

Study: Prayer Melts An Angry Heart

Saying a prayer may help many people feel less angry and behave less aggressively after someone has left them fuming, new research suggests.

A series of studies showed that people who were provoked by insulting comments from a stranger showed less anger and aggression soon afterwards if they prayed for another person in the meantime.

The benefits of prayer identified in this study don't rely on divine intervention: they probably occur because the act of praying changed the way people think about a negative situation, says Brad Bushman, co-author of the study and professor of communication and psychology at Ohio State University.

"People often turn to prayer when they're feeling negative emotions, including anger," he says. "We found that prayer really can help people cope with their anger, probably by helping them change how they view the events that angered them and helping them take it less personally."

The power of prayer also didn't rely on people being particularly religious, or attending church regularly, Bushman emphasizes. Results showed prayer helped calm people regardless of their religious affiliation, or how often they attended church services or prayed in daily life.

Bushman notes that the studies didn't examine whether prayer had any effect on the people who were prayed for. The research focused entirely on those who do the praying.

Bushman says these are the first experimental studies to examine the effects of prayer on anger and aggression. He

conducted the research with Ryan Bremner of the University of Michigan and Sander Koole of VU University in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. It appears online in the journal *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* and will be published in a future print edition.

The project involved three separate studies.

In the first study, 53 U.S. college students were told they would be participating in a series of experiments. First, they completed a questionnaire that measured their levels of anger, fatigue, depression, vigor, and tension.

They then wrote an essay about an event that made them feel very angry. Afterwards, they were told the essay would be given to a partner, whom they would never meet, for evaluation.

But, in reality, there was no partner and all the participants received the same negative, anger-inducing evaluation that included the statement: "This is one of the worst essays I have ever read!"

After angering the participants, the researchers had the students participate in another "study" in which they read a newspaper story about a student named Maureen with a rare form of cancer. Participants were asked to imagine how Maureen feels about what happened and how it affected her life.

Then, the participants were randomly assigned to either pray for Maureen for five minutes, or to simply think about her.

Afterwards, the researchers again measured the students' levels of anger, fatigue, depression, vigor and tension. As expected, self-reported levels of anger were higher among the participants after they were provoked. But those who prayed for Maureen reported being significantly less angry than those who simply thought about her.

Prayer had no effect on the other emotions measured in the study.

Bushman says that in this study, and in the second one, there was no prior requirement that the participants be Christian or even religious. However, nearly all the participants said they were Christian. Only one participant refused to pray and he was not included in the study.

The researchers didn't ask participants about the content of their prayers or thoughts because they didn't want them to become suspicious about what the study was about, which might have contaminated the findings, Bushman says.

But the researchers did run several similar pilot studies in which they did ask participants about what they prayed or thought about. In those pilot studies, participants who prayed tended to plead for the target's well-being. Those who were asked to think about the target of prayers tended to express empathetic thoughts, saying they felt sad about the situation and felt compassion for those who were suffering.

The second study had a similar setup to the first. All the students wrote an essay, but half wrote about a topic that angered them and then received anger-inducing negative feedback, supposedly from their partner. The other half wrote about a neutral subject and received positive feedback, which they thought was from their partner.

Participants were then asked to either pray or think about their partner for five minutes. (They were told this was for a study about how people form impressions about others, and that praying for or thinking about their partner would help them organize the information that they had already received about their partner in order to form a more valid impression.) Finally, the participants completed a reaction-time task in which they competed with their unseen "partner."

Afterwards, if participants won, they could blast their

partner with noise through headphones, choosing how long and loud the blast would be.

Results showed that students who were provoked acted more aggressively than those who were not provoked—but only if they had been asked to simply think about their partner. Students who prayed for their partner did not act more aggressively than others, even after they had been provoked.

The third study took advantage of previous research that found that angry people tend to attribute events in their lives to the actions of other people, while those who aren't angry more often attribute events to situations out of their control.

This study was done at a Dutch university, and all participants were required to be Christian because the Netherlands has a large proportion of atheists.

Half the participants were angered (similar to the methods in the first two studies), while the other half were not.

They then spent five minutes praying for or thinking about a person they personally knew who could use some extra help or support.

Finally, they were asked to judge the likelihood of each of 10 life events. Half the events were described as caused by a person (You miss an important flight because of a careless cab driver). Angry people would be expected to think these kinds of events would be more likely.

The other events were described as the result of situational factors (You miss an important flight because of a flat tire).

Results showed that those who simply thought of another person were more likely to hold the anger-related appraisals of situations if they were provoked, compared to those who were not provoked.

But those who prayed were not more likely to hold the anger-

related views, regardless of whether they were provoked or not.

“Praying undid the effects of provocation on how people viewed the likelihood of these situations,” Koole says.

While the three studies approached the issue in different ways, they all pointed to the personal benefits of prayer, Bushman says.

“The effects we found in these experiments were quite large, which suggests that prayer may really be an effective way to calm anger and aggression,” he says.

These results would only apply to the typical benevolent prayers that are advocated by most religions, Bushman said. Vengeful or hateful prayers, rather than changing how people view a negative situation, may actually fuel anger and aggression.

“When people are confronting their own anger, they may want to consider the old advice of praying for one’s enemies,” Bremner says. “It may not benefit their enemies, but it may help them deal with the negative emotions.”