

Researcher examines impact of religious beliefs on personal well-being

April 20 2009, By Jaweed Kaleem

Hilda Schau says it's a belief in God that carried her through divorce and job loss. Urologist Manuel Padron says he regularly sees the power of faith at work in his patients.

Personal beliefs such as theirs drew millions to church last week on Easter Sunday. But are they quantifiably good for you?

They are, according to Michael E. McCullough, a University of Miami researcher who has been studying the relationship between religion and health for more than a decade.

His conclusions are fueling the debate over the impact of religion on personal well-being.

"It's kind of hard to find a downside to religion," says McCullough, a psychology professor and one of the top researchers in the field.

In a small lab on UM's Coral Gables campus, McCullough, 39, has conducted experiments with hundreds of people of many backgrounds, testing their ability to delay gratification, forgive and be thankful, and correlating those findings with health factors from drug use to depression. All the while, he has asked, "Do you believe in God? How much?"

McCullough's research suggests that religious people of all faiths, by sizable margins, do better in school, live longer, have more satisfying

marriages and are generally happier than their nonbelieving peers.

He has published more than a dozen studies on the subject, including a recent article in *Psychological Bulletin* suggesting that if you want to quit smoking, you may want to get religious about it. In the *Journal of Drug Issues*, he reported that in neighborhoods plagued by alcoholism, church attendance helps more than Alcoholics Anonymous.

"Religious people tend to have good self-control," says McCullough, citing what he considers the biggest reason for their higher scores on health and prosperity indicators.

David Niose, president of the American Humanist Association in Washington, D.C., doesn't dispute such findings, but doesn't find them persuasive.

"The secular outlook is just as capable of bringing one inner peace, stability and happiness as any religious view," says Niose, whose group includes atheists and promotes the view that nonbelievers should live ethically for the greater human good.

McCullough acknowledges that religion is just part of the picture, and a relatively small one at that. He says factors such as race, class and age undoubtedly play larger roles in determining life outcomes.

"Frankly, there are some downsides to religion," he adds, noting that the same self-control that can help a believer beat an addiction can turn a zealot into a suicide bomber.

According to a survey released last month by Trinity College in Hartford, Conn., 70 percent of Americans believe in God.

"Every year, I concentrate more and more on my faith," says Toni

Pallatto, 53, a marketing company owner who looks forward to Easter Mass at Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church in Kendall, Fla. It's "a new beginning," she says of the holiest day on the Christian calendar.

Rituals, whether holiday celebrations or rites such as Communion, have strong, positive psychological effects, McCullough says. While his study samples have been mostly Christian, he says the findings apply across religious beliefs.

Faisal Imtiaz, a Muslim who lives in Kendall, says faith guides his life. "Understanding the limits put down by my religion, the conditions to keep morality, egos and responsibility in check, it points to a better physical and emotional being, not only for me but for my community," says Imtiaz, 43.

A communications company owner, he observes a daily fast during Ramadan, the Islamic holy month that begins in late August, and regularly attends Friday congregational prayers.

Prayer, McCullough says, is especially powerful. Scientists have found that images of the brain in prayer resemble "that of a person interacting with somebody they love."

Schau, 46, who attends twice-a-week services at Calvary Chapel of Doral, agrees.

"I'm incredibly in love with Jesus," says the former administrative assistant, who now works for a temp agency. "He rocks."

The sincerity of your faith has a bearing on its health benefits, McCullough asserts.

"You can be religious because you don't want to embarrass your family

or because you feel guilty. It's important why you're religious."

He has found that religious converts and those who embraced faith later in life reap some of the greatest benefits.

Ali Elhajj, a software programmer in Weston, Fla., was born into a Muslim family in Lebanon, where he says civil war between Christians and Muslims made him "want nothing to do with religion."

Until his mid-20s, he was an atheist. Now 36 and a member of First Baptist Church at Weston, he says he finds more meaning in life because "you are not living for yourself anymore but living for your maker."

Reginald Munnings, 52, has attended St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church in Miami's Overtown neighborhood since he was a boy.

"There are forces at work that you don't know about," he says. "You can't see them, but they are there."

A belief in a power greater than one's self is what leads to more [self-control](#), McCullough posits. He routinely makes an offer to subjects: Take \$50 today or \$65 in a month. The religious ones, he says, wait for the bigger reward.

McCullough sees a corollary between the ability to delay gratification and a belief in heavenly rewards. And he sees such impulse control as a reason that "religious people are less likely to break the law, to have extramarital sex, to do drugs."

A former director of research at the National Institute for Healthcare Research in Rockville, Md., who taught at Louisiana Tech and Southern Methodist universities, McCullough has published widely on religion and health.

"He is one of the top five in the entire field," says Harold Koenig, a psychiatry professor who co-directs the Duke University Center for Spirituality, Theology and Health and occasionally collaborates with McCullough.

In a groundbreaking 2000 paper, they analyzed 42 studies about religion and life span that examined 125,826 people, finding that the religious were 29 percent more likely than the nonreligious to live longer than the norm for their demographic group.

In his recent study on alcoholism, McCullough sifted through surveys of 2,402 residents of poor neighborhoods in Boston, Chicago and San Antonio. Buried in the data, gathered by the National Institutes of Health for a poverty study, were numbers on religion.

His finding: People who attended religious services more than once a week over the course of a year were 24 percent less likely than others to abuse [alcohol](#).

In the *Journal of Clinical and Social Psychology*, McCullough and Koenig analyzed 64 studies about religion and health issues such as hypertension and heart attack. In the majority of cases, they found a correlation between regular worship service attendance and a reduced incidence of health problems.

Religious people were also particularly good at handling physical pain, a quality that Padron, the urologist, has seen close up.

"People of faith can tolerate endless amounts of suffering," says Padron, 47, a devout Catholic who treats everything from urinary-tract infections to gynecologic cancer. "They're unshakable."

McCullough's studies are largely survey-based, and most of his subjects

are students in introductory psychology courses who get a small amount of class credit for volunteering.

"I get religion on their brain in subtle ways," he says—for example, by having them work crossword puzzles with words like God or spirit hidden among the letters. Other times, he is direct: Participants are asked to rate their belief in God and religious practices on a numerical scale.

Forgiveness is another focus of his research. He finds subjects who feel that they have been wronged — "everything from public ridicule to abuse and violence" — and has them recall their experiences. Electrodes measure their blood pressure, heart rate and perspiration as indicators of anger and stress. He used the findings to write "Beyond Revenge: The Evolution of the Forgiveness Instinct" (Jossey-Bass, 2008). Religious people, he found, are less vengeful.

For a study on gratitude, McCullough assigned two groups of students to write daily journals. One group would list things for which they were grateful. The second would list daily hassles and complaints.

He found that the regular practice of gratitude -- something as simple as listing a few things for which one is thankful -- can increase happiness more than 25 percent.

Mary Newman, 74, who has attended Miami Shores Presbyterian Church since she was 6, says thanks daily via prayer -- before eating, driving and sleeping.

A volunteer who devotes up to 30 hours a week to church-related activities, she believes "intensely in prayer" and calls her faith "a personal relationship."

Although he was raised in a "loving Baptist church" in Jacksonville, Fla.,

McCullough, like many of his subjects, began to explore and question his faith as he grew up. He and his wife, a clinical psychologist, are not raising their 4- and 8-year-old children in any particular faith.

"I have been all over the map of Christendom, from the far right to the left and everything between, from informality to strict focus on scripture," he says. "I've never in my own spiritual life roamed too far out of Christianity. I guess you would say I'm a free agent. I definitely still think that search is important."

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