

# Older people who go to church have better mental health

August 2 2019, by Ciara O'shea

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A new study released by the Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA) at Trinity uncovers some of the relationships between faith and mental health in Ireland.

The study is published by the peer-reviewed journal *Research on Aging*.

The research, involving over 6,000 adults aged 50 and over found that a majority of over 50s in Ireland attend religious services regularly, and that regular religious attendance was associated with lower depressive symptoms in this population. Observations took place for six years, from 2010 to 2016.

The relationship between being religious and [mental health](#) was found to be complex. Although those with higher religious attendance had lower depressive symptoms, those who said that religion was very important to them but who did not attend very frequently, had worse mental health. Religious attendance was also related to having a bigger social network, which in turn had a positive effect on the mental health of the population.

TILDA researcher and lead author Joanna Orr said: "This new research shows that religious belief and practice in the over 50s in Ireland is complexly associated with mental wellbeing. Considering the decline in religious participation, belief and practice in Ireland, it is important to assess how this may affect those who are religious. Maintenance of religious practice for those who are religious, as well as the maintenance and bolstering of social networks and social participation for all in this age group emerge as important."

The key findings of the TILDA study included:

- Over the first four waves of TILDA (January 2010 to December 2016), religious attendance declined slightly for both men and women, from 91% to 89% in women, and from 89% to 87% in men.
- The majority of people reported religion as important to them (86% women and 76% men).

- Over the first four waves of TILDA, the size of the social network of both men and women declined. However, both men and women who regularly attended religious services had larger social networks than those who were less frequent attenders.
- Both men and women who attended religious services regularly had lower depressive symptoms.
- Those who considered religion important but did not attend regularly had higher depressive symptoms. This relationship was stronger in men.
- The size of an individual's social network accounts for at least part of the relationship between attending religious services and lower depressive symptoms. This was true for both men and women.

Principal Investigator of TILDA, Professor Rose Anne Kenny, said, "The importance of continued social engagement and social participation as we age is well established and has been associated with improved health and wellbeing and lower mortality. If religious attendance facilitates older people to maintain a larger social circle with continued social engagement, alternative ways to socialize will be necessary as we develop into a more secular society."

**More information:** The TILDA study: [tilda.tcd.ie/](http://tilda.tcd.ie/)

Holton, A, Boland, F, Gallagher, P, Fahey, T, Kenny, R, Cousins, G. Life Course Transitions and Changes in Alcohol Consumption Among Older Irish Adults: Results From The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA). Journal of aging and health. [In Press].

Provided by Trinity College Dublin

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