

Duke University Medical Researcher Says Faith Is Good Medicine

Dr. Harold Koenig says the key to good health is having a deep, personal relationship with God

Duke University researcher is changing the heart of the medical community with a simple, yet profound message that faith is good for your health.

Dr. Harold G. Koenig has found a clear relationship between faith and health, one that he has dubbed “the healing connection.” Koenig, founder and director of the Duke University Center for the Study of Religion/Spirituality and Health in Durham, N.C., and editor-in-chief of Science & Theology News, has published 25 books and more than 200 professional journal articles detailing his findings.

“The pile of evidence is growing and showing that spiritual faith has a very real, scientifically measurable, and positive association with mental and physical wellbeing,” Koenig writes in his book *The Healing Connection*. According to Koenig, the key to the healing connection is “having a deep, personal relationship with God and loving your neighbor.”

“The combination of those two things, at least the research seems to show, is one of the most powerful combinations of things that predict a person’s health,” he said.

Koenig has extensively studied the healing connection in the mentally and physically ill, and in the elderly. "Our research has found a simple behavior that might save more lives than buckling seat belts or quitting smoking," Koenig reported after studying 4,000 randomly selected people over the age of 65 in North Carolina. "People who attend church regularly live longer," he concluded.

After following the subjects for six years, Koenig said he found that the likelihood of dying during that six-year period was 41 percent lower among those who regularly attended religious services.

His most current research involves chronically ill patients. In April, Koenig and his colleagues reported in The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease that among patients with sickle cell anemia, those who go to church at least once a week had the lowest pain scores.

Bottom line, Koenig says, is "as long as you are here on this earth, God has a purpose for your life. That purpose is not sitting around just existing. That purpose involves ministry to others. It's when people do that, that people get healthier."

"I can speak with authority about these issues because I experience them myself," stressed Koenig, who was diagnosed in his late 20s with psoriatic inflammatory arthritis, a progressive disease that inflames the tendons and makes even the most ordinary movements painful. Once athletic, Koenig now

relies on a wheelchair when the pain is heightened and must carefully plot his every movement.

But Koenig says God is using his background in some extraordinary ways, giving him an open door to many secular audiences, including the mainstream media and some of the world's most prestigious medical schools. To date, Koenig's research has been featured on every major U.S. news outlet, and has been included in cover stories for Reader's Digest, Parade magazine and Newsweek.

While his research has amassed international attention, Koenig points to his life's testimony as his most powerful witnessing tool. While a third-year medical student, Koenig says he experimented with a slew of Eastern religions in an effort to overcome shyness. But his attempts to speak up in class became increasingly disruptive, and he eventually was expelled.

After his expulsion, Koenig battled mental illness as a homeless person on the streets of San Francisco for almost four months. Later, a devastating divorce after 2-1/2 years of marriage changed everything for Koenig. The breakup led to a "spiritual rebirth that brought him back from an emotional brink."

At the age of 33, Koenig gave his life to Christ, and he hasn't looked back since.

Today Koenig celebrates almost 19 years of marriage with his wife, Charmin. The two attend King's Park International Church, a charismatic ministry in Durham.

Koenig credits God for giving him a second chance, particularly when he was accepted back into medical school as a third-year student. "When I read the living Bible, it explained just about everything about my life to me," he said. "That helped to organize my life and gave it direction. Turning to Christ helped to really bring it together; it has for almost 20 years now."

This fall, Koenig will release Simple Health, a book he co-wrote with Today's Christian Doctor editor David Biebel. It explains 20 easy and inexpensive changes people can make to improve their health.

SUZY RICHARDSON IN GAINESVILLE, FLA.