

Chronic Financial Strain and Depressive Symptoms: The Role of Religious Attendance and Gratitude

Neal Krause, Professor of Health Behavior and Health Education
University of Michigan

A considerable number of studies suggest that people who are faced with persistent economic problems are more likely to experience symptoms of depression than individuals who are not experiencing financial difficulty. Given the very difficult economic times that confront our nation, it is imperative that we find ways to help those individuals who are confronted by ongoing financial problems. The purpose of this study is to suggest that one potentially important option may be found through religion. Two issues are examined with data from a longitudinal nationwide survey of older people. First, evidence is provided which suggests that when financial problems arise, older people who feel grateful are less likely to experience symptoms of depression over time than older adults who do not feel grateful. Second, the data indicate that older people who are more deeply involved in religion (i.e., those who go to church more frequently) are more likely to be grateful than older individuals who are less involved in religion.

This study also explores why gratitude may help offset the harmful effects of stress. Many older people who are religious believe that God has a purpose and a plan for their lives and even though this plan may involve exposure to difficult experiences, the goal is to promote spiritual growth and personal development. If people believe that the problems they face are part of God's plan to strengthen them and help them grow, then they should feel grateful to God when they are wrestling with adverse experiences. These positive emotions are important because people who are confronted by hard economic times often encounter a flood of negative emotions, including a deep sense of personal failure and an inability to control what is happening in their lives. Gratitude counterbalances these negative emotions with a range of positive feelings. These positive emotions are important because a vast literature suggests that they are essential for the development and maintenance of good mental health.

There are a number of ways in which involvement in religion may instill a sense of gratitude. Religious literature, such as the Christian Bible, extols the virtue of feeling grateful even when adverse times are encountered. In addition, fellow church members often encourage each other to feel grateful even though they may be faced with challenging situations.

The findings from this study are important because they show one way in which interventions may be designed to assist older people who are confronted by difficult economic times. Research indicates that older people go to church more often than younger individuals. If religion helps people feel grateful, and older people are more likely to be involved in religion, it follows that church-based interventions that are designed to enhance feelings of gratitude may be especially effective for our aging population.