

The God of small things

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New research suggests people who are religious gain happiness from believing there is a deeper meaning to everyday events.

Dr. Jonathan Ramsay is a Senior Lecturer in psychology at James Cook University's Singapore campus, with a particular interest in the

psychology of [religion](#).

His team surveyed 231 people from a diverse mix of Christians, Buddhists or Taoists, Muslims and people with no religious affiliation.

Dr. Ramsay said all world religions believe that the universe has an underlying order and structure that gives greater meaning or significance to [events](#) and circumstances.

"What we were interested in is if the believer interprets events in this fashion, does it influence their emotional reaction to those events, and eventually their general sense of well-being?"

Dr. Ramsay said the results show that all people, but especially religious people, regularly assign significance to unremarkable events—such as discussing hobbies with a work colleague, receiving a small but unexpected gift, or spending time with a family member.

"We found the more [people](#) gave meaning, purpose, and significance to such events the more they experienced positive emotions such as gratitude and contentment," he said.

Dr. Ramsay said previous research had shown a link between meaningfulness and religion and well-being, but this was the first study to examine the emotional consequences of giving meaning to otherwise insignificant events, and also the first to investigate this process in immediate, moment-to-moment experience.

"The relationship between religion and well-being is well-known. Our results tentatively suggest that the positive effect of religious belief on well-being via the giving of [meaning](#) to events and the resulting [positive emotions](#) is a general phenomenon that holds across religious and ethnic groups," he said.

More information: Jonathan E. Ramsay et al, Teleological Explanation and Positive Emotion Serially Mediate the Effect of Religion on Well-Being, *Journal of Personality* (2018). [DOI: 10.1111/jopy.12425](https://doi.org/10.1111/jopy.12425)

Provided by James Cook University

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