

### **“Spirituality, Faith, and The Coronavirus”**

Are there health benefits from religious and faith practices in the face of the COVID-19 virus? A recent webinar by Harold Koenig, M.D. at Duke University addressed this question. He began by pointing out that throughout human history, people have always had to deal with pandemics (or plagues, as they were called in the past). And, people have sought comfort from their faith and religious practices during these perilous and frightening times.

Dr. Koenig said that research shows, “religious faith has the potential to help with whatever situation a person is facing, including the risk of infection from coronavirus, and, if one does become infected, spiritual practices can help deal with the illness, as well.”

Here he pointed out that reading religious scriptures can bring peace and reduce fear and anxiety. He read Psalm 91 from the Bible which says, “The person who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, ‘He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.’”

Those can be words of comfort; however, the passage goes on to say, “Surely He will save you from the fowler’s snare and from the deadly pestilence.” Some religious people have taken that to mean God will protect them, so they don’t need to wear a mask or keep social distance. I believe that is a misunderstanding of how to apply scripture in one’s life.

So the question remains, does religious coping help? And, if so, is there scientific evidence that is true? Dr. Koenig reviewed the findings of research from 1887 to 2020 which have been documented in his two volumes of *Handbook of Religion and Health* (Oxford University Press, 2001, 2012, and a third volume to be published in 2021).

Koenig elaborated on the positive correlation between religion/faith practices and several disease processes. For example, in depression, those who use religious practices have shown less depression and faster recovery in 272 of 444 studies (61%). An important study found in *JAMA Psychiatry* (71(2), p. 128-135) reported on Neuroanatomical Correlates of Religiosity and Spirituality in Depression, and showed reduced areas of cortical thickness in patients who reported religion was not very important to them. This was not the case in patients who said religion was very important in their life.

Dr. Koenig also reported that religiosity and faith have been shown to have a positive effect on well-being and happiness in 256 of 326 studies (79% improved) while only 3 of 326 studies (1%) reported lower well-being or happiness. Being religiously involved is also related to finding greater meaning and purpose in life (93%) , finding hope (73%), and greater optimism (81%). Koenig said, “All these have consequences for recovery from illness.” And, they have a positive impact on function of the immune system which fights infections.

There was more in Dr. Koenig’s talk but I think you get his point that one’s religiosity, faith and spirituality can have a great impact on maintaining health during the coronavirus pandemic. But, still wear a mask, keep social distance, and wash your hands regularly. God has given us a brain and we need to use it, especially during a pandemic.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John", with a stylized, cursive script.

John K. Graham, MD, DMin  
President & CEO  
Institute for Spirituality and Health