

# THEORIES OF RELIGIOUS COPING AND MEANING-MAKING

Foundational Resources for Chaplains and Educators on Ken Pargament and Crystal Park



## 1. Why These Theories Matter at the Bedside

Chaplains Ask...	Pargament Helps You...	Park Helps You...
"How is this person using their spirituality/faith to survive right now?"	Spot <b>positive vs. negative religious coping</b> cues	Discern whether the event threatens their <b>global meaning</b> and help them rebuild coherence.
"What intervention best fits their theology/worldview, spiritual needs, and strengths?"	Recognize <b>passive, active, or collaborative coping styles</b> so support feels authentic and gently suggest <b>collaborative coping</b> which evidences resilient outcomes.	Guide patients from dissonant <i>situational</i> stories to a re-aligned, hope-filled narrative.

## 2. Ken Pargament's Theory of Religious Coping in 90 Seconds

- **Religious Coping = Any way people enlist the sacred to face stress.**
  - **Positive:** seeking divine support, benevolent reappraisal ("God is with me"), ritual participation.
  - **Negative:** spiritual discontent, punitive God images, demonic appraisals, interpersonal religious/spiritual conflict.
- **The Three Styles of RC**
  1. **Passive/Deferring** – "God will fix it." or "Let Go and Let God."
  2. **Active** – "I must act here, and God will hopefully help"
  3. **Collaborative** – "God and I work together." *Most resilient outcomes.*
- **Chaplains' Leverage Points**
  - **Assess** coping style early (listen for god-language, agency verbs).
  - **Reframe** negative attributions without dismissing honest lament.
  - **Integrate** rituals or texts that fit the person's tradition *and* coping style.

- **Encourage** movement towards collaborative religious coping (my action together with God's) as this is correlated with resilient patient outcomes.

### 3. Crystal Park's Theory of Meaning-Making in 90 Seconds

- **Meaning-Making = The mind's repair kit when reality shatters assumptions.**
  - **Global Meaning:** core beliefs ("The world is fair"), goals, sense of purpose.
  - **Situational Meaning:** the appraisal of *this* cancer, *this* NICU stay.
  - Distress spikes when the event ≠ global meaning.
- **Meaning-Making Pathway**
  1. **Sense-Making** – "Why did this happen?"
  2. **Benefit-Finding** – "What can still grow here?"
  3. **Identity Revision** – "Who am I now?"
- **Chaplains' Leverage Points**
  - **Explore** ruptures gently: "How does this fit—or not fit—your view of how life works?"
  - **Bridge** global ↔ situational with story work, symbol, communal worship.
  - **Support** emergence of new purpose (post-traumatic growth).
  - **Recognize** that the meaning-making pathway may not be accessible to patients during or directly after traumatic events and may be impaired by traumatic stress.

## Bibliography

- **Pargament, K. I., Smith, B. W., Koenig, H. G., & Perez, L.** (1998). *Patterns of positive and negative religious coping with major life stressors. Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 37(4), 710–724. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1388152>

Seminal empirical map of "helpful" (e.g., benevolent reappraisal) vs. "harmful" (e.g., spiritual despair) coping. Gives chaplains concrete language to differentiate lament from toxic God-images and to tailor intervention accordingly.

- **Pargament, K. I.** (2001). *The psychology of religion and coping: Theory, research, practice*. Guilford Press.

Foundational text that unpacks the full theory behind religious coping styles, offering assessment questions and clinical vignettes useful for CPE curricula.

- **Pargament, K. I.** (2007). *Spiritually integrated psychotherapy: Understanding and addressing the sacred*. Guilford Press.

Extends coping principles into psychotherapy; chaplains can mine its case studies for advanced care-planning with interdisciplinary teams.

- **Pargament, K. I., Feuille, M., & Burdzy, D.** (2011). *The Brief RCOPE: Current psychometric status of a short measure of religious coping. Religions*, 2(1), 51–76. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel2010051>

Presents the 14-item bedside-friendly version of the RCOPE, with scoring norms and clinical cut-offs—perfect for time-pressed chaplains doing outcomes research or

quality-improvement audits.

- **Park, C. L.** (2005). *Religion as a meaning-making framework in coping with life stress*. *Journal of Social Issues*, 61(4), 707–729. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.15404560.2005.00428.x>

Articulates how religious world-views supply “global meaning” and the crisis that ensues when events violate that frame—core insight for guiding patients from theological chaos to coherence.

- **Park, C. L., & Folkman, S.** (1997). *Meaning in the context of stress and coping*. *Review of General Psychology*, 1(2), 115–144. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.1.2.115>

Classic conceptual article linking Lazarus & Folkman’s stress model with meaning-making. Gives chaplains a step-by-step roadmap (sense-making → benefit-finding → identity revision) for spiritual-care conversations.

- **Park, C. L.** (2010). *Making sense of the meaning literature: An integrative review of meaning making and its effects on adjustment to stressful life events*. *Psychological Bulletin*, 136(2), 257–301. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0018301>

Meta-review summarizing two decades of data showing that restored meaning predicts lower distress and greater post-traumatic growth—empirical backing for the chaplain’s role in narrative repair.