

FEBRUARY 2011:

THE FAITH-HEALTH CONNECTION:

Are they really linked??

In November 2010, renowned researcher/author, Dr. Harold G. Koenig M.D., addressed healthcare professionals in California with "The Health and Spirituality Link: What do we know? What will we do?" summarized here...

Throughout recorded history, people have intuitively associated religion with health. From cautions against unhealthy behaviors in ancient texts to the healing miracles of Jesus, the connection has seemed natural and spontaneous. With the advent of modern medicine, evidence for that connection has been scientifically measured and documented. New spirituality and health studies are revealing the mechanisms that explain the "how's" of this connection. We've long been told that healthy lifestyles involving regular exercise, good nutrition, even frequent servings of humor have confirmed benefits. Now, another relationship – the one between spirituality and health – is emerging as equally or even more important: the practice of religion itself correlates with greater longevity and significantly reduced risk of disease (Koenig et al, 2001).

WHAT'S THE CORRELATION (the "how's")?

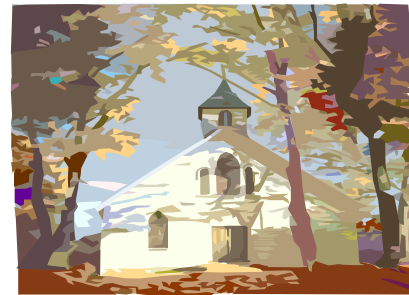
Quantitative, systematic studies of spirituality's impact on wellbeing date back to the late 1800s, when British biostatistician Francis Galt reported the positive effects of intercessory prayer (F. Galt, 1887). Subsequently, results of more than 3000 studies have been published in reputable medical, psychiatric and religious journals. For example, according to a 28-year study of 5000 adults, weekly attendance of religious services decreased the risk of dying during the study period by 36%. These results were replicated in another (six year) study of 3968 adults. Also, a random survey of more than 20,000 Americans found that whites who regularly attend religious services lived an average of 7 years longer than those who did not. For African-Americans, the correlation was even stronger, adding 14 years to their life span (Hummer et al, 1999). Investigators have determined by measuring interleukin-6 [IL-6], a marker of immune system function, that connection to religious practices and faith-based communities (churches, synagogues, mosques) reduces the stress response of the immune system, and fostering a healthy immune system results in improved health overall. In some areas of the United States, Koenig has found, 90% of the population stated that they depend on their faith to help them cope with illness or injury. While many aspects of religious experience may be seen to lower people's stress levels (e.g., both music and socialization have known health benefits) the emphasis on behaviors reflecting love and forgiveness likely play a role.

Spirituality empowers people to alter their life perspectives, allowing them to feel that life still has meaning and purpose. This enables them to deal with negative circumstances more easily, and gives them hope and a sense of control that non-religious people lack.

WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE?

A most surprising aspect of health/spirituality research is the strength of the correlation: the measured effect of the health outcomes is about the same as the effect of quitting smoking, in terms of years added to one's life. Documented benefits include the following:

- lower levels of stress
- better coping skills
- better mental health
- greater social support
- less substance abuse
- healthier behavior choices (e.g., healthier diet, higher incidence of seatbelt use, better sleep, engaging in more physical activity; however, religious people seem to have – or are more willing to acknowledge – problems in managing their weight!)
- increased disease screening and preventive care
- better compliance with recommended treatments



BOTTOM LINE? Your faith isn't only good for your spirit! -- A close relationship with your Creator may afford you such benefits as:

- lower mortality (death rates) from cancer, less heart disease, fewer strokes
- slower progression of Alzheimer's disease
- fewer surgical complications following cardiac surgery
- \geq 90% reduction in meningococcal meningitis in teenagers
- higher immune system function (i.e., CD4 counts and lower viral load measurements) and lower disease progression among HIV-infected persons

READ MORE!

Contrada et al (2004). Psychosocial factors in outcomes of heart surgery. *Health Psychol.*, 23: 227-238

Hummer et al (1999). Religious involvement and US adult mortality. *Demography*, 36: 273-285

Ironson et al (2006). An increase in religiousness/spirituality in people with HIV. *JGenInternMed*, 21: S62-S68.

Koenig HG (2002). *Spirituality in Patient Care*.

Koenig HG (2004). *Faith and Mental Health*.

Krause N (2006). Church-based social support and mortality. *JGerontABioSciMedSci*, 61: S140-S146.

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