How Religion/Spirituality Effects Health? - Reflections on Some Possible Mechanisms

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Introduction

Various systematic reviews and meta-analyses demonstrate that religiosity or spirituality is positively associated with various indicators of health. Religious involvement correlates with decreased morbidity and mortality (Ball et al. 2003). Study also suggests that religiosity may correlate with better outcomes after major illnesses and medical procedures (Oxman et al. 1995). The effects of religion on mental health have been more profoundly studied than effects on physical health. Studies have demonstrated religiosity to be positively associated with feelings of well-being in white American, Mexican American (Markides et al. 1987), and African American populations (Coke 1992). However, there is also substantial literature that connects positive impact of religion or spirituality on physical health (Koenig & Cohen, 2002). A number of investigators have looked at the effects of religion on depression. Prospective studies have also found religious activity to be strongly protective against depression in Protestant and Catholic offspring who share the same religion as their mother (Miller et al. 1997) and weakly protective in female twins (Kennedy et al. 1996). Cross-sectional studies have yielded significant (Koenig et al. 1997) and non-significant (Koenig, 1998) associations between different indicators of religiosity and a lower prevalence of depression in various populations. Researchers have also reported an inverse correlation between religiosity and suicide (Nisbet et al. 2000). A substantial body of literature demonstrates positive impact of religion/spirituality on perceived quality of life (life satisfaction) (Sawatzky et al., 2005).

The links between religion and mental health have been characterized as “impressive” and religious people report being happier and more satisfied with life than nonreligious people (Myers & Diener, 1995). Koenig et al. (2001) reviewed approximately 100 studies that have been done (published as well as unpublished) and reported that most studies report a positive association between some measure of religiosity and some measure of well-being, happiness, joy, fulfillment, pleasure, contentment, or other related types of experiences. Levin and Chatters (1998) also concluded that religion appears to constitute a preventative or therapeutic effect on mental health outcomes.

How Religion/Spirituality Effects Health?

It is very clear that increasing numbers of studies showing positive correlation between religion/spirituality and mental and physical health. Various models have tried to explain this relationship by focusing on various factors that mediate the relationship between religion and mental and physical health. Some of the mediating factors include:
1. Relaxation Response: Many religious practices such as meditation/prayer elicit “relaxation response”. This relaxation response contributes to the reduction in the sympathetic nervous system activities, lowers blood pressure, reduced muscle tension and so on. All these factors contribute to the better health (Benson, 1996).

2. Healthy behavior: Religion contributes in the reduction of unhealthy behavior such as alcohol, smoking, drug abuse (Strawbridge et al., 2001).

3. Social support: Frequent religious involvement is also associated with more extensive social support networks and more extensive social support is consistently found to be connected with a variety of positive physical and psychological health outcomes (Strawbridge et al., 2001).

4. Meaning in life: Religion also contributes to a sense of coherence and an experience of life as meaningful as well as to a hopeful outlook on life, all of which are associated with better physical and mental health (Antonovsky, 1987).

5. Coping: Intrinsic religiosity has been associated with higher self-esteem, less anxiety and depression. Religiosity has also been found to be a powerful coping mechanism which may well serve as a buffer against the deleterious effects of stress on the body (Pargament, 1997).

6. Positive psychological states: Religiosity or spirituality buffers against the negative emotional states (e.g. fear, anger) and promotes positive emotional states such as love, compassion, and joy. It is a well known fact that positive emotions reduce the allostatic load which in turn reduces the cardiovascular reactivity and enhances the immune system (McEwen, 1998).

7. Health service utilization: Some evidence indicates positive relationships between spirituality, religion, and health services utilization. These studies tend to report patterns of greater use of preventive care and compliance with medical regimens among individuals with higher levels of religion or spirituality (Koenig et al., 2001).

8. Altruism: Altruism or selfless service to others is a strong element among all religious traditions. Some research has linked altruism with health. Altruism may positively impact health by reducing excessive self-focus. Stress reactivity, and increased social support (Post, Underwood, Schloss, & Hurlbut, 2002).

So, there can be diverse pathways and mechanisms by which religion/spirituality may directly or indirectly affect our health. Most of these mechanisms are overlapping and work simultaneously rather than in isolation. These diverse pathways demonstrate the power of religion/spirituality on human behaviors and its possible therapeutic value.
REFERENCES


