

Perceived triggers for spiritual dryness and its differentiation from depression among religious brothers - a qualitative study based on the approach of the Grounded Theory

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Background

Spiritual Dryness may be linked to depression, to which it shows many similarities. The question arises how triggers might differentiate.



In mystical theology, union is attained by processes of purification through which a soul must pass. John of the Cross defined these processes as "dark night of the soul" and meant a process of "purification" and spiritual development. The purification is a trial encountered by souls in preparation for contemplation, known as 'dryness'. This spiritual Dryness may be linked to one of the most common diseases in our time, to which it shows many similarities: depression. The question arises how triggers might differentiate.

Source: Pixabay,
<https://www.pixabay.com/de/>

Research Questions

Our qualitative approach intends to attain insights in the individual experience of religious brothers with spiritual dryness in their religious life. These were formulated as research questions:

- 1) How is the period of spiritual dryness perceived by them, and how might these perceptions be related to risk factors or symptoms in the onset of depression?
- 2) How do these perceptions can be formulated in a model covering the correlation of the triggers and matching with risk factors regarding the onset of depression?
- 3) How can the models offer an approach how to differentiate spiritual dryness from depression?

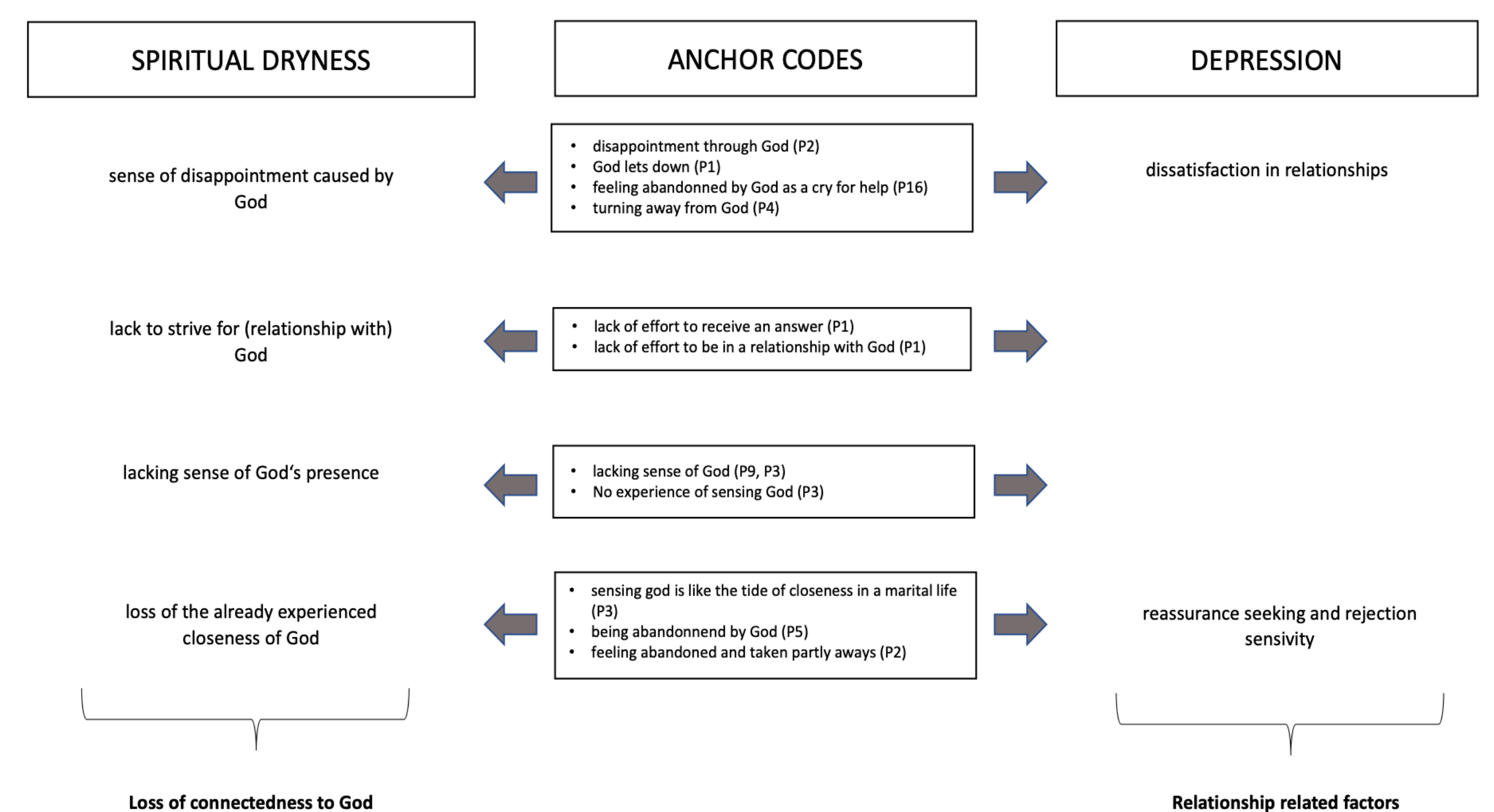
Methods

Based on the findings of Büssing et al. (2020), the semi-structured interviews of a qualitative study among 16 brothers were analyzed with the quality study software Dedoose®, investigating on triggers of spiritual dryness. A set of risk factors for depression was extracted from the S3 Guidelines for the Treatment of Unipolar Depression. Triggers were then checked against the risk factors according to the question, if they could also be considered as a risk factor for the onset of depression.

Results

Four core categories were found, which can be illustrated by the core theme of "loss of connection" to 1) spiritual resources, 2) to others, 3) to the "I" and 4) to God. We could match the subcategories of spiritual dryness' triggers with risk factors. According to depression guidelines, psycho-social risk factors include uncontrollable stresses, physical, emotional and mental exhaustion due to overwork and experiences of social loss. However, the "loss of connectedness to God" may distinguish spiritual dryness from depression. Psychological triggers appeared more than emotional disturbances, since the loss of the soul's connection to God was perceived as a kind of invitation to surrender in connectedness to God to experience that God is always present, even though the senses may not experience Him or the mind may not be able to comprehend him.

Figure 2: Loss of connectedness to God.



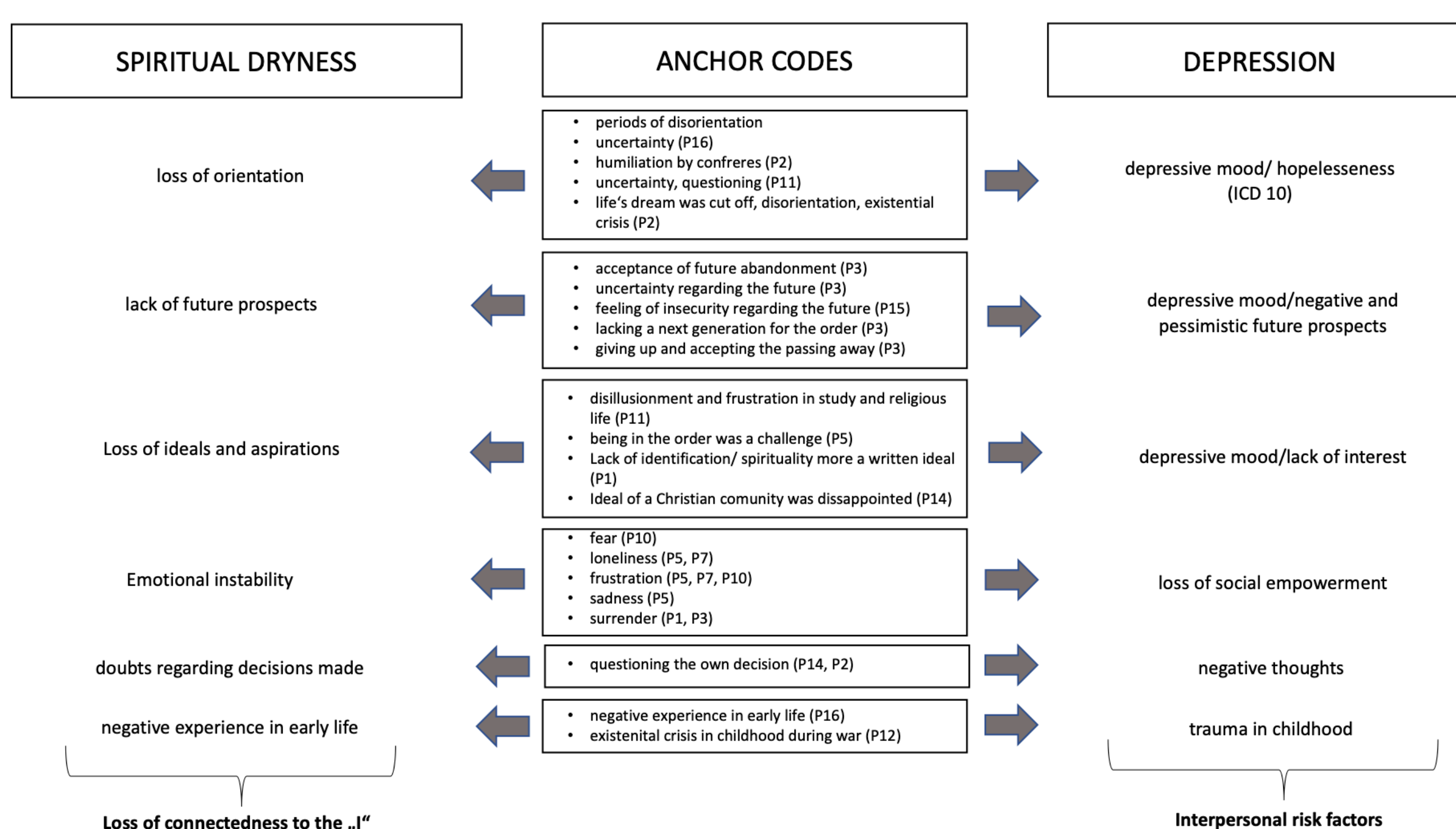
Anchor codes can be seen from the perspective of spiritual dryness and from the perspective as a risk factor for the onset of depression.

Conclusions

The results show that the triggers of spiritual dryness may also be interpreted as indicators for the onset of depression. The **distinction between both** can be seen in the **perception** of the triggers - depending on whether they are **regarded as triggers** as the beginning of a **transformative process** in the context of an unraveling of the "I" in God, which is crucial in the purification of the Soul, **or** whether they are associated with a **negative solidification of the "I"** that in its autonomy could be disabled from all senses that may help to get into contact with God and abide in Him.

In the anthropological psychiatry, the theme of depression is loss, namely the loss of the other, the loss of the world and the loss of confidence in one's own corporeality. The qualitative study presented here shows that this model can be extended to include the *loss of the "I"*, being a part of consciousness, being the subject that is experiencing and *loss of connectedness to God*. From this viewpoint, depression with the feeling of inner void could also be regarded as an emotional difficulty including spiritual questions that could be converted into an opportunity to reflect on one's own life and a potential agent for beneficial change.

Figure 1: Loss of connectedness to the "I"



Anchor codes can be seen from the perspective of spiritual dryness and from the perspective as a risk factor for the onset of depression.