

Religion and healthcare should mix, study says

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Research shows that religion and spirituality are linked to positive physical and mental health; however, most studies have focused on people with life threatening diseases. A new study from the University of Missouri-Columbia shows that religion helps many individuals with disabilities adjust to their impairments and gives new meaning to their lives.

According to the study, persons facing impending death may use religion to help them accept their condition, come to terms with unresolved life issues, and prepare for death. However, the study suggests that religion may be an equally, if not more important, coping mechanism for persons with chronic disabilities such as traumatic brain injury, spinal cord injury, stroke and arthritis.

“Although many individuals with disabilities turn to religion to help them deal with their situations, to date, religion is infrequently discussed in rehabilitation settings and is rarely investigated in rehabilitation research. To better meet the needs of persons with disabilities, this needs to change,” said Brick Johnstone, professor of health psychology in the MU School of Health Professions.

The study notes that few practical suggestions exist for how to address religion in health care. Health care providers should encourage religious practices important to individuals, such as yoga, reading of religious texts, meditation or laying on of hands. Students should be taught about various religious beliefs and how they might be used to the patients’

advantage in a rehabilitation setting.

“Although some professionals may feel uncomfortable obtaining information about patients’ religious beliefs, it is no different than inquiring about their sexual, psychological, substance use and legal histories,” said Johnstone, who also is the director of the MU Spirituality and Health Research Project at the MU Center on Religion and the Professions.

Praying with patients may be appropriate in some cases, according to the study. Rehabilitation psychologists, counselors and chaplains also should work together to initiate forgiveness interventions. Patients who were injured as the result of the actions of others may be better able to work toward recovery if they can use their religious beliefs to work through emotions surrounding the cause of the disability.

“It is also very important that rehabilitation professionals be aware of the different religious customs that should be considered when evaluating and treating patients, including information regarding the appropriateness of physical touching by others, preferences regarding gender specific services, dress and hygiene customs,” Johnstone said.

Source: University of Missouri-Columbia

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