

Spiritual retreat can lower depression, raise hope in heart patients

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Attending a non-denominational spiritual retreat can help patients with severe heart trouble feel less depressed and more hopeful about the future, a University of Michigan Health System study has found.

Heart patients who participated in a four-day retreat that included techniques such as meditation, guided imagery, drumming, journal writing and outdoor activities saw immediate improvement in tests measuring depression and hopefulness. Those improvements persisted at three- and six-month follow-up measurements.

The study was the first [randomized clinical trial](#) to demonstrate an intervention that raises hope in patients with [acute coronary syndrome](#), a condition that includes chest pain and heart attack. Previous research has shown that hope and its opposite, hopelessness, have an impact on how patients face uncertain futures.

"The study shows that a spiritual retreat like the Medicine for the Earth program can jumpstart and help to maintain a return to psycho-spiritual well-being," says study lead author Sara Warber, M.D., associate professor of family medicine at the U-M Medical School and director of U-M's Integrative Medicine program. "These types of interventions may be of particular interest to patients who do not want to take antidepressants for the [depression symptoms](#) that often accompany [coronary heart disease](#) and heart attack."

The findings were published in the July issue of *Explore: the Journal of*

Science and Healing.

The retreat group was compared to two other groups: one received standard cardiac care and the other participated in a [lifestyle change](#) retreat run by the U-M Cardiovascular Center that focused on nutrition, [physical exercise](#) and stress management.

The spiritual retreat portion of the study was conducted at the Windrise Retreat Center in Metamora, Michigan, about 50 miles north of Detroit. In the Medicine for the Earth program, participants are encouraged to see themselves as part of an interconnected web of life. The approach is founded on the work of co-author Sandra Ingerman, M.A., who wrote the book *Medicine for the Earth: How to Transform Personal and Environmental Toxins*, which emphasizes principles of love, harmony, beauty, unity and peace.

The study used a number of standard mental and physical benchmarks to assess the success of the program.

The spiritual retreat group went from a baseline score of 12 on the Beck Depression Inventory, indicating mild to moderate depression, to an improved score of 6 immediately afterward, a 50-percent reduction. Their scores remained that low half a year later. The lifestyle group saw their scores drop from 11 to 7 and remain there. The control group's score started at 8 and went down to 6.

Participants also showed marked improvement in their scores on a test measuring hope. Scores on the State Hope Scale can range from 6 to 48, with higher scores indicating greater hope. All three study groups started with average scores between 34 and 36. After the spiritual retreat, participants' average scores rose and stayed at 40 or above, while the other two groups' averages remained significantly lower, ranging from 35 to 38, three and six months later.

"Our work adds an important spiritual voice to the current discussion of the importance of psychological well-being for patients facing serious medical issues, such as acute coronary artery disease," Warber says.

More information: "Healing the Heart: A Randomized Pilot Study of a Spiritual Retreat for Depression in Acute Coronary Syndrome Patients," *Explore: The Journal of Science and Healing*, July 2011.

Provided by University of Michigan Health System

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