

Practicing Religion and Spirituality: Activity No.11

“Physiologists have been hesitant to study spirituality and religion. On the face of it science and religion cannot mix as religious beliefs cannot be tested in the laboratory. However the effect or consequences of these beliefs can be measured. Indeed a growing body of evidence is suggesting that religious people are happier, healthier and recover better after traumas. For example if you are having serious cardiac surgery and receive strength and comfort from your religion, you’ll be almost 3 times more likely to be alive 6 months after surgery. The trouble is we really do not know why. One obvious answer is that religious people practice healthier living; indeed some prohibit unhealthy behavior such as smoking. But why are they happier and more satisfied with their lives? For example 47% of those attending services 3 times per week describe themselves as very happy compared to those who attend once per month (27%). This could be explained by the social interactions of belonging to such a strong caring group. It is possible that the benefits of belonging to a religion have nothing to do with the religion itself but that it brings them into contact with other similar caring people.

Religion provides a source of unconditional love, a supportive relationship providing great comfort. Secondly, your sense that God has meaning and a purpose in everything, helps find meaning in ordinary life events as well as traumatic ones.

Benefits of Spirituality: Spirituality is defined as the search for the sacred. That is a search for meaning in life through something that is larger than the individual self (self-transcendence). This is of course related to but not always the same as religion. Spiritual people are physically healthier, and live longer lives. This offers something to those who do not want to belong to a formal religion. This search can often be through meditation, prayer, or by instilling a spiritual dimension into our daily lives. Meditation is a powerful tool that can boost physical and psychological well being.

People who benefit most from religion and spirituality are those for whom this feels natural and are doing it for genuine reasons.

The Downsides of religion: Freud argued that religion creates obsessive neurosis whose symptoms include suppressed emotions, repressed sexuality and guilt. The popular media suggests that religious people are more prejudiced and close minded and can be passive about their health (relinquishing control to a God). Studies support some but not all of these points. For example people who strongly believe prayer works tend not to be as active or exercise to stay healthy, passively deferring their problems to God. Also the search for the sacred can be unsuccessful, triggering anxiety and distress.

As with all happiness boosting strategies moderation and common sense are wisest. The benefits cannot be ignored by science.