



**Education**

# A spiritually inclined student is a happier student

## Study finds link between faith and mental health

By Sarah Hofius  
USA TODAY

College students who participate in religious activities are more likely to have better emotional and mental health than students with no religious involvement, according to a national study of students at 46 wide-ranging colleges and universities.

In addition, students who don't participate in religious activities are more than twice as likely to report poor mental health or depression than students who attend religious services frequently.

Being religious or spiritual certainly seems to contribute to one's sense of psychological well-being, says Alexander Astin, co-principal investigator for the

### The stressful college years

Undergraduates' sense of psychological well-being declines significantly during college years:

	Freshmen	Juniors
Percentage who report feeling depressed either "frequently" or "occasionally" during the past year	61%	77%
Percentage who rate their emotional health as "below average" or "bottom 10%"	6%	14%
Percentage who frequently "felt overwhelmed by all I have to do"	33%	40%

UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute

study of 3,680 third-year college students. The study was released this week by the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California-Los Angeles.

Those who participate in religious activities also are less likely to feel overwhelmed during college.

Religious involvement includes such activities as reading the Bible or other sacred texts, attending religious services and joining religious organizations on campus.

These findings are important because psychological well-being declines during the college years, Astin says. One in five

students has sought personal counseling since entering college, and 77% of college juniors report feeling depressed frequently or occasionally during the past year. Only 61% of the students were depressed frequently or occasionally when they first started college.

A high degree of spirituality correlates with high self-esteem and feeling good about the way life is headed. The study defines spirituality as desiring to integrate spirituality into one's life, believing that we are all spiritual beings, believing in the sacredness of life and having spiritual experiences.

"Students seem to feel better about themselves if they see themselves as spiritual," Astin says.

"In these trying times, it's a positive feeling to correlate in people."

But the study also finds that highly spiritual students are more prone to experiencing spiritual distress, or feeling unsettled about spiritual or religious matters, than students who aren't as spiritual.

Being religious also could play a role in whether someone starts to drink alcohol while in college. Three-fourths of students who don't drink beer before attending college won't start in college if involved in religious activity, the study says, but only 46% of students will continue to abstain if not involved religiously.

Astin says the next question to answer is whether students who are more religious and spiritual are more psychologically healthy or whether the more psychologically healthy students are seeking religious and spiritual activities.

The research also finds that 77% of college students pray, 78% discuss religion with friends, and 76% are "searching for meaning and purpose in life."

Strongly religious students tend to describe themselves as politically conservative, but they hold more liberal views on issues such as gun control and the death penalty, the research finds.

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