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Kimberly N. Snow

Mark R. McMinn

George Fox University, mmcminn@georgefox.edu

Rodger K. Bufford

George Fox University, rbufford@georgefox.edu

Irv Brendlinger

George Fox University, ibrendli@georgefox.edu

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RESOLVING ANGER TOWARD GOD: LAMENT AS AN AVENUE TOWARD ATTACHMENT

KIMBERLY N. SNOW, MARK R. MCMINN,
RODGER K. BUFFORD, AND IRV A. BRENDLINGER
George Fox University

Psychologists have mostly overlooked the topic of anger toward God. The current study tested an intervention based on the biblical psalms of lament, consisting of 20 devotional readings and weekly experiential assignments, delivered electronically over a four-week period. A total of 192 college students at Christian institutions across the United States completed the study, and were randomly assigned to the experimental condition, an attention control condition, or a no-contact condition. The expected findings—that the experimental intervention would cause decreased feelings of anger and complaint toward God, as well as increased intimacy with God over time—were not confirmed. However, those participants who reported maximum compliance with the intervention showed increased ratings on Communion with God. Implications are discussed.

“I love God.” Countless believers throughout time have uttered this phrase. But what about the other side of human emotions? What about anger or frustration toward God? Anger toward the divine is nothing new, though it may remain a taboo subject among certain religious groups. Anger, confusion, disillusionment, and frustration with God have affected numerous people throughout centuries. Within the Old Testament, the Book of Psalms is full of honest discourse with God that reflects the gamut of emotions. For example, recorded as the 13th Psalm, we find the following words of angst and desperation (Book of Psalms, NIV, 2000): “How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart?”

Relationship with the divine is a topic that has been long explored, both by theologians and social scientists. However, the topic of anger and disappointment toward God, though valued within religious literature, has been mostly neglected within psychological research until recently. A number of articles pioneering the subject have now emerged (e.g., Exline & Martin, 2005; Wood, Worthington, Exline, Yali, Aten & McMinn, 2010).

Anger toward God is certainly not an uncommon phenomenon. A recent study examined the prevalence of anger toward God in a large national sample revealing that 62% of Americans sometimes experience anger toward God, while 2.5% reported that they are often angry with God (Exline, Park, Smyth, & Carey, 2011). According to this data, anger toward God is a relevant topic affecting a majority of Americans at some time during their lives, while a minority of individuals experience anger toward God on a frequent or persistent basis. Beyond being a widespread phenomena, Exline et al. (2011) concluded that anger toward God is measurable within a variety of contexts and populations.

Relevance of Anger toward God

To grasp the importance of anger toward God, it is helpful to consider the broader phenomenon of religious struggle and coping. When people are faced with stressful life events or crises, they often turn to religion as a resource for coping. In fact, studies have shown that a majority of Americans employ religious coping during difficult times (Schottenbauer, Klimes-Dougan, Rodriguez, Arnkoff, Glass, et al., 2006). Religious coping is multidimensional; it refers to the vast array of ways that people think, feel, and behave regarding their religious beliefs following a stressful event (Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 1998).

Many methods of religious coping have been identified and categorized; for example, the terms positive and negative religious coping have been coined, referring to patterns of religious coping that have been associated with either positive health benefits or health risks (Zinnbauer, & Pargament, 2005). Four broad categories of religious coping have been defined as: 1) passively *deferring* control of life to God, 2) *self-directing*, seeking control through personal initiative rather than through God, 3) *pleading* in order to work through God via petitioning, and 4) *collaborative*, partnering with God in problem-solving (Pargament, 1997). These four categories are not easily confined to either positive or negative religious coping, but are better judged on the basis of situational appropriateness. Positive religious coping may include a collaborative approach, seeking comfort by God, and looking to religion to help with letting go of anger, hurt, and fear. Negative religious coping may be characterized by punitive religious reappraisals, reappraisals of God's powers, and spiritual discontent (Pargament et al., 1998). While anger toward God may fall within either the positive or negative camp, it is likely that persistent unremitting anger toward God is a form of negative religious coping, and thus correlated with numerous health risks.

Anger toward God has been associated with psychological problems, emotional distress, and poorer adjustment to major life stressors such as bereavement, cancer, and homelessness (Exline et al., 2011; Exline, Yali, & Lobel, 1999; Smith & Exline, 2002; Wood et al., 2009). For example, disappointment and anger toward God have been positively correlated with anger, depression, stress, anxiety, low self-esteem, insecure attachment and entitlement (Exline & Martin, 2005; Strelan, Acton, & Patrick, 2009; Wood et al., 2009). It has also been negatively correlated with optimism and life satisfaction (Wood et al., 2009). Spiritual struggle, as assessed by a measure of negative religious coping, has been significantly correlated with anxiety, depression, paranoid ideation, obsessive-compulsiveness, and somatization, among other psychopathologies (McConnell, Pargament, Ellison, & Flannelly, 2006; Pargament, Murray-Swank, Magyar, & Ano, 2005). Although these data have been primarily correlational in nature, it is clear that anger toward God is a theme running through the psychological distress of some individuals. Interestingly, it even appears to be a relevant topic in the lives of individuals who describe themselves as non-religious (Exline et al., 2011).

One preliminary study showed that people who described themselves as less religious tended to report more anger involving God (or the idea of God) than their religious counterparts. When asked about their religious beliefs these individuals endorsed "atheist/agnostic" or "none/unsure," yet further analysis revealed that these individuals had believed in God's existence (or the possibility of God's existence) at some time prior to the study (Exline, Fisher, Rose, & Kampani, 2004). In a study of undergraduate students, 9% of respondents said they resolved their negative feelings toward God by deciding not to believe in God (Exline, 2002). These findings suggest that anger toward God may result in a loss of faith, perhaps even misotheism, a recent term denoting a belief system of hatred toward God (Holmes, 2000; Schweizer, 2010).

Religious commitment and perceived closeness to God have been correlated with lower levels of anger toward God (Exline et al., 2011). In some cases, religiosity and perceived closeness to God may serve as protective factors, guarding against the experience of anger toward God. The possibility remains as well that these findings are based on impression management; that is, individuals who believe that anger toward God is morally unacceptable may be reticent to admit having such feelings (Exline & Martin, 2005).

Finally, research has demonstrated a correlation between negative religious coping and poorer physical health and adjustment to illness (Exline & Martin, 2005; Gall, Kristjansson, Charbonneau, & Florack, 2009). In a study of medically ill elderly patients, two items evaluating negative religious reappraisals were found to predict mortality: "Wondered whether God had abandoned me" and "Questioned God's love for me" (Pargament, Koenig, Tarakeshwar, & Hahn, 2001). In another longitudinal study, anger toward God was correlated with poorer recovery of patients with various medical diagnoses. Recovery was evaluated by performance on activities of daily living, with anger toward God accounting for 9% of the variance in activities of daily living (Fitchett, Rybarczyk, DeMarco, & Nicholas, 1999).

Suffering and Anger toward God

Anger toward God can occur following any kind of suffering, particularly when the individual perceives the suffering unfair. In a study of homeless

individuals, a majority (60%) of respondents reported that becoming homeless “led to problems in their relationship with God” (Smith & Exline, 2002). It has been suggested that misfortune may lead people to simultaneously curse and embrace God, as they attribute blame to God as a moral agent, and yet cling to God in a desire to secure future safety (Gray & Wegner, 2010). People who have a strong sense of justice may have greater difficulty with suffering, both on a small and large scale (Exline et al., 2011).

People may find themselves angry at God on account of their own personal suffering, the suffering of a loved one, or even suffering and pain on a grander worldwide scale (Novotni & Petersen, 2001). The latter has been referred to within religious communities as the problem of pain, and the topic has been expounded within the popular literature by theologians and laypeople alike (Boyd, 2003; Davis, 1981; Kushner, 1981; Lewis, 2001; Lewis, 1973; Phillips, 2005; Young, 2007). Theodicy refers to the justification of God in light of the so-called problem of pain or problem of evil. The primary struggle is to make sense of how evil can exist in the world if God is both loving and all-powerful.

For some individuals, this struggle leads to doubts about the goodness of God, the power of God, or even doubts regarding God’s existence (Davis, 1981). In their desire for theological answers, people may change their beliefs; many are left unsatisfied. In order to make sense of suffering, people may take on the belief that God is all good, but not all powerful; others decide that God is all powerful, but not all good; others choose not to believe in God; still others embrace the sacred mystery, believing that God is both all powerful and all good, despite the suffering in the world.

People struggling with theological questions may find it difficult to discuss these issues with others in their faith community. This can be due to the fact that within religious communities, doubting may be viewed as a threat to faith, and therefore regarded as irreligious. However, it has been argued that doubt is a normal occurrence, and that acknowledgement of doubt, rather than suppression, may result in greater well-being and faith (Taylor, 1992).

Resolving Anger toward God

In a study of undergraduate students, 80% of individuals who reported anger toward God also reported that their anger had lessened over time.

They attributed the decrease in their anger to the following: gaining insight into “why” (27%); passage of time (27%); benign reappraisal of God’s intentions (25%); acceptance (18%); some good outcome (14%); saw as God’s will (12%); problem went away (11%); God not at fault (11%); stopped believing in God (9%) (Exline, 2002). These self-report data show that most people resolve their anger toward God over time, though their means of accomplishing this task are highly varied. About one fourth resolved their problems because the problem went away or because of some (likely unanticipated) good outcome. It appears that most of the other participants in this study employed primarily cognitive means of resolving their anger.

Cognitive reframing and meaning-making are two popular avenues for exploring negative feelings toward God (Exline & Martin, 2005), but experiential avenues to resolving anger have also been posited. *Solace for the Soul: A Journey Towards Wholeness* was created as a spiritually-integrated intervention specifically for female survivors of traumatic sexual abuse (Murray-Swank & Pargament, 2005). The program targeted seven themes, including the theme of abandonment and anger toward God. Among other things, the intervention utilizes prayer and two-way journaling to God. Prayer interventions have also been used with more general audiences (Zornow, 2001). Combining both cognitive *and* affective means of resolving anger makes sense when anger toward God is viewed as a relationship problem.

Emotions in Relationship to God

Beck has argued that human relationships with God have an emotional dynamic that resembles human love relationships (Beck, 2007). Out of the theories of attachment, object-relations, and triangular love, Beck identified the two salient coexisting themes of Communion with God and Complaint against God (Beck, 2006). Beck’s Communion/Complaint Circumplex Model illustrates four styles of attachment with God (Beck, 2007). The model consists of two spectra, which form four quadrants. The spectra are High Complaint versus Low Complaint and High Communion versus Low Communion. The low communion/low complaint quadrant is labeled “disengaged” and refers to a superficial relationship with God, lacking in both intimacy and frustration. The low communion/high complaint quadrant is labeled “critic” and refers to

individuals who are “outside observers,” low in intimacy and highly critical. The high communion/low complaint quadrant represents people who are prone to “summer experiences” in their relationship with God; that is, they are intimate with God, and tend to be free of complaints. Finally, there is a high communion/high complaint category that is referred to as “winter experiences.” This quadrant allows for high levels of both intimacy *and* complaint. It is this quadrant that seems to be least understood.

The term “winter experiences” was borrowed from Christian scholar Martin Marty (1997), and refers to the experiences of a believer who is fully engaged with God, yet commonly experiences disappointment, frustration, and other forms of negativity (Beck, 2006). Just as a married person might truly desire reconciliation with their spouse (and therefore work through, rather than deny or avoid their anger), it is most productive for anger with God to be resolved when people *want* to work things out. Therefore, people high in Complaint as well as Communion (in Beck’s model) may be the best candidates for this type of work. When complaint is brought into relationship with God, even if the complaint is directed *toward* God, it may reflect positive aspects of the relationship. While there are certainly negative aspects of complaint, complaint can also be a sign of safety, openness, and trust within a relationship. It is this aspect of “winter experiences” that is perhaps emotionally and spiritually undervalued.

In a study of Australian Christians from diverse spiritual traditions, Strelan et al. (2009) found that Christians committed to their relationship with God, spiritually mature individuals, and those who possess dispositional forgiveness may be best able to sustain an authentic, spiritually-fulfilling relationship with God amidst disappointments, hurt, and consequential complaint. These findings fit with previous research exploring interpersonal forgiveness, relationship commitment, and well-being, and sheds light on the “winter experience” of some Christians (Strelan et al., 2009). Even high levels of complaint toward God do not preclude a person from an intimate relationship with God. This concept is supported by Christian scripture, perhaps most notably within the “psalms of lament.”

Though popularly referred to as simply the psalms of lament, these heart cries include expressions of anger, fear, frustration, and desperation. The psalmist displays the audacity of proclaiming what is wrong in the world, and boldly questions

God’s involvement, God’s personal care for the individual, and God’s goodness in general. Although the psalmist openly discusses anger in relationship with God, a renewed commitment to trust God can be found within some of these psalms as well. Some of the psalms begin with cries of frustration, yet end with declarations of praise; other psalms present a back and forth process, flowing from despair to hope and back again (Villanueva, 2008). All of the psalms illustrate an open exploration of thoughts and feelings. It has been suggested that the psalms of lament offer spiritually healthy examples of struggling with God (Brueggemann, 1984; Macy, 1999; Novotni & Petersen, 2001). It has been argued that if religious communities are to be authentic, they must incorporate lament within their worship services; to focus exclusively on the expression of positive emotions, churches unbiblically deny the harsh realities of life and the full gamut of human experience (Dawn, 1995; Brueggemann, 1984).

Helping people explore their anger toward God may result in positive mental health outcomes while simultaneously maintaining respect for the religious values of persons. To date, mental health interventions have not been aimed necessarily at eliminating spiritual struggle (Exline & Martin, 2005). Ultimately, spiritual struggles may serve as a benefit, resulting in post-traumatic growth (Shaw, Joseph, & Linley, 2005). In the present study, it was hypothesized that a lament intervention would result in decreased feelings of anger toward God and increased feelings of intimacy with God among students at Christian colleges. It was also hypothesized that these changes would be accompanied by an increase in positive religious coping and a decrease in negative religious coping.

METHODS

Participants

Students from private Christian universities in the United States were recruited to participate in the current research. A total of 259 students were initially recruited by contacting college professors, and 192 participants from 10 colleges completed the study. Of these, 100 were in the experimental group, 43 in the attention group, and 49 in the no-contact group. When doing random assignment, the intervention group was intentionally made to be the approximate size of the two control conditions combined.

Three-quarters (75.5%) of participants were female, and one-quarter (24.5%) male. Participants

ranged from 17 to 44 years old, with a mean of 21 years ($SD = 3.4$). Most (84%) were European American, with 6% Multi-Racial, 3% Hispanic/Latino, 2% African-American, 2% Native American, 1.5% Asian-American, 0.5% Egyptian, and 1% No Response.

Participants' religious affiliation was categorized as 78% Christian Protestant, 12% Orthodox, 4% Catholic, 3% Not Religious, 2% Other, and 1% No Response. Participants also rated their level of religious activity and the importance of their religious beliefs. Importance of Religious Beliefs was assessed on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 ("No importance, I have no religion") to 7 ("Extremely Important, religious faith is the center of my life"). Out of 189 responses to this question, the average score was 6.2, reflecting a high level of personal importance given to religious beliefs ($SD = 1.2$).

Instruments

Instruments were chosen for this study based on two factors. First, communion and intimacy with God will be referred to as Communion scales. Second, relationship strain, disappointment and anger toward God will be referred to as Complaint.

The *Attitudes toward God Scale – 9 (ATGS – 9)*, (Wood et al., 2010) was administered as a pre and post test measure of both communion and complaint. The ATGS – 9 measures two factors, Positive Attitudes toward God and Disappointment and Anger toward God. Items are rated on a Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 10 (*extremely*). Across multiple studies, the ATGS – 9 has shown strong estimated internal consistency, and 2-week test-retest reliability (Cronbach alphas for the full scale ranged from .90 to .98, *Positive Attitudes toward God* = .94 to .97, and *Disappointment and Anger toward God* = .73 to .93). The evidence supports the use of the ATGS-9 as a brief measure of anger and disappointment toward God and positive attitudes toward God. In the current study, Cronbach's coefficient alpha was .94 and .88 for ATGS-9 Positive Attitudes toward God and Disappointment and Anger toward God, respectively.

The *Attachment to God Inventory (AGI)* (Beck & McDonald, 2004) was designed to measure two dimensions of attachment with God: Avoidance of Intimacy and Anxiety about Abandonment. The Avoidance dimension includes difficulty depending on God and lack of emotional expression or intimacy toward God. The Anxiety dimension includes feelings of worry, anger, or jealousy in relationship with God.

The AGI employs a Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 7 (*agree strongly*). Across three Christian samples tested, the AGI demonstrated stable factor structure, internal consistency, and construct validity (Beck & McDonald, 2004). Coefficient alphas ranged from .84 to .86 for AGI-Avoidance and .80 to .87 for AGI-Anxiety. Eleven items from the original 28-item inventory were used in this study, based on Communion and Complaint factor analyses (Beck, 2006). The items used for AGI Communion had a Cronbach's coefficient alpha of .86 in this study, and the AGI Complaint items had an alpha of .79.

The *Spiritual Assessment Inventory (SAI)* is a 54-item "relationally-based measure" of Awareness of God and Quality of Relationship with God (Hall & Edwards, 2002). Twenty-six items were selected for use in this study, from four subscales: Awareness, Realistic Acceptance, Disappointment, and Instability. For this study, items were chosen based on correlation to factors of Communion and Complaint (Beck, 2006). Items from the Awareness and Realistic Acceptance subscales were combined and are referred to as SAI Communion. Items from the Disappointment and Instability subscales combined to make the SAI Complaint subscale in the current study. A Likert-type scale is used, ranging from 1 (*not at all true*) to 5 (*very true*). Items include the following: "There are times when I feel disappointed with God" (Complaint), and a follow-up question: "When this happens, I still want our relationship to continue" (Communion). The SAI Communion and Complaint scales in this study obtained coefficient alphas of .92 and .91, respectively.

The *Spiritual Well-Being Scale* is one of the most frequently used scales measuring religious functioning. A short version of the Spiritual Well-Being Scale (SWB-6) was used in this study (Bufford, 2009). The SWB uses a rating scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). The SWB-6 has shown internal consistencies ranging from .65 to .83 across three samples. Regression analysis has shown that these six items account for at least 94% of the variance on the full SWB. The SWB-6 obtained a coefficient alpha of .68 in this study.

The *Brief Religious Coping Scale (RCOPE)* (Pargament et al., 1998) consists of 14 items assessing clusters of positive and negative coping strategies. The instrument uses a rating scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 4 (*a great deal*). The RCOPE has been validated in a variety of studies as a useful comprehensive measure of religious coping, while the Brief RCOPE is

an acceptable, albeit less-comprehensive version of the original. Development studies show strong internal consistency, with coefficient alphas ranging from .69 to .90. In this study, the coefficient alphas were .86 for Positive Religious Coping and .79 for Negative Religious Coping.

Procedure and Interventions

Participants were recruited in January of 2009 by emailing psychology professors at several Christian colleges and universities across the United States. Professors who showed interest in recruiting students for participation were sent instructions and informed consent forms for students. Students were informed that the current research pertained to attitudes toward God; they were not informed of specifics beyond this. In other words, participants were not recruited based on their baseline level of anger toward God. After the completed sign-up sheets and informed consent forms were returned, student volunteers were contacted via email. The initial contact email contained a link to the online questionnaire as well as an explanation of the research. A prize was offered to one student who was randomly selected upon completion of the study.

The online questionnaire was comprised of a demographics section and the instruments used in the study. Participants were then randomly assigned to one of three groups: an experimental group, an attention control group, or a no-contact group. For every two participants who were assigned to the experimental group, one participant was assigned to each of the other two groups. This was done in order to maximize the size of the experimental group in case of attrition. Each group then received further instructions via email, including the daily interventions provided to the experimental and attention control groups.

Zornow created *Crying Out to God: Prayer in the Midst of Suffering*, as an intervention based on the Old Testament lament psalms (Zornow, 2001). Zornow addresses topics such as: principles and obstacles to crying out to God in prayer, a spirituality of anger, fear and intimacy in addressing God, and coping with spiritual ambivalence. The experimental group received material adapted from Zornow for use in the current study (2009; see Appendix for intervention sample). Participants in this group received reading material based on the lament psalms five days per week for four consecutive weeks. At the end of each week, they were sent a reflection and an experiential

assignment. Participants were asked to read the material and respond via email to the weekly assignment. The lament psalm material approaches several topics related to authenticity in relationship with God, encouraging participants to explore new ways of relating to God honestly and intimately. Pain and suffering, forgiveness, reconciliation, and acceptance of ambiguity and paradox within the life of faith are some of the topics addressed.

Those in the attention control group were also sent daily emails and weekly assignments in the same manner as the first group. The material they received were daily devotional readings by popular Christian authors. Various topics relating to Christianity were explored, rather than a common theme. The no-contact group received no intervention and acted as a true control group.

At the end of the four weeks, participants in each group were directed to take the online survey a second time. Participants were allowed up to two weeks to complete the ATGS – 9, AGI, SWB-6, Brief RCOPE, and SAI online. In addition, participants in the experimental and attention groups were asked to answer questions at the conclusion of the survey pertaining to their level of participation and reaction to the material. All participants were given the opportunity to request a summary of the research.

RESULTS

We expected the experimental group to show decreased feelings of anger toward God and increased feelings of intimacy with God at posttest when compared to the two control groups. Specifically, we expected that scores on the Complaint scales would decrease and scores on the Communion scales would increase from pretest to posttest for the experimental group, but not for the control groups. Complaint and Anger were assessed by three measures: ATGS-Complaint, AGI-Complaint, SAI-Complaint. Communion was assessed by four measures: ATGS-Communion, AGI-Communion, SAI-Communion, SWB-6. For each of these measures, a repeated-measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) was computed to test this hypothesis, with experimental condition as the between-groups factor and pretest to posttest being the within-groups factor. In order to support this hypothesis, an interaction effect would have to show that participants in the experimental group demonstrated relatively greater decrease in Complaint and relatively greater increase in Communion than

TABLE 1
Pretest and Posttest Scores for Experimental, Attention Control and No-Contact Groups

Scale	Experimental (n=100)		Attention) Control (n=43)		No-Contact (n=49)		Findings
	Pretest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest	
ATGS-9 Communion	7.6 (1.3)	7.8 (1.2)	7.4 (1.8)	7.5 (1.7)	7.7 (1.7)	7.9 (1.7)	No main effects, no interactions
AGI Communion	5.1 (1.1)	5.3 (1.1)	4.7 (1.5)	4.9 (1.3)	5.2 (1.1)	5.1 (1.1)	No main effects, no interactions
SAI Communion	3.8 (0.8)	4.0 (0.8)	3.5 (1.0)	3.6 (1.0)	3.9 (0.0)	3.9 (0.9)	Repeated measures effect, $F(1, 189) = 4.23^*$, no between-groups effect, no interactions
SWB-6	4.7 (0.8)	4.8 (0.7)	4.6 (0.8)	4.7 (0.90)	4.8 (0.7)	4.8 (0.7)	No main effects, no interactions
ATGS-9 Complaint	2.3 (1.6)	2.3 (1.5)	2.4 (1.6)	2.2 (1.5)	2.0 (1.3)	1.9 (1.4)	No main effects, no interactions
AGI Complaint	4.0 (1.4)	3.7 (1.6)	3.7 (1.6)	3.4 (1.4)	3.3 (1.7)	3.4 (1.5)	Repeated measures effect, $F(1, 189) = 4.49^*$, no between-groups effect, no interactions
SAI Complaint	2.4 (0.9)	2.3 (0.8)	2.4 (0.9)	2.3 (0.8)	2.2 (0.8)	2.0 (0.8)	Repeated measures effect, $F(1, 189) = 9.98^*$, no between-groups effect, no interactions
Brief RCOPE Positive	3.9 (0.7)	4.0 (0.7)	3.7 (0.9)	3.8 (0.9)	3.9 (0.8)	3.9 (0.9)	No main effects, no interactions
Brief RCOPE Negative	2.0 (0.7)	1.9 (0.7)	2.0 (0.8)	1.9 (0.7)	1.8 (0.7)	1.7 (0.7)	Repeated measures effect, $F(1, 188) = 4.61^*$, no between-groups effect, no interactions

Notes. Cells contain means (and standard deviations). The ATGS – 9 used a Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 10 (*extremely*). The AGI used a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 7 (*agree strongly*). The RCOPE used a rating scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 4 (*a great deal*). The SWB used a rating scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). The SAI used a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*not at all true*) to 5 (*very true*).
^{*}*p* < .05

those in other experimental conditions. However, this hypothesis was not supported; no interaction effects were detected for any of the scales (see Table 1).

A second hypothesis was that the experimental group would show decreased negative religious coping and increased positive religious coping (as measured by the RCOPE-positive and RCOPE-negative). Mixed-model ANOVAs revealed no significant changes across time for measures of positive religious coping. There was a significant repeated measures effect for negative religious coping, $F(1, 188) = 4.61, p < .05$, but no interaction effect. Negative religious coping showed an overall drop among the three groups, but the drop was not greater for the experimental group than other groups, as was hypothesized. Thus, this hypothesis was not supported (see Table 1).

In order to further examine possible benefits of the experimental condition, the same analyses (mixed model ANOVAs) were conducted for participants who reported the maximum level of investment in the study. We excluded participants in either the experimental or attention group who reported their level of participation as less than 7 on a 7-point scale (i.e., not completing all readings and assignments). Therefore, participants included in this Maximum Participation Group ($N = 104$) reported completion of all readings and assignments or were in the no-contact group. A significant interaction was obtained for the AGI Communion subscale, $F(2, 101) = 3.71, p < 0.05$ (See Figure 1). Results of post-hoc repeated measures t-tests revealed that posttest scores for the Experimental group were significantly greater than pretest scores, $t(32) = -2.37, p < 0.05$. Similar changes over time were not observed for the Attention group, $t(21) = -0.85, p = \text{NS}$ or the No-Contact group, $t(48) = 0.96, p = \text{NS}$. No other interaction effects were observed among the dependent variables.

DISCUSSION

The intent of this study was to determine if the lament psalm intervention created for use in this study (Zornow, 2009) would aid volunteers in resolving feelings of anger toward God. Despite expectations, our primary analyses failed to detect the expected changes. When we limited the analyses to participants who reported maximum participation, the experimental condition showed the expected increase on one of several Communion scales, but not the expected decrease in Complaint. Thus, the findings are inconclusive.

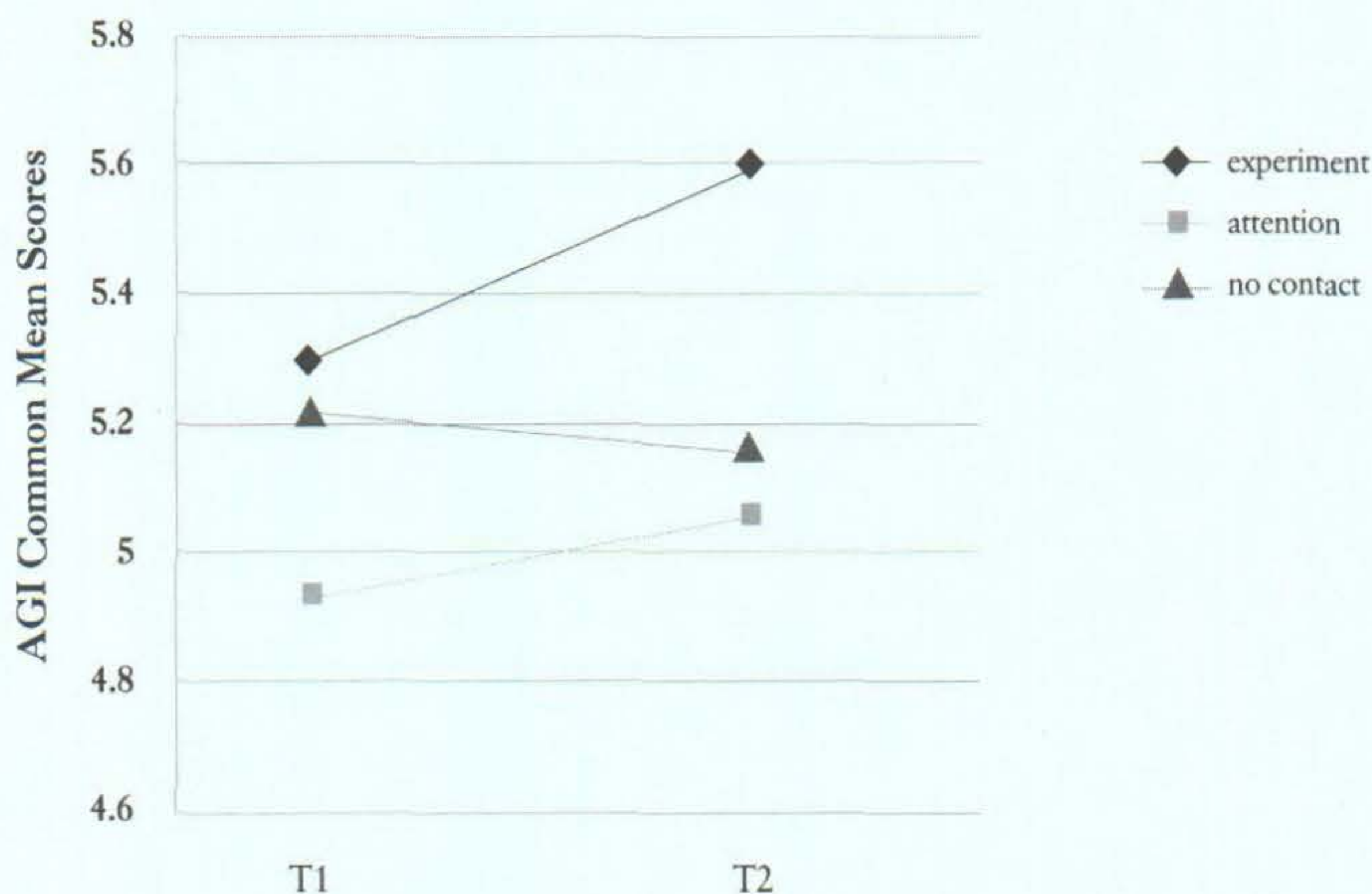
One could argue either that our one expected finding among those with maximum participation is a Type I error, or that our lack of findings is a problem with Type II error. That is, a more powerful intervention with full adherence may cause the changes we hypothesized (see Zornow, 2001). Power could be strengthened by recruiting participants with higher severity of complaints against God, modifying the intensity or duration of the intervention, increasing the compliance level of participants, and increasing the sample size. Participants volunteered to take part in a study designed to explore feelings toward God; they were not selected on the basis of harboring an intense complaint against God. Thus it seems likely that the severity of complaint represented in this sample was not sufficient to detect measurable effects of the intervention. Most striking is that the average rating for the ATGS Complaint scale was 2.2 out of a possible 11. Average scores on the AGI Complaint and SAI Complaint scales were approximately at the scale midpoint (3.8 on a 7-point scale for AGI Complaint, 2.4 on a 5-point scale for SAI Complaint).

Limitations and Future Directions

The scope of the data presented here is limited to college-age students at Christian schools. The ethnicity represented was predominantly European American (84%). Most participants were Christian (95% Protestant, Orthodox, or Catholic). It may be helpful to test this intervention with various age and ethnic groups, and to compare participants from various denominational backgrounds, as the material may be adapted more specifically for various groups.

In the current study, college student volunteers were randomly assigned to receive the lament psalm intervention regardless of current feelings of anger toward God. Throughout the intervention, participants were encouraged to reflect on various incidents of anger, including anger toward self, others, situations, and God; in other words, they were not limited to thinking about one particular incident that made them feel anger toward God. A limitation to the study is the relatively low level of anger toward God that participants reported prior to the intervention. This creates a floor effect, making it unlikely for the intervention to reduce levels of anger that are already quite low. Future researchers may seek participants who have undergone significant stress or been exposed to trauma so that anger toward God is expected to be higher initially. Volunteers with moderately strong

Figure 1. AGI Communion for the Maximum Participation Group



anger toward God, and those who are specifically interested in processing difficult emotions with God, should be recruited for future studies.

Future studies may employ interventions that are more personalized and interactive rather than the electronic methods used in this study. Personal interventions may be delivered in a variety of venues, such as church, hospital, and mental health settings (see Zornow, 2001). While the electronic methods used in this study ensured privacy for participants, it is possible that the delivery method had a negative impact on results. The constructs of attachment and spiritual well-being may necessitate a relationally mediated intervention, rather than an electronically mediated one. Due to the sensitive spiritual nature of the material, an intervention that spans a longer period of time may be appropriate and a later posttest could shed light on potential long-term effects. The resolution of anger, as well as overall changes in attitudes and beliefs may be more observable over time, as these are long-term, complex processes.

Conclusion

The results of this study hint at modest support for the hypothesis that a lament psalm intervention can foster intimacy with God. Maximum compliance with the intervention was associated with increased ratings on the AGI Communion subscale. However, similar

changes were not detected on other measures of communion with God. Other hypotheses were not supported—significant changes in anger toward God and religious coping were not detected. This may be related, at least in part, to floor effects, with participants reporting relatively low levels of anger toward God prior to the intervention.

The lament psalm intervention used in this study encouraged intimacy with God through open communication that included the expression of emotional, spiritual, and physical pain, as well as the processing of difficult emotions and beliefs. The construct of anger toward God, and how to resolve that anger, is quite new in the psychology literature. Many factors may contribute to the process of resolving complex attitudes, thoughts, and feelings toward the divine. Similar to models of forgiveness and stages of grief, the resolution of persistent or complex anger toward God is a process that most likely takes time and a variety of efforts beyond the scope of this study. The materials used in this study promoted goals appropriate to the resolution of anger, including strengthening relationship intimacy, spiritual well-being, forgiveness, acceptance, and an ability to abide in paradox. The ability to live with disappointment and questions in light of true intimacy and relationship with God may be the healthiest end to our efforts in this area. Pargament (2007) asserts that spiritual change is possible, yet he also states:

Though we may aspire to a fully integrated life, few people achieve it on a consistent basis because inconsistencies, contradictions, and paradox are so much a part of human experience. This point certainly holds true for the spiritual dimension. Fortunately, we do not need to be fully integrated to live worthwhile lives. Clients can be encouraged to tolerate a level of internal sacred conflict. (p. 291)

A traditional Christian worldview is founded on the belief that God is loving and good. Despite this belief, however, life's struggles and pain can lead people into an experience of negative feelings directed toward God. Distress caused by this cognitive and emotional dissonance can lead to a variety of negative consequences, even to the abandoning of one's religious beliefs. While the journey towards the resolution of anger with God may be a messy and complicated one, it is also a sacred conflict worth exploring. Lamenting is one way people can process difficult feelings toward God, though more research is required before speculating on its usefulness as an intervention.

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AUTHORS

SNOW, KIMBERLY, N. *Address*: George Fox University, 414 N. Meridian Street #V323, Newberg, OR 97132. *Title*: Clinical Psychology Doctoral Candidate. *Degree*: MA, Clinical Psychology, George Fox University. *Areas of Specialization*: religious and spiritual issues, interpersonal trauma, integration of psychology and theology.

MCMINN, MARK, R. *Address*: Graduate Department of Clinical Psychology, George Fox University, 414 N. Meridian Street, Newberg, OR 97132. *Title*: Professor of Psychology. *Degree*: PhD, Clinical Psychology, Vanderbilt University. *Areas of Specialization*: Clergy health, clergy-psychology collaboration, technology and practice, integration of psychology and Christianity.

BUFFORD, RODGER, K. *Address*: Graduate Department of Clinical Psychology, George Fox University, 414 N. Meridian Street #V104, Newberg, OR 97132. *Title*: Professor of Psychology. *Degree*: PhD, Clinical Psychology, University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana. *Areas of Specialization*: empirical psychology of religion, spiritual wellbeing and maturity, psychology and Christian faith, international trauma.

BRENDLINGER, IRV, A. *Address*: Religious Studies Department, George Fox University, 414 N. Meridian Street, Newberg, OR 97132. *Title*: Professor of Church History and Theology. *Degree*: M.Div., Asbury Theological Seminary; M.Ed., University of Oklahoma; Ph.D., University of Edinburgh. *Areas of Specialization*: pastoral counseling, church history, historical theology.

APPENDIX A

Lament Psalm Material Overview

Daily Reading Material	Weekly Exercise
<div>1. Introduction & Addressing God: A Matter of Having Face</div> <div>2. Addressing God: My Personal God</div> <div>3. Though I am Sinful: The God of the Covenant</div> <div>4. Being Bold Toward Heaven</div> <div>5. The Tide of Persistence & Flexibility</div>	Reflecting on the week’s material
<div>6. Therapeutic Praying</div> <div>7. A Spirituality of Anger</div> <div>8. Anger & Sinfulness</div> <div>9. Anger & Depression</div> <div>10. Anger & Vengeance</div>	Exploring the Basics of Writing a Psalm-Prayer: The Address, The Complaint, Petitioning, Vow to Praise, Thanksgiving, Waiting
<div>11. Using Various Ways of Prayer to Work on Anger</div> <div>12. Anger Leading to Forgiveness of Self</div> <div>13. Anger Leading to Forgiveness of Another</div> <div>14. Living with the Silence of God</div> <div>15. A Spirituality of Ambivalence</div>	Exploring Thoughts and Feelings toward God that are Difficult to Express/Practicing Authenticity, Petitioning, and Listening/Assessing Anger that Needs Processing (Anger toward Self, Someone Else a Group of People, a Situation, or God)
<div>16. The Direction of Our Petitions</div> <div>17. Boxed In and Breaking Out</div> <div>18. The Purposes of Having to Wait</div> <div>19. Prayer, Passion & Putting Trust in God</div> <div>20. How am I to Relate to God While in the Midst of My Suffering?</div>	Exploring the Likable and Frustrating Aspects of Prayer/Commitment to Continue Experimenting with Lament/Exploring What’s Hardest About Waiting Through Times of Distress and Suffering/Exploring What Life Changes Need to Happen in Order to be True to Self/Exploring the Comforting Characteristics of God/Exploring Difficult Attributes of God/Making Vows to God that Seem Fitting/Ending with Praise

APPENDIX A (continued from previous page)

Lament Psalm Material Overview

Introduction

In research, participants are often assigned to various groups. The group you have been assigned to is focused on learning about prayer, and specifically about the psalms of lament. You will be sent a brief daily email devotional, Monday through Friday for the next four weeks. You will also be sent a brief reflection exercise on Friday. Below is your introduction to this material as well as the first devotional reading.

Having emotions is a part of the way that God created all people. However, expressing emotions can be difficult for some people, especially emotions that are often referred to as "negative" (for example: anger, frustration, fear, sadness, rage, doubt, etc.). The Bible teaches that these emotions are a part of life, and the Book of Psalms gives numerous examples of heartfelt communication with God. There is a group of psalms that is often referred to as "lament psalms." Though referred to as lament psalms, these psalms include a lot more than just lament. They express feelings of anger, doubt, fear, confusion, depression, isolation, emptiness, sadness, and more. When a person enters into a relationship with God, they are invited to speak to God honestly and authentically, as the psalms illustrate so well.

Day 1. Addressing God: A Matter of Having Face

Having an honest relationship with God carries with it the challenge of facing our own life honestly. All too often, when life events are very difficult, we tend to avoid thinking about or dealing with those things that cause us great hurt, fear or anger. This is a natural form of defense. It works for awhile, but usually not for the long run. Therefore it is important to use our God-given ability of 'face'—to face up to the challenges of our own life. The good news is that God has not made us to face our challenges alone! He has made us to bring our struggles into relationship with him through prayer. God promises to be there for us. He will face things (all things) with us, and he will aid us in ways beyond our present understanding. Again, this is God's promise—his commitment.

Facing our challenges by praying about them, whatever they may be, can bring us to a new way to cope and deal with our hurts, fears and angers—maybe even resolve or grow beyond them. Prayer is the key to this journey. We cannot simply talk about it, or just talk about God and his part in it. We must talk to God directly! So, this week, more than before, we speak to God directly and honestly.

Psalm 13:1

1 How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?

This daring address of God is possible because of a God-given provision in prayer. The daring questions convey a relationship with God as the Lord, as well as a willingness to question God boldly. They express a daring expression of a deep faith that is being tested by life. Like the great Psalmist, call upon the Lord, address him directly, and take your fears, hurts and angers to God in prayer.

Please Note: In the next four weeks, when hurtful, fearful or angry filled emotions may begin to overwhelm, you are free to talk with someone else about this process. Always leave yourself open to talk with a wise and trusted friend, pastor or counselor. You never need to face anything alone! This too, is part and parcel of the life of prayer and being involved with God in dealing with whatever we need to cope with.
