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Stressed out? Have a little faith

Religious students remain calmer in face of errors, study shows

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Strong religious convictions can lower stress and enhance the performance of basic tasks, a team of Toronto researchers has found.

They came to that conclusion after putting 28 of their students through tests measuring both their religious fervour and their stress at making mistakes on a test.

"The more religious they were, the less brain activity they showed in response to their own errors," says University of Toronto assistant psychology professor Michael Inzlicht, lead author of the study in *Psychological Science*. "They are calmer when they make errors."

The students, from a variety of backgrounds including Christian, Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist, were asked how much they agreed that

their religion was based on objective truth, whether they would go to war for their faith, and other such statements.

The more they agreed, the more religious they were deemed to be.

The students were then given a Stroop test, in which they were told to identify the colour in which various words are written. The words themselves were the names of colours, though the names did not always match the colour of the type.

The word "yellow," for instance, might appear in red, causing stress as the brain sorts through conflicting signals. Brain functions were measured throughout the test.

The religious students showed significantly less activity in the anterior cingulate cortex, a portion of the brain that signals when attention and control are needed, usually due to an anxiety-producing event.

Inzlicht says religious people have a belief system to help them make sense of the world, so can better accept the occasional mistake.

"It lowers uncertainty," he says.

"And when you don't have that uncertainty and you make an error, you just say, 'Okay, that's the way the world is.'"

Inzlicht calls anxiety a "double-edged sword." While it can be a good thing to feel less stress, anxiety also pushes us to correct our mistakes and remain productive. The key, he says, is to find the right balance.

"We need anxiety to get us up in the morning, but too much of it can be paralyzing," he says.

