

THE GOD FACTOR

FAITH AS A PRESCRIPTION?

*By Sharon Platt-McDonald MSC, RHV, RM, RGN
Health Ministries Director/ Special Needs Coordinator*

Most people in the UK would by now have seen the atheist's adverts on public transport which states: "There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life". 800 of these adverts were placed on buses across Britain after an unprecedented fundraising campaign. This was the first ever atheist advertising campaign to take place in Britain. Similar adverts are also currently running on public transports in America and Spain. In the UK, Christian groups responded with various slogans voicing their faith. One advert read: "There definitely is a God. So join the Christian Party and enjoy your life" The caption was created by Rev George Hargreaves of the Christian Party and also placed on buses. An additional advert by the Russian Orthodox Church states "There IS a God, BELIEVE. Don't worry and enjoy your life."

So with God at the centre of a public debate (however creative) about deity and the impact of spirituality, can we really prove that belief makes a difference to our life?

It is clear that spirituality means different things to different people at different times and in various places. Historically, through the centuries spirituality has been expressed through varied forms like religion, building, the arts, and nature itself.

In the 80's whilst I was enjoying the highs of my nurse training and career, it was topical to hear much talk about wholistic health where the importance of spiritual wellbeing was voiced along with awareness of physical, emotional and social health. Reports began to immerge about the importance of health professionals embracing the spiritual aspects of patient care and acknowledging the impact of faith on the health and illness experience of patients.

Whilst several studies has reported the beneficial health outcomes of individuals practising their faith, the most convincing evidenced based reports to date has been around emotional wellbeing.

Recent research has turned to the impact of religion on health; in particular mental health. The evidence produced by various mental health institutions have identified that certain aspects of religious and spiritual involvement are associated with positive mental health outcomes.

¹Spiritual Care and psychiatric treatment... (2002), ²Mentality – Adulthood (2004)

Mirroring this finding, The Royal College of Psychiatrists discovered that mental health service users identified positive outcomes associated with good quality spiritual care. As a result these

service users reported that they experienced improved self-control, raised self esteem, increased confidence and better relationships. *3Spirituality and Mental Health (2005)*

Another study of people with severe mental health problems across a range of diagnosed conditions found significant benefits to having a faith which they practised. The results revealed that 60% of these individuals reported that their religious experience or spirituality was very helpful and had 'a great deal' of beneficial impact on their illness. This was particularly related to the feelings that religion and spirituality fostered and the positive emotions of being 'cared for' and not being alone. The sense of belonging was also key to their recovery. *4Mental Health, Religion and Culture (2004) 5Mental Health Foundation (2006)*

Another study by the Mental Health Foundation published 2006 found that religious people, in particular those who believed in a transcendent being or higher power are more likely to recover from depression. This was also true of people who belonged to a community with others who shared their values and offered support; an element very common to faith groups.

Although significant evidence exists to prove the faith factor in emotional and mental healing, studies are now pointing to the general health benefits of individuals who practice their faith.

A number of studies now reveal that people who go to church regularly live longer. One such report was aired on Tuesday 19th February 2008, when the BBC 2's Horizon documentary revealed findings from a 30 year research by scientists Drs Bradley and Craig Willcox (brothers). The two researchers followed three communities where people live the longest in the world. This they identified as the Blue Zone. Seventh-day Adventists from Loma Linda California were studied in this research as a faith group who experience significant health benefits linked to their faith practice.

The faith aspects of Adventists have been a subject of interest for scientists for many years and the spiritual impact of the Adventist faith on health is now being closely examined. In the Horizon documentary it was evident that there was a correlation between the strong religious beliefs of those who practiced their faith and the positive response to stress that they demonstrated. Researcher Dr Kelly Morton interviewed on the documentary stated: "There are many stressors in life that we cannot control...Connection to something higher than ones self, connection to the sacred, connection to a tight knit religious community allows you to modulate your reactions, your emotions, to believe that there is a broader purpose and therefore your body can stay in balance and not be destroyed by those stressors and traumas over time".

As a follow up research, Dr Kelly Morton is currently undergoing research on Adventist to ascertain more fully the impact of their religion on life expectancy. They are analysing blood and saliva samples for stress hormones. Scientific evidence exists to prove that lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol leads to a longer life. The lower levels of stress indicated in previous Adventist lifestyle studies was linked to their strong faith in God, active religious lifestyle and close community spirit.

I register my vote with the view that there definitely is a God and when one expresses belief, practices their faith and embraces the support of a close knit community of like-minded people, both mental and physical health is enhanced. In a world where we face so many challenges and stressors, where new diseases are being discovered and illnesses increasing at an alarming rate, I would say that definitely, faith is one prescription to try as a remedy!

1 Spiritual Care and psychiatric treatment: and introduction, Advances in Psychiatric Treatment 8: 249-258, (2002)

2 Mentality – Adulthood (2004) available at www.library.nhs.uk/mentalhealth

3 Spirituality and Mental Health, Royal College of Psychiatrists, Culliford L and Powell A, (2005)

4 Mental Health, Religion and Culture, (2004), v. 7, no. 1, p. 5-22 in Cornah D. The impact of spirituality on mental Health: a review of the literature, London: Mental Health Foundation, (2006)

5 Mental Health Foundation (2006) The impact of spirituality on mental health: a review of the literature