

Now What?

A Guide to the Gifts
and Challenges of Aging

Connecting With a Congregation

Joining a congregation is a healthy step

The vast majority of Americans tell pollsters every year that they are people of faith. In the U.S., more than two-thirds of us identify as Christian. One quarter of us identify as Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu or say we don't have any particular religious affiliation. We are an overwhelmingly religious nation, compared with other countries around the world.

However, only about a third of us actually participate in worship services and other congregational activities on a regular basis. That means as many as 200 million Americans don't have a regular connection to a congregation—even though they think of themselves as religiously affiliated.

Now, research shows that taking a simple step—connecting with a congregation on a regular basis—is a powerful predictor of health and well-being in the U.S. and around the world.

Researchers in dozens of countries have been studying the role of religion in public health, especially since 2000. The Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA), the scholarly nonprofit group that collects and shares such studies, has an ever-growing list of such findings, including:

- A study of older Mexican men and women over more than a decade showed a 19% reduction in risk of death, in any given

time period, among those who participate at least once a week in religious activities. In this region, the majority in the study were Catholic, but the specific religious affiliation of the participants did not matter.

- Another study in Taiwan showed a similar pattern—religious attendance and private devotions lead to longer lives. In this region, most people practiced several Asian religious traditions, especially Buddhism and Taoism, and some were Christian. Their affiliation did not matter. Their attendance and regular religious practices did.
- A different kind of study in predominantly Catholic Ireland showed that regular participation in a congregation led to building larger social networks, which lessened the risk of poor mental health.
- In the U.S., researchers followed a group of more than 70,000 women for 20 years and found that frequent religious attendance was associated with a third lower risk of death, in any given period, compared with women who never participate in congregations. A majority of these women identified as Christian, but from a wide range of denominations. Again, the healthy principle was regular attendance, not any particular affiliation.

A 2020 ARDA report summarized many of these global studies and concluded, “Social and medical sciences are increasingly finding evidence to support how religion promotes better health, including living longer.”

Why is religion healthy?

The authors of these studies collected by ARDA are scientific researchers, which means none of their studies have a religious bias. These scholars start by neutrally studying large populations of people, usually over a period of years. They look for experiences that predict a significant change in the participants’ lives.

Around the world in studies that span the last 20 years, scientists have identified at least four religious experiences that encourage health and well-being. ARDA sums up these four in this way:

- You are not alone: Researchers studying loneliness are documenting the potential mental health dangers of a lack of human contact. They are finding that the vibrant social networks of religious communities offer members major health advantages, particularly for older people.
- Having a loving God by your side: Numerous studies find that an association between an image of God as just and merciful can provide benefits such as a good night's sleep, greater self-esteem, a lower likelihood of being anxious or depressed and having a greater sense of optimism and hope even while facing stressful situations.
- Prayer, worship, meditation and inner peace: Studies are strongly linking personal spiritual practices with health. For example, prayer can help reduce anxiety, provide calm and refresh us, especially as we face daily challenges.
- Promoting health through scripture and tradition: Most major faith traditions treat the body as a divine gift and preach against behaviors such as alcohol or drug abuse, gluttony and promiscuity. Highly religious individuals tend to take these teachings seriously, research shows. As a result, regular participation in the life of a congregation predicts fewer health risks.

Religious teachings on health

Christianity is only one of the world religions promoting healthy behavior. For example, healthy principles are a central part of Islam, which includes a ban on alcohol and encourages moderation in eating. "Second to faith, no one has ever been given a greater blessing than health" is one of nearly 130 prophetic sayings from Islam on health and medicine. For more than 1,000 years, Islam also has been known around the world for encouraging the work of doctors, scientists and other health professionals.

Each of the world's ancient religious traditions includes specific teachings about health and diet. Among other notable examples: Hinduism and Buddhism do not require a vegetarian diet, but many Hindus and Buddhists avoid eating meat. One of the Five Precepts of Buddhism is to refrain from intoxicants that cloud the mind. Many other religious traditions have similar bans on substances that can lead to an unhealthy lifestyle or addiction.

These global religions also have core teachings that emphasize caring for the well-being of the elderly, starting with the Ten Commandments: "Honor your father and your mother." One traditional Jewish commentary explains: "What constitutes honor? One must provide them with food and drink and clothing. One should bring them home and take them out, and provide them with all their needs cheerfully."

Healthy principles are associated with most of the major Protestant denominations that make up a majority of the U.S. population. Of course, many men and women who claim those affiliations ignore those teachings—but regular activity in a congregation increases the likelihood that members will follow healthy principles.

In fact, several denominations were founded along with core teachings about health care. Methodism's founder John Wesley encouraged physical exercise, became a vegetarian and wrote an early guide to home health care in the 1740s that was one of the first books on healthy living that thousands of early American families had ever seen. In the 1860s, Seventh Day Adventists were founded with health principles similar to Wesley's ideas—and researchers have found that active congregations of Adventists have significantly greater health and longevity.

No scientist is arguing that this is due to divine intervention or that one religious group is healthier than others. What scientists are saying is that religious communities have a powerful influence on active members' lives—and that entire congregations tend to encourage and reinforce healthy practices among members.

That is why the world's largest Christian denomination, the billion-member Roman Catholic Church, is actively partnering with the World Health Organization's special focus from 2020 until

2030 on a Decade of Healthy Aging. To kick off this decade, the Vatican hosted a global conference on Religion and Medical Ethics in December 2019. More than 250 religious leaders, health care experts and scholars from 35 countries met in Rome for the symposium. The conference focused on the healing impact of spirituality in two key areas: palliative care and the mental health of the elderly.

A report from the conference by Italian journalist Elisa Di Benedetto said, “This global movement of bringing interfaith and cross-cultural perspectives into health care systems has been growing in recent decades. That collaboration has been encouraged by public health experts around the world who increasingly point to the vital importance of an overall pattern of social determinants of health. This broader vision of public health acknowledges that a person’s religious, cultural, social and community network is crucial to health and well-being.”

Her report continued: “One of the great highlights of the Vatican-sponsored event was a call for an interfaith perspective in developing a holistic approach—considering both medical and spiritual needs—specifically in the area of medical ethics and the elderly. A very insightful panel discussion explored whether a cooperative interfaith approach could improve palliative care in communities where families come from diverse backgrounds.”

For his part, Pope Francis preaches and teaches about the need for communities to plan for the care of aging men and women. In his many messages emphasizing this need, Pope Francis points out that providing this care benefits far more than the elderly recipients of assistance. Whenever he speaks to crowds of young people, Pope Francis says that their lives will be richer and happier if they spend time in relationships with older people—including caring for their needs.

The Pope likes to call young people the “bud and foliage” of the world’s family tree, then he says, “but without roots they cannot bear fruit. The elderly are the roots.”

In one of his talks to the world’s youth, Pope Francis emphasized that any successful society cares for the needs of its oldest residents. He said to his young listeners: “You cannot carry all the elderly on

your shoulders, but you can carry their dreams. Carry them forward with you, and they will do you much good.”

This effort is more than charity, the Pope has said repeatedly. If young people allow a “throwaway culture” to dominate, they will lose the great wisdom of their elders. “If the young are called to open new doors—the elderly hold the keys.”

Pope Francis concluded that all generations need each other to thrive: “There is no growth without roots and no flowering without new buds. There is never prophecy without memory, or memory without prophecy—and constant encounter.”