RELIGIOUSNESS ASSOCIATED WITH LESS DEPRESSION, SAYS BYU/U. OF MIAMI STUDY

Using religion for social reasons associated with more depression

PROVO, Utah--A new study by Brigham Young University researchers reveals that greater religiousness is associated with fewer symptoms of depression, with religiousness defined broadly as any attitude, belief, or behavior involving spiritual or religious content.

"The findings suggest that religiousness may provide certain types of religious people with a buffer against depression," says Timothy Smith, a BYU associate professor of counseling psychology and lead researcher on the study. Joining Smith are Michael E. McCullough, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Miami, and Justin Pole, a BYU graduate student.

Published in the latest issue of the American Psychology Association's "Psychological Bulletin," the research is an analysis of 147 previous studies that examined religiousness and depression. The results were similar across gender, age, or ethnicity and apply regardless of religious denomination. Religiousness was defined broadly as any attitude, belief, motivation, pursuit, or behavior involving spiritual or religious content or processes.

Ken Pargament, a professor of psychology at Bowling Green State University and author of "The Psychology of Religion and Coping: Theory, Research, Practice," says the study adds to the growing understanding of the mental health benefits of religion.

"This is a sophisticated, up-to-date, balanced approach to the study of religion and one critical dimension of mental health," says Pargament. "Furthermore, it moves the field forward by identifying specific forms of religion that are tied to both increases and decreases to the risk of depression. These findings underscore what is common sense to most people — religion contributes to health and well being. Now we are beginning to learn how and why."

Other findings revolved around the distinction between what the researchers called intrinsically and extrinsically motivated religiousness. Intrinsic motivation means practicing religion for religion's sake — praying, meditating, and serving because of a sincere belief that doing so is correct. Extrinsicly motivated people practice religion for social reasons — they see church as a chance to build non-faith-based social networks or think, "This is what religion can do for me."

The study found that those who practice religion based on extrinsic motivations or who engage in negative religious coping, like blaming God for difficulties, are associated with higher levels of symptoms of depression.

For those undergoing stressful life events, the researchers found that the buffer against depression is even stronger.

“One would think, 'The greater the stress, the greater the depression,'" says Smith. "But that's not necessarily the case for the intrinsically motivated religious person. Possible explanations for this include the idea that stress may prompt people to turn to religion, to become stronger in their faith in the face of trials. They are turning to God, pleading for help, seeking counsel from scriptures or pastors."

Some of the reasons that those who are religious for intrinsic reasons may enjoy a buffer against depressive symptoms and stress include the traditional use of less alcohol and drugs, belief in spiritual intervention, and support and belief in an afterlife.

"Take the example of death. Some religions teach doctrines about an afterlife that may provide a coping mechanism that relieves stress," says Smith. "If people truly believe in those teachings and hold to them during times of stress, they can get through the ordeal with less trauma than the non-religious or externally motivated religious person."

Additionally, religion tends to teach principles of altruism, which research has shown to be a buffer against depression, says Smith. Self-focus, on the other hand, has been shown to be a factor that tends to increase feelings of depression.

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—Grant Madsen