

University of Chicago to study connections between religious beliefs and health

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A belief in God may improve a person's physical health, according to University of Chicago researchers who are launching the first comprehensive study to examine the relationship between religious attitudes and health.

The Pennsylvania-based John Templeton Foundation has given the University \$1.8 million to launch the study, which will be coupled with University work on aging supported with \$7.5 million from the National Institute on Aging of the Department of Health and Human Services. That work is an interdisciplinary effort to understand the connections between longevity and loneliness. Religious belief, like social support, could have beneficial effects on people's health, scholars contend.

Because the research is multi-disciplinary, including researchers in University of Chicago departments of Medicine, Psychology, Sociology, History, and Human Development, and the Divinity School, it provides a useful framework to study scientifically the connections between religious belief and health, said John Cacioppo, the Tiffany and Margaret Blake Distinguished Service Professor in Psychology and the leader of both studies. Cacioppo is one of the nation's leading experts on social relations and aging.

"The study is based on an evolutionary model of humans as social beings in which the motive to form and maintain attachments and interpersonal relationships is in part genetically determined," Cacioppo said. As a result, people are born with the capacity for spirituality and humanity,

Cacioppo said. The work will explore how this inclination to see a spiritual understanding, a relationship with God, varies among individuals because of social and environmental influences.

Measurable effects of strong spirituality, regardless of religion, are improved physiological functioning, health and well being, especially in difficult times, Cacioppo said. Those benefits of belief in God accrue over time and are an important aspect of dealing with aging, he said.

Subjects in the NIA project—the Chicago Health, Aging and Social Relations Study—have been asked a battery of questions related to their health, exercise habits and emotions, as well as church attendance and religiosity.

For that study, the researchers began a series of day-long interviews and medical tests that began in 2002 and will continue through 2006. The study includes 230 African Americans, Hispanics and whites between the ages of 50 and 67 from Chicago and the suburbs. The researchers are gathering extensive medical histories, health assessments, health care utilization measures, health behaviors measures, sleep quality indices, personality measures and life events assessments.

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