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Is There Such a Thing as Healing Prayer?

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If you've read many of the articles on this site, something you're probably already aware of is that I believe in focusing on your spiritual health and the power of prayer. Have you ever heard someone say that "prayer can heal you?" You may think that this is just hype, exaggerated hope or a bit of a spiritual cliché — but did you know there's actual scientific evidence supporting the health benefits of prayer, meditation and spirituality?

As more and more research is dedicated to figuring out how to **reduce chronic stress** and the widespread positive effects that this can have on our health, healing prayer and meditation are two techniques moving into the spotlight.

I want to be clear that I believe prayer is about communicating directly with God and that He is, in fact, the healer. In this article, I will focus more on the benefits of healing prayer associated with meditation to improve peace in one's life, thereby reducing disease and stress on the body.

We're now seeing results from many clinical studies that show spirituality is a simple healing tool that can help strengthen the mind-body connection and strengthen immune functions. Various forms of spiritual practices, such as meditation, visualization and other mindfulness techniques, can generate inner-peace and personal power that can help improve someone's quality of life — both mentally and physically. This all comes back to our mind-body-connection (or “mind-body-soul” connection, as some people like to say), which means the way our thoughts influences our physical state of health.

According to a large report in the *Indian Journal of Psychiatry*, meditation and prayer have been found to produce significant health benefits, including: (1)

a clinically significant reduction in resting as well as ambulatory blood pressure, to reduce heart rate and result in cardiorespiratory synchronization, to alter levels of melatonin and serotonin, to suppress cortisol neurotransmission, to boost the immune response, decrease the levels of reactive oxygen species, reduce stress and promote positive mood states, reduce anxiety and pain, enhance self-esteem and have a favorable influence on overall and spiritual quality of life in late-stage disease.

In other words, on average more spiritual people are healthier people, too!

What Spirituality Does to Our Brain and Body to Reduce Stress

We know today that spiritual health promotes bodily health, although health practitioners in the West often don't subscribe to this belief as much as those in the East traditionally have. The feelings that we can help ourselves generate have a huge impact on our hormones, neurotransmitters, **gut health**, digestion and more. Regularly practicing a form of spirituality is tied to reduced stress, **balanced hormones**, improved attitudes, better sleep and mending the body in many ways — such as lowering inflammation and cortisol levels.

What exactly happens to our body when we pray? According to authors Chet Tolson and Harold Koenig, the authors of *Healing Power of Prayer*, “Praying helps people function at their best when life serves them the worst.” It strengthens our defenses against stressors and the corresponding rise in hormones like cortisol. We know from years of studies that lower cortisol promotes better health by fighting numerous stress-related diseases, including heart disease, obesity, cancer, and cognitive or mental disorders.

Recent studies have definitely begun to demonstrate the proven health-promoting abilities of various forms of spirituality and prayer. Dr. Larry Dossey, author of *Prayer Is Good Medicine*, tells us, “The capacity of prayer to heal, combined with the capacity of science to heal, is far greater than the healing power of medicine alone.” In this neuroscientist’s opinion, prayer is defined as “an attitude of the heart whose content is neither shaped nor limited by a *single* religious tradition.”

In other words, there are infinite ways to pray and grow spiritually, all of which can fit into a holistic plan that **busts stress** and fights disease.

5 Health Benefits of Prayer, Meditation and Spirituality

1. Lowers Inflammation

For many people, the simple act of praying results in a greater sense of well-being. But how does slowing down and becoming more in touch with a higher being or your “true self” help you live a healthier life? The answer has to do with chronic inflammation caused by stress.

Inflammatory responses are the body’s natural reaction to stress, but unfortunately **inflammation is at the root of most diseases** too, especially when it reaches high levels and isn’t controlled. That stress can come in many forms — whether it’s a poor diet, not getting good sleep or holding a stressful job.

Small amounts of stress can be a good thing — for fighting off illnesses, helping us heal, or preparing us for an important event or work obligation, for example — but when we chronically trigger inflammation, our bodies can turn on themselves and essentially start attacking our own tissue. There’s a lot of strong evidence showing that elevated stress hormones, such as increased **cortisol**, can lead to hormonal imbalances; low immunity; and increased rates of infection, food cravings, and anxiety and depression for this reason.

2. Raises Immunity

Many experts believe in the theory that there’s a strong relationship between chronic inflammation and aging, likely due to stress’s negative impact on the **thyroid and adrenal glands**, which can cause burnout or **adrenal fatigue**. Over time, the negative effects of inflammation build up to create conditions in the body that are a

result of low immune function and promote age-related diseases such as Alzheimer's disease, atherosclerosis, diabetes and cardiovascular disease. That's because inflammation increases **free radical damage** and oxidative stress, which are the very causes of "aging."

Slowing down, getting in touch with the things in life that really matter most and purposefully practicing relaxation techniques like healing prayer can help keep the chronic inflammation in check, immunity high and related diseases at bay. In fact, one 2012 study published in the *Journal of Alternative Therapies in Health and Medicine* found that when researchers conducted a randomized blinded trial and added prayer to normal cancer treatment in 1,000 patients, the prayer-intervention group showed significantly greater improvements over the control group for the primary endpoints related to spiritual well-being, emotional well-being and functional well-being. (2)

3. Increases Longevity

Want to know **how to be happy** and healthy, like some of the oldest living people in the world, such as those who live in the so-called **blue zones**? Many centenarians report that their spirituality is something that keeps them going every day, giving them a purpose to wake up in the morning. Some studies have shown that a spiritual practice maintained by older adults can act as a natural buffer

against chronic stress and helps **reduce the chances of suffering from Alzheimer's disease**, arthritis, strokes and other common age-related conditions.

It doesn't matter if you are Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist or Hindu — studies have shown that attending religious services regularly, even as infrequently as once a month, can make a difference in how long a person lives. Amazingly, a 2010 study in the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* followed 3,617 people for seven years and found that those who attended religious services at least once a month reduced their risk of death by about one-third! As a group, the attendees had a longer life expectancy, with an impact about as great as that of moderate physical activity. (3)

The National Institute of Health Adventist Health Study had similar findings. After following more than 34,000 people over a period of 12 years, researchers found that those who went to church services frequently were 15 percent to 25 percent less likely to die at any age. Clearly these results show that people who pay attention to their spiritual side know how to reduce stress and therefore have lower rates of cardiovascular disease, depression stress and suicide, and their immune systems seem to work better. (4)

4. Reinforces Good Habits

Healing prayer and meditation both help increase “mindfulness,” which really means living in the present moment, letting go of limiting or challenging beliefs from the past, and getting to know your own thoughts and tendencies better. In recent reviews, changes in brain function during meditation and other mindfulness techniques have been documented using electrophysiology, single photon emission computed tomography, PET and functional magnetic resonance imaging.

Results differ somewhat, but in general, they show increased signals in brain regions related to regulation of emotions; attention control; and increases in the release of the “feel good hormones” dopamine, GABA and serotonin. Reviews of the positive effects of the relaxation techniques known as “mindfulness-based stress reduction” (MBSR) have found that this type of practice can **naturally decrease depression**, anxiety and psychologic distress in people with chronic diseases, plus it can reduce stress, ruminative thinking and anxiety even in healthy people. (5)

As a result of making time for these mood-boosting relaxation practices, you’ll likely find yourself able to stick with other important habits related to a healthy lifestyle — for example, eating right, sleeping well, exercising, and spending time with and appreciating friends or family. These are all things that become easier when our mind is in a good place, our hormones are balanced and our neurotransmitters are working properly.

Even though in the U.S. and many other developed nations we generally hold working and being very productive in high regard, “burning ourselves out” and neglecting time to relax or take care of ourselves casts a wide, negative shadow on our lives and health. Creating a schedule when we meditate or pray daily at home, or joining an institution or community that exists to encourage us to do this, is a powerful way to regularly slow down, unwind and de-stress.

5. Puts Us in Touch with Our True Purpose, Which Fights Anxiety and Depression

Dr. Robert Butler and his research team led an 11-year comprehensive National Institute of Health-funded study that looked at the correlation between “having a sense of purpose” and longevity. (6) His team followed highly functioning people between the ages of 65 and 92 and found that individuals who expressed a higher purpose and clear goal in life — something to get up for in the morning and something that they felt truly made a difference — on average lived longer and were sharper than those who did not.

What do they mean by “a sense of purpose?” This can be something as simple as seeing and helping children or grandchildren grow up well, doing volunteer work that helps other people, or teaching younger people important life lessons. This is an effective way to reduce stress or **fight depression and anxiety** while increasing self-worth and self-esteem. The positive effects of such practices can also help fight other conditions related to stress like **PMS and cramps**, headaches, **“the winter blues,”** trouble sleeping, and so on.

According to researchers of *The Blue Zones*, a book that studied the habits of the longest-living people on earth, spirituality and purpose can help increase longevity because it helps people enter into a “zen-like state of total oneness ... you feel fully immersed in what you’re doing. It’s characterized by a sense of freedom, enjoyment, fulfillment, and happiness.”

New to Praying or Meditating? Here’s How to Reduce Stress and Get Started

- **Form a Spiritual Habit or Routine:** Praying regularly, ideally at the same time each day, allows us to set aside time for us to focus on “the big picture” and connect with our Creator. Many people find it’s most helpful to pray or mediate in the morning, before “life gets in the way.” We saw Jesus do this as referenced in *Mark 1:35*. Others like to do so before bed in order to unwind and **fall asleep fast**. Any time is beneficial, as long as you practice *consistently*. Even five to 10 minutes a day can have a big impact.
- **Craft a Personal Mission Statement:** If you don’t have a sense of purpose, forming and writing down your personal mission statement can be a good start. Begin by answering this question in a single, memorable sentence: Why do you get up in the morning? Finding your purpose is critical to your life and spiritual health. One great book to begin understanding this is *The*

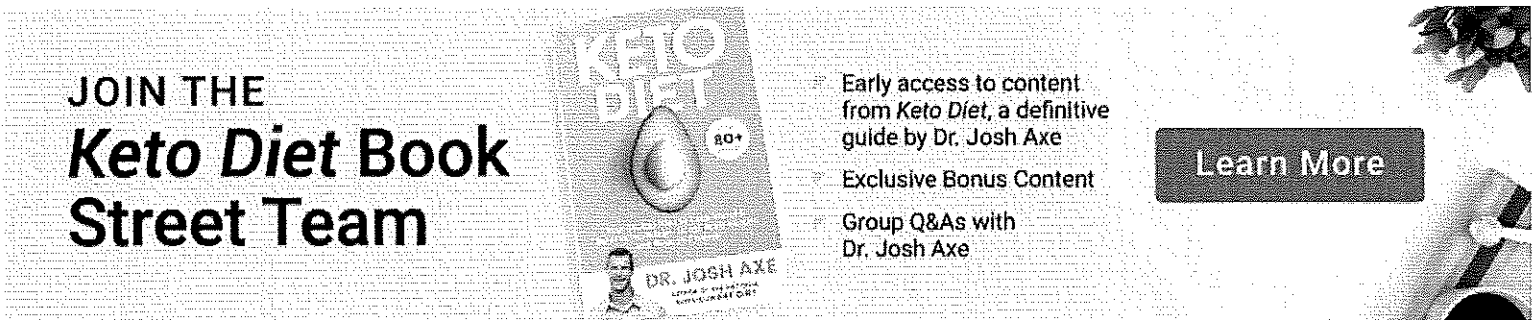
Purpose Driven Life by Rick Warren. Consider what you're passionate about, how you enjoy using your talents and what is truly important to you. Keep these things in mind as you pray, practice visualization, write a gratitude list daily or meditate.

- **Keep It Simple:** You can pray or meditate anywhere and at any time, using nothing at all but your own body, which is the best part! Create a space in your home that's quiet, a comfortable temperature and moderately lit. Make the space feel special and free from clutter by maybe purchasing a meditation cushion or chair, adding plants, inspirational books, and diffusing **frankincense essential oil**. Deep breathing, saying what you're grateful for and visualization are also great ways to connect with God and grow spiritually.
- **Find a Partner or Community:** Find a group with which you can share your life purpose. This can be a spiritual teacher, church or healing prayer group, friend, family member, or spouse — as long as it's someone who can help you honestly assess your plan and your successes while reinforcing your sense of connection to God and others. If you already belong to a religious community, consider getting even more involved and taking a more active role in the organization. Getting involved in activities like singing in the choir, planning a group trip or volunteering might enhance well-being and possibly further reduce stress.
- **Put Aside a Time, Hour or Entire Day Specifically for Unwinding and Connecting:** Going back to the example of the

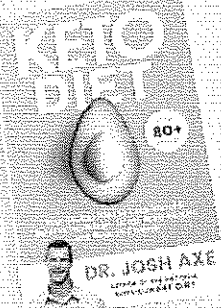
longest-living populations on earth, one common habit among them all is practicing a “Sabbath” or dedicated day for focusing on your relationship with God, resting and building peace. For example, the Seventh Day Adventists living in California practice a weekly Saturday Sabbath as do many practicing Jews that they report acts as a powerful stress reliever. This dedicated day creates a “sanctuary in time” during which they focus on God, their families and nature. They don’t work and kids don’t play organized sports or do homework, but instead families do things together, such as hiking, that brings them together and makes them feel closer to God and their families.

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