



## Sacred Salubrity

New research on self-control explains the link between religion and health

Ever since 2000, when psychologist Michael E. McCullough, now at the University of Miami, and his colleagues published a meta-analysis of more than three dozen studies showing a strong correlation between religiosity and lower mortality, skeptics have been challenged by believers to explain why—as if to say, “See, there is a God, and this is the payoff for believing.”

In science, however, “God did it” is not a testable hypothesis. Inquiring minds would want to know how God did it and what forces or mechanisms were employed (and “God works in mysterious ways” will not pass peer review). Even such explanations as “belief in God” or “religiosity” must be broken down into their component parts to find possible causal mechanisms for the links between belief and behavior that lead to health, well-being and longevity. This McCullough and his then Miami colleague Brian Willoughby did in a 2009 paper that reported the results of a meta-analysis of hundreds of studies revealing that religious people are more likely to engage in healthy behaviors, such as visiting dentists and wearing seat belts, and are less likely to smoke, drink, take recreational drugs and engage in risky sex. Why? Religion provides a tight social network that reinforces positive behaviors

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and punishes negative habits and leads to greater self-regulation for goal achievement and self-control over negative temptations.

Self-control is the subject of Florida State University psychologist Roy Baumeister’s new book, *Willpower*, co-authored with science writer John Tierney. Self-control is the employment of one’s power to will a behavioral outcome, and research shows that young children who delay gratification (for example, forgoing one marshmallow now for two later) score higher on measures of academic achievement and social adjustment later. Religions offer the ultimate delay of gratification strategy (eternal life), and the authors cite research showing that “religiously devout children were rated relatively low in impulsiveness by both parents and teachers.”

The underlying mechanisms of setting goals and monitoring one’s progress, however, can be tapped by anyone, religious or not. Alcoholics Anonymous urges members to surrender to a “higher power,” but that need not even be a deity—it can be anything that helps you stay focused on the greater goal of sobriety. Zen meditation, in which you count your breaths up to 10 and then do it over and over, the authors note, “builds mental discipline. So does saying the rosary, chanting Hebrew psalms, repeating Hindu mantras.” Brain scans of people conducting such rituals show strong activity in areas associated with self-regulation and attention. McCullough, in fact, describes prayers and meditation rituals as “a kind of anaerobic workout for self-control.” In his lab Baumeister has demonstrated that self-control can be increased with practice of resisting temptation, but you have to pace yourself because, like a muscle, self-control can become depleted after excessive effort. Finally, the authors note, “Religion also improves the monitoring of behavior, another of the central steps of self-control. Religious people tend to feel that someone important is watching them.” For believers, that monitor may be God or other members of their religion; for nonbelievers, it can be family, friends and colleagues.

The world is full of temptations, and as Oscar Wilde boasted, “I can resist everything except temptation.” We may take the religious path of Augustine in his pre-saintly days when he prayed to God to “give me chastity and continence, but not yet.” Or we can choose the secular path of 19th-century explorer Henry Morton Stanley, who proclaimed that “self-control is more indispensable than gunpowder,” especially if we have a “sacred task,” as Stanley called it (his was the abolition of slavery). I would say you should select your sacred task, monitor and pace your progress toward that goal, eat and sleep regularly (lack of both diminishes willpower), sit and stand up straight, be organized and well groomed (Stanley shaved every day in the jungle), and surround yourself with a supportive social network that reinforces your efforts. Such sacred salubrity is the province of everyone—believers and nonbelievers—who will themselves to loftier purposes. ■

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