The Benefits of Religion and Spirituality Throughout the Life-Span

Julie A. Jackson

Life-Span Development

A Religious Life

February 10, 2013
The 5\textsuperscript{th} century B.C. spiritual philosopher Siddhartha Gautama Buddha is credited with counseling his adherents: “Just as a candle cannot burn without fire, men cannot live without a spiritual life.” Buddha did not elaborate further, or at least there is no record of him doing so, beyond providing this basic advice. Most practitioners of Buddhist principles, however, interpret his words to mean that those who wish to live a full and complete life must not neglect the inclusion of spiritual components within that life. (Lau, D. C., 1979) Research has concluded that there are substantial physical, psychological, and emotional benefits derived from the inclusion of elements of spirituality and religion in one’s lifestyle. These benefits include greater length of life, better recovery time from surgical procedures, an increased ability to cope with chronic illness and disability, and less incidence of depression. Involvement in religious activity and observance has also been noted as key to improved stress management and overall health and wellness. (Barber, N., 2010) With this research in mind, many doctors believe “they should advise patients to be more active in their churches in much the same vein as they are advising them to exercise or control their cholesterol level.” (Barber, 2010, p. 26) The benefits derived from incorporating religion or spirituality into one’s life extend across the life-span, from the very young to the very elderly.

Spirituality is strongly linked to happiness in children; those who are more spiritual and who attend church, engage in prayer, or meditate are happier. (Holder, M. D., Coleman, B., & Wallace, J. M., 2010) Spirituality is important to children and it can provide a valuable tool to parents to help their children learn right from wrong, develop a sense of compassion and respect for others, and provide a sense of faith and purpose to their lives. (Harper, J., 2009) Children who believe in something greater than themselves report greater levels of happiness. (Healy, M., 2012)
Spirituality and religion also provide benefits to adolescents. Religious participation and religious importance are associated with a decreased incidence of depressive symptoms in adolescents. (Petts, R. J., 2008) Religious affiliation also buffers the impact of life stress, leading to lower teenage participation rates in high risk behaviors, including initial substance abuse and the growth rate of substance abuse. (Van Dyke, C. J., Glenwick, D. S., Cecero, J. J., & Kim, S., 2009) Behaviors such as drinking, drug use, and early sexual activity are reduced as a result of religious involvement among teenagers, and more extensive religious activity is generally associated with positive outcomes throughout adolescence. (Regnerus, M. D., 2003) Teens are also better able to develop and implement coping behaviors into their lives as result of participation in religious congregations and activities. (Van Dyke, Glenwick, Cecero, & Kim, 2009)

For adults, religious activity and engagement can provide “the benefits of social support and collective purpose and mediate the negative effects of unemployment on psychological wellbeing.” (Francis, L., Muller, J., & Goddard, R., 2004, p. 180) Adults may also derive benefits from the social aspects associated with religious practice. A religious congregation can be an essential source of social support, and attending weekly religious services is also beneficial in developing stress management and stress reduction tactics and strategies. (Barber, 2010) There is a strong social networking element included in religious practice which may be emotionally uplifting. (Moeller, P., 2012) People actively participating in a congregation also tend to be more compelled to take positive action to improve their lives and well being. (Penman, J., Oliver, M., & Harrington, A., 2009). Meaning and purpose acquired through religious belief are seen to positively affect attitudes and behavior and to motivate beneficial behaviors and actions. (Coyle, J., 2002) “Spirituality motivates, enables, empowers, and provides hope. A
sense of connectedness to God or to a higher consciousness has consistently been found to
engender hope among people with chronic conditions. It has been shown to enhance the
adaptive capacities of people with chronic illnesses and the elderly.” (Fowler, S., 1997, p. 112).
Perhaps the most significant benefit derived from the inclusion of religious practices or spiritual
engagement in adults’ lives is that it helps patients cope with chronic, advanced, or terminal
illnesses. Patients receiving palliative care report that a relationship with God provides them
with emotional strength, empowerment, control, social support, a sense of belonging, and
spiritual support. (Penman, Oliver, & Harrington, 2009) Religious faith also provides benefits
and emotional sustenance to adult care givers. Those who have a strong personal religious faith
demonstrate greater ability to cope with the stresses associated with long-term provision of care
to others. (Berkman, B. J. & Kaplan, D. B., 2009)

Association in a religious community is the largest source of social support outside of the
family for elderly people. In fact, involvement in a religious organization is the most common
type of voluntary social activity for the elderly, more common than all other forms of voluntary
social activity combined. (Berkman & Kaplan, 2009). Many elderly people report that religion is
the most important factor enabling them to cope with physical health problems and life stresses
such as declining financial resources or loss of a spouse or partner. Elderly people who use
religious coping mechanisms are less likely to develop depression and anxiety than those who do
not. (Moeller, 2012) Active involvement in a religious community correlates with better
maintenance of physical abilities and health. Elderly people who attend religious services are
more likely to stop smoking, exercise, develop and maintain social contacts, stay married, and
live longer. Elderly people who participate in religious congregations also tend to demonstrate
better compliance with their treatment regimens because other religious community members
interact with them and inquire about their health and medical care. Elderly people who have such community networks are less likely to neglect themselves. (Berkman & Kaplan, 2009) (Penman, Oliver, & Harrington, 2009). Religion and spirituality also may help people achieve a sense of closure and peace about their lives that includes of others and of themselves. Beliefs and rituals associated with religious worship help people fulfill the need for forgiveness and allow them to make peace with the things they have done during their lives.

Researchers say that people of all ages who establish spiritual or religious components in their lives enjoy greater happiness. It remains unclear whether the benefits associated with religion are beneficial in and of themselves, or whether the benefits are derived from the strong social network connections established through association with other like-minded people. Whatever the actual source of the benefits, religious practice engages people mentally and physically. There is power in religion that provides meaning to life. Religion provides answers to a lot of life’s questions, and helps people develop and sustain their self-identity and establish a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives. It provides great comfort and help to people throughout the life-span, but intensifies as they get older, especially as they near the end of their lives. (Moeller, 2012)
References


http://www.merckmanuals.com/professional/geriatrics/social_issues_in_the_elderly/religion_and_spirituality_in_the_elderly.html#v1135155


The Benefits of Religion and Spirituality


