

Deep faith beneficial to health

November 16 2020



In a new book, anthropologist Tanya Lurhmann explores how religious practices and narratives can create deep, positive changes for the people who engage in them. Credit: Nikki Ross-Zehnder

People who believe their God or gods are real, even if the existence of those supernatural beings can't be empirically proven, have long fascinated and confounded scientists. In a new book, Stanford

anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann explores the intersection of religion and science, linking profound religious faith to beneficial, scientifically proven practices like mindfulness and cognitive behavioral therapy.

In "[How God Becomes Real: Kindling the Presence of Invisible Others](#)," (Princeton University Press, 2020), Luhrmann explains that religious practices and narratives can create deep, [positive changes](#) for the people who engage in them.

"Prayer is a lot like [cognitive behavioral therapy](#)," Luhrmann said. "It's a way you attend to your own inner experience, let go of distracting thoughts and focus on more positive thoughts. By expressing gratitude, you shift attention from the way that things are going wrong to the ways they are going right."

In the introduction to her book, Luhrmann explains how her scholarship is inspired by two straightforward, but often overlooked, features of religion. "First, religion is a practice in which people go to effort to make contact with an invisible other. Second, people who are religious want change. They want to feel differently than they do," she writes. "Yet instead of exploring these features, most theories of religion begin by treating belief in an invisible other both as taken for granted and as a cognitive mistake."

Luhrmann argues that individuals of faith often have to work hard to make supernatural beings real and that those who are able to do so experience helpful changes. "If they're lucky, they're able to attend differently to their thoughts, feel calmer and more beloved," she said. And these positive outcomes reinforce [religious practices](#), encouraging sustained commitment to ritual and observance.

Relying on ethnographic studies of what she calls "active believers," including evangelical Christians, pagans, Zoroastrians, Black Catholics,

Santeria initiates, and newly orthodox Jews, Luhrmann found that it takes considerable effort and regular practice to create worlds where supernatural others feel present and real.

That's because most people make a clear distinction in their lives between real and unreal. For instance, Luhrmann writes, most people, even those with deep faith, do not ask God to feed the dog or write their term paper. And religious traditions address this dichotomy. Referencing a famous Islamic hadith, or saying of the prophet Muhammad, Luhrmann writes: "Anas ibn Malik reported: A man said, 'O Messenger of Allah, should I tie my camel and trust in Allah, or should I leave her untied and trust in Allah?' The Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings upon him, said, 'Tie her and trust in Allah.'"

For Luhrmann, the story is an example of how human beings instinctively understand the difference between the demands of the real, mundane world and the world of the spirit. Therefore, the puzzle of religion is not the problem of false belief, but rather of what Luhrmann calls "real-making"—how gods and spirits become real for people and what that does for those who engage in the practice.

Rather than presume that people worship because they believe, or build cathedrals because the belief is already present, Luhrmann flips the equation. She argues instead that people believe because they worship. In other words, the process of "real-making" and engaging fully in rituals and practices that bring one closer to God is so satisfying to practitioners that their faith endures.

Research has repeatedly shown that people of faith report feeling better and healthier. One of the most striking findings in social epidemiology, Luhrmann notes, is that religious involvement with God is better for your body in terms of immune functions and reducing loneliness. One explanation for this, Luhrmann writes, is that for those with an intense

faith, God becomes a social relationship. MRI results indicate that in terms of brain function, talking to God resembles conversing with a friend.

But the nature of that relationship is also key in terms of health. The more that God is seen as judgmental and negative, the more mental health symptoms are reported. In contrast, people who represent their relationship with God as being loving and satisfying pray more and report fewer mental health symptoms. "The data suggest that when it's a good relationship, it's better for the body," Luhrmann said.

Even if one is inclined to cultivate that type of relationship with an unseen being, Luhrmann notes that it takes intense work and that some people may be more likely to be successful than others—namely those who are more comfortable using their imaginations. "People who have an Enlightenment mindset—focused on rational, scientific thought—those people often discount these things and don't trust their imaginations as much," she said.

But it is precisely imagination, or as Luhrmann writes, "the human ability to conceive of that which is not available to the senses," that makes possible a close relationship with a supernatural other.

More information: How God Becomes Real: Kindling the Presence of Invisible Others. [press.princeton.edu/books/hard ... how-god-becomes-real](https://press.princeton.edu/books/hardcover/9780691199614/how-god-becomes-real)

Provided by Stanford University

Citation: Deep faith beneficial to health (2020, November 16) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-11-deep-faith-beneficial-health.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.