

# HAPPINESS IN RELATION TO SPIRITUALITY

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Many Americans appear to be preoccupied with pursuing happiness, their God-given right according to the *Declaration of Independence*. What is often neglected in this pursuit is the long-lasting and authentic sense of happiness (Dambrun et al. 1) that spirituality has been proven to grant individuals through neurological and physiological means. Spirituality is the deliberate mental engagement and solitude exercised by secular or religious means and has been proven to have the potential to prevent depression and reduce stress. Educational institutions should approach this data with programs promoting exploration of and engagement in spirituality.

Numerous studies have found spiritual activity to have the ability to prevent the development of depressive symptoms. A correlational, longitudinal study conducted over a time span of ten years kept records of adults with a genetic predisposition to depression recorded a “90% decreased risk in major depression in adult offspring who reported that religion or spirituality was highly important to them” (Miller et. al. 89). MRI testing also found “self-associated attributed importance of religiousness or spirituality to be associated with an increased grey matter in the left and right parietal regions of the cortex, as well as thickening in the occipital region, right mesial frontal, and left cuneus and precuneus regions” (Miller et. al. 89). This neurophysiological change creates thicker cortical regions that demonstrate as a “buffer for the development of depressive symptoms” (Miller et al. 89).

Spiritual engagement has also been found to stimulate regions of the brain directly associated with happiness, as the basal ganglia is activated during spiritual acts (Mcnamara and Butler 215) as well as when positive emotions are elicited

(Wager et al. 521). The anterior cingulate cortex is also stimulated during meditative states (McNamara and Butler 215; Cahn, Rael and Polich 199) as well as during feelings of pleasure (Rolls, Grabenhorst and Parris 1508) and happiness (Engstrom and Soderfeldt 599). Further evidence that affirms the biological reflexivity of spirituality and happiness is the higher than average resting alpha wave rate found in those practicing spirituality for ten years (Tenke et al. 426). Alpha waves have been found to be strongly associated with positive emotions, including positive well-being (Petlock par. 3) and decreased anxiety and stress levels (“Five Types of Brain Wave Frequency” par. 8). Studies have also found heightened activity of the parasympathetic nervous system during spiritual activity (Seeman, Dubin and Seeman 59), a system triggered during soothing situations which “foster(s) the calming and easing that underlie many positive states of being” (Hanson par. 2).

Misconceptions of happiness derived from spirituality is that the happiness is gained from the social context associated therein and that they are limited to certain organized religions. However, research finds that internal spiritual engagement is the source of increased well-being, not the frequency of visits to a place of worship (Kelley and Miller 225). Results find the positive effects of spirituality to be applicable to a wide demographic, positively impacting one’s well-being regardless of their gender (Maselko and Kubzansky 2856), faith (Cohen and Hill 293), or personality (Aghababaei 141). Much evidence supports the inclusiveness of spirituality in benefit to happiness, and “religious/spiritual practice, secular meditation, and spiritually-oriented meditation all hold potential to reduce symptoms of anxiety and

depression, increase resilience and empathy, and improve well-being” (Barnby et al. 229). These indiscriminatory results may encourage people to explore and ponder their beliefs, and then embrace them through spiritual exercise.

We as a society should approach this data with the intent of preventing depression and high stress among adolescents, who are vulnerable to such mental hardships. It would be extremely beneficial to expose students, starting from middle school, to explore world religions and secular practices. Universities should also provide courses pertaining to world religions, and an authentic description of the various practices of spirituality around the world may inspire students to practice so on their own, drastically decreasing their risk for depression and stress while increasing their overall well-being.

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