

Losing your religion deemed unhealthy

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(PhysOrg.com) -- People who leave strict religious groups are more likely to say their health is worse than members who remain in the group, according to a Penn State researcher.

The percentage of people who left a strict religious group and reported they were in excellent health was about half that of people who stayed in the group, said Christopher Scheitle, senior research assistant, in sociology.

"Previous research showed some association between belonging to a religious group and positive [health outcomes](#)," Scheitle said. "We became interested in what would happen to your health if you left a religious group. Would people demonstrate any negative health outcomes?"

About 40 percent of members of strict religious groups reported they were in excellent health, according to the study. However, only 25 percent of members in those groups who switched to another religion reported they were in excellent health. The percentage of the strict religious group members who dropped out of religion completely and said their health was excellent fell to 20 percent. The difference between switchers and non-switchers, in reference to health, is statistically significant for the strict groups. The researchers reported their findings in the current issue of the [Journal of Health and Social Behavior](#).

The study also indicated that people who were raised and remained in strict religious groups were more likely to report they were in better

health than people affiliated with other religious groups. Scheitle, working with Amy Adamczyk, assistant professor of sociology, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, and assistant professor of sociology and criminal justice at the graduate center, City University of New York, defined strict religions, such as The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and Jehovah's Witnesses, as exclusive groups with strict social, moral and physical guidelines for members.

The researchers suggested several possible reasons for the declining health conditions reported by former members.

Strict groups typically require members to abstain from unhealthy behaviors, such as alcohol and tobacco use. These groups also create both formal and informal support structures to promote positive health, according to Scheitle. The social bonds of belonging to the group might be another factor for better health.

"The social solidarity and social support could have psychological benefits," Scheitle said. "That could then lead to certain health benefits."

Religious beliefs may also promote better health by providing hope and encouraging positive thinking.

Besides losing connection to these health benefits, exiting a religious group may increase stressful situations.

"You could lose your friends or your family becomes upset when you leave, leading to psychological stress and negative health outcomes," said Scheitle.

The study does not necessarily mean that leaving a group causes poor health, Scheitle said. Poor health actually could prompt a member to leave the group. Strict sectarian groups require active involvement in

meetings, services and social events that hinder participation by unhealthy members. An unhealthy member may also question membership in a group that promotes the belief in an all-powerful being who has failed to heal his or her condition.

For the study, Scheitle examined a total of 30,523 cases collected from 1972 through 2006 in the General Social Surveys. Of those, more than 10,000 switched to another religion and more than 2,000 dropped out of religion completely. A total of 423 strict religious group members were studied with approximately 96 members switching to other religions and about 54 members no longer affiliated with any religion. The Opinion National Research Center has conducted this survey annually or biennially since 1972. Scheitle said drawing deeper conclusions about the health issues from leaving a strict religious group would require more exact studies. Those longitudinal studies are new in the religious field, he added.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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