

Existential spirituality can foster happiness, study finds

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Existential spirituality may improve health-related quality of life among adults who suffer from neurological illness, according to a new study published in the journal *Geriatrics*. The Virginia Commonwealth University School of Medicine researchers who led the study say the results can inform best practices for healthy aging.

"For the first time in human history, most people around the world can expect to live into their 60s," said lead author James Wade, Ph.D., citing the World Health Organization's 2015 "World Report on Aging and Health." "The global population is aging, so the central question is: How can you age successfully? If you are going to be around for a while, how can you do it happily?" Wade is a professor in VCU School of Medicine's Department of Psychiatry.

The study examined associations among religiosity, [spirituality](#) and happiness in 354 people treated for neurological disorders at an outpatient clinic where Wade sees patients. "We found that spirituality was important in coping with a lifestyle threat, but it was only the existential – or secular – spirituality that was strongly related to happiness," Wade said, adding that the researchers identified happiness as a proxy for successful aging.

Wade described existential spirituality as differing from religiosity in that it involves developing an internal strength, rather than relying on an external omniscient spiritual force. "The literature refers to a self-efficacy component of existential spirituality," Wade said. "Religious spirituality is built upon the notion that there is some higher power, and that by praying and living in a moral way according to scripture, the practitioner will gain benefits. The existential approach toward spiritual development does not involve reliance upon an external power."

The results build on previously published academic research that links spirituality to improved physical and mental health. Spiritual beliefs could have a protective effect on depression in patients with heart failure and could play a role in the emotional health of individuals recovering from stroke. Higher levels of spirituality are also associated with lower cardiovascular mortality.

In order to cultivate existential spirituality, Wade recommended practicing a meditation technique called loving-kindness, which promotes acceptance and compassion for all living things. Wade demonstrated the positive effects of the technique in a study he published last year in the journal *Clinical and Translational Gastroenterology*, in which patients who were suffering from end-stage liver disease practiced the loving-kindness meditation with their caregivers. As a result, the patients and their caregivers experienced a reduction in depression symptoms and improved sleep, among other positive benefits.

"This most recent study tells us why we got such good results in the loving-kindness meditation study," Wade said. "We now see that the technique of developing existential spirituality is important for cultivating happiness. The loving-kindness meditation is a simple, inexpensive and quick way to help foster that sense of existential spirituality."

More information: James Wade et al.

Associations between Religiosity, Spirituality, and Happiness among Adults Living with Neurological Illness, *Geriatrics* (2018). DOI: [10.3390/geriatrics3030035](https://doi.org/10.3390/geriatrics3030035)

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