

The Healing Power of Prayer

Have a little faith – and lower your risk of depression, heart disease and more

After undergoing a bone marrow transplant for lymphatic cancer last year, Mike Coyne, 33, of Whitman, Massachusetts, credits his healing to his doctors—and his faith. Prayer provided him with reassurance that everything would be okay. “It gave me strength and peace,” says Coyne. That may be why so many of us turn to faith for healing. According to a National Institutes of Health survey of 31,000 people, prayer is the most commonly used form of alternative medicine.

“Spiritual people tend to be optimistic and have more self-esteem and social support, factors that improve health,” says Yale researcher Holly Prigerson. She found that bereaved people who used religion to cope needed fewer doctor visits than those who didn’t. Other research has shown that prayer improves heart disease, hypertension and cancer. The idea that faith can heal is controversial, but recent studies report positive findings:

Depression deterrent In a 2004 Duke University Medical Center

Study of 838 hospitalized older adults, those who were more religious had fewer symptoms of depression and better cognitive function than patients who were not spiritual. And in another study earlier this year, Yale University School of Medicine doctors reported that poor people in urban areas who believed in a higher power were less likely than their nonspiritual peers to be depressed during hard time.

Heart helper Doctors at Italy’s University of Pavia found that adults who recited the rosary had improved lung and heart function. In a study of 999 cardiac patients from the Mid America Heart Institute of St. Luke’s Hospital, those who unknowingly had others praying for them fared better than heart patients who didn’t receive intercessory prayers.

Mood enhancer In a 2004 study at the University of Washington, people who had strong faith were more optimistic before undergoing heart surgery; other studies have shown that prayer promotes healing post-surgery.

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