

**THE** role of spirituality and religion in healing both physical and emotional illness is currently a hot topic in professional journals and the media. Some studies covering the topic have found:

- Depression, and other psychological disorders, increase in line with a decline in religious observance.
- Those with a strong spiritual or religious base are healthier both physically and mentally.
- Depression is more prevalent in those who lack spiritual practices or religious beliefs.

In our work we offer concrete, positive tools to use with one's innate spirituality, as well as supportive relationships, to combat the blues. People with depression and anxiety (which are actually two sides of the same coin) need two things: to feel safe and to escape the narrow "depressive self" by connecting to a larger, more harmonious, reality. According to researchers, our brains have inbuilt mechanisms to help us do exactly that. However, in our stressful, competitive, consumerist and image-obsessed modern society, most of us have forgotten how.

But what do we mean by religion and spirituality? They are "different but not exclusive concepts", according to William Hathaway PhD, of Regent University in Virginia. Religion usually involves belief in a "power greater than yourself" and spirituality includes connection to other people, your body, nature and the Divine. Recent research has shown that each of these experiences relates to different parts of the brain which, although separate, interact with each other.

### Optimism and the God module

The first indication that we are hard-wired for religious belief came with the announcement on 31 October 1997 by neuroscientists working at the University of California in San Diego that they had found a small region in the brain which specialised in processing religious belief. This "God module", as the lead researcher, Vilayanur S Ramachandran, called it, is located in the left temporal lobe just behind the forehead and also governs attention and focus. When words related to religion and faith are used, this area lights up and becomes very active.

Announcing his team's findings at the annual meeting of the Society of Neuroscience, Ramachandran said, "We suggest there are neural circuits in the temporal lobe that may be part of the machinery of the brain that is involved in mystical experiences and God."

Since every society on earth has or has had a religious belief system of some kind, there must be benefits from having a faith in a transcendental being, whether that being is a personal god, the spirit of an ancestor or animal, a symbolic god or simply nature. There seems to be a deep-seated need to have, in the words of the old Gershwin song, "someone to watch over me".

Imagine two bands of early hunter-gatherers: the Mbane and the Mbake. The Mbane have a fully developed animist religion that worships ancestors, animal spirits, the gods of the forest, mountains, streams and sky and, over all, the Earth Mother who watches over everything. The Mbane perform rituals and dances to make the rains come, stop the floods and attract the gnu (a form of antelope). The Mbake, in contrast, are led by a council of atheists. They scorn the whole idea of spirits, gods and Mother Earth. They are rationalists with a materialist bent. When the drought comes and forest fires swallow up the smaller game and devour the grasses that draw the gnu, which band will survive to become our ancestors? Almost certainly the Mbane will, because their

faith gives them the optimism that, eventually, if they do the right dances and make the right offerings, the spirits will provide: the rains will come, the gnu will return.

Recent research has confirmed this link between religious belief and optimism and also the fact that pessimism is much more likely to overcome those who don't have a deep-seated faith. There is also a strong link between optimism and freedom from depression. While you can be depression-free yet not particularly optimistic, or even happy, it's not possible to be at once optimistic and depressed. Anything that increases your optimism will reduce your depression, and this is exactly what intrinsic, or deeply felt, faith does. To get the most anti-depressant power from your beliefs, it's important to express them and seek out the company of those who share your views. Suppressing the expression of faith, as some do out of fear that friends or colleagues will disapprove, is a depressant in itself.

### Escape the depressed self

Of course, if you have no religious beliefs you can't just believe on cue. In fact, if someone imposes their belief on you, you may feel guilty for not living up to their standards and this form of control can lead to more anxiety and depression.

Luckily, the brain has other ways besides belief of allowing you to expand your consciousness beyond the limited, depressed self and be healed of depression. Scientists recently discovered a small region in the back of the brain called the posterior superior parietal lobe (PSPL). The job of this bundle of neurons (brain cells) is to constantly calculate your spatial orientation — your sense of where your body ends and the world begins. This area is normally a hive of activity. However, during intense prayer or meditation, this region becomes a quiet oasis of inactivity. It's as if sensory information coming into the PSPL has been blocked, creating what Professor Andrew Newburg of Pennsylvania University calls "a blurring of the self-other relationship. If meditators go far enough, they have a complete dissolving of the self, a sense of union, a sense of infinite spacelessness."

In his book *Why God Won't Go Away*, Newburg says that when this happens, "The brain has no choice but to perceive that the self is endless and intimately interwoven with everyone and everything that the brain senses. And this perception feels utterly and unquestionably real."

This connectedness lies at the heart of spirituality. It's also a powerful antidepressant. As an internal system, depression acts as an entity that strives to trap us within its grasp and thus ensure its own survival. If you're depressed or anxious you replay the same internally driven thoughts, go through the same internally driven actions and behaviours and repeat the same dysfunctional relationship patterns. There is no mechanism within the self, within your consciousness, to rescue you from depression's grasp. The PSPL is your escape pod, which allows you to blur the boundaries of the depressed self and truly connect to something outside.

### Nature, pets, your body

Meditation is not the only way to free yourself from the depression trap. Functional relationships to other people are also a key to a depression-free life, as is connecting to nature, your body and even your pet. Psychologists are coming to the realisation that the further we get from nature and the more we surround ourselves with concrete, artificial light and mechanical noises, the more depressed we become. Spirituality is largely about reaffirming our link with the natural

world, and the process can start in small ways that can have a profound effect, such as placing a potplant on your windowsill.

Rachael and Stephen Kaplan, both psychology professors at the University of Michigan, blame our modern depression pandemic on our separation from the natural world, beginning in infancy. Rachel cites, as a personal example that confirmed years of research, how her mood changed when she switched offices from one that looked out onto a barren courtyard to one with a view of trees, squirrels and grass. Researchers at a Swedish hospital recently found that heart surgery patients in intensive care units could reduce their anxiety and need for pain medication by looking at pictures depicting trees and water.

Just being with a dog or cat considerably reduces people's stress level, makes challenging tasks easier and raises mood, according to a team led by Dr Karen Allen of the State University of New York at Buffalo. Awareness of the body can also have this effect. In our work, we use elements of the Feldenkrais method (which we call repatterning movements) to help people tune into their bodies and explore new options for moving and experiencing themselves. As well as offering relaxation and increased physical wellbeing, this kind of learning literally creates new connections within the brain that bypass the old "programmed" thoughts and feelings – the depressive self.

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Focusing your attention with awareness on a tree, waves on a beach, on your own body or on stroking your cat, activates the part of the brain that generates your spiritual impulses. You are able to separate from the depressed self and in doing so you are using your spirituality in ways that human evolution intended.

### Borrowing from the Buddhists

Buddhists, who focus more on spiritual practice than belief, have long advocated a wide range of exercises to escape from the self and connect meaningfully to the world outside. Recent US studies show that, overall, Buddhists really are happier than other people, a difference that shows up in their brains. Richard Davidson at the Laboratory for Affective Neuroscience at the University of Wisconsin in Madison has found that the left prefrontal lobes of experienced Buddhist practitioners light up consistently (rather than just during meditation), which indicates positive emotions and good mood. No antidepressant can make you happy, but Buddhist meditation, consistently practised, perhaps can.

We have used Feldenkrais concepts to create a variation on a traditional Buddhist walking meditation that harnessed the advantages of meditation, body awareness and connection to nature (see Walking Meditation). Just walking in nature is good for your ongoing mood, especially if done with awareness in pleasant, safe and familiar surroundings. It's important to notice variations in colours and shape of the landscape as you walk, as well as differences from the last time you were there. You might notice the shape of a tree, lichen on a rock, the curve of a root, flowers coming into bloom in spring and trees going to sleep in winter. As you give more and more of your mind to these things, the less chance the thoughts that keep you anxious and depressed will have of dominating your consciousness.

### Walking meditation

This exercise is best done on a natural, uneven surface. A park, forest or beach is perfect. Try to find a place and time when there's relative quiet or at least little traffic or construction noise. Before you begin your walk, stand still. Close your eyes. Take in the sounds around you. Be aware of your balance. Don't try to stand in any particular way; just let your skeleton and your muscles hold you comfortably. Allow your arms to fall down by your side and let your head sink onto your chest.

Try to be aware of nothing external except the sounds that come to you. Attempt to identify each sound; is it high or low, shrill or mellow, pleasing or grating. Each sound repeats in a different rhythm. Despite the apparent randomness of natural sound there is, in fact, an underlying order to it. There is a pattern in the way birds repeat their calls and echo each other. There is an underlying cadence in the sound of a brook, a waterfall or the waves on a beach.

You are now ready to begin. Unlike an aerobic walk, this is a slow, ordinary series of steps based on awareness of your feet as they touch the ground. Notice the variation in the ground: subtle changes in the level you walk over, in the texture of the surface, in the way your feet roll over stones or roots. Awareness comes as you notice more and more differences in the same path. You can walk in a circle or in a line. You can go over the same stretch of ground many times or you can walk for about five minutes before turning back. Your eyes should be lowered to the ground, just a few steps ahead.

While walking, give attention to the contact of each foot as it touches the surface. When other things arise in your mind, simply notice what took your attention and gently return your focus to your walking. Towards the end of the meditation, ask yourself what differences you feel in your body and the way you walk from when you started and from when you last did this. Try this for 20 minutes daily or even every few days. It can result in a deep awareness.

Exactly what you focus on during your walks will be unique to you. They are part of your awareness. Through that awareness comes connection: connection to the ground as you notice the changes and variations in it; connection to sounds that you may not have noticed before; connection to trees as you become aware of their individuality.

If you are walking through forest, you may come to realise that each tree is an individual being with its own personality, history and physiology. By walking with awareness you are performing a spiritual act. By consistently doing so, you are loosening the grip depression has on your brain.

## Spiritual unions

Spirituality and religion can also greatly enhance the most powerful antidepressant of all: relationships with other people. The old saying, "The family that prays together stays together", may actually be true, according to recent research by Barbara Fiese and others at Syracuse University. Shared spiritual practices or religious rituals strengthen the bond between people, which may explain why religion took such a hold on the human mind. Other researchers at Duke University have found that the act of going to church and participating in religious rituals — no matter what you believe and even if the church is an atheistic one — can both raise your immune system and elevate your mood.

Relationships themselves can be a spiritual exercise, especially if they're truly supportive and based on the mutual satisfaction of functional needs. In fact, a close union with others can link us to something greater than ourselves, some transcendent entity or "higher power". Any group of mutually supportive people, whether it's an AA meeting or an office, church, club or family, is more than just the sum of its parts. The human brain works differently when it's operating in conjunction with others: it operates faster and reasons better. It's as if the brains of those in the group become parts of a meta-mind, a higher power.

In our 20-year marriage, we have come to see the union between us as something of this nature. Not long ago we were walking, hand in hand, through the Foreshore National Park in Sydney. It was a beautiful spring day and the sun was creating exciting pools of light through the trees and dancing on the small waves of Sydney Harbour. On such a day and in such a place it was as if we could feel the presence of the consciousness intrinsic to everything, and we were silent, allowing ourselves to experience that presence. All at once Bob stopped and said, in that voice he has when he's been struck by a blinding flash of the obvious: "The relationship is the higher power. I feel watched over, not just by you, but by the relationship!" It was as if the relationship, the marriage, the union, was an entity in itself, containing, but more than, the two of us within it.

That spiritual realisation is profound. Alicia has often said that it's the relationship that enabled her to be healed of depression. Of course, Bob was part of that process, but we believe the real healer was the higher power that was the union itself. It's as if the relationship is partly Alicia, partly Bob and partly "all there is". The marriage rites of religious groups are designed to bring God into the union of two people — the parties make vows not just to each other but also to God and enter into a three-way contract.

You are an innately spiritual being, you are hardwired for spirituality and you can use this wiring to greatly enhance your optimism and overall mood. Whether it's through a firm and uplifting belief system, various meditation techniques, connection to nature or to your pets, group spiritual or religious practices or just by allowing the power of a really supportive relationship, you can escape from the demons of your anxious or depressive self. You can use your spiritual nature to set yourself free. ☺

*References available on request. Bob Murray PhD (psychologist) and Alicia Fortinberry MSc (psychotherapist and Feldenkrais practitioner) are authors of Creating Optimism: A Proven, 7-Step Program for Overcoming Depression (McGraw-Hill, 2004). They offer their Uplift Program workshops in Sydney in July 2004. E: [info@upliftprogram.com](mailto:info@upliftprogram.com), [www.upliftprogram.com](http://www.upliftprogram.com) and [www.creatingoptimism.com](http://www.creatingoptimism.com).*