

Extensive Research Supports the Healing Effect of Spiritual Practices

The research studies of health and spirituality suggest that the following spiritual practices aid in the development of the “Fruits of the Spirit” and have a profound effect on health.

Meditation can induce feelings of calm and clear-headedness as well as improve concentration and attention. Brain researcher Richard Davidson’s research shows that meditation increases the brain’s gray matter density, which can reduce sensitivity to pain, enhance your immune system, help you regulate difficult emotions, and relieve stress. Mindfulness meditation in particular has been proven helpful for people with depression and anxiety, cancer, fibromyalgia, chronic pain, rheumatoid arthritis, type 2 diabetes, chronic fatigue syndrome, and cardiovascular disease.

Prayer may elicit the relaxation response, along with feelings of hope, gratitude, and compassion—all of which have a positive effect on overall wellbeing. There are several types of prayer, many of which are rooted in the belief that there is a higher power that has some level of influence over your life. This belief can provide a sense of comfort and support in difficult times—a recent study found that clinically depressed adults who believed their prayers were heard by a concerned presence responded much better to treatment than those who did not believe.

Yoga is a centuries-old spiritual practice that aims to create a sense of union within the practitioner through physical postures, ethical behaviors, and breath expansion. The systematic practice of yoga has been found to reduce inflammation and stress, decrease depression and anxiety, lower blood pressure, and increase feelings of wellbeing.

Journaling is another, often overlooked, contemplative practice that can help you become more aware of your inner life and feel more connected to your experience and the world around you. Studies show that writing during difficult times may help you find meaning in life’s challenges and become more resilient in the face of obstacles.

Dr. Steven Southwick’s book, *Resilience: The Science of Mastering Life’s Greatest Challenges*, describes how some people overcome trauma—such as abduction, war, and imprisonment—by seeking comfort in spirituality or religion. He gives examples where spiritual people find ways to “meet the challenge and continue with purposeful lives...they bounce back and carry on.”

Spiritual people make healthier choices.

Adhering to a particular spiritual tradition may bring an indirect health benefit because many traditions have rules about treating the body with kindness and avoiding unhealthy behaviors. Research shows that perhaps because of these tenets, people who practice a religion or faith tradition are less likely to smoke or drink, commit a crime, or become involved in violent activity, and they are more likely to engage in preventative habits like wearing seatbelts and taking vitamins.

Spirituality may help you live longer.

An exhaustive review that compared spirituality and religiousness to other health interventions found that people with a strong spiritual life had an 18% reduction in mortality. Giancarlo Lucchetti, lead author of the study, calculates that the life-lengthening benefits of spirituality can be compared to eating a high amount of fruits and vegetables or taking blood pressure medication. Although some researchers have suggested that the extent of spirituality’s benefit on health is exaggerated, most researchers agree **there is a positive relationship between religious and spiritual practices and better health outcomes.**

Forgiveness is good medicine.

Letting go of blame and negative feelings after a hurtful incident is a practice that is reflected by a number of spiritual traditions, including Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism. Modern science shows the health benefits of forgiveness are numerous: better immune function, longer lifespan, lowered blood pressure, improved cardiovascular health, and fewer feelings of anger or hurt.

Studies show that people who forgive are happier and healthier than those who hold resentments. The first study to look at how forgiveness improves physical health discovered that when people think about forgiving an offender it leads to improved functioning in their cardiovascular and nervous systems. Another study at the University of Wisconsin found

the more forgiving people were, the less they suffered from a wide range of illnesses. The less forgiving people reported a greater number of health problems.

In three separate studies, including one with Catholics and Protestants from Northern Ireland whose family members were murdered in the political violence, he found that people who are taught how to forgive become less angry, feel less hurt, are more optimistic, become more forgiving in a variety of situations, and become more compassionate and self-confident. His studies show a reduction in experience of stress, physical manifestations of stress, and an increase in vitality.

Based on more than 30 years of psychological counseling and pastoral care, Howard Clinebell believed that humans have seven spiritual hungers in common. As you read through them, consider whether you recognize any of these spiritual needs in yourself. Are there particular areas of "spiritual hunger" in your life that need more attention than others?

Specifically, Clinebell felt that human beings long to:

1. Experience the healing and empowerment of love—from others, self, and an ultimate source.
2. Experience renewing times of transcendence—expansive moments beyond the immediate sensory spheres.
3. Have vital beliefs that lend meaning and hope in the midst of losses, tragedies, and failures.
4. Have values, priorities, and life commitments centered in issues of justice, integrity, and love to provide guidance in personally and socially responsible living.
5. Discover and develop inner wisdom, creativity, and love of self.
6. Develop a deepening awareness of oneness with other people, the natural world, and all living things.
7. Have spiritual resources to help heal grief, guilt, resentment, unforgiveness, self-rejection, and shame and deepen experiences of trust, self-esteem, hope, joy and love of life.

Andrew Weil, author of *Spontaneous Happiness*, describes empathy and compassion as "learnable skills that can bring greater happiness into your life and improve all of your relationships." They are important to spiritual development, he explains, because they help you get out of self-centered ways of thinking and help you make connections with others.