

# Participating in religion may make adolescents from certain races more depressed

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One of the few studies to look at the effects of religious participation on the mental health of minorities suggests that for some of them, religion may actually be contributing to adolescent depression. Previous research has shown that teens who are active in religious services are depressed less often because it provides these adolescents with social support and a sense of belonging.

But new research has found that this does not hold true for all adolescents, particularly for minorities and some females. The study found that white and African-American adolescents generally had fewer symptoms of depressive at high levels of religious participation. But for some Latino and Asian-American adolescents, attending church more often was actually affecting their mood in a negative way.

Asian-American adolescents who reported high levels of participation in their church had the highest number of depressive symptoms among teens of their race.

Likewise, Latino adolescents who were highly active in their church were more depressed than their peers who went to church less often. Females of all races and ethnic groups were also more likely to have symptoms of depression than males overall.

Setting all other factors aside, the results suggest that participating in

religion at high levels may be detrimental to some teens because of the tensions they face in balancing the conflicting ideals and customs of their religion with those of mainstream culture, said Richard Petts, co-author of the study, who did the work as a doctoral student in sociology at Ohio State University.

"Most research has shown that religious participation, for the most part, is good and can be very helpful for battling depression. But our research has shown that this relationship does not hold true in all instances," he said.

While the study shows that females and males from certain groups may be more inclined to become depressed, involvement in religious services still had an overall positive affect for many youth in the study. The results do provide important insight into the impact of religious participation on teenage depression, but race and gender may only be part of the reason certain youth were more depressed, Petts said.

"The study shows that we need to consider the broader social aspects of institutions such as religion on an individual's well being, both good and bad. We focus specifically on race and gender, but these are not the only two factors that may be contributing to higher and lower depression among youth," he said.

Petts, who is now an assistant professor of sociology at Ball State University, conducted the study with Anne Jolliff when they were both doctoral students at Ohio State. Jolliff is now a research coordinator at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis. The pair based the study on data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, a study surveying middle and high school students throughout the United States.

Adolescents in grades 7 through 12 were initially interviewed in school

and a random number of students were again interviewed at home. Students were asked to identify the positive and negative feelings they had experienced in the preceding week such as depression, loneliness, isolation, happiness, or excitement. They were also asked about their behavior in the last year and asked to identify their race, religious preference, and how often they attended services during the same period of time.

Adolescents were then interviewed a second time one year later at home about the same topics. Parents of these adolescents were also asked about their child's moods and behaviors. Only the 12,155 adolescents who participated in both parts of the study and had information from their parents were included in this study.

The results were recently published in the journal *Review of Religious Research*.

Among adolescents who never attended church, Asian-American adolescents reported 4 percent fewer symptoms of depression in the preceding week than did their African-American peers.

In comparison, Asian-American youth who attended church at least once a week reported 20 to 27 percent more symptoms of depression than their white and African-American peers who attended at the same level.

Latino adolescents fared about the same as Asian Americans, reporting 6 to 14 percent higher rates of depression symptoms than did African-American and white teens when attending church at least once a week.

The results showed that in stark contrast to the findings for white and African-American adolescents, Asian-American adolescents who never attended services and Latinos attending at intermediate levels were the least likely to be depressed within their groups.

The results suggest that something unique was affecting adolescents within these two groups when they went to church often. Petts believes that the traditional nature of religion for these two groups may be conflicting with the ideals and customs of mainstream American society. This conflict may be putting additional stress on these youth as they try to balance competing principles and traditions, he said.

"Asian and Latino youth who are highly involved in a culturally distinct church may have a more difficult time balancing the beliefs of their family and their traditional culture with mainstream society. Their religious institution is telling them what should be important in their lives and how to behave, and mainstream society is saying something else," he said.

At higher levels of participation, Asian-American and Latino adolescents had a harder time juggling which set of ideals to adopt because they were more involved and committed to their religion.

Meanwhile, Asian-American adolescents who had lower levels of involvement in church were able to focus more on life without worrying about conflicting ideals, resulting in lower depression. At lower levels of involvement, adolescents still gained the social support of their religious community while also feeling in touch with mainstream society, Petts said.

The results also showed that the problem for Latino adolescents may be two-fold. At high levels of involvement in their religious community, Latino teens experienced the same tension between culture and society as some Asian-American teens. This led to higher reports of depression symptoms among these youth.

But Latino teens who never attended church reported high levels of depression as well, reporting 26 to 28 percent higher rate of depression

symptoms than did white and African-American youth. Religion is often an important part of social support for these adolescents and no involvement in their religion may leave these teens without a sense of connection to their community and culture, he said.

"Participating to a certain extent may enable these youth to balance their lives better. They have a connection with a religious community and all the benefits it offers, but they are not so immersed that they're out of touch with mainstream society. So they're sort of getting the best of both worlds," Petts said.

The tension between society and religion may also help explain why females who were sexually active report higher levels of depression than do sexually active males. The disconnect between how their religion told them to act and what they chose to do may cause these females to have higher emotional distress and increased depression, he said.

In addition, Latina females who participated heavily in their religion were more likely to become depressed than Latino males. Not only were these young women more at risk for feeling depressed than were their male counterparts, but they were also more depressed than Latina females who attended church at intermittent levels.

"Females in these religious institutions often have subordinate status and if females feel that they don't have equal say in that religious institution, that may contribute to higher levels of depression," Petts said.

This may also explain why attending church at intermediate levels resulted in lower depression for these females. Latina females who attend at moderate levels may benefit from the social support of the religious community, while avoiding the patriarchal tensions experienced by those who attend services weekly.

Source: Ohio State University

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