

Science & Spirituality

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In the last decade, research on the link between health and spirituality has doubled. In 2002 alone, more than 1,000 peer-reviewed articles appeared in the medical literature showing how the search for the sacred in your life brings about myriad health benefits. More than 80% of those research studies, performed at America's leading academic centers such as Harvard Medical School, disclosed a positive relationship between your health and spirituality or religious practices. Moreover, the research reveals that when medical interventions such as surgery, for example, are needed, the patient's outcome is improved.

An example of the research on health and spirituality is that by William Strawbridge, Ph.D., a professor at the University of California at Berkeley. DR. Strawbridge, a gerontologist, examined the data from the famous Alameda County Study, a longitudinal study of health begun in 1965. The purpose of this work was to determine if good health behaviors could be determined for those living a spiritual lifestyle, which included attending religious services weekly as opposed to those attending less often. The data showed that people who attend services weekly are more likely to stop smoking or not start, to start exercising, to reduce drinking, to increase and maintain friendships, to stay married, and to maintain good mental health.

The many positive mental, physical, and emotional health benefits of living a spiritual life are cumulative over your lifetime. The idea is to start living a more spiritual lifestyle now and keep it going. Following a spiritual lifestyle, the four pillars of which I'll discuss below, has been scientifically proven to be beneficial in the following illnesses or situations:

- cardiovascular disease
- cancer
- obesity
- HIV/AIDS
- chronic pain
- irritable bowel syndrome
- cognitive decline
- posttraumatic stress disorder
- alcohol abuse
- drug addiction
- marriage and the family
- crime and delinquency
- aging
- end-of-life issues
- anxiety
- depression

The Four Pillars of Spiritual Living

Here are the four crucial ingredients to living a more spiritual lifestyle:

1. Practice: Wake Up to Wellness
2. Service: Bring Altruism into Your Life
3. Community: Have a Strong Social Support System
4. Remembrance: Remember the New Golden System

Practice: Wake Up to Wellness

In my view, without a regular spiritual practice, it is not possible to live a spiritual life. The key to spiritual realization is to start your day in a positive way with techniques such as Kundalini Yoga, Chi Gong, deep relaxation, meditation, and prayer. Developing a regular morning practice, called sadhana in the yogic tradition, is steeped in the history of health, happiness and spiritual fulfillment. The late Yogi Har Bhajan Singh Khalsa said, "Sadhana is the time you energize your soul."

A plethora of studies over the years have showed the multiple healing benefits of meditation. Elegant fresh research in the field of neurotheology – how meditation changes brain physiology – illustrates how meditation orchestrates a symphony of healing chemicals in the brain that sends positive message throughout your mind and body. Additionally, according to studies done at Harvard, the meditation techniques taught by Yogi Bhajan are 'fast and accurate in activating particular areas in the brain, such as the frontal lobe, which is responsible for attention, and in quieting the temporal lobe of the brain, which gives the practitioner the feeling of oneness or transcendence.'

Once a student asked the master, "Sir", she said, "May I take a nap after sadhana?"

To which the master replied, "You can do anything you want after sadhana."

You can do anything you want in life. But first do your sadhana.

Service: Bring Altruism into Your Life

When you serve others, even if it's just to offer them a silent prayer, a smile, or a handshake, research shows that you reduce your own stress. When people are altruistic and develop behaviors that are compassionate and unselfish, their health improves. Current thinking links this discovery to two parallel physiological events: reduction in the stress hormone cortisol, along with a corresponding improvement in immune system function.

One patient of mine, a 42-years-old woman recuperating from a severe case of chronic fatigue syndrome, highlights this point. Bonnie goes to her local library twice a week to read to disadvantaged children. She feels that giving freely of her time helps her heal, and, as I've just pointed out, she is absolutely correct. The ultimate, everlasting, and infinite gratification of your soul comes from helping other people. We were created to serve.

Community: Have a Strong Social Support System

According to both eastern healing philosophy and western science, group energy, be it from friends, family, church, or synagogue members, is very important for healing and living in the light. Surrounding yourself with like-minded people, those who support your energy, rather than drain it, is imperative for feeling great.

Moreover, when prayers are from people who love and care about, the effects are magnified. According to one ground-breaking study, the prayers from a support group can lower your risk of dying after heart surgery by 700%. There is no other factor in medicine that has a greater effect on the quality of your life and the incidence of disease than the love and prayers of your community.

Remembrance: Remember the new Golden Rule

Everyone knows the old Golden Rule: "Do unto others." The new Golden Rule reads: "See the other person as yourself. See the other person as a soul". The other person is you. He or she carries a spark of the divine inside of them, just as well all do. Remember this as you go about the busy hours of your day. When you are able to see another as yourself, your interactions will occur on a much more loving, intimate or unified level. In the simple act of seeing yourself in the other, enlightenment becomes possible. When you reach the stage of spiritual development where you remember the new Golden Rule, you have achieved an elevated state of being where you see God in all and are able to surrender your will to the will of your higher power.

Beyond Health and Longevity

When you live a spiritual lifestyle, you soon find extraordinary richness and meaning in your life. You become able to understand God's Will for you and move toward fulfilling the purpose of your incarnation.

An elderly female artist in the healing group I lead seeks renewed meaning in her life by being a more loving, kind, and caring person. But her love is different from any she has ever experienced. She shared with me that her new love comes from a deeper source – her soul. When you are able to love this deeply, you are truly present in the moment, often for the very first time. Yet it is one of the greatest tragedies of modern living that so many people don't discover their inner love and beauty until they are gravely ill or dying. My prayer is that you won't have to wait another moment to feel your love and see the light. With our love we can save the world. It's in our hearts. It's in our minds. It's in our hands.

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