

Belief in god cuts two ways, study finds

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Being reminded of the concept of God can decrease people's motivation to pursue personal goals but can help them resist temptation, according to new research published by the American Psychological Association.

"More than 90 percent of people in the world agree that God or a similar spiritual power exists or may exist," said the study's lead author, Kristin Laurin, PhD, of the University of Waterloo in Canada. "This is the first [empirical evidence](#) that simple reminders of God can diminish some types of self-regulation, such as pursuing one's goals, yet can improve others, such as resisting temptation."

A total of 353 college students, with an average age 19 and 186 of whom were women, participated in six experiments to determine how the idea of God can indirectly influence people's motivations, even among those who said they were not religious. The students did not have to have an opinion on the existence of a god or any other spiritual power. The findings were reported in the online version of the [Journal of Personality and Social Psychology](#).

In one experiment, [engineering students](#) completed a "warm-up" word task. They were asked to form grammatically correct sentences using four words from sets of five. Some students were provided either God or God-related words (divine, sacred, spirit and prophet), while the control group used more neutral words (ball, desk, sky, track and box). Next, each student had to form as many words as they could in five minutes, using any combination of specific letters. The researchers determined the students' motivation level by the number of words they produced.

The more motivated they were, the more words they produced. They were told that a good performance could help predict if they would succeed in an engineering career.

Several weeks before this experiment, the students had been asked if they believed outside factors (other people, beings, forces beyond their control) had an influence on their careers. Among participants who said outside factors such as God might influence their career success, those who did the God-related word task performed worse than those who used neutral words. There was no difference in performance among the participants who did not believe outside factors influenced their career success.

Researchers also measured the importance participants placed on a number of values, including achievement. Participants reminded of God placed the same value on achievement as did participants primed with the more neutral words. "This suggests that our findings did not emerge because the participants reminded of God devalued achievement," said Laurin.

A second set of experiments looked at participants' ability to resist temptation after being reminded about God. In one study, participants who said eating healthy food was important to them ate fewer cookies after reading a short passage about God than those who read a passage unrelated to [God](#).

Participants who read a short God-related passage reported greater willingness to resist temptations to achieve a major goal, such as maintaining a healthy weight, finding a long-term relationship or having a successful career. This effect was found only among participants who had previously said they believe an omniscient entity watches over them and notices when they misbehave.

The level of participants' religious devotion had no impact on the outcomes in any of the experiments, according to the researchers.

Provided by American Psychological Association

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