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New Study of College Students Finds Connection Between Spirituality, Religiousness, and Mental Health

College students with high levels of religious involvement and commitment report better emotional and mental health than those with little or no involvement, according to new research released today by UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute.

Those who are highly involved in religion are less likely to feel depressed or experience psychological distress, and to report poor emotional health. For example, non-church-going students are more than twice as likely to report feeling depressed or poorer emotional health than students who attend religious services frequently.

The analysis, part of a national study of 3,680 third-year college students at 46 diverse colleges and universities, also shows that highly "spiritual" students have relatively high levels of spiritual distress, but they also have high levels of self-esteem.

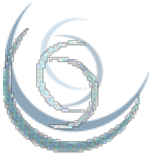
Overall, there is a substantial decline during the college years in students' psychological well-being, self-rated physical health, and health-related behaviors. Nearly eight-in-ten college juniors say they have been depressed at least occasionally during the past year, and one-in-five have sought personal counseling since entering college. And, while alcohol consumption grows dramatically in college, religious and spiritual students tend to drink far less than other students.

"College can be an unsettling time as students struggle with change and fundamental issues about themselves and the world," said UCLA Professor Alexander W. Astin, co-principal investigator for the project. "This study suggests that religion and spirituality can play a positive role in the mental and emotional health of students."

Religiousness and Well-Being

Participation in religious activity is positively associated with emotional health. For example, students who frequently participate in religious services, compared to non-participants, show much smaller increases in frequently feeling overwhelmed during college (+2 percent versus +14 percent). Similarly, students who do not attend religious services, compared to those who attend frequently, are more than twice as likely to report feeling depressed frequently (13 versus 6 percent) and to rate themselves "below average" or "bottom 10%" in emotional health (21 versus 8 percent).

(more)



- Students who exhibit high levels of *Religious Involvement* were not as apt to experience *Psychological Distress* as were students exhibiting little or no religious involvement. Only 20 percent of highly religiously involved students report high levels of psychological distress, compared to 34 percent of students with low levels of religious involvement.

(Religious involvement includes such activities as reading sacred texts, attending religious services, joining religious organizations on campus, etc. Psychological distress includes such indicators as feeling overwhelmed, feeling that life is full of stress and anxiety, and feeling depressed.)

- Similar findings emerged with *Religious Commitment*. Only 23 percent of highly religiously committed students report high levels of psychological distress, compared to 33 percent of students with low levels of religious commitment. (Commitment is measured by indicators such as students saying that spiritual/religious beliefs are one of the most important things in life; provide strength, support, and guidance; and give meaning/purpose to life.)

Spirituality and Well-Being

Spirituality (e.g., desiring to integrate spirituality into one's life, believing we are all spiritual beings, believing in the sacredness of life, having a spiritual experience) has a mixed relationship with psychological health.

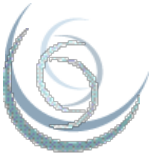
- Highly spiritual students, for example, are prone to experiencing *Spiritual Distress* (e.g., questioning religious/spiritual beliefs, feeling unsettled about spiritual/religious matters, feeling angry with God): 22 percent of highly spiritual students report high levels of spiritual distress, compared to only 8 percent of students with low scores on spirituality. Highly spiritual students are also slightly more likely than students with low scores on spirituality to report high levels of psychological distress (26 versus 21 percent).
- *Spirituality* is positively related to both *Self-Esteem* (e.g., intellectual self-confidence, social self-confidence, self-rated courage) and feelings of *Equanimity* (e.g., feeling good about the direction in which life is headed, feeling at peace/centered, seeing each day as a gift). (Self-esteem and equanimity are also positively associated with both religious commitment and religious involvement, but the associations with spirituality are stronger.)

“These findings regarding spiritual distress suggest that many spiritual seekers, in contrast to most highly religious people, may be unsettled about spiritual and religious matters,” said Astin.

“Educators need to be aware of, and sensitive to, the fact that many college students are looking at very, very big questions and confronting these questions in meaningful ways,” said John A. Astin, a health psychologist and researcher at the California Pacific Medical Center, and an advisor to the HERI spirituality project. “That they are looking at these questions undoubtedly has some effects on their mental and physical health.”

Students' Overall Sense of Well-Being Declines in College

Undergraduates' sense of psychological well-being declines significantly during the college years. Fully 77 percent of the college juniors report feeling depressed either “frequently” or “occasionally” during the past year, compared to 61 percent when they first entered college.



During the same period, the number of students who rate their emotional health as either “below average” or “bottom 10%” more than doubled (from 6 to 14 percent), and the number who frequently “felt overwhelmed by all I have to do” also increased (from 33 to 40 percent). About one student in five also report that they have sought personal counseling since entering college.

Students also show a net decline in their self-rated physical health during college: the number who rate their physical health as either “above average” or “top 10%” drops significantly between college entry and the end of the junior year (from 57 to 45 percent), while the percent rating their physical health as either “below average” or “bottom 10%” doubles (from 5 to 10 percent).

Changes in Health-Related Behaviors During the College Years

Students show marked increases in the frequency of alcohol consumption during the first three years of college. While only 17 percent of the students reported drinking beer “frequently” when they entered college as freshmen, the rate of frequent beer drinking increases to 29 percent by the end of the junior year. Similarly, the number of students who report drinking wine or liquor frequently more than doubles (from 11 to 24 percent) during the first three years of college, while the number who abstain from wine or liquor declines by more than half (from 42 to 19 percent).

Conversely, hours per week devoted to exercising or playing sports declines substantially during the first three years of college: those devoting more than 10 hours per week to such physical activity decreases by more than half (from 35 to 14 percent), while the number devoting less than 6 hours per week increases from fewer than half (44 percent) to two-thirds (68 percent).

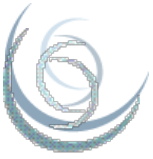
“The fact that students engage in less physical activity after they enter college,” says UCLA’s Alexander Astin, “may help to explain the declines in their self-rated physical health.”

Spirituality, Religiousness, and Health-Related Behaviors

Being religiously involved appears to decrease the likelihood that non-drinkers will become involved with alcohol during college. Thus, among students who abstain from drinking beer prior to entering college, three-fourths (74 percent) continue to abstain during college if they are highly involved in religious activities, but fewer than half (46 percent) continue to abstain if they have little or no involvement in religious activities while in college. Similar differences by degree of religious involvement occur among students who abstain from drinking wine or liquor prior to college.

Alcohol consumption was less likely to occur among students who were highly spiritual, religiously committed, and religiously involved, but the negative relationship with beer drinking was strongest among the religiously involved: Only 9 percent of highly religiously involved students reported drinking beer “frequently” during college, in contrast to 41 percent of those who had little or no religious involvement; the rates of total abstinence from beer drinking for the two groups were 60 percent and 18 percent, respectively.

“These results,” says Alexander Astin, “once again underscore the well-established negative relationship between religious involvement and alcohol consumption.”



Spirituality and religion do not appear to have much impact on physical health. Attendance at religious services, for example, shows little relationship to self-rated physical health, nor does spirituality. And religious and spiritual involvement bear little relationship to exercising and participation in sports.

These findings are part the Higher Education Research Institute's project, "Spirituality in Higher Education: A National Study of College Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose." Designed to look at students' spiritual and religious development, this groundbreaking study employs measures of spirituality, religious commitment and engagement, equanimity, charitable involvement, spiritual quest, spiritual distress, psychological distress, and other qualities related to the students' spiritual and religious life.

Findings reported earlier revealed that there is a high level of spiritual engagement and commitment among college students, but that many institutions do little to foster or encourage students' interest. For example:

- 77% report that they pray
- 78% discuss religion/spirituality with friends
- 76% say they are "searching for meaning and purpose in life"
- 56% report their professors never provide opportunities to discuss the purpose/meaning of life

Strongly religious college students tend to identify themselves as politically conservative and hold conservative views on issues of sex, abortion, gay rights, and drugs, but they lean in a liberal direction when it comes to issues such as gun control and the death penalty.

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The project, which is funded by a grant from the John Templeton Foundation, is led by Co-Principal Investigators Alexander W. Astin and Helen S. Astin and Project Director Jennifer A. Lindholm. A revised survey is currently being administered to a comprehensive sample of 130,000 entering Fall 2004 freshmen at a nationally representative sample of 240 colleges and universities.

HERI is widely regarded as one of the premiere research and policy organizations on postsecondary education in the country. Housed at the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies at UCLA, HERI serves as an interdisciplinary center for research, evaluation, information, policy studies, and research training in post-secondary education.