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Study finds less depression among weekly churchgoers

by Nancy Frazier O'Brien by Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON -- Past studies have shown that those who attend religious services at least weekly tend to live longer and healthier lives. Now, new research indicates that frequent churchgoers also face those additional years with more optimism and greater social support than other people.

A study involving more than 92,000 postmenopausal women showed that those who reported weekly attendance at religious services were 56 percent more likely to be above the median in terms of their optimism level. They also were significantly less likely to be depressed or to be characterized by cynical hostility.

Titled "Psychological and Social Characteristics Associated with Religiosity in Women's Health Initiative Participants," the study was published in *Journal of Religion and Health* Nov. 11. The research was conducted by a team led by Eliezer Schnall, clinical associate professor of psychology at Yeshiva University in New York.

In a telephone interview with Catholic News Service Nov. 10, Schnall said the study was a natural follow-up to his earlier research showing that those who attended weekly religious services had a lower mortality rate over the eight-year period studied than those who attended less frequently or not at all.

The new study was "one of the first to look at" whether there were negative factors or social strains associated with frequent church attendance, particularly among such a large sample group, Schnall said. He compared such factors to the negative side effects that can sometimes accompany the use of beneficial medications.

The research team postulated that "maybe there could be some social strains having to do with religious identification or networks or associations," he said. "For example, it could be a support system but discourage associating with others not of the belief system, or be a source of strife in marriages or fodder

for disagreement" with other relatives or friends, he added.

But instead the researchers found that women who attended religious services, regardless of frequency, "were significantly more likely to report higher than media level of overall social support," the study said. Those who attended weekly or more frequently were 54 percent more likely to be high in social support.

"We looked at the religious practices of nearly 100,000 women and -- like it or not -- found a strong connection between going to church or synagogue or any other house of worship and a positive outlook on life," he said in a news release about the study.

Schnall told CNS that the researchers deliberately did not look at the specific religion of the women studied.

"We realized that in a post-9/11 era, comparing and contrasting one religion to the next ... in the hands of those who have axes to grind, those kinds of comparisons would create more heat than light," he said.

The study, which used data from the long-running Women's Health Initiative Observational Study, was funded by the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute of the National Institutes of Health. No margin of error was given for the figures.

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