

Why Your Faith Is a Direct Key to Your Physical and Psychological Health

Studies published in the *Archives of Internal Medicine* and the *Journal of Family Practice* state that more than 80 percent of physicians surveyed thought they should be aware of a patient's religious beliefs and consider their spiritual needs in treatment. However, a much smaller percentage (31 to 39 percent) agreed that doctors should inquire about patients' spiritual beliefs. Less than 10 percent of doctors regularly address spiritual concerns even with patients who are terminally ill. It should come as no surprise, then, that a survey of nearly 2 million U.S. hospital patients found that patients were often dissatisfied with the emotional and spiritual aspects of care they received.

Many doctors either have no interest in or have not been trained in how to discern or respond to the spiritual needs of their patients. The Christian Medical & Dental Associations (CMDA) is trying to do something to change this in a variety of ways, from training medical and dental students to sponsoring workshops and seminars such as the internationally successful series "The Saline Solution." In *Practice by the Book*, Drs. Gene Rudd and Al Weir suggest that Christian doctors might ask themselves, in each patient encounter, "What is God doing?" (WIGD), with the goal of opening communication channels about spiritual matters between patient and doctor. Each doctor who acknowledges spiritual needs of patients as legitimate health concerns will pursue these needs with you in a unique way. But the most important thing, if you have spiritual concerns that you think may be affecting your health, is that you communicate these in some way to your health-care provider.

Faith and Your Psychological Health

Psychological factors, especially in long-term emotional stress, may negatively influence physical health by affecting the immune system, the body's natural first defense against infection and other illness. This leaves you more susceptible to minor health problems such as colds or flu, and it could even in some cases influence the development of serious illnesses such as cancer or coronary heart disease. High levels of stress-related hormones, such as cortisol, epinephrine and norepinephrine, can increase blood pressure, which may over time lead to damages in the arteries that supply blood to the heart and the brain, and even affect cholesterol deposits (plaque) in blood vessel walls. These changes can increase your risk of having a heart attack or stroke. Faith helps to diminish emotional stress through providing inner peace, hope and optimism. Your community of faith may help reduce your stress through social support during times of need, close friendships and access to counseling from the ministerial staff.

Studies show that people who regularly attend worship services are significantly less likely to become depressed, and those with deep faith recover from depression more quickly. Faith also helps people cope better with major life events, combating pessimism or despair that can sometimes lead to ignoring one's health, including the need for regular checkups.

People experiencing long-term emotional stress sometimes seek relief by cigarette smoking, alcohol or drug use, risky sexual behavior, unhealthy eating habits or other activities that can add to and worsen health problems. One's faith can counteract these temptations by providing alternative ways of coping with stress (prayer, talking things over with another church member) and also by observing religious teachings that help us to avoid behaviors that can negatively impact our health.

Overall, people of faith tend to experience a higher level of life satisfaction, which can affect the quality of life and may even influence their health in general. {eoa}

This article is an excerpt from Simple Health: Simple and Inexpensive Things You Can Do to Improve Your Health by David B. Biebel and Harold G. Koenig. Copyright 2005 by David B. Biebel and Harold G. Koenig.