

The “R Word” and its Effects on Drug Use and Prevention

The American media often depicts religion in a negative context. Recent examples include the sexual abuse of children by members of the clergy, so-called “holy wars,” and the divisive role of religious factions in politics. This has caused many people to question the role and value of religion in our modern world. However, it has been demonstrated that religion offers much to its believers and can be a positive force to help one overcome the harmful influences of society. Teenagers especially, while experiencing one of the most pivotal and confusing times in their lives, can benefit greatly from the sense of community and comfort derived from religion.

A recent study conducted by Willis, Yaeger, and Sandy at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine at Yeshiva University “found that the perceived importance of religion was particularly important for teens who were facing a lot of life stressors.” The research specifically focused on how religiosity provides a “buffering effect” to protect youths from substance abuse (Willis, 2003). However, before examining the findings of the study, it is necessary to establish a clear definition of religion.

According to Koenig, McCullough, and Larson’s *Handbook of Religion and Health* (2001), religion may be defined as “an organized system of beliefs, practices, rituals and symbols to facilitate closeness to the sacred or transcendent (God, Higher Power, or ultimate truth/reality) and to foster an understanding of a person’s relationship and responsibility to others in living together in a community.” This broad interpretation allows for all aspects of the diversity of religions to be included, and illuminates how religion brings one closer with not only the sacred but also with one’s community.

Willis, Yaeger, and Sandy’s study does not focus on a specific religion, or adolescents of a certain racial profile, socioeconomic class or age, but instead is a longitudinal study that surveyed 1,182 New York metropolitan students of different backgrounds annually from 7th to 10th grade. The information was collected by self-report questionnaires indexed with demographic items including family structure, Jessor’s Value on Religion Scale, and a 20-item inventory of life stressors and questions regarding substance abuse. The results of the study confirmed the researchers’ hypothesis that “religiosity would have a buffering effect for the relation between life stress and substance abuse” (Willis, Yaeger & Sandy, 2003). This enlightening research concluded that “those adolescents who viewed religion as a meaningful part of their life and a way to cope with problems were half as likely to use drugs than adolescents who didn’t view religion as important” (Willis, 2003). The impact of religion was found to be critical in order to cope and make strong decisions for many teens. Even as the students developed, the established order and community fostered within their religions allowed for strong moral reasoning and resistance to behaviors that contradicted their beliefs. Although perspectives regarding drug use vary among religions, most main-stream groups oppose recreational drug use. This study provides evidence of the potential impact of religion on preventing drug use.

In addition to preventing drug use among teens, religion also assists young adults in overcoming substance abuse problems. In recent years, there has been an increased focus on the effectiveness of drug treatment programs, both secular and faith-based. A study by researcher Aaron T. Bicknese at Northwestern University investigated a “Christian nonprofit addiction treatment ministry with 130 centers (2885 beds) in the United States” known as the Teen Challenge International. The name is somewhat of a misnomer, since the average participant is 31 years old; yet there is a large program for teens in many areas. The study compared the effectiveness of participants’ abstinence from drug use in two different programs, Teen Challenge and a secular, publicly-funded Short-Term Impatient (STI) drug treatment program. The Teen Challenge participants were generally more severely addicted to multiple drugs. The study found that “86% of those Teen Challenge graduates interviewed for his study were abstaining from drugs,” and only 14% have had problems craving alcohol as compared to 29% in the STI group. Furthermore, only 19% of the Teen Challenge graduates have had problems craving other drugs, compared to 35% in the STI group. Bicknese also collected data regarding “what makes the program work”. The overwhelming response was “Jesus Christ/God,” thus supporting the healing power of religion. The Teen Challenge emphasizes the “vibrant faith in Jesus Christ” and claims that the “‘Jesus Factor’ is still the only true answer to the drug problem” (Kenney, 1999).

Even at an overwhelmingly liberal, suburban high school that is less than 10 minutes outside of Washington, D.C., many students turn to their religious faith for guidance and moral teaching, rather than to their peers or youth culture. Willis explains the value of religion as he states, “Religiosity may influence a person’s attitudes and values, providing meaning and purpose in life. It could also help persons to view problems in a different way” (2003). Religion is only one mode of instruction of values and structure. Like many schools of thought, religion can be dangerous. A too literal interpretation has caused disaster and misfortune throughout history. It is important to understand that the benefits of religion rely on self motivation and a sense of appreciation for a community of shared believers.

In a fundamental sense, religion is not meant to provide divisions or create fear, but help individuals. The “R Word,” as religion is often referred to, denotes a somewhat apprehensive tendency to doubt religion (Witham, 1995). However, religion maintains a vast historical significance, and hopefully future generations will see the beneficial aspects of a positive religious outlook. No matter what God, higher power, or understanding one adopts, the strength of personal belief can push one to seek a purpose in life and a personal identity.

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