

The Power of Prayer

People who choose to pray find personal comfort during hard times, according to a study from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Indeed, the 75 percent of Americans in the study who prayed on a weekly basis turned to conversation with God to manage a range of negative situations and emotions, including illness, sadness, trauma and anger.

Through the course of in-depth interviews with dozens of victims of violent relationships with intimate partners, Shane Sharp, a graduate student studying sociology at the university, discovered a myriad of ways prayer helped them deal with their situations and emotions through coping mechanisms such as venting.

For example, people who were boiling over with anger said they found “a readily available listening ear” with God. “If they vented their anger to that abusive partner, the result was likely to be more violence,” Sharp says. “But they could be angry at God while praying without fear of reprisal.”

During any interpersonal interaction, the study participants are considering how they look through the other’s eyes. In the case of people who pray, they are considering God’s view.

“During prayer, victims came to see themselves as they believed God saw them,” Sharp says. “Since these perceptions were mostly positive, it helped raise their senses of self-worth that counteracted their abusers’ hurtful words.”

Prayer is also a welcome distraction for some, Sharp found. Simply folding hands and concentrating on what to say is a reprieve from the anxiety of an abusive relationship. The experience isn’t that much different from a conversation with a close friend or a parent, he says.

“I looked at the act of praying, of speaking to God, as the

same as a legitimate social interaction,” Sharp says. “Instead of a concrete interaction you would have face-to-face with another person, prayer is with an imagined other.”

That’s not to diminish God’s role by considering Him an imagined participant in a prayer, Sharp adds. “On the contrary, I wouldn’t expect prayer to have these benefits for people if they thought God wasn’t real,” he says. “The important point is that they believe God is real, and that has consequences for them emotionally and for their behavior.”

Many of those interviewed said they believe in God, but don’t belong to a specific church.