Is Religion Good or Bad for Us?

(Psychology Today)

 In the approach to the Jewish festival of Rosh Hashanah (when Jews count their blessings and ask for forgiveness for wrongdoing), a rabbi shared his conviction that religion can be one of the most powerful forces for good in individuals’ lives. “It offers us the opportunity to be better, happier, healthier people,” he asserted. “We shouldn’t forget that.” For believers, Rosh Hashanah is a time of psychological and spiritual introspection, renewal, and growth.

Indeed, few forces have historically been more powerful than religion in shaping people’s existences. According to the latest poll by the [Pew Research Centre](http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/), 77 percent of Americans say that religion is at least somewhat important in their lives and 83 percent say they’re fairly certain that God or a higher power exists. But not everyone agrees that religion is good for us. There has long been a debate among scholars about this issue, with some claiming that it contributes to well-being and others claiming that it leads to psychological problems.

Literally thousands of studies have now investigated the relationship between religion and well-being. A total of 79 percent of relevant studies showed a link between religion/spirituality and psychological well-being. A majority also demonstrated a relationship with physical well-being. In fact, one of the most widely celebrated findings is that religion and spiritualty are related to longer life. About 68 percent of studies on that topic have found a link. In [one study](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1047279707004693), of over 8,000 people for more than 8 years, results revealed an 18 percent reduction in the risk of dying during this period for people who attended church services once per week, and a 30 percent reduction for those attending more than once per week—numbers approaching the power of regular moderate physical exercise.

*Here are three of the most important*[*reasons that researchers believe*](http://psycnet.apa.org/record/2007-10362-001)*religion and spirituality may be good for us:*

**Reason #1: Better Health Habits**

Many religions encourage people to take care of their bodies and minds. The New Testament, for instance, calls the human body a “temple of the Holy Spirit,” encouraging followers to look after their physical selves. In many faiths eating certain foods are encouraged and others avoided. A [number of studies](https://insights.ovid.com/psychology-religion-spirituality/pors/2014/02/000/differing-pathways-religiousness-spirituality/2/01429397) have shown that religiousness is associated with better general health habits, including lower rates of smoking and alcohol consumption.

**Reason #2: Enhanced Coping**

When we encounter problems in our lives, researchers have observed that people can use religion to cope in [both healthy and unhealthy ways](http://psycnet.apa.org/record/2006-00771-026). Positive religious coping consists of strategies that include a trusting relationship with God, a sense of connectedness to others and seeing oneself as collaborating with God to solve problems. It’s important to note, however, that not everyone who considers themselves to be religious or spiritual practices healthy coping. People also can experience spiritual discontentment, religious conflict, or come to believe that negative events are punishments from God.

**Reason #3: Social Support**

A third important way that spirituality and religion may impact well-being is through social and emotional support. The word fellowship is often associated with Christian communities and *sangha* (Pali for “community”) for Buddhists. [Many religious institutions](https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/religion-in-the-lives-of-african-americans/book226348) run support groups for people coping with emotional and physical difficulties, visit the sick and their families, or offer food and other resources to individuals with low incomes. Although religious groups are hardly the only sources of support in people’s lives, for believers, they can be important ones.

Despite the research connecting religion with well-being, it’s important to remember that people who consider themselves atheist and agnostic can be just as healthy and happy as those who are religious.

It’s also important to realize that religion and spirituality aren’t always associated with greater well-being. People who experience [struggles with their religious and spiritual beliefs](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/jclp.20325) may experience greater anxiety and other forms of lowered psychological well-being. In addition, although people who believe in a forgiving God [tend to forgive themselves](https://search.proquest.com/openview/75721d46976520392fc005bd07c70b0d/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=38088) when they make mistakes, those who believe in a *less* forgiving God deal with themselves more harshly.

*It may be tempting to buy into oversimplifications like, “religion is good,” real life isn’t so clear. Although the research shows that religion and spirituality are often helpful, we should be open to the idea that specific aspects of religion may be good or bad for our health under different circumstances.*

Things to do:

* Read the information and draw up a list of positive reasons to belong to a religion.
* Draw up another list of some of the less positive reasons to belong to a religion.

In your lists consider other aspects of religion you have learnt about over the last few lessons.