



Religious Older Adults Have A Higher Quality Of Life Than Their Non-Religious Peers

UNH Researcher Presents Findings At International Gerontology Conference

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DURHAM, N.H. -- Older individuals who are religious have a significantly enhanced quality of life in old age than nonreligious older Americans, and are more generous and less afraid of death than their less religious peers, according to new research by Michele Dillon, professor of sociology at the University of New Hampshire.

Dillon presented the research at an international symposium on values and aging in Galway, Ireland, Oct. 20, 2006.

Based on longitudinal research conducted by Dillon and her collaborator, Paul Wink, professor of psychology at Wellesley College, religiousness plays a significant role in enhancing the quality of life in old age, even among seniors who are economically well off, and in good physical and mental health. Religious seniors are more involved in social activities such as visiting with family and friends, altruistic community activities and creative activities such as painting and craftwork.

When it comes to social responsibility and civic engagement, religious seniors are more giving and generous toward others, more aware of and sympathetic to the needs of others, and more involved in social activism (e.g. on behalf of homelessness, the environment), according to Dillon.

On the health front, the researchers found religious seniors in poor health were buffered against depression because of their religious involvement.

"For many in the study, their faith provided a strong source of meaning and consolation during illness and other times of adversity. Religious individuals also were more satisfied with life and had a stronger sense of having control over their lives than their nonreligious peers," Dillon says.

Finally, those who were highly religious were the least afraid of dying; those who were moderately religious were the most afraid. Secular seniors had a similarly low fear of death.

"Religious individuals who believe in an afterlife and who attend church on a frequent basis are less afraid of death than those who believe in an afterlife but who don't attend church,"

Dillon says. "In short, when it comes to warding off fear of the Grim Reaper, an individual's beliefs must be consistent with their practices -- believe in an afterlife and go to church or don't believe in an afterlife and don't go to church."

Dillon and Wink's research is based on an unprecedented long-term study that has followed the lives of close to 200 men and women who were born in Northern California in the 1920s. Participants were interviewed in depth during adolescence and four times in adulthood: 1958 in their 30s, 1970 in their 40s, 1982 in their 50s, and 1997-2000 when they were in their late 60s and mid-70s.

Most of the participants came from mainline Protestant families (73 percent), though the sample includes a sizeable number of Catholics and conservative Protestants. Almost all are white and middle class. In old age, most were happily married, in good health, well satisfied with their lives and engaged in a wide range of personal hobbies and social activities.