

Is religion good for your health? It depends on how, why, when and where.

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Whether religion is good for your health depends on a number of factors: *why* people are religious, *how* people are religious, *when* people are religious, and *who* and *where* the person is.

Part of the power of religion lies in the fact that it is able to respond to the diverse needs of its members. But not all motives are alike. Studies show that religious motivation (i.e., the *why's* of religion) makes a difference for health and well-being. For example, one group of researchers distinguished people who felt that their religious involvement was personally chosen from those whose religious practices were motivated by guilt, anxiety, and external pressures. They found that those with a more internalized religious motivation showed better mental health and higher self-esteem than those whose religious motivation was based on guilt and social pressure.

Research also indicates that knowing *how* someone is religious has more important implications for health than knowing *whether* someone is religious. Studies have shown that people who feel they have a partner in God in stressful times experience greater benefits than those who simply defer the responsibility for their problems to God.

We also have to consider *when* someone is religious; in particular, whether the individual is religiously discerning, applying the appropriate religious resource in the right time and place. Research suggests that in uncontrollable life situations, the wisest course of action may be to surrender control over to something beyond oneself. On the other hand, to take a deferring approach in response to controllable situations is potentially dangerous, as in cases of people with treatable medical illnesses who refuse treatment for religious reasons.

Finally, when trying to answer the question whether religion is good for your health, it is important to consider *who* and *where* the person is. Studies have found that people who are more deeply religious appear to gain more health benefits from their religion. Another study found that members of African-American churches may also experience added health benefits as a result of greater levels of spiritual support, religious meaning, and powerful uplifting spiritual emotions in the church.

To understand religion and its relationships to health and well-being, we need ask more specific questions. The question whether religion is good for your health leads to a tougher but more appropriate question: "How helpful or harmful are particular kinds of religious expressions for particular people dealing with particular situations in particular social contexts according to particular criteria of helpfulness and harmfulness?" The answer to this question holds important implications for our efforts not only to understand the religious dimension of life, but also to promote psychological, social, physical, and spiritual health and well-being.