

Explaining the Relation between Religiousness and Reduced Suicidal Behavior: Social Support Rather Than Specific Beliefs

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Religiousness has been associated with decreased risk of suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, and completed suicide, but the mechanisms underlying these associations are not well characterized. The present study examined the roles of religious beliefs and social support in that relation. A survey measuring religiousness, social support, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts was administered to 454 undergraduate students. Involvement in public, but not private, religious practices was associated with lower levels of both suicidal ideation and history of suicide attempts. Social support mediated these relations but religious beliefs did not. Results highlight the importance of social support provided by religious communities.

People with higher levels of religious involvement are at decreased risk of suicide compared to people who are not religious or whose level of religious involvement is lower (Hilton, Fellingham, & Lyon, 2002). One hypothesis is that certain religious beliefs may offer protection from suicide (Dervic et al., 2004). An alternative explanation, based on the work of sociologist Emile Durkheim (1897/1951), is that strong social networks formed in religious communities may decrease a person's risk of suicide by increasing the person's social support (Stack & Wasserman, 1992).

The term religiousness has been used to refer to the general characteristic of ad-

hering to a set of religious beliefs or practices shared by a group (National Institute on Aging Workgroup, 1999). Numerous aspects of religiousness have been investigated including religious beliefs, private religious practices such as praying by oneself, and public religious practices such as attendance at religious services (National Institute on Aging Workgroup).

Religiousness, measured in various ways, has been examined in relation to suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, and completed suicides (Burr, McCall, & Powell-Griner, 1994; King, Hampton, Berstein, & Schichor, 1996; Walker & Bishop, 2005). Walker and Bishop determined that a higher level of intrinsic religiosity, defined as internalizing religious beliefs and meanings, was associated with a lower level of suicidal ideation. King, Hampton, Berstein, and Schichor reported that religiously affiliated students were less likely to have attempted suicide than students who were not religiously affiliated. Dervic et al. (2004) found that clinically depressed psychiatric inpatients who indicated a religious affiliation re-

ported lower levels of suicidal ideation and fewer suicide attempts. Dervic et al. (2004) also found that religiously affiliated patients had lower rates of suicidal ideation and suicide attempts.

The inverse relation between religiousness and suicidal ideation and attempts has been supported in a number of studies. For example, Dervic et al. (2002) examined the relation between religiousness and suicidal ideation and attempts in a study of members of the Roman Catholic Order of the Most Holy Mother Day Saints with a history of suicidal ideation and attempts. Rates of suicidal ideation and attempts were lower for active members than for less active members. Nisbet, Duberstein, and Greening (2000) analyzed a sample of 1,000 members of the Mortality Follow-up Study who had died by suicide. Participation in religious activities once a month was associated with a lower risk of suicide.

DO RELIGIOUS BELIEFS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RELIGIOUSNESS AND SUICIDE

The preceding research has led to the conclusion that religiousness is associated with lower levels of suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, and even completed suicide. However, it is difficult to account for these findings. The relation between religiousness and suicidal ideation and attempts has been attributed to a number of factors. One possibility is that people hold religious beliefs that are thought to lessen the risk of suicide (Wasserman, 1992). Another possibility is that students, Greening et al. (2000) measured components of religiousness as church attendance, religious styles, and acceptance of traditional religious practices. The outcome measures were suicidal ideation, suicide, assessed by a clinician, and suicidal ideation. They thought that religiously affiliated students were less likely to have attempted suicide. Orthodoxy was associated with a lower risk of suicide.

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