

People with strong faith have better mental health

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First, we have to give credit where credit is due. President Duterte should be commended for not only immediately signing the Philippine Mental Health Law, or Republic Act 11036, but openly supporting it.



This law will certainly help erase the stigma on people with mental illness. It ensures better access to professional health care for those suffering from depression, severe anxiety and worse cases, like schizophrenia.

Once this law is enacted—hopefully soon, because I think we have had a sudden surge of anxiety cases lately—mental health services will become available up to the barangay level. Government hospitals will also be enjoined to integrate mental health in their core programs to increase awareness and ensure availability of psychological or psychiatric services for all cases.

The law also seeks to improve mental health facilities and promote mental health education in schools and workplaces, so people won't be ashamed to admit they're seeing a psychologist or psychiatrist.

In the United States and Europe, highly accomplished people and celebrities openly admit that they're seeing a shrink—slang for a mental health professional. It's nothing to be embarrassed about.

The new law now mandates PhilHealth, the government health insurance provider, to subsidize outpatient psychiatric consultations and treatment, and not just hospitalization for serious psychiatric illness.

Stressors

A psychiatrist friend once told me, “The higher an individual goes up the ladder of success, the more the stressors are, and the more the need to get ‘back-up’ support from a clinical psychologist or psychiatrist.”

I totally agree with that, and the new mental health law should broaden everyone's horizons and look at mental problems from a different perspective—as an ailment no different from physical ailments like heart disease or cancer, which need expert care. If ne-

glected and left untreated—because “it’s only in the mind” —it can snowball into something serious and potentially tragic.

This brings us to the next point. It seems ironic that President Duterte is a staunch advocate for mental health, and yet is causing so much damage to the collective mental health of the nation.

Somehow, in the last two years, people have tried to adjust to his being crass and insensitive. But nothing prepared us for what he said about the God all Christians worship. I’m not a religious person, but if the statement caused me to lose sleep, I figure the anxiety must be more for those who are religious and spiritual.

For many Christians, one’s faith in God is a strong anchor that can protect one from going haywire amid the various crises in life. Our faith has allowed us to weather all storms, and there is actually scientific data showing the stress-alleviating effect of faith.

Although faith and spirituality are abstract concepts we cannot logically concretize — hence, President Duterte’s dilemma in trying to understand the mystery of creation with his logical mind—a strong spirituality results in concrete benefits by enhancing mental health and making stress manageable.

Faith and spirituality offer comfort and solace when one feels low and depressed. They activate the psychological compensatory mechanisms we have in our body, so more beneficial hormones like endorphins (the “happy hormones”) are secreted.

Personal relationship

A strong personal relationship with God is also associated with optimism, enriched interpersonal relationships, strengthened support systems and better quality of life. The bottom line is a positive impact on mental health.

There is now fairly robust scientific data establishing a scientific link between faith and mental health. In the majority of these studies and scientific reviews, the conclusion of the authors is that the stronger the faith, the greater the positive effects on their mental health.

A review of 148 studies published in 2002, involving more than 98,000 subjects, sought to determine if a person’s amount of religiousness had any effect on depression. The authors’ conclusion showed a promising inverse link between the two; the more religious a person was, the fewer the depressive symptoms.

Buffer effect

This benefit was also noted to be stronger during periods of high stress. This phenomenon is now known as the buffer effect of faith and spirituality.

In another meta-analysis or review of scientific literature published in 2008, researchers analyzed 115 articles to determine the relationship between religiousness or spirituality and adolescent substance abuse, anxiety, depression, delinquency and suicidality (serious thoughts about taking one’s own life). The authors reported that nine out of 10 of the

articles showed a significant relationship between religiousness and improvement of mental health.

Another study published in the *Journal of Aging and Health* in 2009 looked at the relationship of church attendance and marital status in relation to mood, as seen in older adults.

Close to 800 adults enrolled in the study were followed up for eight years. The authors concluded that regular church attendance exhibited a protective effect on the overall health of the older adults. The researchers theorized that being religious and having a strong faith gave people a stronger sense of purpose and meaning in life.

Offspring

The last landmark study I'm going to cite was published in the *American Journal of Psychiatry* in 2012. This was a longterm study that investigated the relationship between religiousness and major depression.

This study is more interesting because it looked at the offspring of parents with depression. The hypothesis was that these offspring were considered at high risk for also developing depression.

After 10 years of follow-up, offspring of depressed parents—who are members of either Catholic or Protestant denominations, and described religion as highly important in their lives—had a 76 percent less risk of experiencing an episode of major depression. This suggested that one's faith and spirituality can have a protective effect on people who may have genetic or familial tendencies to develop depression.

When one's faith is viciously attacked by no less than the most powerful and influential man in the country, it is inevitable that the mental health balance of many will be shaken terribly. People now fear what divine punishment could befall the President, and many worry about what will happen to our country. In Biblical times, the curse could extend to the people who do nothing to correct any disrespect of God or blasphemy, as some describe what the President has committed.

I believe our faith and spirituality have provided us the inner strength that made us resilient as a nation through all the crises we've been through. That the President himself should rock our "spiritual boat" makes me realize how inadequate I am in understanding the minds of other people.

My finite mind assures me, though, that we have an infinite, loving and ever-patient God who remains in full control, even if some of His followers don't give Him the respect and love due Him.