

Participating in large-crowd event could have physical, mental benefits

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(Medical Xpress)—Being stuck in a crowd of a million people doesn't sound like much fun, but according to the latest research, being with others – even during difficult conditions - can actually be good for well-being.

The study, into the biggest religious festival on earth, the Magh Mela, suggests that participation in large-scale events is beneficial because the psychological comfort of taking part outweighs any [physical distress](#).

In a new report, researchers at the Universities of St Andrews, Allahabad and Dundee say that the annual Hindu festival is 'probably the greatest event on earth'.

The festival in Allahabad, [Northern India](#), sees crowds of predominantly elderly [pilgrims](#) descend on the banks of the Ganges to participate in the event. It is particularly challenging because of the demanding conditions in which the participants live, often sleeping on the ground in near freezing conditions for a whole month.

And yet, despite the obvious physical discomforts to an ageing group, the new study published today found that participants reported enhanced physical and mental well-being after the event.

Professor Stephen Reicher, an expert in [crowd behavior](#) at the University of St Andrews, commented, "The Magh Mela is probably the greatest event on earth. Over the month of the festival many millions of

people can attend. As a result, it is densely crowded, extremely noisy and the sanitary conditions are rudimentary at least. All this would suggest that the event would be stressful and a threat to health and well-being, but what we found is that attending the Mela is actually good for people."

In the first properly [longitudinal study](#) of its kind, pilgrims (known as Kalpwasis) and a comparable sample of non-attendees completed measures of well-being before and after the Mela.

Despite bathing daily in the cold Ganges water and sleeping in flimsy tents frequently flooded by rain, it was the pilgrims that reported improvements in overall well-being.

The researchers suggest that being part of a crowd where members have a sense of common purpose and a common identity fosters close, warm and supportive relations between people.

Professor Reicher continued, "It creates a sense that, with such support, one is better able to deal with the challenges of everyday life. And this sense enhances mental and physical well-being. Indeed, those who attended the pilgrimage reported less headaches and less aches and pains amongst other improvements."

The Economic and Social Research Council funded study was carried out in collaboration with colleagues at the University of Allahabad in India, the University of Exeter, and Queen's University Belfast.

Allahabad's Dr Shruti Tewari had the challenge of scouring the countryside up to 100 miles from Allahabad for the 500 participants, and keeping track of them to follow their progress after the event.

Professor Narayanan Srinivasan, from the University of Allahabad,

headed up the Indian side of the study. She commented, "The Mela is huge, crowded and noisy; the conditions are often harsh and the pilgrims give up all their home comforts. One might have thought that it would take a toll on the health of these people, many of whom are frail and elderly. But to the contrary, it brings them together in a way that actually improves their wellbeing. This is one more remarkable aspect of a quite remarkable event."

Dr Nick Hopkins, of the University of Dundee, was Head of the UK-based side of the team. He concluded, "This is an important study that, for the first time, demonstrates that taking part in crowd events can have important consequences for one's life outside the crowd. Moreover, against a background where so many people highlight the negatives of crowds, this work shows that crowds can actually be good for you!"

More information: The study "Participation in mass gatherings can benefit well-being: Longitudinal and control data from a North Indian Hindu pilgrimage event", is published by *PLoS ONE*.

Provided by University of St Andrews

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