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The Science of Prayer

Many people are praying now, and scientists say the practice may boost mental health



Many people are looking to a higher power for comfort these days.

PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES



By

[Elizabeth Bernstein](#)

May 17, 2020 9:00 am ET

Jillian Richardson has a new routine when she takes a walk. She puts on a mask, pops in her earbuds and heads out the door. Then she starts talking out loud.

“Dear Lord,” she began recently. “Help me to stay grounded and grateful in stressful times. Show me how I can be of most service to you and others.”

To passersby, Ms. Richardson appears to be talking on the phone. But she’s actually praying—something she’s been doing a lot more of since the pandemic started.

“There’s so much uncertainty right now and so little in my power,” says the 26-year-old event producer in New York. “When I bust out a quick prayer, especially out loud, I feel a shift inside myself from tension and distrust to a more trusting, hopeful feeling.”

Many people are looking to a higher power for comfort these days. In March, the number of Google searches for prayer skyrocketed, according to a not-yet-published analysis of search results for 95 countries by an economist at

the University of Copenhagen. A Pew Research Center survey in March also found that more than half of Americans had prayed to end the spread of the coronavirus.

“There may still be some atheists in foxholes,” says Kenneth Pargament, a professor emeritus in the department of psychology at Bowling Green State University in Ohio, who studies how people use religion to cope with major life stressors and trauma. “But the general trend is for the religious impulse to quicken in a time of crisis.”

Scientists have no way to measure the existence of a higher power, of course. And they’ve done little research on any health benefits of prayer, largely because of a lack of funding in the medical community for spiritual research, says David H. Rosmarin, assistant professor of psychology at Harvard Medical School and director of the Spirituality and Mental Health Program at McLean Hospital, in Belmont, Mass.

‘It lets you put down your burden mentally for a bit and rest’

— Amy Wachholtz, associate professor and clinical health psychology director at the University of Colorado Denver

Prayer is also hard to study, Dr. Rosmarin says. To measure its impact, researchers need to find people who are open to praying but don’t already do it, which isn’t easy. Brain scans are difficult, because people often pray out loud and don’t typically stay still when they pray, as they do when they meditate. And prayer is only likely to have mental-health benefits for those who are open to it.

“I would never advise a patient who doesn’t want to pray to pray,” says Dr. Rosmarin, who incorporates prayer into the treatment programs for some patients with anxiety, depression or other mental-health conditions. He tells people who are curious about prayer to imagine a heart-to-heart conversation with someone they haven’t talked to in a while. “If you think, ‘Yeah, I should probably pick up the phone but am not sure what to say,’ then it might help.”

Dr. Rosmarin says that the research that has been done on prayer shows it may have similar benefits to meditation: It can calm your nervous system, shutting down your fight or flight response. It can make you less reactive to negative emotions and less angry.

A 2005 study in the Journal of Behavioral Medicine comparing secular and spiritual forms of meditation found spiritual meditation to be more calming. In secular meditation, you focus on something such as your breath or a nonspiritual word. In spiritual meditation, you focus on a spiritual word or text. Participants were divided into groups, with some being taught how to meditate using words of self-affirmation (“I am love”) and others taught how to meditate with words that described a higher power (“God is love”).

They then meditated for 20 minutes a day for four weeks.

Researchers found that the group that practiced spiritual meditation showed greater decreases in anxiety and stress and more positive mood. They also tolerated pain almost twice as long when asked to put their hand in an ice water bath.

Some scientists who study prayer believe that people who pray are benefiting from a feeling of emotional support. Imagine carrying a backpack hour after hour. It will start to feel impossibly heavy. But if you can hand it off to someone else to hold for a while, it will feel lighter when you pick it up again. “This is what prayer can do,” says Amy Wachholtz, associate professor and clinical health psychology director at the University of Colorado Denver, and lead researcher on the meditation study. “It lets you put down your burden mentally for a bit and rest.”

Prayer can also foster a sense of connection—with a higher power, your environment and other people, including “the generations of people who have prayed before you,” says Kevin Ladd, a psychologist and director of the Social Psychology of Religion Lab at Indiana University South Bend.

People pray for many reasons, including for guidance, thanksgiving, solace or protection. But not all prayer is created equal, experts say. A 2004 study on religious coping methods in the *Journal of Health Psychology* found that people who approach God as a partner, or collaborator, in their life had better mental- and physical-health outcomes, and people who are angry at God—who feel punished or abandoned—or who relinquish responsibility and defer to God for solutions had worse outcomes. It’s similar to the way a loving relationship to a partner brings out the best in you, says Dr. Pargament, the lead researcher on the study.

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

Has prayer helped you cope during the pandemic? Join the discussion below.

Prayer can also help your marriage, according to several studies at Florida State University, in Tallahassee. Researchers there have found that when people pray for the well-being of their spouse when they feel a negative emotion in the marriage, both partners—the one doing the praying and the one being prayed for—report greater relationship satisfaction. “Prayer gives couples a chance to calm down,” says Frank Fincham, eminent scholar in the College of Human Sciences at Florida State University, who conducted the studies. “And it reinforces the idea that you are on the same team.”

I turned to prayer one day last summer—one of the worst of my life. My father, who had suffered a heart attack and a stroke a few weeks earlier, had

a cardiac arrest in the hospital one morning. I have never been someone who prays much, but as I paced the hallway outside my dad's room while doctors worked—for four long minutes—to jump-start his heart, a nurse asked if I wanted to pray. I told her I did, but wasn't sure how. She took my hands in hers, bowed her head to mine, and began praying out loud for both of us. "Dear Lord, we ask for your support..."

The medical staff was able to revive my father. He was intubated and rushed to the ICU, and a doctor explained that my dad was not out of the woods. So I went down to the small chapel at the hospital and called for a chaplain.

A pastor arrived. He taught me the serenity prayer, then recited it with me until I stopped crying: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." When we finished, I felt stronger. Now, I return to the serenity prayer again and again.

Ms. Richardson says she started to pray a year ago, when she was going through a tough time. She began by asking God for the strength to repair a relationship with a family member. Almost immediately, she says, she felt a sense of relief "and a feeling that I have this option to get a little outside of the emotional storm that is going on inside of me."

She started to pray regularly. Sometimes she lights a candle and sits in front of a mirror, looking herself in the eye. Other times, she writes a letter to God, asking for advice, then writes herself a response. (She says it comes out in a softer, gentler voice.) She prays when she walks outside because she says it makes her feel protected as she moves around a city ravaged by the coronavirus.

"When I pray, I get that feeling you have when you talk to a friend who is a really good listener," she says. "I feel seen and heard, and I get a burden off my shoulders."

Write to Elizabeth Bernstein at elizabeth.bernstein@wsj.com or follow her on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram at EBernsteinWSJ.