four: Attachment to God as a Conceptual Framework for Christians’ Experience of Their Relationship with God	30

The importance of a theoretical framework for research on ERG.....	30
Overview of human attachment theory.....	31
Attachment style classifications.....	32
Attachment in adulthood.....	34
Attachment to God.....	35
Ainsworth’s criteria as applied to ATG	37
Styles of ATG	39
Dimensions underlying attachment style: Anxiety and avoidance.....	41
Attachment dimensions with respect to ATG.....	44
Limitations and benefits of ATG theory as a conceptual framework.....	44
Strong theoretical basis	46
Benefits for therapeutic practice	47
(1) ATG theory is based on a familiar theoretical framework	48
(2) ATG theory promotes a non-pathologising view of clients’ ERG	48
(3) ATG theory recognises both the positive and negative sides of ERG.....	49
(4) ATG theory facilitates an experiential understanding of ERG.....	49
(5) ATG theory acknowledges the possibility of positive change in ERG.....	50
Summary.....	51
Chapter Five: Attachment to God and Mental Health.....	53
Human attachment and mental health.....	53
ATG and mental health.....	55
Qualitative research.....	55
Empirical research on constructs relevant to ATG	56
Empirical studies of ATG and mental health.....	57
Limitations of research on ATG and mental health.....	60
Lack of prospective studies	61
Measurement limitations	62
Sampling limitations	64
The need to examine potential moderating variables.....	65
Negative events.....	65
Gender	66
Summary.....	68
Chapter Six: Attachment, Negative Events and Coping	70

Mechanisms for an effect of human attachment on mental health: The role of negative events and coping	70
ATG, negative events and coping.....	72
Religious coping style as a mediator of the relationship between ATG and mental health	72
ATG-anxiety, abandoning/punishing appraisals (APA), and mental health.....	73
ATG-avoidance, reduced seeking of support from God (SSG), and mental health	74
ATG style as a moderator of the effect of negative events on mental health	76
Summary.....	77
Chapter Seven: Aims and Hypotheses	80
Summary of literature review and aims of the current study.....	80
(1) The use of a cross-lagged research design	80
(2) Improved measurement of ATG	83
(3) Controlling the effects of human attachment style.....	84
(4) Exploring moderating effects of negative events and gender	84
(5) Exploring mechanisms for an effect of ATG on mental health: The role of negative events and religious coping.....	85
Selection of mental health variables for the present study	86
Hypotheses of the study.....	87
SECTION III: METHOD	91
Chapter Eight.....	91
Participants.....	91
Demographic descriptors of the sample.....	92
Attrition analyses	94
Measures.....	94
ATG measures	95
Emotional wellbeing measures	97
Relationship Questionnaire (RQ).....	100
Religious Commitment Inventory (RCI-10).....	100
Psychiatric Epidemiology Research Interview Life Events Scale (PERI).....	101

Brief Measure of Religious Coping (Brief RCOPE)	103
Items assessing the emotional quality of participants' experience of their relationship with God.....	105
Procedure.....	105
Methodological issues relating to the use of an internet survey	106
Data analysis and preparation of data	107
Overview of SEM	107
Advantages of SEM	108
Assumptions of SEM	110
Fit indices used to evaluate models in the present study	112
Data preparation.....	114
Planned testing, modifying and statistical modelling of measures.....	115
Confirmatory factor analysis.....	115
Cross-validation	116
Testing and modification process for the ATG scale.....	117
Planned tests of hypotheses	118
Testing of cross-lagged effects (Hypotheses 1-3).....	118
Testing moderating effects in cross-lagged models (Hypotheses 2-3)	121
Testing mediation effects (Hypothesis 4)	122
Testing whether attachment style moderates the effect of negative events on emotional wellbeing (Hypothesis 5)	123
Measurement invariance testing	124
Group invariance.....	124
Time invariance.....	125
Process of invariance testing.....	125
 SECTION IV: RESULTS	 127
Chapter Nine: Testing and Modification of Measures	127
ATG Scale.....	127
Principal components analysis.....	129
Confirmatory factor analysis.....	130
Further validity testing of the ATG Scale: Relationships with other constructs.....	133

Emotional wellbeing measures	133
Combining the emotional wellbeing measures	134
Brief R-COPE... ..	136
Chapter Ten: Hypothesis Testing	138
Cross-lagged relationships between ATG and emotional wellbeing (Hypothesis 1).....	140
Moderators of cross-lagged relationships between ATG and emotional wellbeing (Hypotheses 2 and 3)	143
Gender moderation (Hypothesis 2).....	144
Post-hoc exploration of gender differences.....	146
Negative events moderation (Hypothesis 3)	147
Post-hoc exploration of gender differences in the moderating impact of negative events	149
Mechanisms for the effect of ATG on emotional wellbeing: The role of negative events and coping (Hypotheses 4 and 5).....	151
Mediation of religious coping (Hypothesis 4)	151
Moderation of ATG on the effect of negative events (Hypothesis 5).....	153
Post-hoc exploration of the effects of human attachment style	155
Post-hoc exploration of the effects of deleting non-invariant indicators	155
SECTION V: DISCUSSION.....	157
Chapter Eleven: Study Findings	157
Introduction and overview	157
The relationship between ATG-anxiety and emotional wellbeing.....	160
Moderating effects of negative events	162
Moderating effects of gender	163
Magnitude of the effect of ATG-anxiety on emotional wellbeing amongst males	166
Effects of emotional wellbeing on ATG-anxiety amongst women.....	167
Mechanisms for the effect of ATG-anxiety on emotional wellbeing	169
The mediating role of religious coping.....	169
ATG as a moderator of the effect of negative events on emotional wellbeing.....	172
The relationship between ATG-avoidance and emotional wellbeing.....	175

What is the ATGS-avoidance subscale assessing?	176
Why does ATG-avoidance predict better emotional wellbeing only in males?.....	179
Summary of study findings.....	180
Chapter Twelve: Limitations, Applications, Contributions and Recommendations of the Present Study	182
Limitations of the present study	182
Measurement limitations.....	182
Generalisability of findings.....	183
Sample size	184
Time frame.....	185
Potential therapeutic applications of study findings	186
Assessment of ATG-anxiety	188
Therapy with Christian clients with high ATG-anxiety.....	188
Therapy with Christian clients with secure ATG.....	189
The influence of emotional wellbeing and negative events on ATG- anxiety.....	192
Summary.....	193
Contributions and strengths of the study	194
Improved research methodology.....	195
Development of an improved ATG measure and identification of ATG measurement issues.....	197
Identification of moderators in the relationship between ATG and mental health.....	200
Identification of mechanisms by which ATG-anxiety may influence mental health	200
Suggestions for future research	202
Improved measurement of ATG-avoidance.....	202
Testing the generalisability of findings.....	202
Further exploration of moderators and mediators.....	204
Additional time points and covariates.....	205
Conclusion.....	206

REFERENCES	209
APPENDICES.....	269
Appendix A: Time 1 Questionnaire	269
Appendix B: Additional Relevant Measures Administered at Time 2.....	275
Appendix C: Information Sheets.....	278
(1) Time 1 information sheet accompanying paper questionnaire	278
(2) Time 1 information sheet accompanying online questionnaire	289
(3) Time 2 information sheet accompanying paper questionnaire	280
(4) Time 2 information sheet accompanying online questionnaire	281
Appendix D: Review of Content Validity of ATG Items.....	282
ATG-Anxiety items	282
ATG-Avoidance items.....	283
Appendix E: Additional Details Relating to Analyses of the ATGS	285
Items deleted in forming the ATGS.....	285
Unstandardised factor loadings for ATGS items.....	288
Cross-validation of the ATGS	289
Relationships between the ATGS and relevant measures	289
Exploring whether ATGS items tap emotional wellbeing.....	292
Appendix F: Additional Details Relating to Analyses of Emotional Wellbeing Measures.....	293
Individual CFAs of emotional wellbeing measures.....	293
CES-D.....	293
PANAS-N.....	294
Affectometer 2	294
Analyses relating to the combined emotional wellbeing model.....	295
Appendix G: Additional Details of Analyses Relating to the Brief RCOPE	297
Appendix H: Additional Details of Analyses Relating to Hypothesis 1 (Cross- Lagged Relationships).....	298
Appendix I: Additional Details of Analyses Relating to Hypothesis 2 (Gender Moderation).....	301
Appendix J: Additional Details of Analyses Relating to Hypothesis 3 (Negative Events Moderation)	305

Appendix K: Additional Details of Analyses Relating to Hypothesis 4 (Religious Coping Mediation).....	310
Appendix L: Additional Details of Analyses Relating to Hypothesis 5 (ATG Moderation).....	312

List of Figures

<i>Figure 1.</i> Attachment style dimensions and categories.....	43
<i>Figure 2.</i> Depiction of mediator and moderator effects in the relationships between human attachment style, negative events, coping, and mental health.....	71
<i>Figure 3.</i> Hypothesised models depicting mediation of religious coping in the relationship between ATG and mental health	76
<i>Figure 4.</i> Hypothesised and competing models depicting relationships between ATG and mental health over time	82
<i>Figure 5.</i> Mediation of religious coping styles in the relationship between ATG styles and emotional wellbeing	88
<i>Figure 6.</i> Hypothesised and competing models depicting relationships between ATG and emotional wellbeing over time	119
<i>Figure 7.</i> The hypothesised effects model, showing measurement and structural portions.....	120
<i>Figure 8.</i> Models planned to test the mediating role of religious coping in the relationship between ATG and emotional wellbeing	122
<i>Figure 9.</i> Model planned to test the effect of negative events severity on emotional wellbeing in ATG groups	123
<i>Figure 10.</i> Structure of the ATGS, with standardised coefficients	132
<i>Figure 11.</i> Final emotional wellbeing model with standardised coefficients	136
<i>Figure 12.</i> Brief RCOPE model with standardised coefficients and fit statistics	137
<i>Figure 13.</i> Models A to D, depicting possible relationships between ATG and emotional wellbeing	141
<i>Figure 14.</i> Standardised coefficients and fit statistics for hypothesised effects model	142
<i>Figure 15.</i> Standardised coefficients and fit statistics for stability model in females and hypothesised effects model in males.....	145

<i>Figure 16.</i> Standardised coefficients and fit statistics for stability model in low negative events group and reciprocal effects model in high negative events group.....	148
<i>Figure 17.</i> Standardised coefficients and fit statistics for reverse effects model in female high negative events group.....	150
<i>Figure 18.</i> Standardised coefficients and fit statistics for model in which APA mediates the relationship between baseline ATG-anxiety and Time 2 emotional wellbeing, controlling for baseline emotional wellbeing and ATG-avoidance.....	152
<i>Figure 19.</i> Standardised coefficients and fit statistics for model testing the effects of negative events on emotional wellbeing in secure/dismissing and preoccupied ATG groups	154

Figures Appearing in the Appendices

<i>Figure H1.</i> The stability model, showing measurement and structural portions	298
<i>Figure H2.</i> Full depiction of hypothesised effects model.....	300
<i>Figure I1.</i> Full depiction of stability model in females and hypothesised effects model in males.....	303
<i>Figure J1.</i> Full depiction of stability model in low negative events group and reciprocal effects model in high negative events group	307
<i>Figure J2.</i> Full depiction of reverse effects model in female high negative events group	309
<i>Figure K1.</i> Full depiction of model in which APA mediates the relationship between baseline ATG-anxiety and Time 2 emotional wellbeing, controlling for baseline emotional wellbeing and ATG-avoidance.....	310
<i>Figure L1.</i> Full depiction of model testing the effects of negative events on emotional wellbeing in secure/dismissing and preoccupied ATG groups	314
<i>Figure L2.</i> Standardised coefficients and fit statistics for model testing the effects of negative events on emotional wellbeing in secure/dismissing and preoccupied ATG groups using full set of indicators for latent variables.....	315

List of Tables

<i>Table 1.</i> Demographic Characteristics of the Sample at Time 1 and Time 2.....	93
<i>Table 2.</i> Descriptive Statistics for Key Measures at Time 1 and Time 2.....	128
<i>Table 3.</i> Fit Statistics for ATGS Models.....	131

<i>Table 4.</i> Fit Statistics for Emotional Wellbeing Models	135
<i>Table 5.</i> Latent Correlations Among Study Variables	139
<i>Table 6.</i> Unique Proportion of Variance in Emotional Wellbeing Variables Accounted for by Negative Events Severity in Secure/Dismissing and Preoccupied ATG Groups	155

Tables Appearing in the Appendices

<i>Table E1.</i> First Set of Items Deleted from the ATG Scales	285
<i>Table E2.</i> Second Set of Items Deleted from the ATG Scales.....	286
<i>Table E3.</i> Unstandardised Factor Loadings with Standard Errors and p-values for ATGS	288
<i>Table E4.</i> Test of Measurement Invariance of ATGS Across Development and Cross-Validation Samples	289
<i>Table E5.</i> Latent Relationships Between ATG Dimensions and Relevant Constructs.....	291
<i>Table E6.</i> Fit Statistics for Models of ATG-Anxiety and Negative Affect.....	292
<i>Table F1.</i> Fit Statistics for CES-D Models	293
<i>Table F2.</i> Fit Statistics for PANAS Models.....	294
<i>Table F3.</i> Fit Statistics for Affectometer 2 Models.....	295
<i>Table F4.</i> Unstandardised Factor Loadings with Standard Errors and p-values for Emotional Wellbeing Model.....	295
<i>Table F5.</i> Tests of Measurement Invariance of Emotional Wellbeing Model Across Development and Cross-Validation Samples.....	296
<i>Table G1.</i> Unstandardised Factor Loadings with Standard Errors and p-values for Brief RCOPE Model.....	297
<i>Table G2.</i> Tests of Measurement Invariance of Brief RCOPE Across Development and Cross-Validation Samples.....	297
<i>Table H1.</i> Tests of Measurement Invariance Over Time for the Stability Model.....	299
<i>Table H2.</i> Chi-square Test of Competing Models A to D in Full Sample	299
<i>Table H3.</i> Unstandardised Coefficients with Standard Errors and p-values for Key Paths in Hypothesised Effects Model Tested in the Full Sample	300
<i>Table I1.</i> Means and Standard Deviations of ATG and Emotional Wellbeing Variables for Males and Females	301
<i>Table I2.</i> Chi-square Test of Competing Models A to D in Females and Males	302

<i>Table I3.</i> Unstandardised Coefficients with Standard Errors and p-values for Key Paths in Favoured Models Tested in the Female and Male samples	304
<i>Table I4.</i> Standardised Coefficients for Cross-Sectional Latent Relationships Between ATG and Emotional Wellbeing Variables in Females and Males, Controlling for Human Attachment and the Opposite ATG Dimension.....	304
<i>Table J1.</i> Means and Standard Deviations of ATG and Emotional Wellbeing Variables for High and Low Negative Events Groups.....	305
<i>Table J2.</i> Chi-square Test of Competing Models A to D in Low and High Negative Events Groups	306
<i>Table J3.</i> Unstandardised Coefficients with Standard Errors and p-values for Key Paths in Favoured Models Tested in the Low and High Negative Events Groups	308
<i>Table J4.</i> Chi-square Test of Competing Models A to D in Female Members of the High Negative Events Group.....	308
<i>Table J5.</i> Unstandardised Coefficients with Standard Errors and p-values for Key Paths in Reverse Effects Model in the Female High Negative Events Group...	309
<i>Table K1.</i> Unstandardised Coefficients with Standard Errors and p-values for Key Paths in Mediation Model.....	311
<i>Table L1.</i> Means and Standard Deviations of Negative Events Severity and Emotional Wellbeing Variables for Secure/Dismissing and Preoccupied ATG Groups	312
<i>Table L2.</i> Tests of Measurement Invariance Across Time and Groups (Secure/Dismissing ATG vs. Preoccupied ATG).....	313
<i>Table L3.</i> Unstandardised Coefficients with Standard Errors and p-values for Key Paths in Model Depicting Negative Events Predicting Emotional Wellbeing in Secure/Dismissing vs. Preoccupied ATG groups	314