

Researchers: Jewish religiousness reduces stress

Series of studies in psychology find that frequent praying, synagogue attendance and positive beliefs about God protects observant Jews against anxiety

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A series of research studies has revealed that traditional religious beliefs and practices are protective against anxiety and depression among Jews.

Spearheaded by David H. Rosmarin and Kenneth Pargament in the department psychology at Bowling Green State University, these studies are amongst the first to examine the impact of the Jewish religion on psychological health.

"Most research in this area has been conducted with Christians" says Rosmarin, "but now we have strong evidence to suggest that religiousness is correlated with lower levels of stress in the Jewish community."

Rosmarin and Pargament's research indicates that frequency of prayer, synagogue attendance, and religious study, and positive beliefs about God are associated with markedly decreased levels of anxiety, and associated with higher levels of happiness, even after controlling for variables such as age, gender, and use of psychiatric medication.

According to Rosmarin, "In this day and age, there is a lot to worry about, and the practice of religion may help people to maintain equanimity and perspective". Results of the research are viewable at Rosmarin's website www.jpsych.com.

The relationship between psychology and religion has traditionally been tenuous, but research conducted in the past 30 years has consistently indicated that religion and spirituality are not harmful to mental health.

Bowling Green State University is one of a few hotbeds of psychological research on spirituality and religion, being home to two full time faculty members and about 15 graduate students conducting research in the area. "Not all facets of religion are helpful though" says Rosmarin. "Spiritual struggles involving negative beliefs about God, or conflicts with clergy seem to be predictive of higher levels of distress" he says.

Currently, Rosmarin and Pargament are conducting a web-based study to investigate whether spirituality and religion can be used to help Jews suffering from worry and stress.

Pargament is a noted researcher in this area, and in 2007 he authored the book *Spiritually Integrated Psychotherapy* (Guilford Publishers). "With the financial markets in crisis, and with security concerns in Israel and throughout the world, we see a tremendous need for spiritually-integrated treatments to help Jews with stress and worry" says Rosmarin.

This research is part of a body of research on web-based treatments which do not involve an actual psychotherapist. According to Rosmarin, the therapy system being tested seeks to empower clients by giving them skills so that they can reduce their own stress. Jewish individuals currently suffering from anxiety can receive free treatment by participating in the study, which is being conducted on-line at www.jpsych.com.

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