

Spirituality correlates to better mental health regardless of religion: researchers

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Despite differences in rituals and beliefs among the world's major religions, spirituality often enhances health regardless of a person's faith, according to University of Missouri researchers. The MU researchers believe that health care providers could take advantage of this correlation between health – particularly mental health – and spirituality by tailoring treatments and rehabilitation programs to accommodate an individual's spiritual inclinations.

"In many ways, the results of our study support the idea that spirituality functions as a personality trait," said Dan Cohen, assistant teaching professor of religious studies at MU and one of the co-authors of the study. "With increased spirituality people reduce their sense of self and feel a greater sense of oneness and connectedness with the rest of the universe. What was interesting was that frequency of participation in religious activities or the perceived degree of congregational support was not found to be significant in the relationships between personality, spirituality, religion and health."

The MU study used the results of three surveys to determine if correlations existed among participants' self-reported mental and physical health, personality factors, and spirituality in Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, Catholics and Protestants. Across all five faiths, a greater degree of spirituality was related to better [mental health](#), specifically lower levels of neuroticism and greater extraversion. Forgiveness was the only spiritual trait predictive of mental health after personality variables were considered.

"Our prior research shows that the mental health of people recovering from different medical conditions, such as cancer, stroke, spinal cord injury and traumatic brain injury, appears to be related significantly to positive spiritual beliefs and especially congregational support and spiritual interventions," said Cohen. "Spiritual beliefs may be a coping device to help individuals deal emotionally with stress."

Cohen believes spirituality may help people's mental health by reducing their self-centeredness and developing their sense of belonging to a larger whole. Many different [faith](#) traditions encourage spirituality though they use different names for the process. A Christian monk wouldn't say he had attained Nirvana, nor would a Buddhist monk say he had communed with Jesus Christ, but they may well be referring to similar phenomena.

"Health workers may also benefit from learning how to minimize the negative side of a patient's spirituality, which may manifest itself in the tendency to view misfortune as a divine curse." As the authors note, spiritual interventions such as religious-based counseling, meditation, and forgiveness protocols may enhance spiritually-based beliefs, practices, and coping strategies in positive ways.

The benefits of a more spiritual personality may go beyond an individual's mental health. Cohen believes that the selflessness that comes with [spirituality](#) enhances characteristics that are important for fostering a global society based on the virtues of peace and cooperation.

More information: The paper, "Relationships among Spirituality, Religious Practices, Personality Factors, and Health for Five Different Faiths" was published in the Journal of Religion and Health.

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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