

## MENTAL WELL-BEING:

### COMMUNITY, FAITH, & CULTURE

#### Creating community connections for mental health

Often times, faith and community leaders are the first point of contact when individuals and families face mental health problems or traumatic events. When faced with crisis or a time of need, many people turn to trusted leaders in their communities before they turn to mental health professionals. This could be due in part to the stigma surrounding mental health and mental illness. However, it could also be attributed to people are unsure where to turn.



Faith and community leaders can help educate individuals and families about mental health, increasing awareness of mental health issues and making it easier for people to seek help. Community connectedness and support, like that found in faith-based and other neighborhood organizations, are also important to the long-term recovery of people living with mental illnesses.

As we learn more and more about the connections between the mind and body, it becomes clear that spirituality, religion and faith can help some individuals live well with mental health conditions. Keeping in mind that spirituality, religion and faith is not necessarily the same thing for each person.

#### How Faith Can Help

Research has shown that for some, religion and individual spirituality can directly improve our physical and mental health. Here are some ways you may find helpful:

##### Meditation

One practice that has received a lot of attention is contemplative prayer and meditation. Many studies have found that 10-20 minutes of meditation twice a day causes what is called the "relaxation response": decreased metabolism, decreased heart rate, decreased breathing rate and slower, calmer brain waves.

The relaxation response was originally observed in practitioners of Transcendental Meditation, a form of Buddhist meditation, but subsequent research has found the relaxation response can result from other

contemplative practices as well. The daily ritual prayers of Islam and the Catholic practice of praying with rosary beads, for instance, are religious rituals that invoke the relaxation response.

##### Togetherness

Religion can offer other supports for some with mental health as well. In the United States, the Christian practice of congregational prayer is so popular that it now exists even in Asian religions such as American Buddhism and Hinduism. One of the most popular ways to interact with the community is to attend congregational gatherings such as Sunday church, Saturday Torah readings, prayer meetings or full-moon celebrations at Hindu temples.

These group religious rituals provide structured social activities that cause relatively little anxiety and benefit our health directly. Places of worship

may also offer a number of resources and social activities that can encourage and support people living with a mental health condition and their families, providing additional benefits through community connections.



##### A Sense of Understanding

For some, the most important aspect of spirituality, religion and/or faith is that it offers ways to understand our experiences. The major world religions each offer explanations of why suffering exists in the world. Turning to these explanations brings comfort to many people confronting illness. The "why me?" question can never be answered entirely by medical science, and some people find the answers they seek in religion.

##### Helping Others

Relatively recent research suggests that we experience direct health benefits when we volunteer to help others. Religious organizations may provide us with straightforward, simple opportunities to serve the community, thus improving our mood and reducing our anxiety levels.

