

“The Effects of Religion on Mental Health

March 10, 2011

John K Graham, M.D., D.Min.

The Institute for Spirituality and Health
at the Texas Medical Center,
Houston, TX 77054

Thursday Schedule Gone By

- January 13, 20, 27 – John Graham, M.D., 3-week study entitled, “Religion and Effects on Health and Healing”
 - Jan 13: Positive and Negative Effects of Religion on Health and healing
 - Jan 20: Effects of Religion when Coping with Chronic Illness
 - Jan 27: Effect of Religion on Well Being

Thursday Schedule Gone By

- February 3, 10, 17 – Rabbi David Lyon, 3-week study from his book entitled, "God of Me," (Jewish Lights Publishing, 2011).
- Feb 3: God is Everywhere and God Lives with Me
- Feb 10: God Knows Me and God Receives Me
- Feb 17: God Comforts Me and God Strengthens Me

Thursday Schedule Gone By

- February 24 – The Rev. Stephen Spidell – 1-week study on subject entitled, “Essential Spirituality in Patient Care.”
- Feb 24: Essential Spirituality in Patient Care.
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Today's Class

- March 3, 10, 17, 24, 31 – John Graham, M.D., 7-week study entitled, “Effects of Faith on Health & Medicine” --Review of H. Koenig, et al, *Handbook of religion and Health (HRH)*
- March 3: Effect of Religion on Depression and Suicide, (chapter 7 - 8 HRH)
- **March 10: Effect of Religion on Mental Health (chapter 15 HRH)**

Upcoming Thursday Class Schedule

- March 17: Effect of Religion on Anxiety Disorders, Schizophrenia, and other Psychoses (ch. 9 - 10, HRH)
- March 24: Effect of Religion on Alcohol and Drug Use, Delinquency (chapter 11 - 12, HRH)
- March 31: Effect of Religion on Heart Disease & Hypertension (chapters 16-17, HRH)
- April 7: Effect of Religion on Immune System Dysfunction and Cancer (chapter 19-20, HRH)
- April 14: Effect of Religion on Longevity and Disability (Chap. 21-22, HRH)

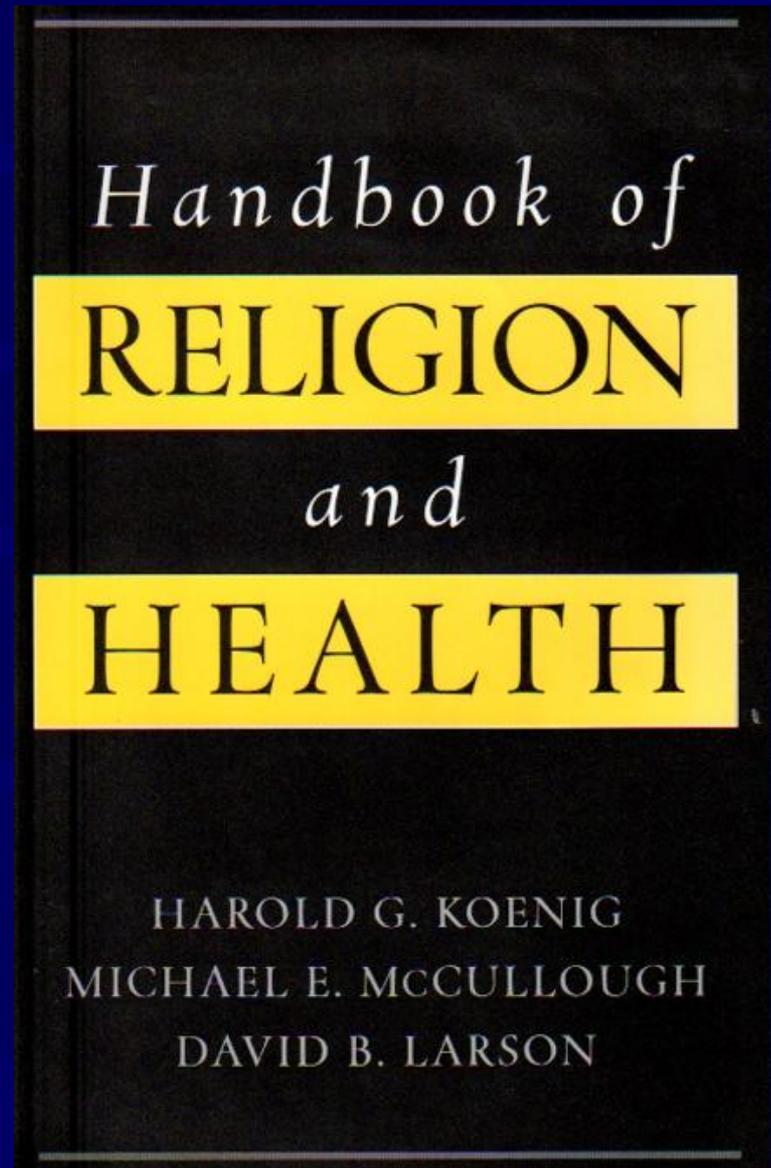
Outline for today's talk

"The Effects of Religion on Mental Health"

- Introduction
- Summary of Research Findings
- Factors that influence Mental Health
- Theoretical Model of Religion's Effects on Mental Health
- Negative Influences on Mental Health
- Summary and Conclusions

I. Introduction:

- Today we are looking at Chapter 15 of Dr. Harold Koenig, Michael McCullough and David Larson's book,
- ***Handbook of Religion and Health (2001)***
- published by Oxford University Press, New York.



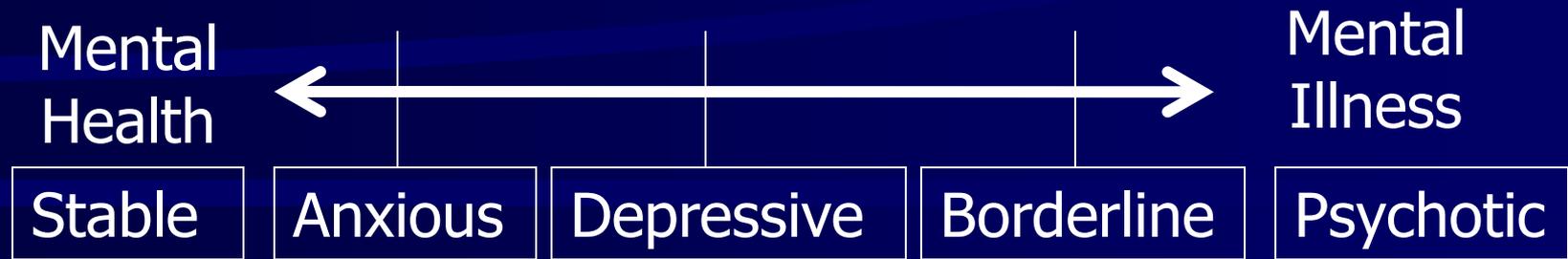
I. Introduction: What is Mental Health?

- **Mental health** describes a level of cognitive or emotional well-being and implies the absence of a mental disorder.
- Mental health includes an individual's ability to enjoy life and procure a balance between life activities and efforts to achieve psychological resilience .
- Mental health also signifies the ability to adapt to a range of demands that life may place upon us.

I. Introduction: What is Mental Health?

- The **World Health Organization** defines mental health as "a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community".
- Yet, there is no one "official" definition of mental health. Cultural differences, subjective assessments, and competing professional theories all affect how "mental health" is defined.
- Also, there are different types of mental health problems, some of which are common, such as depression and anxiety disorders, and some not so common, such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder.

Mental Health, may be seen as a continuum



Mental health includes emotional well-being - the capacity to live a full and abundant life with positive relationships, and the flexibility to deal with life's inevitable challenges.

The Mental Health . . .

Mental health can also be defined as an absence of a major mental condition (i.e., one of the diagnoses in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*).

But broadly speaking, mental health includes health of the mind and emotions and this means issues of social, cultural, physical and education all have an impact on a person's mental health.

II. Research Findings on Religion & Mental Health

Research studies (CRTs) reveal there is a positive relationship between religion and mental health as measured by a:

1. Greater sense of Well-Being (80% of over 100 studies)
2. Greater Hope and Optimism (no study has shown that religious persons are less optimistic than those without religious faith)
3. Greater Self-Esteem (of 29 studies 55% showed greater self-esteem among the more religious subjects; 10 studies showed no difference; 2 studies had mixed results; and only 1 study showed a negative association with religion).

- Prometheus is an organization named after the mythological hero who stole fire and gave it to mankind as a gift, and for this group, the “gift” is intelligence. Membership is open to anyone with extremely high intelligence – those who have an IQ that is equal to or greater than that of the highest one thirty-thousandth of the general population (i.e., those at or above the 99.997th percentile of the general population).
- Koenig (p. 215) quotes Prometheusian W. Watters (1992) who published an article in their journal entitled “*Deadly Doctrine: Health, Illness, and Christian God-Talk,*” saying: “It is difficult to understand how any family can perform this task (i.e, help a child develop autonomy and actualize her human potential) if it is influenced to any degree by the teachings of Christianity since that institution’s teachings are uncompromisingly antithetical to the development of self-esteem.”

It appears for Prometheusians their high intelligence means they don’t have to look at research data.

But, when you look at research data :

- Koenig (1994) says: "Religious beliefs and teachings, by discouraging both excessive pride and self-condemnation, may foster a healthier view of self that is more in line with reality."
- In a 1995 study by Neil Krause at U of Michigan reported that among older adults: "Feelings of self worth tend to be lowest for those with very little religious commitment."

(Religion and Self-Esteem among older adults. *J of Gerontology*, 1995, p. 236)

4. Better adaptation to Bereavement – All religious traditions have rituals that facilitate grieving and adaptation to loss. Of 17 studies, over half show that association; only one study showed a negative association.

Summary of research, cont...

5. Greater Social Support. The need to help and support others is encouraged by virtually every religion. (Of 20 studies, 19 showed a positive correlation in this area).
6. Less Loneliness. Religious beliefs and practices, in particular when they include active participation in a religious community, can help loneliness and counteract isolation. (10 such studies showed this connection.) Frequency of attendance in religious services is inversely related to loneliness in both men and women.
7. Less Depression. (in 101 studies, 65% reported a significant positive relationship between a measure of religious involvement and lower rates of depression or depressive symptoms).

Research, cont...

8. Fewer Suicides. Most Western religious teachings teach that suicide is wrong and studies reveal there is indeed a lower suicide rate among the more religious. (of the 68 studies examining suicide rates and attitudes by level of religious involvement, 84% found less suicide and more negative attitudes toward suicide in the more religious).

9. Less Anxiety. Given the concern about whether or not religion fosters neurosis, many studies have sought a correlation between religion and anxiety. In summary, the majority of the studies found less anxiety and fear among the more religiously motivated, including 86% of clinical trial studies).

Research, cont...

10. Less Schizophrenia and Fewer Other Psychoses. There are few studies in this area but Koenig found 16 that examined the relationship. In general, religious involvement, particularly in main-stream religious groups, is either unassociated with psychotic tendencies or inversely related to them.

11. Less Alcohol and Drug Abuse. Looking at 95 studies that quantitatively examined the religion-alcohol relationship, Koenig says, "Religious persons are less likely to abuse alcohol and/or to take illicit drugs" (p 218).

88% of the studies that measured religiousness reported significantly lower alcohol use or abuse among religious subjects. The same is true for use of illicit drugs, especially among teens and young adults.

Research, cont...

12. Less Delinquency and Crime. Koenig found 36 studies that had examined this relationship. 78% found significantly lower rates of delinquency or crime among the more religious. Interestingly, delinquents were more likely than non-delinquents to agree with the statements: "Every word of the Bible is literally true," and "God is powerful and controls our life."

13. Greater Marital Stability. Divorce and separation rates have been studied extensively. Not only does a stable and satisfying marriage enhance the quality of life for the marital partners, it also increases the likelihood that the emotional needs of the couple's children will be met. Children of single-parent families are at a higher risk for delinquency and for drug and alcohol abuse.

III. What Factors Influence Mental Health?:

1. Heredity and Biological Factors – Genetic factors largely determine temperament which in turn determines a person's emotional set-point and level of sensitivity.
2. Developmental Factors: Childhood losses, deprivations, or abuse (physical, emotional, or sexual) affect later susceptibility to mental health problems. Includes:
 - Lack of a parental nurturing relationship.
 - Teasing or bullying by peers.
 - Loss of a parent, sibling or loved one through death or divorce.
 - Healthy training or lack thereof by teachers, coaches, those in authority (a priest).

II. Factors that Influence Mental Health:

3. Stressful Life Events and Traumatic Experiences – Successes, failures, gains and losses impact people differently depending on temperament and personality, childhood training, prior life experiences, and social relationships. But, we now know severe stress can cause permanent changes within the brain that lower the threshold for future traumatic events (PTSD). And, use of alcohol and Drugs likely will exacerbate the situation.
4. Cognitive Appraisal: Negative life events or circumstances do not automatically and directly affect mental health. Events must first be cognitively processed in order to give meaning to them. One's worldview and prior experiences influence cognitive appraisal. I.e., whether you see the world as "friendly and safe" or "not friendly and unsafe"?

II. Factors that Influence Mental Health:

5. Coping Resources – Particularly important for maintaining mental health are coping resources that help people adapt to or overcome life stressors. These resources include: financial resources, education, physical health, supportive social relationships, and altruism (the capacity to reach out to help others).
 - Socioeconomic status is a strong and consistent predictor of mental and physical health. Social support buffers stress, reduces the risk of depression and speeds recovery from illness. When bad things happen it is always helpful to have friends, money and good health.
6. Coping Behaviors: In response to stressful life changes, some behaviors are destructive to self and others (alcohol, drug use) and others are life enriching (build and enhance character; altruism gives sense of usefulness and purpose)

**OSCAR WINNERS
AND LOSERS!**

Behind the
Scenes With
Colin Firth

**HOW TO
FIX THE
SHOW**

What's
An Oscar
Worth?



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Entertainment

WEEKLY

CHARLIE SHEEN'S WAR

His Battle
Against His Boss,
His Network...
and Himself



The demise of Charlie Sheen is a classic example of a person with poor Coping Behavior made worse by drugs and alcohol.

PUNISHMENT
COMER ONE WAY OR ANOTHER

JEFF BRIDGES
MATT DAMON
JOSH BROLIN

WRITTEN FOR THE SCREEN AND DIRECTED BY
JOEL & ETHAN COEN

TRUE
GRIT

PRODUCTION DESIGNER: JAMES W. BRIDGES
EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS: JAMES W. BRIDGES, JAMES W. BRIDGES
PRODUCED BY: JAMES W. BRIDGES, JAMES W. BRIDGES
WRITTEN FOR THE SCREEN AND DIRECTED BY: JOEL & ETHAN COEN
CASTING BY: JAMES W. BRIDGES, JAMES W. BRIDGES
COSTUME DESIGNER: JAMES W. BRIDGES, JAMES W. BRIDGES
HAIR AND MAKEUP: JAMES W. BRIDGES, JAMES W. BRIDGES
PRODUCTION OFFICE: JAMES W. BRIDGES, JAMES W. BRIDGES
COURTESY OF THE COEN BROTHERS

RETRIBUTION

In this movie, Mattie Ross' (Hailee Steinfeld) father was murdered by a hired hand, Tom Chaney (Josh Brolin).

Mattie seeks a man with True Grit to bring her father's murderer to justice. We soon learn Mattie is the one with True Grit, not Rooster Cogburn (Jeff Bridges).

THE FOLLOWING **PREVIEW** HAS BEEN APPROVED FOR
APPROPRIATE AUDIENCES
BY THE MOTION PICTURE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA, INC.

www.filmratings.com

www.mpa.org

PSYCHOLOGY

THE NEUROSCIENCE OF TRUE GRIT

When tragedy strikes, most of us ultimately rebound surprisingly well. Where does such resilience come from?

By Gary Stix

“When tragedy strikes, most of us ultimately rebound surprisingly well. Where does such resilience come from?”

“When faced with danger, the brain initiates **a chemical cascade** that primes you to “fight or flight.” In turn, a series of chemicals in the brain can dampen that response, thereby promoting resilience to stress.”

The **hypothalamus** releases Corticotropin-releasing hormone (CRH) causing the **pituitary** to secrete adrenocorticotropin hormone (ACTH) which in turn stimulates the **adrenal glands** to release the hormone Cortisol which heightens the body’s ability to respond to challenges. Too much can cause lasting damage (PTSD).

Two chemicals (DHEA & Neuropeptide Y) help keep things in check; and drugs & psychotherapy can help produce stress busters.”

Understanding the Effect of Religion on Mental Health

Koenig's Model

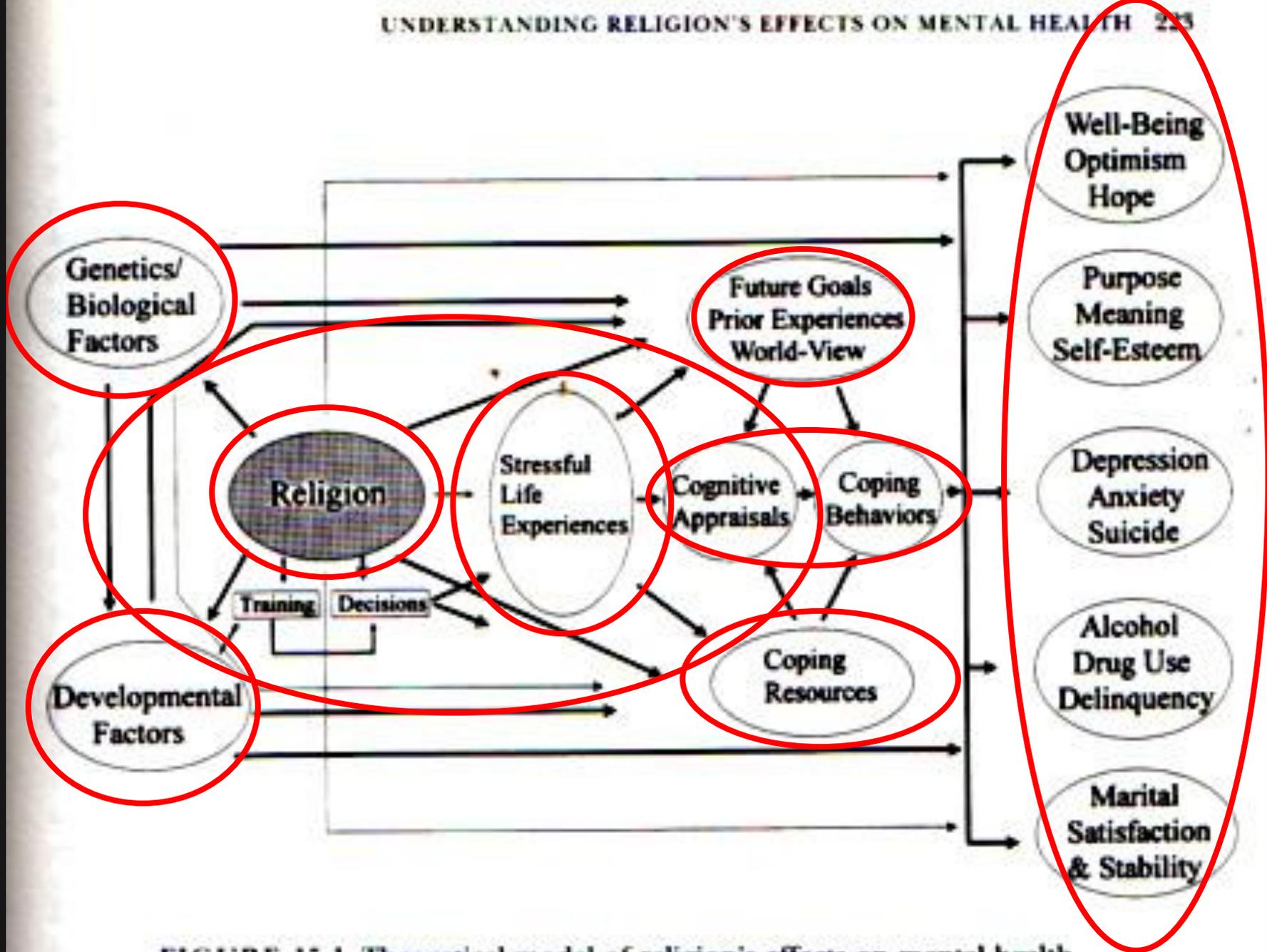


FIGURE 15.1 Theoretical model of religion's effects on mental health.

How Does Religion Affect Heredity?

- Heredity – Religion can influence heredity if religious persons selectively mate with others from the same religious group, especially if isolated geographically or socially (Amish, Jews).
- If religious mothers are less likely to drink alcohol or smoke cigarettes or carry sexually transmitted diseases such as AIDS, religion can have an positive effect on embryonic fetal brain development.
- Conversely, through compassion, religion can increase the chance of survival of those less fit -- making Down's Syndrome, depression, schizophrenia, etc., more prevalent; but religion may also equip families to better handle this.

What about Developmental factors?

- Developmental Factors – Early life experiences can have a major impact on future susceptibility to mental disorders. The religiousness of parents may affect their availability and motivation to meet the emotional needs of their children.
- If the mother/dad has a mental disorder and her religion helps her adjust to her illness, she is better able to tend to the needs of her child.
- Religions stress the importance of family life and encourage the avoidance of alcohol and drugs, divorce.
- A person's image of God forms early in life. If a child is taught God is loving, all-powerful, personal and friendly, the image of a powerful, loving and personal God is instilled.

What about stressful events/circumstances?

- Stressful Events and Circumstances – Religious beliefs and practices may reduce the frequency of negative life events and stressful circumstances in adulthood. For example:
- Religions encourage a man or woman to be faithful in their marriage; this may help one decide not to have an extramarital affair and avoid stress or domestic violence.
- The same applies to decisions on whether or not to use alcohol and drugs, cigarettes (body is temple of Holy Spirit).
- Religions discourage stealing, cheating, and risky behavior that likely lead to accidents and misfortunes. Religious beliefs also have an effect on physical health and longevity.

How does Religion effect Cognitive Appraisal?

- Cognitive Appraisal – Religion may provide a cognitive framework that enables a healthier appraisal of those stressors that do occur in life.
- By promoting a positive and coherent worldview, religious belief and commitment help people interpret losses in a more optimistic manner that is not threatening to the self.
- Religion provides a basis for self-esteem that is independent of individual productivity, talent, physical appearance or relationships to others.
- By attaching their hopes and dreams on God/transcendent religion provides a focus *outside* of themselves and discourages excessive preoccupation with self.

How Does Religion Affect Coping Resources?

- Coping Resources – Religion can enhance resources that facilitate coping – health, education, socioeconomic status, social support, and altruistic activities.
- Religious involvement can promote education and professional success. Religion may prevent alcohol and drug abuse which can otherwise derail one's future.
- Religious beliefs teach character development, responsibility, social skills and honesty, all important in professional life.
- Religious involvement can provide greater social support and healthy relationships. Churches have youth ministries which help parents raise their children. Religions have rituals that celebrate birth, marriage, & death helping one cope with loss.

What about Coping Behaviors?

- Coping Behaviors – When a life event is cognitively appraised as involving loss or negative change, coping behaviors are mobilized to correct the situation or reduce the stress associated with it.
- Many religions encourage active problem solving; others advocate acceptance or turning the problem over to God.
- AA's Serenity prayer: "God grant me the ability to change the things I can, accept the things I cannot, and wisdom to know the difference."
- Also, shifting one's focus from one's self to others is encouraged by religions. In the US, religions provide the major source of volunteers (a powerful coping behavior).

Negative Influences of Religion on Mental Health

- Excessive devotion to one's religion. When excessive, religious practices or religious social activities can lead to the neglect of job responsibilities or loved ones resulting in a disruption of family and social life.
- When one spouse is more religious than the other this can lead to bitterness, resentment, and ultimately divorce.
- Rigid interpretation of Sacred Scriptures can justify violence against wife and excessive punishment of children.
- Religion can promote overdependence on laws and rules and disregard for individuality and personal autonomy. This can lead to excessive guilt, shame, and judgment of others. And, can also lead to withholding of medical care (trusting in God).

Negative Influences of Religion on Mental Health

- There is the matter of religious cults. Involvement in a cult can promote excessive and unhealthy emotional dependence on one often-charismatic leader, often deferring all decisions to that person.
- The result is isolation from family and loved ones, and alienation from the greater community. Members of cults often making derogatory even hateful comments towards those who do not hold their viewpoint.

Having said this, Koenig says we should remember that research shows the negative consequences of religion tend to occur less often than the beneficial outcomes conveyed by having a strong personal faith and active involvement in a religious community.

Summary and Conclusions

In the majority of studies, religious involvement is correlated with:

- Well-being, happiness, and life satisfaction
- Hope and optimism
- Purpose and meaning in life
- Higher self-esteem
- Adaptation to bereavement
- Greater social support and less isolation, loneliness
- Lower rates of depression and faster recovery
- Lower rates of suicide and less positive attitude towards suicide
- Less anxiety, psychosis and fewer psychotic tendencies
- Lower rates of alcohol and drug abuse
- Less delinquency and criminal activity
- Greater marital stability and satisfaction

Look at Koenig's model -- do you have any observations to make?

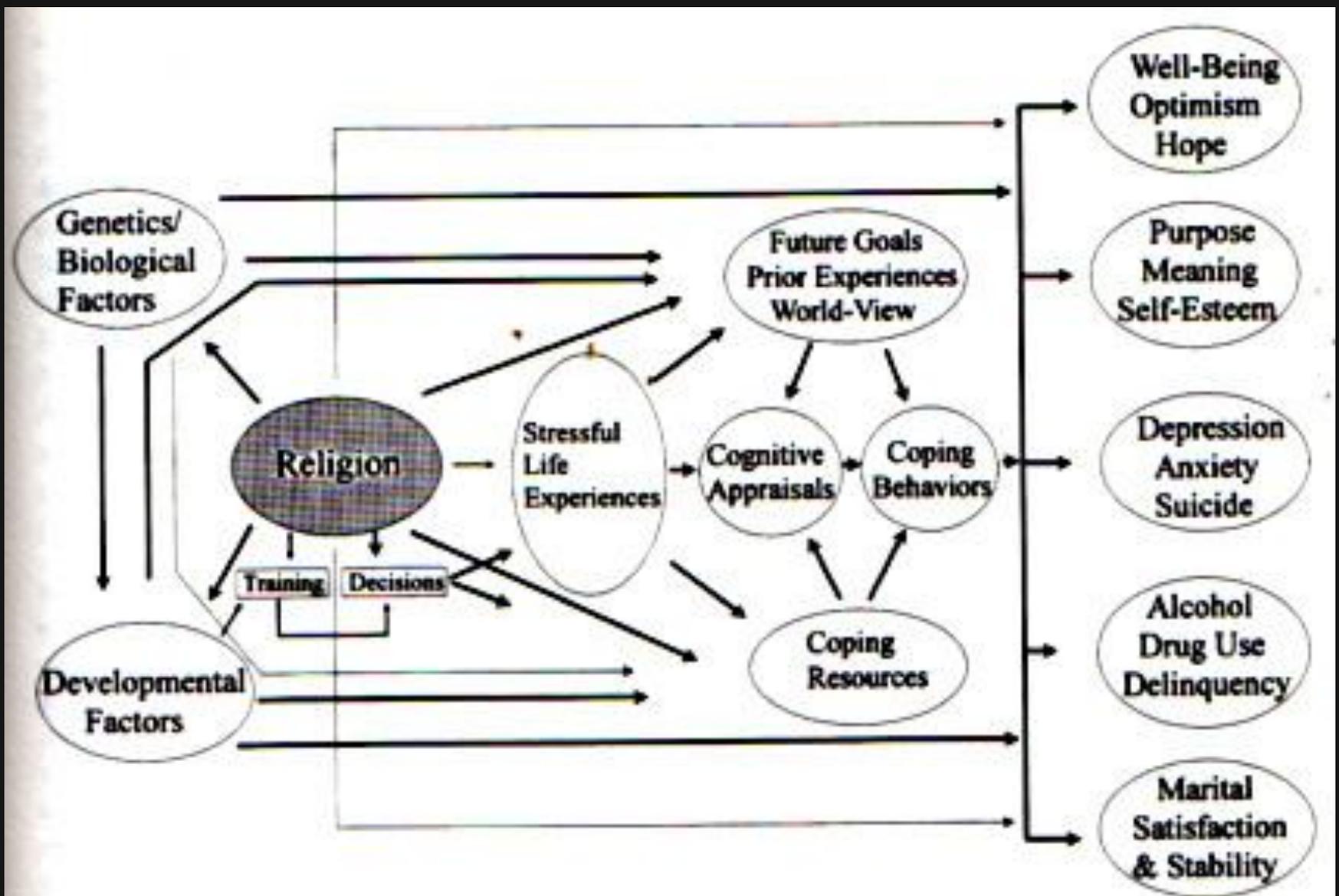


FIGURE 15.1 Theoretical model of religion's effects on mental health.

Next Thursday Class Schedule

- **March 17: Effect of Religion on Anxiety Disorders, Schizophrenia, and other Psychoses** (ch. 9 - 10, HRH)
- **March 24: Effect of Religion on Alcohol and Drug Use, Delinquency** (chapter 11 - 12, HRH)
- **March 31: Effect of Religion on Heart Disease & Hypertension** (chapters 16-17, HRH)
- **April 7: Effect of Religion on Immune System Dysfunction and Cancer** (chapter 19-20, HRH)
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