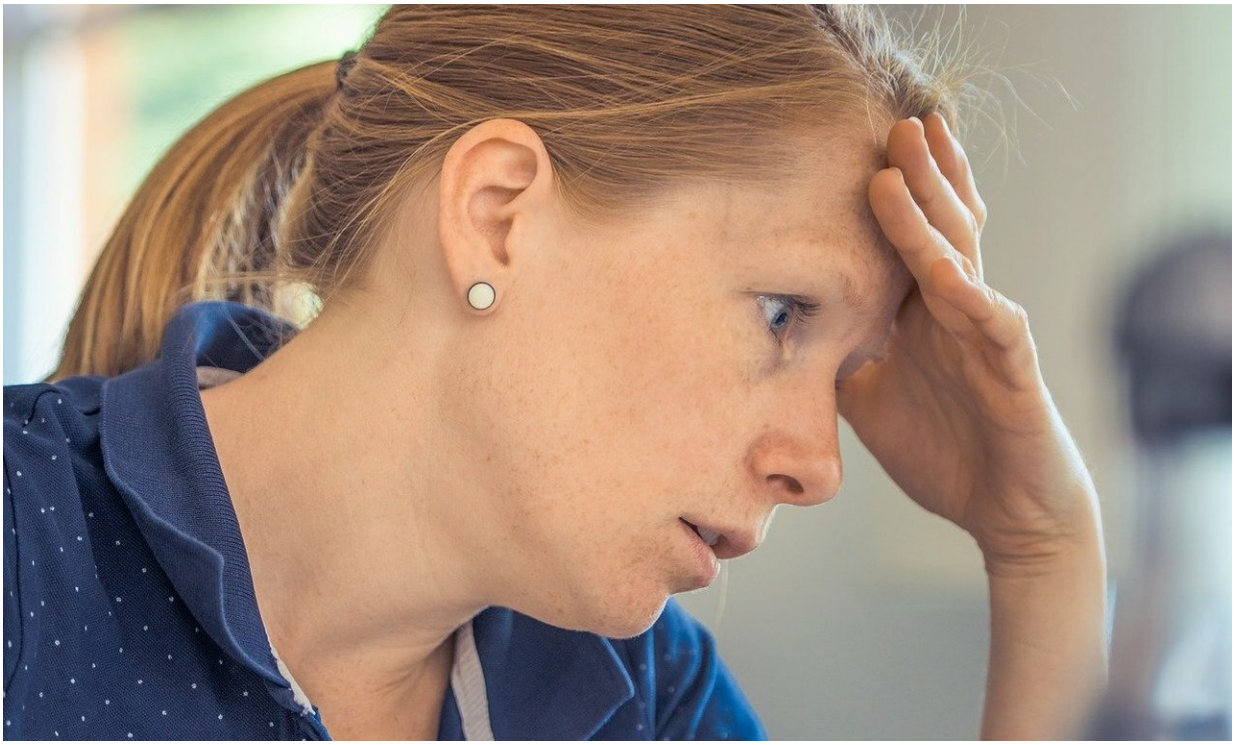
Belief in God or science does not help to alleviate acute stress, new study finds

March 7 2019



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Relying on a strong belief system – in either religion or science – cannot help alleviate acute, in-the-moment stress, a new study has found.

The research – published in the journal *Psychology of Consciousness: Theory, Research, and Practice* – shows that reflecting on personal

beliefs before a stressful experience does not help people cope better, contrary to popular perceptions that belief in a higher power or ideology can help us deal with difficulties.

In the first study of its kind into whether beliefs can actually help alleviate acute stress, psychologists at Coventry University and University at Albany, New York, worked with both scientific and religious believers to explore how belief systems impacted on stress responses.

The pioneering study tested 100 university students, all either religious or non-religious scientists. Half were asked to write about an important event in their lives where a god or science were particularly helpful, prompting them to focus and reflect on their beliefs. The other half – the control group – wrote instead about their favourite season.

Stress levels were then increased as participants were asked to argue their case for or against Britain leaving the EU in front of a panel who would judge the credibility of their arguments.

As well as measuring heart rate, blood pressure, and levels of cortisol (a hormone that regulates stress responses) throughout, each participant was monitored for subjective measures of stress alongside their strength of ideology to see the impact of reflecting on belief.

While both perceived stress and state anxiety were higher after the task for all participants, there were no differences between strong believers who had been prompted to reflect on those beliefs, and those who had simply written about the seasons.

The findings suggest that when people are not able to anticipate an upcoming acute stressor, their ability to cope with the stressful situation is not improved by having recently reflected on their beliefs. And that

that perhaps it is not belief itself, but the complex of practices and associated social support which helps believers cope with stress.

Dr. Miguel Farias, co-author and experimental psychologist at Coventry University's Brain, Belief and Behaviour Research Lab, said:

"It's widely thought that belief in a god allows people to cope better, and this extends to other beliefs. When facing difficulty, non-religious people cling to another belief, for example in science.

"This was the first time we'd tested whether this faith can be used to downgrade stress, and what we didn't expect was that there seemed to be no belief-busting effect of faith and that reflecting on belief before a stressful situation is encountered may not actually have any immediate benefits.

"As there's no evidence that belief in a god or in science allows for de-stressing in the moment, do the faithful have any advantage over those without a system of faith, or does it provide merely a semblance of meaning and control?"

Co-author Anna Newheiser, assistant professor of psychology at University at Albany, SUNY, said:

"It's possible that had participants had a chance to reflect on their beliefs after rather than before the Brexit stress test, they might have been able to selectively consider aspects of their beliefs that could have more directly helped them cope with what they were experiencing.

"So religion or scientific belief may be of limited use to help people anticipate the specific nature of a stressful situation, though belief may help them cope with longer-term stressors."

Medical Xpress

More information: Miguel Farias et al. The effects of belief in God and science on acute stress., *Psychology of Consciousness: Theory, Research, and Practice* (2019). DOI: 10.1037/cns0000185

Provided by Coventry University

Citation: Belief in God or science does not help to alleviate acute stress, new study finds (2019, March 7) retrieved 23 April 2024 from https://medicalxpress.com/news/2019-03-belief-god-science-alleviate-acute.html

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