

How Can Spirituality Affect Your Health

Recent studies have shown that spirituality could be as important as fitness or nutrition for your health. Stretching this point even further some scientists believe that not having any spiritual beliefs could be a potential risk factor for a person. Researchers have found that in general, people who are spiritual have a more positive outlook on life and look at disease or illness in a different way than a non spiritual person.

More specifically research from several studies indicate that people with strong religious and spiritual beliefs heal faster from surgery, are less anxious and depressed, have lower blood pressure, and cope better with chronic illnesses such as arthritis, diabetes, heart disease, cancer, and spinal cord injury.

Many people are becoming interested in the role of spirituality in their health and healthcare. This may be because of the realization that medical science does not have answers to all questions about health and wellness, and the age old theory that positive thinking and optimism always helps with life issues.

But, what exactly is spirituality? We could define it as;

1. A higher power, or metaphysical reality, whether it is religion, nature, a higher consciousness, or the essence of something else, which is greater than oneself.
2. A sense of connection to yourself and others as well as the world and environment.
3. A sense of meaning and purpose in your life.
4. An awareness of ourselves and who we are.

Spirituality is often associated with religion, but most people believe that personal spirituality can be developed outside of religion. Acts of compassion and selflessness, altruism, and the experience of inner peace and self-awareness are all parts of spirituality.

Spiritual practices tend to improve coping skills and social support, foster feelings of optimism and hope, promote healthy behavior, reduce feelings of depression and anxiety, and encourage a sense of relaxation.

By denying stressful and negative feelings and only having optimism and healing thoughts, spirituality can positively influence all of our body systems and disease processes.

“Many researchers believe that certain beliefs, attitudes, and practices associated with being a spiritual person influence health. In a recent study of people with acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS), those who had faith in God, compassion toward others, a sense of inner peace, and were religious had a better chance of surviving for a long time than those who did not live with such belief systems. Qualities like faith, hope, and forgiveness and the use of social support and prayer seem to have a noticeable effect on health and healing.

- *Faith. A person's most deeply held beliefs strongly influence his or her health. Some researchers believe that faith increases the body's resistance to stress. In a 1988 study of women undergoing breast biopsies, the women with the lowest stress hormone levels were those who used their faith and prayer to cope with stress.*
- *Hope. Without hope—a positive attitude that a person assumes in the face of difficulty—many people become depressed and are more prone to illness. In a 35-year study of Harvard graduates, researchers found that those graduates who expressed hope and optimism lived longer and had fewer illnesses in their lifetime.*
- *Forgiveness. A practice that is encouraged by many spiritual and religious traditions, forgiveness is a release of hostility and resentment from past hurts. In 1997, a Stanford University study found that college students trained to forgive someone who had hurt them were significantly less angry, more hopeful, and better able to deal with emotions than students not trained to forgive. A more recent survey of 1,400 adults found that willingness to forgive oneself and others and the feeling that one is forgiven by God have beneficial health effects. Some researchers suggest that emotions like anger and resentment cause stress hormones to accumulate in the blood, and that forgiveness reduces this build-up.*
- *Love and Social Support. A close network of family and friends that lends help and emotional support has been found to offer protection against many diseases. Researchers believe that people who experience love and support tend to resist unhealthy behaviors and feel less stressed. In a study of a close-knit Italian-American community in Pennsylvania, researchers found that the death rate from heart attack was half that of the United*

Thus far, more than 30 medical schools in the United States have included spiritual teachings in their curricula.”
(*“resource, West Coast Holistic*)

We know for a fact that spirituality gives us a more positive outlook and a belief in a brighter future. When people suffer ill health spiritualism helps patients because their beliefs comfort them, help them to be more optimistic and they are more likely to achieve health goals, as well as believe that they will get better. Because of this it has been shown that patients recover from surgeries faster, their sense of hope and optimism is better, they have less depression, and they experience less anxiety and fear and overall have a general sense of well-being.

Another point about spirituality is that we now know that prayer; meditation, imagery and visualization all help us to heal. When other people pray for us the positive energy can manifest positive results for us.

Listed below are some ways that spirituality can be of benefit to us;

1. When we pray, meditate or have positive thoughts there is a change that happens in our bodies.
2. Our brains release chemicals that are natural painkillers and mood enhancers.
3. Our blood pressure decreases.
4. Stress and anxiety levels are decreased.
5. We sleep better.

To conclude, I have seen first hand what positive thinking can do for your health and for curing medical illnesses. Whether it is called spirituality or not, the point is that a belief in something greater than us and a trusting outlook does help in the healing process.

(some resources taken from West Coast Holistic, see above)*