Do Religious People Recover Faster From Depression?

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People who believe in a concerned and caring God recover more quickly from a depressive episode, according to a study by researchers at Rush University Medical Center in Chicago. So far so good: This finding should be explored further. But lets all be careful about jumping from these results to the conclusion that everybody with mental illness ought to get right with God.

As with every other study of this kind, correlation does not prove causation. In other words, this study says that there was an association between belief in a caring god and quicker recovery from depression. That's wonderful. Any tool to help people recover from a mental illness is welcome.

What the study cannot show, however, is that belief in a caring God actually caused people to recover more quickly. For instance, people who believe in a caring god might also have some other quality about them that would make them heal more quickly from psychological blows. That's the kind of thing that needs to be teased out. The same caution would apply to any other potentially beneficial factors that we think might aid in the treatment of mood disorders, such as loving friends, exercise or a type of diet. Each of these has been linked to improvements in mood, and it's logical to think they help, but we still haven't proved causation.

If people are already religious or seeking to be more religious, information of this kind might be useful. Enhancing a person's belief in a caring God probably won't hurt, but it might help. We should be careful, however, not to take these data and use them to insist that people become religious if they don't care to be--or to ask them to change their beliefs about God if their religion looks at this kind of thing differently, as is the case with Buddhism.

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