

Study finds prayer can help handle harmful emotions

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Those who choose to pray find personalized comfort during hard times, according to a University of Wisconsin-Madison sociologist.

The 75 percent of Americans who pray on a weekly basis do so to manage a range of negative situations and emotions — illness, sadness, trauma and anger — but just how they find relief has gone unconsidered by researchers.

Through the course of in-depth interviews with dozens of victims of violent relationships with intimate partners, Shane Sharp, a graduate student studying sociology at UW-Madison, gathered an array of ways prayer helped them deal with their situations and emotions through coping mechanisms such as venting. Sharp's interviewees represented a wide swath of the United States in geographic, educational and racial terms, and came largely from Christian backgrounds.

Those who were boiling with anger said they found "a readily available listening ear," says Sharp, who explores how prayer helps manage [emotional](#) pain in the December issue of the journal *Social Psychology Quarterly*.

"If they vented their anger to that abusive partner, the result was likely to be more violence," Sharp says. "But they could be angry at God while praying without fear of reprisal."

During any interpersonal interaction, the participants are considering

how they look through the other's eyes. In the case of people who pray, they are considering God's view.

"During prayer, victims came to see themselves as they believed God saw them. Since these perceptions were mostly positive, it helped raise their senses of self-worth that counteracted their abusers' hurtful words," Sharp says.

Prayer is also a handy distraction for some, Sharp's study found. Simply folding hands and concentrating on what to say is a reprieve from the anxiety of an abusive relationship. The experience isn't that much different from a conversation with a close friend or a parent, he says.

"I looked at the act of praying, of speaking to God, as the same as a legitimate social interaction," Sharp says. "Instead of a concrete interaction you would have face-to-face with another person, prayer is with an imagined other."

That's not to diminish God's role by considering him an imagined participant in a prayer, Sharp adds. "On the contrary, I wouldn't expect prayer to have these benefits for people if they thought God wasn't real," he says. "The important point is that they believe God is real, and that has consequences for them emotionally and for their behavior."

Yet, the consequences of prayer aren't always positive. "For some, through prayer they told me they learned to forgive their abusive partners, to let go of their anger and resentment," Sharp says. "But that's a double-edged sword. It's good for those who are out of that violent relationship to let go of it to a certain extent. But if they're still in their violent relationship, it may postpone their decision to leave, and that can be bad."

That double-edged sword makes the mechanics of prayer an important

topic for new research, according to Sharp. "Religion is often pointed to as a mostly positive or mostly negative thing," he says. "It's way more complicated than that."

Many of those interviewed by Sharp said they believe in God, but don't belong to a specific church. "They still pray," he says. "It's the most common religious practice you can find. For that reason alone, it deserves more attention, and I think future research should consider [prayer](#) as an interaction instead of a one-sided act."

Provided by American Sociological Association

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