

Smartphone surveys find a connection between daily spiritual experiences and well-being

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Using smartphone check-ins twice a day for two weeks, sociologists in a national study have found a link between individuals' daily spiritual experiences and overall well-being, say researchers from Baylor University and Harvard University.

While other studies have found such a connection between spirituality and [positive emotions](#), the new study is significant because frequent

texting made it easier to capture respondents' moment-to-moment [spiritual experiences](#) over 14 days rather than only one or two points in time, they say.

"This study is unique because it examines daily spiritual experiences—such as feeling God's presence, finding strength in religion or spirituality, and feeling inner peace and harmony—as both stable traits and as states that fluctuate," said study co-author Matt Bradshaw, Ph.D., research professor of sociology at Baylor University Institute for Studies of Religion (ISR).

"Because surveys usually capture only one or two points in time, researchers often have to assume that associations between spirituality and positive emotions capture stable traits in respondents rather than momentary states of mind," he said. "But these findings suggest that stable, consistent spiritual experiences as well as short-term periodic ones both serve as resources to promote human flourishing and help individuals cope with stressful conditions."

Additionally, "the prevalence of smartphones makes this sort of 'experience sampling' study doable on a much larger scale than in the past, when pagers or palm pilots were used to trigger [data collection](#)," said lead author Blake Victor Kent, Ph.D., Research Fellow of Harvard Medical School/Massachusetts General Hospital and a non-resident scholar at Baylor ISR.

The study—published in *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*—uses data from SoulPulse, a project funded by the John Templeton Foundation, to study religion, spirituality and mental and physical well-being. Participants were 2,795 individuals who signed up for the study after learning of it through national media—including the Associated Press, the Religion News Service and The New Yorker—and by word of mouth.

Kent said that daily spiritual experiences are measured as one of two types:

* Theistic spiritual experiences examine the degree to which God is experienced as present, available and active in the individual's life using six questions: "I feel God's presence," "I find strength and comfort in my religion or spirituality," "I feel God's love for me directly or through others," "I desire to be closer to God or in union with the divine," "I feel guided by God in the midst of daily activities" and "I feel close to God."

* Non-theistic spiritual experiences assess transcendent feelings not specifically connected to God or a divine being using three questions: "I feel a deep [inner peace](#) or harmony," "I am spiritually touched by the beauty of creation" and "I feel thankful for my blessings."

To keep daily surveys short and interesting for participants, 10 to 15 items were pulled from some 100 questions and appeared with varying frequency. They included assessments of depression or positive emotions with such items as: "I feel downhearted and blue," "I feel that life is meaningless," "I am unable to become enthusiastic about anything," "I am feeling happy," "I am feeling that I have a warm and trusting relationship with others" and "I have something important to contribute to society."

Another item asked whether, since the most recent daily survey, the person had experienced a stressful situation such as an argument with a loved one, illness, injury, accident, job stress, [financial problems](#) or tragedy.

"The findings indicate, as you would expect, that the wear and tear of daily stressors are associated with increased [depressive symptoms](#) and lower levels of flourishing," Kent said. "What this study really contributes is that daily spiritual experiences play an important role as

well. Essentially, if you take two people who have equal levels of stress, the one with more spiritual experiences will be less likely to report depressive symptoms and more likely to indicate feelings of flourishing. That's a comparison between two people.

"But what about one person?" he said. "The unique thing about this study is we are able to show that when someone's spiritual experiences vary day to day, the 'above average' days of spiritual experience are associated with better mental well-being than the 'below average' days."

More information: Blake Victor Kent et al, Do Daily Spiritual Experiences Moderate the Effect of Stressors on Psychological Well-being? A Smartphone-based Experience Sampling Study of Depressive Symptoms and Flourishing, *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* (2020). [DOI: 10.1080/10508619.2020.1777766](https://doi.org/10.1080/10508619.2020.1777766)

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