

Religious, Spiritual Support Benefits Men and Women Facing Chronic Illness, MU Study Finds

by Emily Martin - News Bureau University of Missouri (October 26, 2011)

Individuals who practice religion and spirituality report better physical and mental health than those who do not. To better understand this relationship and how spirituality/religion can be used for coping with significant health issues, University of Missouri researchers are examining what aspects of religion are most beneficial and for what populations. Now, MU health psychology researchers have found that religious and spiritual support improves health outcomes for both men and women who face chronic health conditions.

“Our findings reinforce the idea that religion/spirituality may help buffer the negative consequences of chronic health conditions,” said Stephanie Reid-Arndt, associate professor of health psychology in the School of Health Professions. “We know that there are many ways of coping with stressful life situations, such as a chronic illness; involvement in religious/spiritual activities can be an effective coping strategy.”

Religious and spiritual support includes care from congregations, spiritual interventions, such as religious counseling and forgiveness practices, and assistance from pastors and hospital chaplains. The recent publication from the MU Center for Religion and the Professions research group, authored by Reid-Arndt, found that religious support is associated with better mental health outcomes for women and with better physical and mental health for men.

“Both genders benefit from social support – the ability to seek help from and rely on others – provided by fellow congregants and involvement in religious organizations,” said co-author Brick Johnstone, health psychology professor. “Encouragement to seek out religious and spiritual supports can assist individuals in coping with stress and physical symptoms related to health issues. Health care providers can urge patients to take advantage of these resources, which provide emotional care, financial assistance and opportunities for increased socialization.”

The study examined the role of gender in using spirituality/religiosity to cope with chronic health conditions and disabilities, including spinal cord injury, brain injury, stroke and cancer. Using measures of religiousness/spirituality, general mental health and general health perception, the researchers found no differences between men and women in terms of self-reported levels of spiritual experiences, religious practices or congregational support. This finding contrasts with other studies that suggest women may be more spiritual or participate in religion more frequently than men.

“While women generally are more religious or spiritual than men, we found that both genders may increase their reliance on spiritual and religious resources as they face increased illness or disability,” Johnstone said.

For women, mental health is associated with daily spiritual

experiences, forgiveness and religious/spiritual coping, the study found. This suggests that belief in a loving, supportive and forgiving higher power is related with positive mental coping for women with chronic conditions. For men, religious support – the perception of help, support and comfort from local congregations – was associated with better self-rated health.

Johnstone is director of the MU Spirituality and Health Research program. He has completed several studies examining the relationships that exist among religion, spirituality and health, particularly for individuals with different chronic disabling conditions and for those from different faith traditions.

The study, “Gender Differences in Spiritual Experiences, Religious Practices, and Congregational Support for Individuals with Significant Health Conditions,” was published in the *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health*. It was funded by the Center on Religion and the Professions at MU, funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts. ❖

Religion and Culture: Clash or Congruity?

by Veronica Kaur (March 27, 2010)

This article grew out of a request for a lecture/lesson for a Sikh children's camp in Poughkeepsie, New York, and Reading, Pennsylvania. The objective of the article is two-fold: first, to help students, parents and prospective teachers of Sikh religion and history to appreciate the relevance of the teachings of the Sikh Gurus to everyday life. Second, to introduce the concept of cultural perspective to help students make the difficult choices that they must make every day.



Do religion and culture influence each other?

A little exercise may help to understand this partnership. Just imagine for moment a Catholic priest, a Jewish rabbi, a Buddhist monk, and an Islamic mullah given the task of meeting together to decide on a religious service for some young people who are graduating from college. The monk may insist on chanting, the priest may insist on having bread and wine for a mass, the rabbi would say that wine is ok, but the mullah would say it is an abomination.

Each may wish for the service to be in a special language - Pali, Latin, Hebrew or Arabic. Each may insist on the methods and symbols that have been taught to them as their way of worshipping God - of their religion and culture. They might find in this task an opportunity to see who can gain the most ground for their way of worshipping.

The Ten Gurus, the esteemed Teachers of the Sikh religion, were very much aware of the culture in which they lived.

Culture is the adaptation groups of men and women make to their times - the natural environment and resources, the effects of language and migrations, the political and family structures and the beliefs of the society that are passed down from generation to generation.

The Sikh Gurus were cognizant of the fact that they lived in a culturally diverse environment where several political, religious, and linguistic heritages both competed and blended. This experience was further enriched by their travels. Guru Nanak traveled from Sri Lanka to Tibet, some say to China; and he traveled to Mecca, as well as to the hill tribes in the Haimalayas.

Guru Tegh Bahadar, after years of contemplation, also traveled extensively.

Guru Gobind Singh was born in Patna in the State of Bihar and traveled across Punjab and finally to the Deccan in South India, where he died.

All of the Gurus not only studied Punjabi, their mother tongue, but also Sanskrit, Persian, Urdu and a variety of regional dialects. Guru Gobind Singh also wrote poetry and hymns in Brijbhasha. Guru Arjan included hymns by Muslim and Hindu saints in the Adi Granth.

Why was this lucky for us? Aside from the obvious opportunity for worldly success that knowledge confers, the knowledge of cultures and languages gives depth to perception, allowing the person who is ordinarily enmeshed in an homogeneous culture of his or her birth, to see culture as an arbitrary artifact of time and place. Much as a one-eyed person finds it very difficult to have depth perception, the person exposed to only one culture and language may take it for granted that this is the way things are and usually assumes that this is also “the way things should be”.

Guru Nanak had the opportunity as a child tending his family’s cattle, to observe nature and to learn from it. He was also a keen observer of human beings and the cultures they produced. Like the Sakyamuni Buddha, those observations led him to ask the “big” questions about the meaning of death and the purpose of life. God was kind to him and, while Nanak was in a three-day meditative state, he was shown other planes of existence all the way to *Sach Kand*. There he experienced God in the joyous state beyond language and cultural trappings.

When emerging from the meditation, he said, “*Na koi Hindu, na koi Mussalman.*” - ‘There is no Hindu, there is no Muslim.’ Guru Nanak was a religious leader who acknowledged that there are differences among the diverse ways men and women worship God, and yet there is true spirituality that is beyond culture.

The Sikh Gurus said that true spirituality, like true prayer, is a function of a pure mind and heart. Whether the religious culture prescribes kneeling or sitting, offerings or readings, it is the state of the mind and the intention of the person that distinguishes a “*gurmukh*”, one who faces God, and a “*manmukh*”, one who faces man and the cultures made by



men.

Go back now to imagine, not the monk, but a *true* Buddhist saint, a Catholic saint really connected to God, a Sikh saint as defined in Sukhmani Sahib, a Jewish saint, and a Muslim saint working together to develop a service. Would there be an emphasis on external rituals and practices? Would the participants hate the differences in their religious expression or enjoy each other’s company because they would see the light of the one true God in each other? Where would the emphasis of their work lie? In helping the students, or in fighting with each other over the details of the service?

If we are truly trying to be *gurmukhs*, we will be living as the most fortunate on earth, the inheritors of the legacy of the Ten Gurus and the message of our Living Guru, the Guru Granth Sahib, which is the most culture-free of all of the religious books of revelation - this is so whether we have ever even heard of “Sikhism” or not. If we truly understand this amazing contradiction, we understand the essence of Sikhism.

Children raised outside of Punjab by Punjabi parents are extremely lucky to have the opportunity to live in cultural diversity, just as the Gurus did. And so do all children exposed to global society. No *gurmukh* can ever be enmeshed in a culture (*maya*) no matter how great or beautiful. So these children have an advantage on the spiritual path; like the Gurus, they can see that there are many ways to worship God, many languages, many cultures. Therefore they have the opportunity to transcend the material world and enter the spiritual realms - and most are hungry to do so. Yet the entrapments of *maya* are even stronger today than ever before for these very same children.

Helping children to achieve the spiritual security that they long for in this stormy sea of life takes guidance. “*Nanak naam jahaz hai!*” Guru Nanak says that the Name of the Lord is like a ship that will carry us through any storm.

Children need your help not only to appreciate the beauty and greatness of Punjabi culture and language; they also need to achieve true spiritual development and to problem-solve in future situations. You are not just any parent. You are a parent blessed with the wisdom of *gurbani* and the knowledge of the lives of the Gurus. The manner in which questions are answered and problems of daily life are solved is also very important.

Think of your own grandparents. How many of them dreamed of the problems your children face today? The most successful of your grandparents were not the ones who gave orders, but the ones who taught by example - imparting the tools of intelligence: discrimination in thinking, comparison and contrast, methods of perception, the understanding of values and motivation. These tools help us to thrive in any familiar or alien culture.

Our children deserve both our spiritual and cultural heritage.

Who knows what tomorrow may bring? ❖