

Mardons: Science shows benefits of prayer and meditation

On March 11, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 to be a global pandemic. The designation confirms pieces of information reported by international media.

COVID-19, also known as the coronavirus, crosses international boundaries, is highly infectious, and can be lethal. Europe's response has been swift; a surging infection rate and death toll have public health agencies calling for the cancellation of public gatherings.

Italy, Europe's epicentre of COVID-19, has mandated the closure of schools and businesses while urging the public to stay home and avoid unnecessary contact with others. Canada's COVID-19 infection and mortality statistics are low. However, Canadians are beginning to see similar closures of events, buildings, and public services.



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Social distancing, a public health measure used to slow the spread of an illness, is the motivating principle behind these cancellations. For places of social worship, such as churches, mosques, and synagogues, social distancing introduces unique challenges to spiritual practice.

Public worshippers may feel isolated from their parishioners. They may worry about the implications social distancing has on their spirituality and well-being. While benefits of social spirituality are well documented, there is

evidence that solitary and small-group spiritual practice has certain health benefits as well. Specifically, meditation and prayer have positive effects on the immune system, even when practiced alone.

A 2017 article in the journal *Advances in Mind-Body Medicine* describes the link between stress, meditation, and a healthy immune system. The review, conducted by Ayman Mukerji Househam and colleagues, compiles research from several of the world's leading health-science databases.

Househam concludes that social or solitary meditation leads to reduced levels of stress, which helps the immune system function properly. This boost in immune function results from the body's cells fighting off inflammation, producing and distributing chemicals called neurotransmitters throughout the body. Strikingly, the authors recommend integrating meditation and spiritual practice into a daily wellness routine to achieve this desirable immune system response.

Another study from the Institute for Mind-Body Medicine, a department within Massachusetts General Hospital, describes how prayer creates a 'relaxation response' in the human body. This relaxation response allows the body to carry out processes that boost our health, such as energy metabolism, cellular function, and reduced inflammation. The overarching benefit of these processes is an enhanced immune system that can fight illnesses such as COVID-19 more effectively.

COVID-19 has our attention transfixed on news and social media. We may wonder how day-to-day life will change as the virus becomes prevalent in our work, play, and worship activities. Canadians are beginning to witness the beginnings of social distancing, and many brace for a stall in day-to-day life as schools and businesses potentially shutter for the foreseeable future.

For most Canadians, the strain caused by COVID-19 is psychological. Such disruption to social and spiritual routine leaves many feeling despondent and alone. Medical literature points to meditation, mindfulness, and prayer as a potent non-prescriptive supplement to our mental and physical health.

When used in conjunction with other healthy habits, such as a nutritious diet and regular exercise, spiritual practice can bolster the immune system and quiet the mind. If Canada follows suit with Europe and Asia by closing public spaces, solitary prayer and meditation is a compelling alternative to social worship and may help Canadians stay healthy in body and mind.

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