

## Can religion, spirituality benefit our mental well-being?

Community, structure and purpose can help

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When Christine Whelan’s 5-month-old son died unexpectedly from unknown causes, she found herself frustrated when people offered condolences like, “It was God’s plan” or, “God needed another angel.”

“My response was always, ‘Do you want to offer your angel then?’ I mean, come on,” said the author and professor in the School of Human Ecology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. “Everyone gave me the damned ‘Heaven Is For Real’ book. That was so awful.”

Still, she tried to give people some leeway.

“Often people lean on religion when they don’t know what else to lean on and what else to say,” said Whelan, a practicing Catholic. “That actually can be quite good, because in times of tragedy, we do need a cultural script.”

Whelan’s experience comes as the intersection of mental health and religion is perhaps timelier than ever.

One in five Americans experience mental illness of some sort, according

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to the most recent annual State of Mental Health in America report. Almost one-third do not receive any treatment. One in 10 youths deal with depression bad enough to hamper their daily functioning. Almost two-thirds do not receive any treatment.

Young people are pushed to succeed, but as they careen into the world of adulthood, Whelan said, they can’t say they know why they’re doing any of it. “One of the reasons I think they are struggling is because they don’t have a sense of why they’re here, what they’re doing, what the point of all of this is,” she said.

At the same time, in the last 15 years, the percentage of adults who say they are atheist, agnostic or nothing has grown from 16% to 29%, according to the Pew Research Center. During this time, the share of U.S. adults identifying as Christian has fallen from 78% to 63%, while the share who identify as other religions has stayed almost the same, between 5% and 7%.

So, do religious and spiritual practices have an effect on mental health?

Fred Coleman, a clinical assistant professor of psychiatry at the UW-Madison Department of Psychiatry, offered important framings to consider.

First, religion is distinct from spirituality. Religion is an organized faith group, replete with a set of texts, a place, a set of services, rituals, observances and practices all centered around a community, Coleman said. Spirituality, on the other hand, focuses on an individual’s relationship to a higher plane, whether that points to a deity, greater meaning or living as a grounded being.

Important to this discussion are the three pillars of religion Coleman defines: community, structure and a sense of purpose.

Religion and mental health have been strongly intertwined across millennia. It wasn't until the 1950s that the science community folded in behavioral health, Coleman explained. By the 1980s, medical and theological journals were publishing studies where religion, spirituality and mental health overlapped, and that trend continues.

Coleman has worked with a range of religious groups, from conservative Evangelical Christians to those who follow Islam, Judaism and Native American spiritualities, Catholicism and Buddhism.

Across all groups, this triad of community, structure and purpose-making exists.

“(This triad) places a person in a community, and you're less likely to struggle with — or struggle as severely with — anxiety and depression if you're in a community,” Coleman said. “Secondly, there's an overarching sense of meaning or purpose in life. That also helps with general mental health. And finally, there's a structure.”

### **The question of purpose in life**

Mary Salm, vice president of mission integration and spiritual care at Hospital Sisters Health System Wisconsin, works with patients who find themselves grappling with existential crises on top of recent diagnoses. The graver or more life-altering the medical prognosis, the deeper the questions of purpose and meaning in life.

“There's an overwhelming number of patients who want to visit with a chaplain, they want that opportunity of the chaplain to be able to remind them of God's care and presence,” Salm said. “There are times when they are seeking chaplain support as they sort through some moral or ethical concerns. If we can do those things, that helps them find more peace and be able to connect with meaning and purpose.”

Patients who can access spiritual peace and comfort, whether through praying, eating a culturally specific meal, finding mindfulness through meditation or reading sacred texts, often rely less on pain medication, Salm said. They've been granted a kind of control outside of pharmaceutical management, she said, which can also offset mental health struggles.

Conversing with spiritual leaders is one means of potentially finding peace with one's circumstances. Another is by consulting literature, sometimes in the form of sacred texts, sometimes in the form of self-help advice.

Whelan was interested enough that she wrote a book about it called “The Big Picture: A Guide to Finding Your Purpose in Life.” In the book, she cited a USA TODAY poll from 1999 in which readers were asked what single question they would ask God or a supreme being if they could get a direct, immediate answer.

The leading question: What is our purpose in life?

Whelan agrees with Coleman that religion and mental health have a profoundly connected relationship. One measure: Religious books make up the largest subset of self-help books printed at any given time in the United States, Whelan said. She attributed it to people yearning for “religious-based happiness advice.” Only half-joking, she said the Bible is “the best-selling self-help book of all time.”

“If you think about what a self-help book is, it is a guide to trying to lead a better life, to find happiness and peace and well-being,” Whelan said. “The Bible is a book about how to live a good life in this life, so that you can achieve something greater, which is happiness and well-being in the afterlife.”

The Bible, she continued, offers a set of rules to achieve this inner peace, and there’s a great deal of mental health lessons along the way. Looking at one of the more basic commandments, “Love thy neighbor as thyself,” for example, can be heard in a modern-day therapist reminding patients they should give themselves the same respect and dignity they give those around them.

“What most people see on the surface is that you’ve got to be nice to everybody else — and that’s true. But to love your neighbor as yourself means that you also have to love yourself and see yourself as a worthy child of God, and then bring that worthiness of yourself to your interactions with others,” Whelan said. “I mean, that’s Therapy 101 right there.”

### **Religious involvement can reduce symptoms**

Corrie Norman is the associate director of the Religious Studies Program at UW-Madison and teaches a course to undergraduates called “Religion in Sickness and Health” where she examines religion and spirituality through the lens of public health.

Studies tell us, broadly, that there are correlations between religion and living longer, Norman said, although it’s hard to answer why. The common thread across studies appears to be the role of community support and being present with other people.

“Groups that suffer from health disparities often have very powerful resources in their religious communities. And so being able to work with that is really, really important in public health and in clinical medicine,” Norman said.

People who suffer from certain mental illnesses can also benefit from religious or spiritual practices, Coleman said, but it depends on the category of illness. In people who struggle with depression, anxiety disorders or mood problems, religious involvement can reduce symptoms. The same can be said for people experiencing cognition and memory issues.

People who experience psychosis, whether severe bipolar illness or schizophrenia, don’t experience that same reduction of incidence by religious or spiritual involvement, Coleman said.

Then there’s the question of those wrestling with PTSD and other trauma disorders.

“One of the things that happens to people with severe PTSD — war, disaster, intrafamilial trauma — is the loss of a sense of future, and loss of a sense of meaning and purpose in life,” Coleman said. “The fact of a trauma ... isn’t necessarily prevented by being actively involved in religious spiritual traditions. But the recovery of regaining a sense of a future, and a sense of meaning and purpose, obviously fits in with what those traditions help to provide.”

Sometimes, though, a belief system is so extreme, people lose sight of themselves and anything outside the confines of a given religion.

Whelan likes to remind people that if you believe something is powerful enough to transform you for the better, you must also acknowledge that a belief can potentially harm you, too.

Whether it’s with supplements or various wellness treatments or selfhelp or religion, we often are happy to give people or ideas the power to help us, she said. But we don’t acknowledge that

power “can go both ways,” Whelan said. “Your faith can lift you up. It can also break your heart.”

One way it can go wrong is with binary thinking, the notion of “good” vs. “bad,” that fails to acknowledge that life is often far more gray than black or white, Coleman said.

“If we had to deal with every bit of sensory input — everything around our environment, every person, every relationship — on a carefully graded continuum, it would overwhelm us,” Coleman said. “We generally say, ‘That’s good for me, that’s bad for me.’ We use binaries to simplify life. But they’re rarely true.”

### ‘What matters to people’

On a basic level, religion can be defined as “what matters to people,” said Norman, the religious studies scholar from UW-Madison. And it invites contradictions, just like life itself. That’s part of what makes religion so expansive, Norman said — that its contradictions and complexities don’t diminish its power.

“To an outsider, religion can really look contradictory at times,” Norman said. “For religious folks, that’s complexity, the complexity of life: You can have joy and pain at the same time.”

Norman shared the story of an immunologist who found herself calling up Psalm 23 while creating a garden in her backyard. It was a prayer that her father, a Holocaust survivor, reflected on often, especially the section “he leadeth me beside still waters, he restoreth my soul.”

The moment, mounting a deck in her backyard, was mundane, but the prayer filled her suddenly with a new meaning, one she hadn’t considered. She remembered her father, and his appreciation for nature. She realized she was copying her parent’s backyard garden, living out their values. It took being in a specific place for these revelations to strike her. “Religion can work that way. It can work for people who pray the same prayer like the Lord’s Prayer or something from the Book of Common Prayer or something from the Catholic missal. The same prayer that they have prayed all of their lives all of a sudden gels for them in the situation they’re in,” Norman said.

“How they act on that can create an enormous, impacting mood and then it can create a kind of motivation to think about something a certain way, to act about something a certain way.”

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