

# Can Religion Extend Your Life?



By *Chuck Dinerstein* — June 16, 2018



By Ammodramus [1]

There is increasing evidence that a correlation exists between a person's social support and engagement and their longevity. At a bare minimum, it makes sense because it is challenging to manage chronic disease or recovery from hospitalization on your own. A new study looks at religious participation as a marker for that social integration and to avoid the bias of self-reported religious activity; the researchers measured religious involvement noted in obituaries. (Of course, they might also have induced a bit of bias on the report of grieving family members writing those obituaries)

There is a clear link between attendance at religious services and social support, even the number of close friends. Involvement in any group activity in the long-term fosters more social relationships. One theory, religion as a social value, suggests that being religious in a region where religion is socially valued may confer a halo of benefits, primarily stress reduction. The hypothesis tested by the researchers was that religious affiliation noted within obituaries would confer a survival benefit beyond that already conferred by marital status and gender.

They piloted the study initially using obituaries in the Des Moines Register and found that even controlling for marital status and gender when religious affiliations were noted in the obituary, the individuals were nearly 6.5 years older than those without such mentions. Based upon the pilot study, the study was extended to consider obituaries in online newspapers in 42 major U.S. cities, sampling a little over 1,000 obituaries. And again, controlling for marital status and gender, individuals whose obituaries mentioned their religious practices lived 5 years longer than those whose obituaries made no mention of religious activity. A deeper dive into the obituaries suggested that "the opportunities and incentives to volunteer and participate in other social groups provided by religious communities" were in part responsible for the lengthening life-span. Those who might

recoil at religious belief extending life might consider engaging in social activity and friendship as the real underlying correlation.

Finally, the researchers attempted to look at the context of religious activity within the community, seeking to confirm the religion as social value hypothesis. In cities that were more insular, church and family cultures, religious affiliation resulted in greater longevity; in more diverse towns, where religion was not as uniformly practiced, longevity was extended but not to the same degree. The researcher's regression analysis suggested that the effect of volunteering and participation accounted for 20% or 1 year of the impact, while religious affiliation accounted for the remaining four years or 80%. At this juncture, I think we are getting lost in numbers rather than a compelling narrative.

The use of obituaries was unique but limits the study's findings. Besides the bias of the writer, obituaries rarely mention smoking or health issues, and there may be costs associated with publishing these memorials that reduce the representation of some socioeconomic demographics.

Source: Does Religion Stave Off the Grave? Religious Affiliation in One's Obituary and Longevity *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 2018 DOI: 10.1177/1948550618779820

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