

# Study shows that religious people are better at understanding that small sacrifices lead to big rewards

April 4 2012

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Delayed gratification: People who are good at overcoming their immediate impulses to take small rewards now — in favor of larger rewards down the road — do better in many areas of life, including academic achievement, income, job performance and health. What life experiences develop this ability? A new study published online, ahead of print, by the journal of *Evolution and Human Behavior*, finds that religious people are better able to forgo immediate satisfaction in order to gain larger rewards in the future. The study is the first to demonstrate an association between religious commitment and a stronger preference for delayed, but more significant, rewards.

"It's possible to analyze virtually all contemporary social concerns, from excessive credit card debt to obesity, as problems of impulsivity. So the fact that religious people tend to be less impulsive has implications for the sorts of decisions they make with their money, time, and other resources," says Michael McCullough, professor of Psychology in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Miami (UM), and principal investigator of this study. "Their tendency toward less impulsive decision-making might even be relevant to their stands on public policy issues, such as whether governments should be seeking to reduce their expenditures on public services and entitlement programs in the current economic environment."

In the research work, titled "[Religious people](#) discount the future less,"

277 undergraduate University students, from a variety of religious denominations and ethnic backgrounds, chose between receiving a small financial monetary reward that the investigators made available immediately--for example "\$50 today," or a larger [reward](#) that was available only after longer amounts of time had passed—for example, "\$100 six months from now." Participants' commitment to their religious beliefs and institutions was also measured, among other relevant variables. The data shows that the extent to which the participants follow religious teachings positively correlates with their ability to delay gratification.

The findings suggest that through religious beliefs and practices, people "develop a more patient style of decision making." According to the study, religion teaches this type of patience by directing people's attention to the distant future—the afterlife—which may cause their nearer-term future on this earth to feel subjectively closer.

"People who are intrinsically religious and who indicate an interest in the afterlife tend to report that the future feels as though it is approaching quickly and that they spend a lot of time thinking about the future," the study says.

Provided by University of Miami

Citation: Study shows that religious people are better at understanding that small sacrifices lead to big rewards (2012, April 4) retrieved 9 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-04-religious-people-small-sacrifices-big.html>

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