



Thinking about God reduces distress, study finds

Kieron Lang, CTV.ca News

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Thinking about God can make you less upset about making mistakes, but only if you're a believer.

Researchers at the University of Toronto Scarborough say they've proven that when people have God on their brain, they can better take setbacks in stride, effectively allowing stress to slide off their backs.

Study co-authors Michael Inzlicht and Alexa Tullett came to the conclusion after conducting a study of the effect of religious beliefs on reaction to anxiety-provoking mistakes.

Test subjects' brains were first primed to think about religion: consciously by writing about God; and subconsciously by completing a religiously-themed word scramble.

Then, the participants were given a simple, but tricky computerized test.

When the test subjects made a mistake, researchers measured minute, but significant reactions in the anterior cingulate cortex -- an area of the brain that typically alerts us when things go wrong.

"Believers showed brain activity that was indicative of being less emotional, showing less distress to their own errors," Dr. Inzlicht told CTV.ca

According to the study, thinking about one's religion amounts to "a bulwark against defensive reactions to errors; it muffles the cortical alarm bell."

And it doesn't seem to matter which religion.

"This pattern seems to hold for all religious people. It doesn't seem to be that it's only the Christians or Hindus or Muslims, it seems to be for all religious believers," the associate professor of psychology said.

But what if you don't believe?

For non-believers, however, thinking about God before tackling the test had the opposite effect -- a heightened, distress-related neural response. Although such distress reactions last mere milliseconds after making an error, Inzlicht says those fractions of a second can add up over the course of a lifetime.

"These 50 millisecond differences could potentially lead to a life of greater equanimity, better grace," he said, noting religious belief is credited with a myriad of effects including greater happiness, longevity and even lower morbidity rates from some diseases.

As for the distress response at the centre of this study, Inzlicht says the effect holds even when God isn't top of mind.

"Regardless whether you're thinking about it or not, you tend to show this effect, though it does seem to magnify when you are thinking about it."

Take the example of a believer strolling to the bus stop, for example. Admiring a church en route could prime the religious thoughts that will take the sting out of noticing the bus has passed by.

But Inzlicht advises non-believers not to lose hope. While it's natural to want to avoid distress whenever possible, a little anxiety may be a good thing.

"This isn't anxiety generally, this is related to an error that you make," Inzlicht explained.

"And to the extent that we want to make fewer errors in our life, having anxiety about making errors is adaptive," he said. "Because the more anxious you are about making an error, the less likely you are, in theory, to make an error in the future."

Besides, Inzlicht suggests the effect may have more to do with the fact you believe than what you believe in.

"I don't think this has to do with religion at all. It has to do with having beliefs that structure, organize and navigate your world. Giving you instructions about what to do, when to do it and how to do it."

Other belief systems may perform at least some of the same functions: political ideology, for instance, or strict adherence to the tenets of science.

"These could all provide potential relief when things go wrong," Inzlicht advises.

The article, "Reflecting on God: Religious Primes Can Reduce Neurophysiological Response to Errors" is published in the latest edition of the journal *Psychological Science*.