

Spirituality protects against depression better than church attendance

October 23 2008

Those who worship a higher power often do so in different ways. Whether they are active in their religious community, or prefer to simply pray or meditate, new research out of Temple University suggests that a person's religiousness – also called religiosity – can offer insight into their risk for depression.

Lead researcher Joanna Maselko, Sc.D., characterized the religiosity of 918 study participants in terms of three domains of religiosity: religious service attendance, which refers to being involved with a church; religious well-being, which refers to the quality of a person's relationship with a higher power; and existential well-being, which refers to a person's sense of meaning and their purpose in life.

In a study published on-line this month in *Psychological Medicine*, Maselko and fellow researchers compared each domain of religiosity to their risk of depression, and were surprised to find that the group with higher levels of religious well-being were 1.5 times more likely to have had depression than those with lower levels of religious well-being.

Maselko theorizes this is because people with depression tend to use religion as a coping mechanism. As a result, they're more closely relating to God and praying more.

Researchers also found that those who attended religious services were 30 percent less likely to have had depression in their lifetime, and those who had high levels of existential well-being were 70 percent less likely

to have had depression than those who had low levels of existential well-being.

Maselko says involvement in the church provides the opportunity for community interaction, which could help forge attachments to others, an important factor in preventing depression. She added that those with higher levels of existential-well being have a strong sense of their place in the world.

"People with high levels of existential well-being tend to have a good base, which makes them very centered emotionally," said Maselko. "People who don't have those things are at greater risk for depression, and those same people might also turn to religion to cope."

Maselko admits that researchers have yet to determine which comes first: depression or being religious, but is currently investigating the time sequence of this over people's lives to figure out the answer.

"For doctors, psychiatrists and counselors, it's hard to disentangle these elements when treating mental illness," she said. "You can't just ask a patient if they go to church to gauge their spirituality or coping behaviors. There are other components to consider when treating patients, and its important information for doctors to have."

Source: Temple University

Citation: Spirituality protects against depression better than church attendance (2008, October 23) retrieved 4 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2008-10-spirituality-depression-church.html>

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