

God as drug: religious belief can take the sting out of living, say scientists

BY MISTY HARRIS, CANWEST NEWS SERVICE JULY 2, 2010



A new Canadian study finds belief in God works much like an anti-anxiety drug, creating a buffer against defensive or distressed reactions to the mistakes we make.

Photograph by: John Mahoney, Montreal Gazette

With apologies to Karl Marx, it seems religion is the Xanax of the masses.

A new Canadian study finds belief in God works much like an anti-anxiety drug, creating a buffer against defensive or distressed reactions to the mistakes we make. Building on previous research that demonstrated an association between religion and palliative brain activity, scientists say they're now able to show that one actually causes the other.

The study, to be published in the respected journal *Psychological Science*, provides a clue to why religious people tend to lead longer lives and enjoy better physical and mental health.

When people learn of errors they've made, the brain sets off what study co-author Michael Inzlicht calls a "cortical alarm bell." While this alert can be helpful in terms of self-correction, too much vigilance can lead to a frazzled state of mind.

Religion, and its accompanying sense of order, provide insulation against such distress.

"These brain signals occur within a few hundredths of a second," says Inzlicht, associate professor of psychology at the University of Toronto Scarborough. "Although that sounds trivial, (dampened alerts) over the course of a lifetime can translate into years in which a person enjoys greater equanimity and greater grace under pressure."

Alongside Alexa M. Tullett, Inzlicht conducted experiments in which people performed mental tasks while their brain activity was monitored using electroencephalography. Researchers watched specifically for changes in error-related negativity (ERN), which arises from the anterior cingulate cortex and is associated with defensive reactions to mistakes.

Among those participants with a strong belief in an active, involved God, being primed to think of religion before completing the tasks resulted in the cortical alarm bells being muffled, with ERN decreasing. Among non-believers, however, ERN was amplified in response to self-error.

"Religion seems to act as a palliative for believers. It buffers them against the pains of everyday living, it offers meaning, and it structures their understanding of the world," says Inzlicht.

"As a result, when something bad happens, that framework makes them less anxious about it. They think, 'Well, there's a reason for this.'"

Inzlicht hastens to add that they aren't suggesting there's a "man in the sky;" only that believing there is can have very real, very positive effects on well-being. There's evidence that a similar effect would take place for non-religious ideologies which similarly offer a sense of meaning and structure, provided the individual was primed to think about those beliefs before confronting self-error.

"Maybe when atheists think about science, and the way our world is organized through that lens, it would offer them the same reassurance," suggests Inzlicht. "The point here is the power of the mind to change external circumstances."

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