

The MIND HEALTH REPORT

Secrets to Unlocking Your Mind for Work, Love and Life

Special Report

47 Health Benefits of Prayer Plus: The Prayer Pitfall and How to Avoid It

“Some people are sick and have pain, and it gets the best of them. Not me. Praying eases the pain. Sometimes I pray when I am in deep, serious pain; I pray, and all at once the pain gets easy.”

Those are the words of an 83-year-old woman (called “Mrs. A” to maintain confidentiality), published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, where doctors marveled at her amazing resilience.

Mrs. A suffered from goiter, arthritis, diabetes, and a rare type of nerve damage, possibly a complication of diabetes, that triggered pain all over her body and weakness in her legs. Medications, acupuncture, and massage brought no relief yet she lived alone, without assistance from a homemaker or nurse, and remained in good spirits.

As well as taking care of herself, Mrs. A regularly attended church services and prayer groups, and helped others in charitable work with the sick. She boggled her doctors’ minds.

In the journal article, one of them wrote:

“She is a very impressive patient in that, throughout the 15 years that I have known her, she has continued to live with a chronic, progressive, and debilitating illness and has done so with incredible spirit, particularly in light of the lack of traditional medicine to offer her a lot of hope. She relies on her belief in God and her own prayers to get her through some really tough times.”

What Scientists Don’t Understand

While Mrs. A’s doctors recognized the power of her religious beliefs, they were left with more questions than answers about how religion affects health. Other scientists have tried to find some answers through research.

One type of study has examined intercessory prayer — the prayers of strangers at a distance — to see whether these influence the subjects of the prayer, people who are suffering from some type of illness. There is no direct contact between these individuals and the ill people have no knowledge of the prayers for their welfare.

To test the outcome, researchers have also observed another, similar group of ill people for whom prayers are not being said (a “control group”), and compared changes in health to see if prayer had an impact. Some of these studies have found that those for whom prayers were said fared better, while others have not, but

that doesn’t mean prayer doesn’t help people.

Ultimately, this type of research is flawed, according to Wendy Cadge, Ph.D., a sociologist and associate professor at Brandeis University in Boston who studies the role of religion in healthcare. “Prayer happens for all kinds of people all the time, even though many of us don’t know we’re being prayed for,” she says. “And in lots of religious organizations, there are prayers for groups of people.”

Religious beliefs and activities can have a **profound impact** on our mental and physical well being by reducing stress, improving resistance to diseases, enhancing memory and **mental function**, and helping us to lead longer lives.

—Andrew Newberg is a founder of neurotheology, the study of the relationship between spiritual phenomena and the human brain.



Long Life

► An analysis of 42 studies with a total of more than 125,000 people found that in addition to private prayer, attending religious services and being involved in church activities predicted a longer and healthier lifespan.

In other words, scientists' assumptions that no one is praying for people in a control group are unrealistic and impossible to confirm. "Scientists tried their best to study something that may be beyond their best tools," says Cadge. Perhaps more important, she says, is the fact that there is no need for science to validate religious beliefs.

47 Benefits of Faith

Many studies have looked at how health and well-being are influenced by having spiritual beliefs, praying, and attending religious services, and these have found a wide range of benefits. The Mind Health Report compiled a summary of these benefits.

1 Becoming More Forgiving

Two studies at Florida State University found that praying for a person increases your ability to forgive that person. In one study, people who prayed for a romantic partner harbored fewer vengeful thoughts and emotions and were more ready to forgive and move on after a conflict.

In another study, men and women prayed for the well-being of a close friend, daily for four weeks, while others simply thought positive thoughts about their friend. Those who prayed were more willing to forgive, not only the friend but other people in general. Forgiveness is associated with better overall health and satisfaction with life.

SOURCE: *Psychological Science*

2 Achieving Goals More Effectively

Researchers at the University of Miami analyzed more than eight decades of research and found that prayer and other religious practices improve the ability to pursue and achieve long-term goals. Prayer affects regions of the brain that improve self-control, and people who view their goals as sacred put more effort and energy into attaining them.

SOURCE: *Psychological Bulletin*

3 Living a Longer Life

Numerous studies have found that people who are religious are likely to live a longer life. For example, an analysis of 42 studies with a total of more than 125,000 people found that in addition to private prayer, attending religious services, and being involved in other church activities predicted a longer and healthier lifespan.

SOURCE: *Health Psychology*

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4 Coping Better With Breast Cancer

Praying in an online support group helped breast cancer patients experience less stress, have lower levels of negative emotions, and experience greater well-being, according to a study of 97 patients at the University of Wisconsin-Madison Center of Excellence in Cancer Communications Research. In addition, belief in an afterlife reduced fear of death.

SOURCE: *PsychoOncology*

5 Protecting Teens Against Drugs

Teens who view religion as a meaningful part of their lives are half as likely to use drugs, compared to non-religious teens — especially during stressful times, such as having an unemployed parent. So concluded researchers at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, who studied 1,182 adolescents in grades 7 through 10.

SOURCE: *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors*

6 Recovering From Abusive Relationships

Prayer helps victims of abusive relationships to recover a positive view of themselves and reduces emotional pain, according to in-depth interviews with dozens of abuse victims by a sociologist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. In addition, people who are religious are less likely to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder after being victims of violence in a relationship.

SOURCE: *Social Psychology Quarterly*

7 Reducing Financial Strain

A study of more than 800 older people found that faith and attendance at religious services offset the emotional toll of financial strain. Researchers at the University of Michigan found that prayer increases gratitude which, in turn, reduces the negative impact of financial difficulties.

SOURCE: *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*

8 Reducing Genetic Risk for Depression

Adults with the highest risk of depression, due to a family history of the condition, are one-tenth as likely to suffer from depression if religion is important in their lives and they frequently attend religious services, according to a study at Columbia University. Those who are religious and at lower risk of depression are at least one-fourth as likely to develop depression as their non-religious peers.

Numerous other studies show that prayer and other religious practices reduce or alleviate depression, with or without genetic risk.

SOURCE: *The American Journal of Psychiatry*

9 Increasing Happiness and Financial Satisfaction

A University of South Florida study of 1,413 adults found that those who are the most religious, in terms of prayer with a positive focus, attendance at church services, and using their faith to deal with day-to-day problems in a positive way, are happier and more satisfied with their financial situation.

SOURCE: *Journal of Religion and Health*

Financial Satisfaction

► Those who are the most religious in terms of positive prayer, church attendance, and using faith to deal with day-to-day problems are more satisfied with their financial situation.

Stress Protection

► When faced with stress, people with strong religious beliefs do not experience significantly elevated blood pressure. Prayer reduces the harmful stress response in the brain.

10 Improving Recovery From Heart Surgery People who pray with a positive, hopeful attitude as an ongoing part of their lives prior to undergoing heart surgery, experience less depression and anxiety afterwards, both in the short and long term, according to studies at the University of Washington Health Sciences and the University of Pittsburgh. However, those who pray only after surgery or take a negative view do not experience the same benefits.

Another study, at the University of Michigan, tracked 151 patients for a year and found that private prayer significantly improved mood and overall state of being.

SOURCE: *The Gerontologist*

11 Improving Outlook Among Prostate Cancer Patients A study of 367 prostate cancer patients at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York found that those whose religion gave them a sense of meaning and peace were less likely to experience depression and coped more effectively with their condition. This impact of religious beliefs and practice was not changed by age, marital status, or the stage of disease.

SOURCE: *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*

12 Enhancing Recovery From Brain Injury Researchers at Wayne State University, in Detroit, Mich., looked at the impact of religion on 88 people who had suffered traumatic brain injury, examining their function up to 20 years after the injury. Those who felt the strongest connection to a higher power were least distressed, most satisfied with their lives, and experienced better recovery.

SOURCE: *Rehabilitation Psychology*

13 Protecting Against Stress When faced with stressful events, older people with strong personal religious beliefs do not experience significantly elevated blood pressure, according to a study at Utah State University. Their reaction is much like that of people who are 30 or 40 years younger. Other research found that

The Prayer Pitfall

Most of the time, prayer focuses on positive things such as giving thanks or seeking strength, support, or guidance. It reduces stress, anger, and hostility, and has a beneficial effect on one's physical and emotional health. However, when prayer has negative connotations, the effect is detrimental.

At Duke University, a study of nearly 600 hospital patients, published in the *Archives of Internal Medicine*, found increased risk of

death among those with negative perspectives such as: "Wondered whether God had abandoned me," "Questioned God's love for me," and "The devil made this happen."

Another study, published in the *Journal of Palliative Medicine*, looked at nearly 200 breast cancer patients. It found that mental well-being, depression, and life satisfaction decreased significantly among women who felt abandoned by or angry at God.

Several studies at Case Western Reserve University, published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, found that anger at God and other negative religious perspectives led to problems recovering from the death of a loved one.

Negative views included holding God responsible for severe harm, attributions of cruelty to God, difficulty finding meaning, and seeing oneself as a victim.

prayer which fosters compassion and a loving attitude reduces a harmful stress response in the brain.

SOURCE: *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*

14 Reducing Impact of Chronic Pain

Researchers in Belgium studied 202 people with chronic pain and found that those who prayed with a positive attitude were less affected by pain in their daily lives. Although on a physical level, the degree of pain did not appear to change, patients who prayed were better able to manage it and had a more positive outlook on life.

SOURCE: *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*

15 Decreasing Alcohol Abuse

People who frequently pray and regularly attend church services are less likely to abuse alcohol, according to a Duke University study of nearly 3,000 people between the ages of 18 and 97. Watching or listening to religious television or radio programs does not have the same impact.

SOURCE: *Hospital & Community Psychiatry*

16 Kids Doing Better in School

Kids who are involved in church activities have higher educational expectations and are likely to do better in math and reading. The National Survey of Children's Health found that school-aged children who attend religious services at least once a month are half as likely to repeat a grade than those who attend less frequently.

SOURCE: *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*

17 Significantly Lowering Health Risks

Numerous studies have shown that people who hold and practice religious beliefs with a positive outlook have lower health risks, assessed in studies with the same types of tests used in medical check-ups, including weight, blood pressure, cholesterol, and blood sugar.

For example, in a study of nearly 6,000 Californians between the ages of 21 and 75, attending weekly religious services reduced risk of death and disease for women to the same extent as not smoking, not abusing alcohol, or being physically active. Benefits for men, although notable, were not as pronounced.

SOURCE: *International Journal of Psychiatry in Medicine*

18 Making Substance Abuse Treatment More Effective

Strength of positive religious beliefs plays an important role in recovery from drug and/or alcohol abuse, according to numerous studies. For example, an analysis of data from Veteran Affairs hospitals showed that among 600 veterans who underwent a substance abuse treatment program, those who were most religious were 34 percent less likely to need readmission for further treatment. Other studies of people who were not veterans show similar benefits.

SOURCE: *Psychiatric Services*

How to Calm Anger

Brad Bushman, Ph.D., professor of communication and psychology at Ohio State University, recently did several studies of prayer, published in the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.

"Prayer reduces anger by about 30 percent," says Bushman.

In Bushman's studies, participants were insulted and instinctively felt angry. However, if they prayed for the well-being of the offending person, or even for the well-being of another person who had no connection to the anger-provoking situation, they became less angry.

- If you feel angry, think of someone you care about and pray for their well-being, or try to pray for the well-being of the person who made you angry
- If you are struggling with your beliefs, seek out and take time to study religious teachings that have meaning for you
- Take a moment to reflect on things for which you are grateful, and give thanks

Diabetes Relief

► Those who attend religious services are less likely to have chronic inflammation, which indicates increased risk of diabetes complications.

19 Reducing Risk for Diabetes Complications

In a group of 556 people with diabetes, researchers at the Medical University of South Carolina found that those who attended religious services, at least occasionally, were less likely to have chronic internal inflammation (measured as C-reactive protein). Inflammation indicates increased risk for heart disease and complications of diabetes.

SOURCE: *Diabetes Care*

20 Recovering From the Loss of a Loved One

Researchers at the University of Michigan found that among 1,723 people age 60 and older, those who believed in a good afterlife were less likely to develop high blood pressure after the death of a loved one. Thus, they were in better health.

SOURCE: *Journals of Gerontology*

21 Lowering Men's Risk for Fatal Heart Disease

Researchers at the Harvard School of Public Health tracked the health of more than 28,000 men between the ages of 42 and 77 for 10 years. Those who lacked close friends or a social network and did not attend religious services had significantly increased risk of death from heart disease.

SOURCE: *American Journal of Epidemiology*

22 Enhancing Satisfaction With Life

Helping others through one's religious activities increases satisfaction and improves one's outlook on life, according to a study of more than 2,000 church members located in various parts of the United States. Giving help brought about greater benefits than receiving help.

SOURCE: *Psychosomatic Medicine*

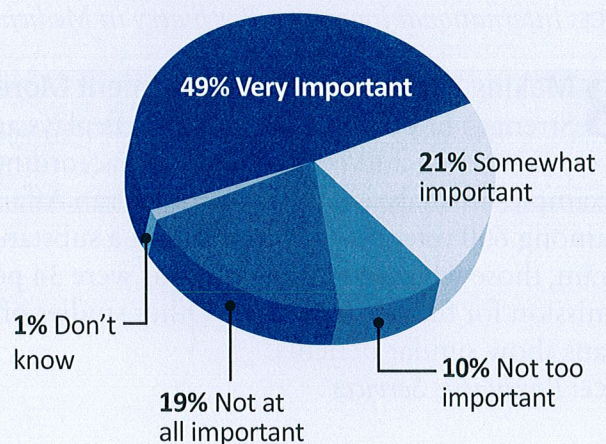
23 Lowering Kids' Anxiety Before Surgery

Researchers in Australia tested the anxiety levels of a test group of 120 children ages 5 to 12 while they were waiting to receive anesthesia for

How Important Are Religious Beliefs?

► Surveys of more than 35,000 American adults have shown that religious beliefs play an important role in our lives. The results below were obtained from searches of the iPOLL Databank and other resources provided by the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research at the University of Connecticut.

How important a role has religion played in helping you or a family member get through your experience with cancer?



surgery. Those children whose mothers were religious were less anxious.

SOURCE: *Anaesthesia & Intensive Care*

24 Lowering Blood Pressure

A number of studies have shown a correlation between religious beliefs and practice and lower blood pressure. For example, researchers at Duke University tracked nearly 4,000 people age 65 and older and found 40 percent less risk of elevated blood pressure among those who prayed or studied the Bible daily and attended religious services at least once a week.

Another study of nearly 15,000 American adults showed that regular attendance at religious services was associated with lower blood pressure.

SOURCE: *International Journal of Psychiatry in Medicine*

25 Protecting Teens Against Meningitis

Researchers at the University of London in England examined nearly 300 patients between the ages of 15 and 19 and found that attending religious services was associated with approximately 90 percent less likelihood of meningitis (inflammation of the membranes of the brain and spinal cord). Such a risk reduction was slightly greater than that associated with meningitis vaccine.

SOURCE: *British Medical Journal*

26 Protecting Against Age-Related Mental Decline

Researchers at Yale University School of Medicine studied more than 2,000 people over age 65 and found that those who attended religious services were less likely to lose their mental faculties in the following few years. Religious people were also less likely to become physically disabled.

SOURCE: *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B*

27 Shortening Hospital Stays for Heart Surgery

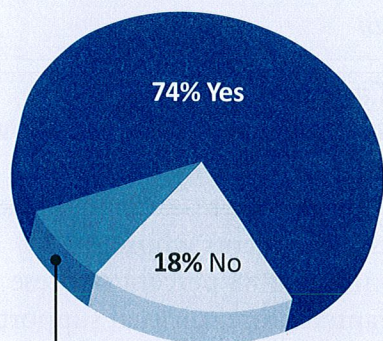
People with stronger religious beliefs who had heart surgery had fewer complications and, as a result, shorter hospital stays, according to a

Divine Intervention

Research shows that when medical treatment offers no hope for the victims of life-threatening injuries, more than 57 percent of American adults believe that divine intervention could save the patient. The number of physicians who share this view is much smaller: not quite 20 percent.

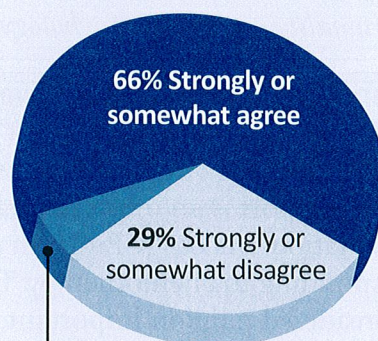
These are the findings of a survey of approximately 1,000 adults and nearly 800 physicians in trauma centers, published in *Archives of Surgery*, one of the journals of the American Medical Association.

Do you believe in life after death?



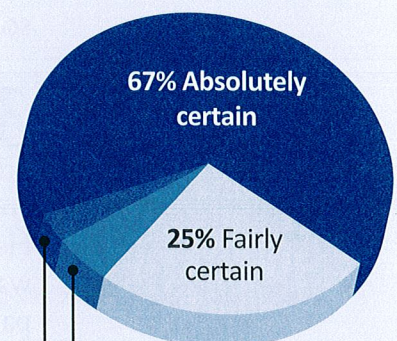
8% Don't know, volunteered a different answer or didn't answer

My confidence in life after death has increased as I have gotten older.



5% Don't know or didn't answer

How certain are you about your belief in life after death?



5% Not too certain
3% Not at all certain, don't know or didn't answer

Mood Improvement

► Studies have found a strong connection between religious beliefs and reduced incidence of depression. Benefits were comparable for both men and women.

study of 142 patients by The State University of New Jersey. Prior to their surgery, religious patients were more optimistic and less angry and hostile than those who did not have a strong faith. How often patients prayed or attended church services did not influence complications after surgery.

SOURCE: *Health Psychology*

28 Reducing Stress in Fibromyalgia Patients

Fibromyalgia is a debilitating condition associated with stress and marked by pain in joints, muscles, and tendons, severe fatigue, and an inability to get a good night's rest. Malfunction of the fight-or-flight hormone cortisol, which enables us to deal with stress in day-to-day life, is one of its characteristics.

A study of 91 women with fibromyalgia, at the University of Louisville in Kentucky, found that those who had stronger religious beliefs had healthier levels of cortisol, enabling them to be more resilient to stress.

SOURCE: *International Journal of Psychiatry in Medicine*

29 Improving Mood and Outlook

Numerous studies have found a strong connection between deeply held religious beliefs and less likelihood and incidence of depression. For example, a study of more than 600 middle-age and older adults, by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, examined how both men and women experienced the influence of religious beliefs that protected them against symptoms of depression.

Researchers found that these were some of the protective experiences: "I feel God's presence," and "I feel comfort in my religion or spirituality." Benefits were comparable for both men and women.

SOURCE: *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*

30 Calming Anger

Anger not only detracts from human relationships but is also associated with increased health risks, because it puts our stress reaction into overdrive, can raise blood pressure, and if frequent or chronic, can damage the brain. Studies at Ohio State University have found that praying for the well-being of the person with whom one is angry, or even praying for someone else, calms anger and fosters positive emotions and attitudes, such as compassion, that improve overall health.

SOURCE: *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*

31 Supporting Patients With Advanced Cancer

A number of studies found that religious beliefs that foster a positive outlook help patients live a better life when faced with advanced cancer, and spiritual support is an important factor. For example, researchers at the Harvard Radiation Oncology Program studied 230 patients whose cancer was not responding to chemotherapy. They found that 88 percent of these patients considered religion important, and wanted more spiritual support.

Another study, at the Mayo Clinic Cancer Center, found that religious practice and support, with a positive attitude, dramatically improved the quality of life among advanced cancer patients.

SOURCE: *Journal of Clinical Oncology*

32 Improving Family Relationships

Compared to non-religious teenagers, those who find meaning and importance in religion, and continue to do so during their teen years, experience a better relationship with each parent. And, the whole family has a more satisfying relationship. However, when parents try to enforce beliefs that the children do not share or easily accept, relationships can worsen.

SOURCE: *Sociological Quarterly*

33 Reducing Prostate Cancer Symptoms

A study of 222 men at the University of California, Los Angeles, found that religious conviction and practice significantly reduced the negative impact of prostate cancer. Since the disease most often progresses very slowly, improving patients' quality of life is extremely important.

Researchers found that religious patients were in better physical and mental health and experienced less decrease in sexual function and fewer urinary problems.

SOURCE: *Psychooncology*

34 Reducing the Odds of Smoking

Multiple studies have shown that religious people of all ages are less likely to smoke. One study also looked at the influence of religion on a genetic predisposition to smoke among 315 sets of twins and more than 1,000 pairs of other siblings.

Even where there is a genetic risk to take up the habit, researchers at the University of Colorado found that three aspects of religion — personal beliefs, participation in organized religious activities, and being affiliated with a congregation — reduced the influence of genes and lowered the odds of a person starting to smoke.

SOURCE: *Nicotine & Tobacco Research*

35 Controlling Fear of Terrorist Attacks

Several studies in Germany looked at students facing the threat of terrorist attacks, and how religion affected their reaction to the situation. Researchers found that students who held deep personal religious beliefs had fewer fears or thoughts of death, and their religious convictions reduced the stressful impact of threats, which helps to improve overall health.

The study concluded that religion provided meaning, helping these students to feel significant and to view themselves as eternal.

SOURCE: *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*

36 Reducing Stress Among Caregivers

Caring for a loved one with dementia and surviving their death are two of the most stressful events that we can experience. At the University of Pittsburgh, researchers looked at the role of religion among more than 1,200 caregivers.

They found that three aspects of faith reduced caregiver stress, improved mood, and fostered a brighter outlook: attendance at religious services, private prayer or meditation, and strength of personal beliefs. For bereaved caregivers, frequently attending religious services had the greatest impact.

SOURCE: *American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*

Less Smoking

► Personal religious beliefs, participation in organized religious activities, and being affiliated with a congregation all lower the odds of a person starting to smoke.

Reduced Side Effects

► Head and neck cancer patients who considered themselves “believers” felt better before, during, and after radiation treatment.

37 Encouraging a Healthy Lifestyle

At the University of Texas, researchers examined whether people who frequently attend religious services take more action to maintain good health, compared to those who attend less frequently or not at all.

Among 1,504 Texas adults, they found that those who attended church once a week were approximately 60 percent more likely to get regular physical and dental exams and to routinely take vitamins; about half as likely to go to bars; twice as likely to regularly use seat belts; 73 percent more likely to walk; 84 percent more likely to do strenuous exercise; and 49 percent more likely to get restful sleep.

Those who attended religious services more than once per week were half as likely to smoke and nearly three times as likely to drink alcohol only occasionally or moderately, rather than being heavier drinkers.

SOURCE: *Preventive Medicine*

38 Alleviating Panic Disorder

Canadian researchers at the University of Saskatchewan looked at the impact of religion on 56 people suffering from panic disorder, characterized by repeated attacks of intense fear that something bad will occur when not expected. They found that those to whom religion was most important felt less stressed and experienced fewer symptoms of panic attacks.

SOURCE: *Depression and Anxiety*

39 Reducing Cancer Treatment Side Effects

In Germany, researchers explored the effect of religious beliefs on side effects of radiation therapy among 105 patients with head and neck cancer. Based on questionnaires about patients’ religious convictions, they classified them as “believers” and “non-believers.” The study found that as a rule, “believers” felt better before, during, and after the treatment, experiencing fewer adverse effects from the disease and the radiation.

SOURCE: *Strahlentherapie und Onkologie*

40 Helping Couples Deal With Chronic Disease

At a leading cancer center in Southern California, researchers surveyed 101 patients with prostate cancer and their spouses, to see how religion can help people cope with chronic illness. They compared the impact of religious beliefs and practice if both spouses were or were not religious, or if only one spouse was religious. The study concluded that if both husband and wife shared religious beliefs and these helped them cope with the disease, problems were more easily resolved.

SOURCE: *European Journal of Cancer Care*

41 Buffering Against Stress and Negative Emotions

In the Netherlands, researchers at the University of Amsterdam looked at the effect of a religious upbringing on neuroticism, which means a tendency to experience negative emotions, such as anxiety, anger, guilt, and depression, and to view life situations as threatening or hopelessly difficult. People who have such a disposition are more adversely affected by stress.

The study examined adults over the age of 25, including 4,369 twins and

1,304 siblings from 2,698 families. It found that people who had a religious upbringing were less likely to manifest neuroticism, even if they were genetically predisposed to the condition.

SOURCE: *Twin Research & Human Genetics*

42 Aiding Recovery From Gambling Addiction

A study of 100 people who were pathological gamblers looked at the impact of religion on their ability to overcome their addiction. The participants were seeking treatment to stop compulsive gambling. Researchers found that those who were religious had higher levels of well being and were more likely to recover.

SOURCE: *Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion*

43 Slowing Progression of Alzheimer's Disease

In a Canadian treatment center, researchers evaluated the effect of religion among 70 people with Alzheimer's disease. They found that those who placed a high importance on their religious beliefs and private prayer experienced a significantly slower progression of the disease. The researchers were not able to identify how this worked, but observed that private religious practice improved mental function to a marked degree. Attending religious services did not seem to slow down progression of the disease.

SOURCE: *Neurology*

44 Improving Immune Function

People who regularly attend religious services more than once per week have an immune system that functions more effectively, boosting their resistance to viruses and other infections and protecting against damage to cells, according to a study at the University of Iowa. Researchers looked at more than 500 people. They concluded that this was one of the mechanisms that contribute to a longer life among religious people.

SOURCE: *Health Psychology*

45 Reducing Hostility

Researchers in New York surveyed more than 1,600 people to gain a better understanding of how religion protects health. They found that

Boosted Immunity

► People who attend religious services more than once a week have a better resistance to viruses and other infections.

How Often Do We Pray?

► The Association of Religion Data Archives at Pennsylvania State University compiles data from religious scholars and research centers. When it comes to the frequency of prayer, interviews with more than 3,500 American adults revealed this:

	Men	Women
Several times a day	21.2%	33.3%
Once a day	25.1%	33.7%
Several times a week	11.3%	11.4%
Once a week	7.2%	5.7%
Less than once a week	17.1%	8.8%
Never	17.3%	6.2%
Don't know	0.4%	0.3%
No answer	0.4%	0.6%

Happier Marriage

► Couples who share religious beliefs, practices, and affiliations are happier than those with different or no religious orientation.

religious beliefs and practices increase forgiveness and forgiveness leads to reduced hostility which, in turn, leads to better health.

Other research has established that hostility increases wear and tear on a human body and contributes to unhealthy cholesterol, elevated blood pressure and blood sugar, and hormonal changes that impair optimum function. As a result, reactions triggered by hostility increase risk for all the major diseases, such as heart disease, stroke, and diabetes, and shorten life.

SOURCE: *Journal of Religion and Health*

46 Protecting the Heart

Individuals who hold religious beliefs that are meaningful to them and aim to live their lives according to those beliefs are less likely to suffer from heart disease, according to a joint study at the University of Utah, Utah State University, and Syracuse University.

Researchers analyzed earlier research relating to religion and heart health and tested blood pressure responses to stress among 75 healthy men and women. Half the participants were guided on a daily basis by their personal beliefs, describing their perspective this way: “My religious beliefs are what really lie behind my whole approach to life.” Their blood pressure was not significantly affected by stress.

Other study participants had a different attitude, typified by this statement: “The church is most important as a place to formulate good social relationships.” These participants experienced a significant rise in blood pressure when faced with stress.

The observed difference in blood pressure response to stress, according to the researchers, is significant enough to increase or decrease risk for heart disease, more so than exercise (or lack of it) or being overweight. In addition, people who practice kindness and view God as sympathetic to their challenges may see the world as less threatening and, as a result, less stressful, and such a perspective further contributes to a healthier heart.

SOURCE: *Research on Aging*

47 Having a Happier Marriage

Couples who share religious beliefs, practices, and affiliations are happier than those with different or no religious orientation, according to a study of nearly 1,400 Americans between the ages of 18 and 59, conducted by the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia. The happiest couples think, discuss, and practice their beliefs in the home, rather than only attending church services.

Earlier research has identified three ways in which religion enhances marriages: By promoting ethical behavior (the Golden Rule) and forgiveness; by providing a family-oriented social network; and by bringing a sense of meaning and purpose to life, which increases resilience to stress.

SOURCE: *Journal of Marriage and Family* □

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