

Church Attendance, Marital Status Can Affect Mood of Older Adults

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(PhysOrg.com) -- UA graduate student Rita Law's study to evaluate long-term effects of marital status and church attendance is among very few that have considered such a correlation.

Aging is typically associated with increases in depression, but one University of Arizona graduate student is studying the effects that marital status and church attendance can have later in life to forestall some of the negative experiences later.

University of Arizona graduate student Rita Law was quite familiar with prior research indicating that declining health and the death of family and friends are factors in increased depressive moods in older adults.

Yet she became curious about the effects of church attendance and marital status can have to prevent some of these poor outcomes and initiated a research project involving data culled from the Australian Longitudinal Study of Aging.

In her research, which was supervised by David Sbarra, a UA assistant professor of psychology, Law observed that [religious services](#) and having a partner had positive effects as a person aged, and also noticed curious nuances she was not expecting to find.

The findings were published in an article she co-authored with Sbarra titled, "The Effects of Church Attendance and Marital Status on the Longitudinal Trajectories of Depressed Mood Among Older Adults,"

which appeared in the September issue of *Journal of Aging and Health*.

“There are a lot of challenges associated with getting older,” said Law, a doctoral degree candidate and graduate teaching assistant in the UA’s [psychology](#) department, noting that losing [cognitive abilities](#) and facing one’s death are among them.

“But we want to better understand them to determine if we can protect them against the development of depressive moods,” Law said.

The co-authored paper reads: “These findings suggest that when evaluating the effects of marital status on older adults’ emotional life, it is important to consider changes in marital status rather than a static picture of marital status at a given time point.”

The study is among very few to evaluate the effects of marital status and church attendance on individual changes in depressive mood among older adults, Law said.

“Instead of a snapshot, we can show how people change over time to give us a better understanding of how people cope over time, and this approach is far more informative,” Law said.

To investigate these issues, Law relied on a sample comprised of nearly 800 adults aged 65 and older who had been interviewed several times over an 8-year period, allowing her also to evaluate mood progressions.

Those surveyed were either married, in a common law marriage, separated, divorced, widowed or had never been married and who were Anglican, Catholic, Orthodox, members of the United Church of Christ or another congregation and who were non-religious.

As part of the study, participants were asked to rate their health on a scale and also asked to explain what type of social support they had,

whether from family, friends or others.

They found that while being married helped to ward off depression, attending church appeared to have a "protective effect" against symptoms consistent with depression.

Those were the anticipated findings, Law said.

But some of the subtle differences were that people who reported not going to church at all had lower levels of depression than did those who either went consistently or inconsistently.

“We’re thinking that it is possible that a person can get a sense of purpose by going to church and endorsing the belief system,” Law said. But those who do not attend church consistently are likely deriving a sense of purpose in life elsewhere, possibly from being in a relationship or participating in other meaningful activities, she added.

Findings also suggested that, over a five-year period, the depressive mood for non- churchgoers increased at a faster rate and eventually caught up with those who go to church either consistently or inconsistently.

The authors also warn that it would be faulty to assume that simply by attending church or getting married would result in better moods, and that other stressors should be considered in further study. The article does attest that additional research is required to further understand what these effects mean and how they may be manifest in other populations.

She noted that unspecified and unknown social and cultural differences may be occurring.

But, ultimately, it is promising that the research shows a strong

correlation between religion, relationships and depression as people age.

“The next logical step would be to look at why that association exists,” Law said. “If purpose in life is the key, interventions could be designed around how to help people create a sense of purpose in their lives.”

Provided by University of Arizona ([news](#) : [web](#))

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