



Written by [Bruce Walker](#) on November 16, 2011

Surveys Suggest Religion Helps Mental Health

According to a study published in the *Journal of Religion and Health* recently, regular attendance at religious services produces a more optimistic outlook on life and a reduced inclination to depression. Those respondents to the survey who attended religious services more than once a week in the prior month were 56 percent more likely to be above the median score on a measurement for optimism than those who had not attended religious services at all. Respondents who attended weekly religious services were 22 percent less likely to be depressed than those who did not attend religious services.



Not everyone agrees, however, about what exactly these numbers mean. Eliezer Schnall, an associate professor of clinical psychology at Yeshiva University in New York notes that: “There is a correlation, but that does not mean there is causality. One could argue people who are more optimistic may be drawn to religious services. The person who says, ‘I guess if I go to services, that will make me more optimistic’ — while a possibility, that may not be true.”

A 2008 study conducted by Schnall found that those who went to religious services regularly had a 20 percent reduced risk of death over the period of the study and its follow up. Schnall again cautioned against reading too much into the study: “We’re trying to connect the dots here. We know they’re less likely to die, and health outcomes can be related to psychological factors.”

[Baylor University](#) has conducted research that shows that Americans who attend religious services more than once a week have a more positive outlook on life than those who seldom or never attend religious services. According to a September 2011 study, respondents who strongly believe that they have a warm relationship with God report 31 percent fewer mental health-related symptoms than average respondents, those who strongly believe that God knows when they need support report 19% fewer mental health issues, than the typical respondent, and those who strongly believe that God’s love never fails them have 17 percent fewer mental health issues.

The Baylor study also found that those who were “worriers” were less likely to go to religious service. Thirty-three percent of worriers never went to religious services in the last year, and only 17% of worriers attended religious services every week. By contrast, only 25 percent of non-worriers had not attended religious services in the past year, while 37 percent of non-worriers attended religious services every week.

The Baylor study had findings similar to Professor Schnall’s study about the relationship between religious service attendance and depression (or optimism.) Out of the population in the study of “non-depressed” people, 36 percent attended religious services every week and 22 percent did not attend religious services. Among depressed respondents, 15 percent attended religious services every week and 39 percent did not attend religious services.



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More specifically, the Baylor study connects those who believe in an “engaged God,” rather than no God or a distant, indifferent God, with lower risks of a number of specific mental disorders: 21 percent fewer with concerns related to “Generalized Anxiety,” 34 percent fewer with concerns related to “Social Anxiety,” 25 percent fewer with concerns related to “Paranoia,” 18 percent fewer with concerns related to “Obsessions,” and 17 percent fewer with concerns related to “Compulsions.”

The connection between physical and mental health and religious faith has been studied extensively over the past several decades, and even when examined from a purely secular perspective, as in the 2004 book, *The Link Between Religion and Health: Psychoneuroimmunology and the Faith Fact*, concur that there is a positive connection. This is a proposition that many people who work in hospitals and doctor’s offices have understood without the need for surveys or studies: these doctors and nurses have seen the effect of faith on health too often firsthand.



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