

UPFRONT

Prayer takes the edge off, a new study suggests

June 2011, Vol 42, No. 6

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Saying a prayer when you feel angry enough to lash out at someone can reduce your feelings of anger as if you hadn't been provoked at all, finds a study published online in March by the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.

Researchers Brad Bushman, PhD, of Ohio State University, Ryan Bremner, a University of Michigan social psychology doctoral student and Sander Koole, PhD, of VU University Amsterdam, asked participants to write an essay about an experience that made them angry. Participants were then given feedback on the essay from an unseen, fictional partner who negatively rated the essay's organization and writing style, and included the comment, "This is one of the worst essays I've ever read!"

After reading a description of a young woman coping with cancer, participants were randomly assigned either to pray for or think about her for five minutes. Participants who prayed for the cancer patient felt less angry at the person who maligned their essay than those who thought about her, says Bushman.

The researchers repeated the anger-provoking essay exercise with a second group of participants, but in the second experiment, asked them to pray for their partners or think about them. Participants then played a reaction-time game. Whoever "lost" the game by pushing a button slower would receive a blast of unpleasant noise through a pair of headphones. Researchers asked participants to decide how loudly, and for how long, their partners would hear the noise if the partner lost.

The researchers found that participants who prayed inflicted the noise at a lower volume and for a shorter length of time on their partners.

Prayer might help people regulate their emotions by promoting cognitive reappraisal — changing how they think about an event, such that their feelings about it change as well, Bremner says.

"Instead of thinking about what a horrible person this is who just insulted you, you can think about how their day might be going, for them to be acting so rudely in an unprovoked way," he says. "That thought might lead you to feel more compassion and less anger, and you might be less likely to retaliate against the person," Bremner says.

Prayer's calming effects did not vary by gender, religious affiliation, frequency of religious service attendance or whether, or how often a participant prayed, Bushman says. Although the researchers think they've established prayer's effects on anger, they plan to do more research on why prayer reduces anger and aggression.

"What we think prayer does is change the way people view the world and the events that happen to them," Bushman says.

—C. Munsey

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