

Negative spiritual beliefs associated with more pain and worse physical, mental health

September 24 2015

Individuals who blame karma for their poor health have more pain and worse physical and mental health, according to a new study from University of Missouri researchers. Targeted interventions to counteract negative spiritual beliefs could help some individuals decrease pain and improve their overall health, the researchers said.

"In general, the more religious or spiritual you are, the healthier you are, which makes sense," said Brick Johnstone, a neuropsychologist and professor of [health](#) psychology in the MU School of Health Professions. "But for some individuals, even if they have even the smallest degree of negative spirituality – basically, when individuals believe they're ill because they've done something wrong and God is punishing them – their health is worse."

Johnstone and his colleagues studied nearly 200 individuals to find out how their [spiritual beliefs](#) affected their health outcomes. Individuals in the study had a range of health conditions, such as cancer, [traumatic brain injury](#) or chronic pain, and others were healthy. The researchers divided the individuals into two groups: a negative spirituality group that consisted of those who reported feeling abandoned or punished by a higher power, and a no negative spirituality group that consisted of people who didn't feel abandoned or punished by a higher power. Participants answered questions about their emotional and physical health, including physical pain.

Those in the negative spirituality group reported significantly worse pain

as well as worse physical and [mental health](#) while those with positive spirituality reported better mental health. However, even if individuals reported positive spiritual beliefs, having any degree of negative spiritual belief contributed to poorer [health outcomes](#), the researchers found.

"Previous research has shown that about 10 percent of people have negative spiritual beliefs; for example, believing that if they don't do something right, God won't love them," Johnstone said. "That's a negative aspect of religion when people believe, 'God is not supportive of me. What kind of hope do I have?' However, when people firmly believe God loves and forgives them despite their shortcomings, they had significantly better mental health."

Individuals with negative spiritual beliefs also reported participating in religious practices less frequently and having lower levels of positive spirituality and forgiveness. Interventions that help combat negative spiritual beliefs and promote positive spiritual beliefs could help some [individuals](#) improve their pain and their mental health, Johnstone said.

The study, "Relationships Between Negative Spiritual Beliefs and Health Outcomes for Individuals With Heterogeneous Medical Conditions," was published in the Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health.

More information: "Relationships Between Negative Spiritual Beliefs and Health Outcomes for Individuals With Heterogeneous Medical Conditions." [DOI: 10.1080/19349637.2015.1023679](https://doi.org/10.1080/19349637.2015.1023679)

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

Citation: Negative spiritual beliefs associated with more pain and worse physical, mental health (2015, September 24) retrieved 27 April 2024 from

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