

Parents' religious beliefs may affect kids' suicide risk: study

August 8 2018, by Steven Reinberg, Healthday Reporter



(HealthDay)—Teens, especially girls, whose parents are religious may be

less likely to die by suicide, no matter how they feel about religion themselves, new research suggests.

The lower [suicide](#) risk among those raised in a religious home is independent of other common risk factors, including whether parents suffered from depression, showed [suicidal behavior](#) or divorced, the Columbia University researchers said.

The study, however, does not prove that a religious upbringing prevents suicide, only that there is an association between the two.

"We know that spiritual beliefs and practices tend to help people feel a greater sense of connection, of hope and meaning in their lives," said Melinda Moore, chairwoman of the clinical division of the American Association of Suicidology. She is also an assistant professor of psychology at Eastern Kentucky University in Richmond, Ky.

In addition, spiritual communities can help people who are in crisis by giving them hope and meaning, she said. And while clergy aren't trained [mental health professionals](#), they can refer people to appropriate care.

Moore, who had no role in the study, said some religions stigmatize suicide, but helping people who are at risk should be part of the caring these communities offer. Any community that is compassionate and caring is going to be protective, she said.

It's not that religious people don't have suicidal thoughts or take their own lives—after all, even ministers sometimes die by suicide, she said. Rather, a spiritual group may provide a valuable sense of belonging and support to those who are suffering from thoughts of self-harm.

"We know what places people at risk for suicide—it's a sense of not feeling connected to a community and feeling like you're a burden and

your life doesn't matter," Moore said, noting faith communities counter that. "They provide connection, making them feel they belong, that they're not a burden and that their life is important—that's very protective."

But, she added, "they may need more than prayer and fellowship. They may need [mental health](#) care."

About 12 percent of American teens say they have had [suicidal thoughts](#). And suicide is the leading cause of death among 15- to 19-year-old girls.

For the study, Priya Wickramaratne and colleagues examined data from a three-generation study at New York State Psychiatric Institute and Columbia University. The data, spanning 30 years, included 214 children from 112 families.

Most belonged to Christian denominations and some families lived in areas with limited church choices. All were white.

Among teens who thought religion was important, researchers found a lower risk for suicide among girls but not boys. Researchers saw the same association with church attendance.

When parent and child views were weighed together, however, researchers found a lower risk for suicide among young people whose parents considered religion important.

Wickramaratne, an associate professor of biostatistics and psychiatry at Columbia University, said, "Our findings suggest that there may be alternative and additional ways to help children and adolescents at highest risk for suicidal behaviors."

She said those strategies include asking parents about their spiritual

history when a child is brought in for psychiatric evaluation, and assessing the child's own religious beliefs and practices—especially with girls.

The report was published online Aug. 8 in the journal *JAMA Psychiatry*.

More information: Priya Wickramaratne, Ph.D., associate professor, clinical biostatistics in psychiatry, Columbia University, New York City; Melinda Moore, Ph.D., assistant professor, psychology, Eastern Kentucky University, Richmond, Ky., and clinical division chairwoman, American Association of Suicidology; Aug. 8, 2018, *JAMA Psychiatry*, online.

The U.S. National Institute of Mental Health has more about [suicide](#).

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Citation: Parents' religious beliefs may affect kids' suicide risk: study (2018, August 8) retrieved 25 April 2024 from

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