

## Why church is better for your mental health than football or politics

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The London School of Economics' recent study of the kinds of social activities that help to overcome depression has shown up religion observance as the only activity to make a positive difference to mental wellbeing over time, outranking voluntary work and joining political parties, sport and social clubs.

Researchers have asked if belief in God might be a phenomenon found among those who are not the depressive type or if, perhaps, it is the support and sense of community that churchgoing provides that is the basis of religiously inspired coping mechanisms.



Copy of Martin Schongauer, The Torment of Saint Anthony There are a lot of assumptions here, both about religion and about depression. I'm not at all surprised that joining a political party doesn't help to keep depression at bay. The way things are at the moment I should think many dedicated political activists are heading for the therapist's couch. But if joining a social or sports club makes no long-term difference to psychological wellbeing then it's unlikely that the trade-off of religious activity is its social aspect. Why should the sense of belonging to the Salvation Army help keep you cheerful where being an Arsenal fan doesn't? (Actually, on reflection that question has just answered itself.)

Then there's the type of person that engages in religious activity. Are we all just bouncy, "Tigger" types by nature? On the contrary, there's plenty of evidence to suggest that being religious makes you

think about things that would normally drag most people's spirits down. Take Heaven, Hell, death and judgment for a start. St Ignatius Loyola was overwhelmed by suicidal thoughts and said he would have been willing to follow a dog if it would lead him out of his black depression. Paintings of St Anthony of Egypt and other hermits show them surrounded by demons in full assault. Being a believer didn't prevent St Thérèse of Lisieux from suffering agonies of doubt and terror in the face of death. Neither Henri Nouwen nor Mother Teresa was immune from inner darkness, despite the deeply consoling words they were able to offer others. And what about the Dark Night of the Soul? Sts John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila could keep a depression factory going on their own. Or could they?

There's a significant difference between spiritual desolation and depression. Anyone who has ever suffered from depression will know that it's not something to be taken lightly. The agonies of mental illness are real and lasting, and easy religiosity is no remedy. Equally the spiritual desolation or "long loneliness" spoken of by the likes of Mother Teresa, Dorothy Day and Mary Ward are not for the faint-hearted. Engaging seriously in religious faith takes us face to face with what would make most people run a mile. In that sense the Garden of Gethsemane awaits us all. It may not be provide the necessary empirical data for scientific proof, but I suspect that religious observance can help with depression because it both takes human darkness seriously and provides a lasting and meaningful response to it. A God who comes to meet us in the Valley of the Shadow of Death and is its ultimate overthrowing can be the joy of all our desiring.

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*Above: Michelangelo's The Torment of Saint Anthony via Wiki/Kimball Art Museum*

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