

# Physiological responses to spiritual stimuli: prayer and healing

## **Results:**

Student volunteers from a Portuguese university (N=217) completed two inventories: *Personal Belief System* and *Attitudes towards Meditation*. A subset (N=78) completed a laboratory study of physiological response to meditative prayer. Half of the subjects meditated with a neutral, sub-vocal, mental device, then shifted to a mental device consistent with the individual's belief system. Half reversed the order. EEG and skin conductance data were recorded as well as subjective reaction to the meditation.

It was theorized, following the work of Benson (1996), that the use of a belief system-consistent device would elicit states of repose more profound than those elicited with a neutral device.

In the second half of the experiment, the group using the belief system-consistent device showed a marked increase in alpha activity. Both subjects with strong religious and non-religious components in their personal belief systems reported more positive feelings toward the meditation experience.

Correlational evidence suggests an individual difference factor: A possible trait of high and low alpha-emitting groups emerges after a period of 8-9 minutes in the relaxed state brought on by the Benson technique. The high alpha group displayed externality of causality and a greater religious component in their belief systems.

The evidence suggests that the technique of meditative prayer may be a useful therapeutic tool to assuage the cognition-emotion-stress link. The existence of a strong personal belief system—religious or non-religious—seems fundamental to the efficacy of this coping mechanism. Major limiting factors may include the necessity to practice the technique and a possible trait predisposition for the benefits of the technique.

## **Published Work:**

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