

Religion habit cuts anxiety in women

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For many, religious activity changes between childhood and adulthood, and a new study finds this could affect one's mental health.

According to Temple University's Joanna Maselko, Sc.D., women who had stopped being religiously active were more than three times more likely to have suffered generalized anxiety and alcohol abuse/dependence than women who reported always having been active.

"One's lifetime pattern of religious service attendance can be related to psychiatric illness," said Maselko, an assistant professor of public health and co-author of the study, which appears in the January issue of *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*.

Conversely, men who stopped being religiously active were less likely to suffer major depression when compared to men who had always been religiously active.

Maselko offers one possible explanation for the gender differences in the relationship between religious activity and mental health.

"Women are simply more integrated into the social networks of their religious communities. When they stop attending religious services, they lose access to that network and all its potential benefits. Men may not be as integrated into the religious community in the first place and so may not suffer the negative consequences of leaving," Maselko said.

The study expands on previous research in the field by analyzing the

relationship between mental health — anxiety, depression and alcohol dependence or abuse — and spirituality using current and past levels, said Maselko, who conducted the research when she was at Harvard University.

In the study sample, comprising 718 adults, a majority of men and women changed their level of religious activity between childhood and adulthood, which was critical information for the researchers.

“A person’s current level of spirituality is only part of the story. We can only get a better understanding of the relationship between health and spirituality by knowing a person’s lifetime religious history,” Maselko said.

Out of the 278 women in the group, 39 percent (N=109) had always been religiously active and 51 percent (N=141) had not been active since childhood. About 7 percent of the women who have always been religiously active met the criteria for generalized anxiety disorder compared to 21 percent of women who had stopped being religiously active.

“Everyone has some spirituality, whether it is an active part of their life or not; whether they are agnostic or atheist or just ‘non-practicing.’ These choices potentially have health implications, similar to the way that one’s social networks do,” Maselko said.

Source: Temple University

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