

# Scientific Research and Spirituality

## Spirituality vs. Religion – Excerpts from *Spiritual Caregiving Healthcare as a Ministry* by Verna Benner Carson and Harold G. Koenig, MD<sup>7</sup>:

- **Spirituality** – how we're connected in relationship with God ... deals with meaning and purpose and how these factor into being a "holistic" person. Spirituality is within us, around us, about us. Every aspect of life has a spiritual component.
- **Religion** – represents our outward actions in response to our spirituality. It's the formal expression of God incarnate expressed in relationship with others through education, worship, fellowship, etc.

## From *The Healing Power of Faith* by Harold G. Koenig, MD<sup>8</sup>:

Studies from the Duke University Center for Spirituality, Theology and Health, as well as hundreds of major studies by other physicians, researchers and organizations, have produced the following results:

- People who regularly attend church, pray individually and read the Bible have significantly lower diastolic blood pressure than the less religious (in older adults, they were 60 percent more likely to). Those with the lowest blood pressure both attend church and pray or study the Bible often.
- People who attend church regularly are hospitalized much less often than people who never or rarely participate in religious services.
- The deeper a person's religious faith, the less likely he or she is to be crippled by depression during and after hospitalization for physical illness.
- Religious people have healthier lifestyles. They tend to avoid alcohol and drug abuse, risky sexual behavior and other unhealthy habits.
- Elderly people with a deep, personal ("intrinsic") religious faith have a stronger sense of well-being and life satisfaction than their less religious peers. This may be due in part to the stable marriages and strong families religious people tend to build.
- People with strong faith who suffer from physical illness have significantly better health outcomes than less religious people.

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<sup>7</sup> Benner Carson, V., and Koenig, H. G. (2004). *Spiritual Caregiving: Healthcare as a Ministry*. West Conshohocken: Templeton Foundation Press.

<sup>8</sup> Koenig, H. G. (2001). *The Healing Power of Faith: How Belief and Prayer Can Help You Triumph Over Disease*. New York: Touchstone.

- People who attend religious services regularly have stronger immune systems than their less religious counterparts. People who went to church regularly had significantly lower blood levels of interleukin-6 (IL-6), which rises with unrelieved chronic stress. High levels of IL-6 reflect a weakened immune system, which, in turn, increases the risk of infection, autoimmune disease and certain cancers.
- Religious people live longer. A growing body of research shows that religious people are both physically healthier into later life and live longer than their nonreligious counterparts. **Religious faith appears to protect the elderly from the two major afflictions of later life: cardiovascular disease and cancer.** In this regard, religion may be as significant a protective factor as not smoking, in terms of survival and longevity.
- Religious hip-fracture patients recover faster than their nonreligious counterparts.
- Older people who attend religious services avoid disability significantly longer than their non-attending peers.
- After open-heart surgery, patients who find comfort in their religious faith are three times more likely to survive than nonreligious patients.
- Persons with mental illness like schizophrenia can achieve higher functioning if they're surrounded by a supportive church community.
- A year into recovery from heroin addiction, people in religious-based recovery programs were almost eight times more likely to report abstinence from opiates than those who received purely secular treatment.<sup>9</sup>
- In 1998, the *Journal of the American Medical Association* reported that depression visits to physicians between 1985 and 1994 almost doubled from 10.99 million to 20.43 million. The National Institute of Mental Health estimates that approximately 17.6 million Americans suffer depression each year. But people with strong religious faith are less likely to suffer depression from stressful life events, and, if they do, they are more likely to recover from depression than those who are less religious.
- Deeply sincere devotional practices reduce stress. People enjoy improved mood; they are delivered from anguished tension to tranquility. Mood is connected to chemical neurotransmitters in the brain, such as serotonin. Neuroscientists now believe many people suffering from depression have low levels of certain neurotransmitters, which seem to predispose them to drug or alcohol abuse.

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<sup>9</sup> Matthews, D., Larson, D., and Barry, C. (1993). *The Faith Factor: An Annotated Bibliography of Clinical Research on Spiritual Subjects, Vol 1*. Rockville: National Institute for Healthcare Research.

## **From the *American Academy of Anti-Aging Medicine*: “Science or Miracle? Holiday Season Survey Reveals Physicians’ Views of Faith, Prayer and Miracles”<sup>10</sup>**

A national survey of 1,100 physicians, conducted by HCD Research and the Louis Finkelstein Institute for Religious and Social Studies of The Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City, found that 74 percent of doctors believe that miracles have occurred in the past and 73 percent believe that miracles can occur today.

The poll also indicated that American physicians are surprisingly religious, with 72 percent indicating they believe that religion provides a reliable and necessary guide to life.

Those surveyed represent physicians from Christian (Roman Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox Christian and other), Jewish (Orthodox, Conservative, Reform and secular), Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist religious traditions.

## **From *Stress and Health in Psychology*: “Spirituality and Faith Communities”<sup>11</sup>**

As medical science matured, healing and religion diverged. The separation between religion and medicine is now shrinking. “Spirituality” has made a comeback:

- Since 1995, Harvard Medical School has annually attracted 1,000–2,000 health professionals to its Spirituality and Healing in Medicine conferences.
- Duke University has established a Center for Spirituality, Theology and Health.
- Eighty-six of America’s 126 medical schools offered spirituality and health courses in 2002, up from five in 1992 (Koenig, 2002).
- A Yankelovich survey (1997) found 94 percent of HMO professionals and 99 percent of family physicians agreeing that “personal prayer, meditation, or other spiritual and religious practices” can enhance medical treatment.
- More than 1,000 studies have sought to correlate “the faith factor” with health and healing. Consider two:
  - Jeremy Kark and his colleagues (1996) compared the death rates for 3,900 Israelis either in one of 11 religiously orthodox or in one of 11 matched, nonreligious collective settlements (kibbutz communities). The researchers reported that over a 16-year period, “belonging to a religious collective was associated with a strong protective effect” not explained by age or economic differences. In every age group, those belonging to the religious communities

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<sup>10</sup> HCD Research. (2004, December 20). “Science or Miracle? Holiday Season Survey Reveals Physicians’ Views of Faith, Prayer and Miracles.” Retrieved Oct. 1, 2013, from HCD Research: <http://www.hcdi.net/News/PressRelease.cfm?ID=47>.

<sup>11</sup> Myers, D. (2007). “Spirituality and Faith Communities.” Originally printed in Chapter 14: Stress and Health, in *Psychology*. Retrieved Oct. 1, 2013, from David G. Myers: Professor of Psychology, Hope College: <http://www.davidmyers.org/Brix?pageID=52>

were about half as likely as their nonreligious counterparts to have died. This is roughly comparable to the gender difference in mortality.

- An earlier study of 91,909 persons in one Maryland county found that those who attended religious services weekly were less likely to die during the study period than those who did not – 53 percent less from coronary disease, 53 percent less due to suicide and 74 percent less from cirrhosis of the liver (Comstock & Partridge, 1972).

### **From the International Center in Health and Spirituality: Attending Religious Services Lowers Risk of Death by 28 Percent<sup>12</sup>**

Older Americans' chances of living longer are stretched by 28 percent when they attend religious meetings each week – even after considering key health and social factors that also could lengthen lives.

“The risk of dying for frequent attendees was 46 percent lower than for those attending less often,” commented researcher Dr. Harold G. Koenig.

### **From a CBS News Poll: “Should Doctors Pray with Their Patients?” (April 20-21, 1998)<sup>13</sup>**

- 80 percent believe personal prayer or other spiritual and religious practices can speed or help the medical treatment of people who are ill.
- 22 percent say they have been cured of an illness as a result of personal prayer or other spiritual and religious practices.
- 63 percent believe doctors should join their patients in prayer to ask for help in curing an illness, if patients request it.
- 34 percent believe that prayer should be a standard part of the practice of medicine.
- 59 percent say religion is very important or extremely important in their daily lives.
- 60 percent say they pray at least once a day. 64 percent say they pray for their own health, and 82 percent say they pray for the health of others.

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<sup>12</sup> Koenig, H., George, L., Hays, J., Larson, D., Cohen, H., and Blazer, D. (1998). “The Relationship Between Religious Activities and Blood Pressure in Older Adults.” *International Journal of Psychology in Medicine*, 28(2):189-213.

<sup>13</sup> Sperry, L. (2001). Use of Spiritual Interventions by Mental Health Professionals. In L. Sperry, *Spirituality in Clinical Practice* (p. 7). Ann Arbor: Sheridan Books.

## USA Weekend Faith and Health Poll (1996)<sup>14</sup>

- 56 percent say their faith has helped them recover from illness, injury, or disease. Most interesting: 49 percent of 18-34 year olds say their spiritual faith has helped them heal. That number rises to 62 percent in the 45-54 age group.

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<sup>14</sup> Associated Press. (1996, April 3). "Poll: 6 in 10 Think Doctors Should Talk About Spiritual Faith."  
Retrieved Oct. 1, 2013, from AP News Archive: <http://www.apnewsarchive.com/1996/Poll-Six-in-10-Think-Doctors-Should-Talk-About-Spiritual-Faith/id-3bb9a6cd75efc883027442f5d35e474a>