

# First Person / We are all prodigal sons: Spirituality can help redeem men's health

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By Anthony Isacco

Sunday mornings are always the same for me. I wake up, drink coffee (black), read the newspaper and then head to Mass with my family. It's probably the best part of my week.

I belong to a wonderful faith community at St. Bonaventure Parish in Shaler. I grew up in this parish, went to school there, was married there. It is a joy to see many of the same churchgoers I saw when I was a child, while also being part of the new "Young Adult Movement."

I go to church, my dad does, many of my male friends do. In fact, I see many men at church each week -- single men, fathers, grandfathers, married, not married. In many ways, I feel inspired by these men to live a better life, to be a better father and man.

However, my experience may be different from the norm among men in the United States.

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According to the Pew Research Center, women are more religious than men. Pew surveys indicate that men are less likely to be affiliated with a religion and less likely to consider religion to be important in their lives, to believe in a personal God or universal spirit, to pray or to attend weekly worship services.

I have mixed feelings about these statistics. They stand in stark contrast to my personal experiences, yet the conclusions reached by Pew confirm some of my professional experiences as a counseling psychologist.

I have worked with many college-aged men who lacked meaning in their lives and have suffered from depression, anxiety and social isolation. These men were good guys but seemed to make terrible choices about their health and well-being. They just seemed lost.

When I would inquire about their spiritual or religious beliefs, almost all gave me some kind of answer that equated to "that's not for me" or "I used to belong to a church, I don't now." My hunch was that there was a connection between their problems and lack of spiritual experiences. But this was a tough connection for college-aged men to make.

During these clinical moments, my mind recalled the familiar biblical story of the Prodigal Son. Like the Prodigal Son, these men have set out to distant lands, away from their families and communities of origin to prove themselves as earners, providers, self-made men. After all, this is what so many boys learn -- to become a man you need to take risks, be independent, earn your own way, become self-reliant.

Going to church and praying to a God is like asking for help; it's the safe route. Relying on a God means that you don't rely on yourself. Becoming a man and being religious may seem at odds to some men. It's not a surprise, then, that men are less religious than women.

So, the question becomes why should men, like the Prodigal Son, come back?

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I can't provide an answer from a moral or theological perspective. I'll leave that to ministers, priests, reverends, theologians and spiritual advisers.

My answer comes from a bit of research I engaged in recently. I reviewed more than 150 scientific articles in such fields as psychology, medicine, nursing and social work that dealt with religion, spirituality and men. There is compelling evidence that being religious or spiritual is healthy for men!

Specifically, religion and spirituality have been linked to fewer depressive symptoms and completed suicides, to a lower risk of cardiovascular disease and to a reduced risk of nicotine and substance abuse -- to name just a few of the positive connections. What explains this apparent link?

That is a tough question to answer and I am sure we all have our hypotheses. But it seems as though being religious or spiritual are important in two ways for men.

First, religion and spirituality can provide valuable internal coping resources. Second, belonging to a community of believers can provide valuable external support. The ability to cope and social support help promote healthy lifestyle choices, provide meaning and produce positive emotions for many men.

So, should men be encouraged to pray and go to church?

I think so. Aside from the health benefits, there is an important theme of redemption in the Prodigal Son story.

If you look up redemption in the dictionary, it means to reclaim, to come back better, to atone for mistakes. What man doesn't need some redemption from mistakes, to be better and healthier, to feel welcomed into a community?

I suppose we all do, and that's why we're all prodigal sons.

Anthony Isacco is an assistant professor of counseling psychology at Chatham University ([aisacco@chatham.edu](mailto:aisacco@chatham.edu)). For more information on men's health, visit [www.menshealthmonth.org](http://www.menshealthmonth.org).  
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