

ILLUMINATING THE PATH OF RECOVERY: SPIRITUAL TRANSCENDENCE, MEANING IN LIFE, AND POST-TRAUMATIC GROWTH IN BURN SURVIVORS

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Abstract

Burn injury is a profoundly traumatic experience that often disrupts survivors' psychological, emotional, and existential well-being. Emerging research suggests that spiritual transcendence and meaning in life can serve as vital psychological resources, fostering post-traumatic growth and aiding recovery among burn survivors. The current study was conducted with the aim to investigate the relationship among spiritual transcendence, meaning in life, and post-traumatic growth in burn survivors. A correlational research design with a purposive sampling technique was employed to collect data from Lahore and Islamabad burn units (N = 200; n=100 men and n =100 women). The study utilized the Spiritual Transcendence Scale (Piedmont, 1999), the Post-Traumatic Growth Scale (Baker et al., 2008), and the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MILQ) (Steger et al., 2006). The results revealed that among the dimensions of spiritual transcendence, prayer fulfillment emerged as a significant predictor of both meaning in life (presence and search) and several components of post-traumatic growth—including relating to others, spiritual change, and appreciation of life. Connectedness showed a weaker yet significant association with relating to others, whereas universality did not significantly predict meaning in life or post-traumatic growth. The study suggests that spiritual transcendence, particularly prayer fulfillment, enhances meaning in life and fosters post-traumatic growth in burn survivors, supporting their positive psychological adaptation after trauma.

Keywords: Burn survivors, spiritual transcendence, meaning in life, and post-traumatic growth

Introduction

Burn injuries remain a substantial global public-health problem, with the heaviest burden borne by low- and middle-income countries. The World Health Organization estimates approximately 180,000 burn-related deaths annually and emphasizes that non-fatal burns produce long-term physical, psychological, and social consequences that require comprehensive care (WHO, 2023). Population studies and global burden analyses further document millions of new burn cases each year and substantial years-lived-with-disability attributable to burns, highlighting the scale and enduring impact of these injuries (Yakupu et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2025). Beyond the immediate threat to life, burn survivors commonly face protracted pain, scarring, functional limitations, and repeated medical interventions, all of which complicate rehabilitation and quality of life (Al Hanna et al., 2024; Kornhaber et al., 2025).

The psychological sequelae of burn injury are both prevalent and multifaceted. Systematic

reviews and matched-cohort studies report elevated rates of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress symptoms among survivors compared with population norms, with pooled estimates of clinically meaningful PTSD symptoms frequently reported in the range of roughly 15–25% depending on sample and timing of assessment (Kang-Auger et al., 2024; Boersma-van Dam et al., 2025). Chronic pain, altered body image, and social stigma particularly for those with visible facial or hand burns further undermine social participation and life satisfaction (Hutter et al., 2024; Kankam et al., 2025). These psychosocial consequences underscore that recovery from burns is not purely biomedical but intrinsically psychosocial and existential.

Despite this knowledge, important gaps remain. Many epidemiological studies emphasize physical outcomes while neglecting long-term social participation and existential recovery; recent work therefore advocates for measures that capture survivors' lived experience, social roles, and participation (Ryan et al., 2025). Moreover, although associations between spirituality, meaning, and PTG have been reported, the pathways linking spiritual transcendence and meaning-making to PTG in burn survivors require additional empirical clarity, particularly in diverse cultural settings. These lacunae motivate the present study, which investigates how spiritual transcendence and meaning in life relate to post-traumatic growth among burn survivors an inquiry that addresses both the clinical need for holistic rehabilitation and the theoretical imperative to understand the existential dimensions of trauma recovery.

Spiritual Transcendence refers to the capacity of individuals to view themselves and their lives as part of a larger, meaningful reality that extends beyond their immediate physical existence and personal concerns. It encompasses a sense of connectedness to something greater whether conceptualized as the divine, humanity, nature, or the universe which provides purpose, coherence, and inner peace, particularly in the face of adversity (Piedmont, 1999). Unlike traditional religiosity, which is tied to formal doctrines or rituals, spiritual transcendence reflects a universal human capacity that can be experienced both within and outside specific religious frameworks (Piedmont & Leach, 2002). This makes it especially relevant in clinical and multicultural contexts, where individuals may draw on diverse belief systems or personal philosophies to cope with trauma.

In the context of burn injury, where survivors often face profound disruptions to their physical integrity, identity, and worldview, spiritual transcendence may serve as a crucial inner resource. It can help individuals integrate traumatic experiences into a broader life narrative, fostering a sense of continuity and coherence despite physical and emotional suffering (Connor et al., 2023). This transcendent perspective can not only buffer psychological distress but also promote post-traumatic growth, including enhanced personal strength, appreciation of life, and improved relationships. Understanding spiritual transcendence in burn survivors may therefore illuminate pathways through which people transform trauma into growth, making it a vital construct to explore in psychosocial rehabilitation research.

Meaning in life refers to the sense that one's existence is purposeful, coherent, and significant within a broader context. It encompasses three interrelated components: coherence (understanding life as structured and comprehensible), purpose (having valued goals and direction), and significance (feeling that one's life matters) (Martela & Steger, 2016). This construct has gained increasing attention in psychological research for its crucial role in human well-being, resilience, and post-adversity adjustment. Unlike transient emotional states, meaning in life provides a stable framework through which individuals interpret experiences and navigate challenges, making it especially vital for people facing major life disruptions such as burn injury.

In populations who have experienced profound physical trauma, such as burn survivors, the restoration or discovery of meaning can be pivotal for achieving post-traumatic growth (PTG). Meaning-making allows individuals to integrate the traumatic event into their life narrative and construct new life goals that align with their changed circumstances (Hefferon et al., 2009).

Research with trauma-exposed patients has shown that meaning in life predicts higher levels of PTG, including enhanced personal strength, spiritual change, and appreciation of life (Triplett et al., 2012; Chong et al., 2023). Thus, examining meaning in life in burn survivors can help clarify how individuals transform suffering into growth, guiding interventions aimed at psychological rehabilitation and holistic recovery.

Post-traumatic growth (PTG) refers to the experience of positive psychological change that occurs as a result of struggling with highly challenging life events or trauma (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). PTG is characterized by enhanced appreciation of life, improved relationships, increased personal strength, recognition of new possibilities, and spiritual or existential development. Unlike resilience, which involves returning to pre-trauma functioning, PTG implies a transformation to a higher level of psychological functioning. This distinction is particularly relevant in the context of burn injuries, which often disrupt not only the body but also an individual's identity, worldview, and sense of life continuity. Burn survivors are frequently confronted with intense physical pain, visible disfigurement, functional impairment, and lengthy medical treatment, all of which can challenge their fundamental beliefs about the self and the world (Kornhaber et al., 2025).

Burn survivors often experience a range of mental health challenges, including symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, depression, anxiety, and difficulties in adjusting to physical and emotional changes after the trauma. Mental health is a state of well-being in which an individual realizes their abilities, can cope with normal stresses of life, work productively, and contribute to their community (Khizer et al., 2024; Tariq et al., 2024; Sadaf et al., 2024; Khan et al., 2021; Sabri et al., 2021). These psychological struggles can hinder their overall recovery and quality of life. Quality of life is the overall sense of well-being and satisfaction a person experiences in relation to their physical health, psychological state, social relationships, and ability to function in daily life (Iqbal & Ijaz, 2025; Hameed et al., 2022; Gillani et al., 20022). However, the presence of strong social support networks such as caring family members, friends, and supportive healthcare professionals can significantly buffer the negative psychological impact of their experiences (Zulfiqar et al., 2025; Iqbal et al., 2025; Umar et al., 2024; Kazmi et al., 2023; Javed et al., 2021). Likewise, self-compassion enables survivors to approach their pain with kindness and understanding rather than self-criticism, fostering emotional resilience (Javed et al., 2022). Together, social support and self-compassion act as protective factors that promote positive adaptation, helping burn survivors find meaning in their suffering and supporting their journey toward post-traumatic growth (Iqbal et al., 2025).

Despite the growing global interest in understanding post-traumatic growth (PTG), there remains a significant gap in research focusing on burn injury survivors within Pakistan, where burn injuries are prevalent due to domestic accidents, industrial hazards, and in some cases, interpersonal violence. Survivors in Pakistan often face not only physical disfigurement and chronic pain but also social stigma, discrimination, and limited access to psychosocial rehabilitation services, which can intensify their psychological distress and impede recovery (Nasrullah et al., 2022). Exploring the roles of spiritual transcendence and meaning in life as predictors of PTG is particularly relevant in this cultural context, as Pakistani society places strong emphasis on spirituality, religious beliefs, and collective support systems that may facilitate positive psychological transformation after trauma. By investigating these factors, this study aims to provide culturally sensitive insights that can inform the development of holistic interventions and psychosocial support programs tailored to the unique sociocultural and spiritual framework of Pakistan, ultimately promoting psychological well-being and recovery among burn survivors.

Objectives of the Study

- To investigate the relationship among spiritual transcendence, meaning in life, and post-

traumatic growth in burn survivors.

- To find out the predicting role of spiritual transcendence on post-traumatic growth in burn survivors.
- To determine the gender difference on the level of post-traumatic growth in burn survivors.

Hypotheses of the Study

- There would likely to be significant positive relationship among spiritual transcendence, meaning in life, and post-traumatic growth in burn survivors.
- Spiritual transcendence would likely to be a positive predictor of post-traumatic growth in burn survivors.

Material and Methods

A correlational research design with purposive sampling was employed to collect data. The participants of the study were burn survivors who had experienced moderate to severe burn injuries. Due to the critical nature of their condition, data collection was carried out with utmost care and sensitivity. Given the vulnerability of the sample, strict ethical guidelines were followed throughout the study. A total of 200 burn survivors ($n = 100$ men; $n = 100$ women) participated in the study. Only those who were medically stable, cognitively able to understand the questionnaires, and willing to provide informed consent were included. The survivors completed three self-report measures assessing Spiritual Transcendence, Meaning in Life, and Post-Traumatic Growth.

The Spiritual Transcendence Scale (STS), developed by Piedmont (1999), was used to assess participants' ability to view life from a broader perspective. It is a 9-item self-report measure comprising three subscales: Prayer Fulfillment (items 1, 4, 8), Universality (items 6, 7, 9), and Connectedness (items 2, 3, 5). Items 5 and 6 are reverse scored. Responses are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*), with higher scores indicating greater spiritual transcendence. In the original validation, the STS demonstrated acceptable internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from .64 to .89 across the subscales.

The Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ), developed by Steger et al. (2006), was used to assess participants' sense of meaning in life. It is a 10-item self-report measure with two subscales: Presence of Meaning (items 1, 4, 5, 6, 9) and Search for Meaning (items 2, 3, 7, 8, 10). Item 9 is reverse scored. Each item is rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*absolutely untrue*) to 7 (*absolutely true*), with higher scores reflecting greater presence or search for meaning. The MLQ has shown strong internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values of .86 for the Presence subscale and .87 for the Search subscale.

The Post-traumatic growth Inventory (PTGI), developed by Baker et al. (2008), was used to measure positive psychological change following trauma. The PTGI is a 21-item self-report scale divided into five subscales: Relating to Others (items 6, 8, 9, 15, 16, 20, 21), New Possibilities (items 3, 7, 11, 14, 17), Personal Strength (items 4, 10, 12, 19), Spiritual Change (items 5, 18), and Appreciation of Life (items 1, 2, 13). Items are rated on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*I did not experience this change as a result of my crisis*) to 5 (*I experienced this change to a very great degree as a result of my crisis*). Higher scores indicate greater post-traumatic growth. The PTGI has demonstrated excellent reliability, with an overall Cronbach's alpha of .90 and subscale alphas ranging from .67 to .85.

Results

Table 1

Descriptive statistics, Mean, Standard Deviation, Range and Skewness of study variables

	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	α	Range		Skewness
					Potential	Actual	
Prayer fulfillment	200	12.17	1.63	.76	5-15	7-15	.41
Universality	200	10.89	1.39	.78	5-15	8-14	.38
Connectedness	200	10.34	2.15	.86	5-15	5-14	-.37
Spiritual Transcendence Total	200	33.40	3.55	.89	9-45	22-41	-.60
Presence of Meaning	200	20.04	3.05	.70	5-25	10-25	.19
Search for Meaning	200	19.68	3.10	.72	5-25	9-25	.17
Meaning in Life Total	200	39.72	5.58	.83	10-50	19-50	.35
Relating to others	200	25.12	4.43	.71	0-35	7-32	.36
New Possibilities	200	16.42	3.73	.81	0-25	6-25	-.30
Personal Strength	200	13.97	2.76	.79	0-20	3-18	.43
Spiritual Change	200	7.51	1.66	.82	0-10	2-10	.24
Appreciation of life	200	10.14	2.25	.75	0-15	3-14	-.65
Post-traumatic Growth Total	200	73.16	12.14	.86	0-105	23-95	.28

Note. N= Total Sample Size, M= Mean, SD= Standard Deviation, α = Cronbach Alpha Reliabilities

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the study variables, including means, standard deviations, potential and actual ranges, skewness, and internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) for the sample of 200 burn survivors. The results indicate that participants reported moderate to high levels across all dimensions of Spiritual Transcendence, Meaning in Life, and Post-Traumatic Growth. Cronbach's alpha values ranged from .70 to .89, suggesting acceptable to good reliability of the measures. Skewness values for all variables were within acceptable limits (−.65 to .43), indicating relatively normal distributions. The table provides a clear overview of central tendencies and variability, reflecting the overall psychological and spiritual experiences of the participants.

Table 2

Pearson Product Moment Correlation of Spiritual Transcendence, Meaning in Life, and Post-Traumatic Growth in Burn Survivors

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Prayer fulfillment	---	.19*	.23*	.67***	.37***	.24*	.34**	.29**	.11*	.11*	.04	.19*	.21**
Universality		---	.44**	.56***	.14*	.03	.09	.13*	.00	.00	.15*	-.01	.06
Connectedness				.79***	.30**	.29**	.33**	.25**	.09	.12*	.27**	.18*	.22*
ST total					.41**	.30**	.39**	.34**	.11*	.13*	.25*	.19*	.25**
Presence						.64***	.80***	.60***	.44**	.56***	.46**	.64***	.67***
Search							.75**	.46***	.38**	.48***	.45**	.54***	.56***
MIL total								.58***	.46**	.57***	.50***	.65***	.67***
Relating to others									.60***	.67***	.49**	.62***	.88***
New possibilities										.54***	.42**	.57***	.81***
Personal strength											.60***	.61***	.83***
Spiritual change.												.40***	.66***
Appreciation of life													.78***
PTG total													

Note. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Table 2 presents the Pearson product-moment correlations among Spiritual Transcendence, Meaning in Life, and Post-Traumatic Growth variables in burn survivors. The subcomponents of Spiritual Transcendence—Prayer Fulfillment, Universality, and Connectedness—showed significant positive correlations with each other and with the total Spiritual Transcendence score, indicating internal consistency. Both Presence of Meaning and Search for Meaning were strongly interrelated and positively correlated with the Meaning in Life total score. Importantly, Spiritual Transcendence and Meaning in Life dimensions demonstrated significant positive associations with the subcomponents and total score of Post-Traumatic Growth, suggesting that higher spiritual and existential well-being is linked to greater post-traumatic growth among burn survivors. Most correlations were statistically significant at $p < .05$, with several reaching $p < .001$, highlighting robust relationships among the study variables.

Table 3

Regression Analysis for Prediction of Spiritual Transcendence on Meaning in life

Variables	Meaning in life					
	Presence			Search		
	β	R^2	F	β	R^2	F
		.14	10.80***		.12	9.03***
Prayer Fulfillment	.27**			.26**		
Universality	.12			.09		
Connectedness	.03			.05		

Note. ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Regression analyses were conducted to examine the predictive effect of Spiritual Transcendence dimensions on Meaning in Life in burn survivors. The results indicated that Prayer Fulfillment significantly predicted both Presence of Meaning ($\beta = .27$, $p < .01$, $R^2 = .14$, $F = 10.80$, $p < .001$) and Search for Meaning ($\beta = .26$, $p < .01$, $R^2 = .12$, $F = 9.03$, $p < .001$). In contrast, Universality and Connectedness did not significantly predict either aspect of Meaning in Life. These findings suggest that among the components of Spiritual Transcendence, Prayer Fulfillment plays a key role in enhancing both the presence and search for meaning in life among burn survivors.

Table 4

Regression Analysis for Prediction of Spiritual Transcendence on Post Traumatic Growth

Variables	Post traumatic growth														
	Relating to Others			New Possibilities			Personal Strength			Spiritual Change			Appreciation of Life		
	<i>B</i>	<i>R</i> ²	<i>F</i>	β	<i>R</i> ²	<i>F</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>R</i> ²	<i>F</i>	β	<i>R</i> ²	<i>F</i>	β	<i>R</i> ²	<i>F</i>
		.15	11.69***		.02	1.96		.03	2.66		.05	3.88*		.05	4.04**
Prayer Fulfilment	.27***			.14			.15			.11			.13		
Universality	.03			.03			.02			.01			.08		
Connectedness	.17*			.07			.05			.15			.08		

Note. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Regression analyses were conducted to examine the predictive effect of Spiritual Transcendence dimensions on Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG) and its subcomponents in burn survivors. Prayer Fulfillment significantly predicted Relating to Others ($\beta = .27$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .15$, $F = 11.69$, $p < .001$), Spiritual Change ($\beta = .11$, $p < .05$, $R^2 = .05$, $F = 3.88$), and Appreciation of Life ($\beta = .13$, $p < .01$, $R^2 = .05$, $F = 4.04$). It also showed smaller but non-significant effects on New Possibilities and Personal Strength. Connectedness significantly predicted Relating to Others ($\beta = .17$, $p < .05$, $R^2 = .07$) and showed moderate non-significant effects on the other PTG dimensions. Universality did not significantly predict any PTG subcomponent. Overall, these findings indicate that Prayer Fulfillment and, to a lesser extent, Connectedness are important aspects of Spiritual Transcendence that contribute to the post-traumatic growth of burn survivors.

Discussion

Experiencing a severe burn injury is a profoundly traumatic event that often challenges individuals' physical, psychological, and spiritual well-being. Burn survivors frequently struggle with pain, disfigurement, and social stigma, which can disrupt their sense of identity and life purpose (Palmu et al., 2018). In the aftermath of such trauma, survivors may engage in cognitive and emotional processes aimed at reconstructing meaning and finding hope. Prior literature suggests that spiritual and existential resources can play a crucial role in facilitating recovery and fostering growth following traumatic experiences (Park, 2016; Pargament, 2011). The current study explored how spiritual transcendence, meaning in life, and post-traumatic growth are interrelated among burn survivors, contributing to a growing understanding of the psychological mechanisms underlying resilience and positive adaptation after trauma.

The present findings revealed that the subcomponents of spiritual transcendence—Prayer Fulfillment, Universality, and Connectedness—were positively interrelated and also significantly associated with meaning in life and post-traumatic growth. This aligns with prior research indicating that spirituality often serves as a vital coping resource following trauma. For instance, spiritual beliefs can foster a sense of coherence, hope, and acceptance, which in turn facilitate growth after adversity (Pargament, 2011; Park, 2016). Burn injuries are typically accompanied by physical pain, psychological distress, and disruptions in identity; in this context, spiritual transcendence may offer survivors a framework to reinterpret suffering, develop resilience, and rebuild a positive self-concept. The strong intercorrelations among spiritual transcendence dimensions observed in this study support the notion that transcending the self through connectedness to a higher purpose or to humanity fosters adaptive meaning-making processes crucial for recovery.

Similarly, the results demonstrated that both Presence of Meaning and Search for Meaning were positively linked to post-traumatic growth in burn survivors, echoing evidence that meaning-making is central to recovery from traumatic experiences (Park & Folkman, 1997; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Survivors who find or actively seek meaning often reinterpret traumatic events as catalysts for personal transformation, which facilitates the development of new life goals and deeper appreciation for life. The observed associations at $p < .05$ and $p < .001$ levels underscore the robustness of these relationships. These findings suggest that fostering both spiritual transcendence and meaning in life could play a protective and growth-promoting role in the psychological rehabilitation of burn survivors, helping them not only to cope with trauma but also to experience positive psychological change as a result.

The finding that prayer fulfillment significantly predicted both Presence of Meaning and Search for Meaning underscores the central role of personal spiritual practices in fostering meaning in life among burn survivors. Prayer has been widely documented as a coping mechanism that provides comfort, emotional regulation, and a sense of purpose during adversity (Pargament, 2011; Ai et al., 2007). Through prayer, individuals may reinterpret their suffering as part of a larger spiritual narrative, thereby facilitating both the recognition of existing meaning and the pursuit of new meaning in life. The absence of significant predictive effects from universality and connectedness suggests that internal, personal forms of spirituality may be more directly influential than abstract or relational aspects in the early stages of recovery. This aligns with evidence that personal spiritual practices, rather than generalized beliefs, are more strongly associated with meaning-making and psychological adjustment following trauma (Park, 2016; Shaw et al., 2005).

The finding that prayer fulfillment significantly predicted several subcomponents of post-traumatic growth—particularly Relating to Others, Spiritual Change, and Appreciation of Life—highlights the vital role of personal spiritual practices in fostering growth after trauma. Prayer can provide emotional comfort, strengthen perceived social and divine support, and facilitate cognitive reframing, all of which are key mechanisms underlying post-traumatic

growth (Pargament, 2011; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). This suggests that burn survivors who engage in prayer may find it easier to build closer relationships, develop a renewed sense of spirituality, and appreciate life more deeply following their traumatic experiences. The smaller and non-significant effects on New Possibilities and Personal Strength might reflect that these domains require more active behavioral engagement and time to develop, whereas prayer primarily nurtures emotional and relational growth (Shaw et al., 2005).

Additionally, the finding that connectedness predicted Relating to Others, though to a lesser extent, further underscores the social dimension of spiritual transcendence in recovery. Feeling connected to others and to a broader human community may help survivors rebuild trust and strengthen interpersonal relationships after trauma (Park, 2016). In contrast, the lack of significant effects of universality suggests that more abstract or philosophical beliefs about oneness may not directly translate into personal growth outcomes in the early stages of recovery. Instead, relational and experiential forms of spirituality, such as prayer and connectedness, appear more immediately relevant for promoting post-traumatic growth among burn survivors.

Conclusion of the Study

This study concludes that personal and relational dimensions of spiritual transcendence, particularly prayer fulfillment, play a pivotal role in fostering meaning in life and promoting post-traumatic growth among burn survivors. Prayer fulfillment was found to enhance both the presence and search for meaning, as well as key domains of post-traumatic growth such as relating to others, spiritual change, and appreciation of life. These findings highlight the importance of spiritual and existential resources as protective factors that support psychological recovery and resilience following traumatic injury. Cultivating spiritual practices may therefore be a valuable component of holistic rehabilitation programs for burn survivors.

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