

How Religious Beliefs and Practices Are Related to Stress, Health and Medical Services

Harold G. Koenig, M.D., Professor of Psychiatry & Behavioral Sciences
Duke University Medical Center

This presentation reviews original research published in social, psychological, behavioral, nursing and medical journals that examine relationships between religion/spirituality and the health of individuals and populations. It describes: (1) the prevalence of religious beliefs and practices in the U.S.; (2) increasing levels of stress in America and negative effects on physical health; (3) the role that religion/spirituality plays in coping with stress and physical illness; (4) the relationships between religious involvement, stress, and depression; (5) the relationships between religion, substance abuse, and health behaviors; (6) the relationships between religion and physical health; (7) the impact on the need for medical care and use of health services; and (8) the effects on community resiliency following natural disasters and acts of terrorism.

This review suggests that as many as 3,000 quantitative studies have now examined relationships between religion/spirituality and health (both mental and physical), and the majority of these studies report positive findings. This presentation examines the implications of this research for improving public health, promoting community resiliency, enhancing patient care, and lightening the ever-increasing economic burden of providing health care and protecting the population, while being careful to avoid applications that might be seen as coercive in this private area or that might arouse concern over threats to church-state separation.