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Spiritual Life

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Dose of spirituality has healthful effect

Midway through a flu season that has been mild after the initial panic over a possible vaccine shortage, the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is reminding the public that flu cases usually peak this month or next. Since we're not out of the viral woods yet, don't be shocked if a devout doctor offers this advice: Say two prayers and call me in the morning.

A variety of studies suggest that emotional happiness, including the kind often found among members of spiritual and religious communities, bolsters the immune system against the flu, colds, and other illnesses.

Among the apostles of spirituality in healthcare is the New England School of Whole Health Education, hidden in a shoe box of an alley in Wellesley. School founder Georgianna Donadio stresses the emotional and spiritual aspects of health. Mixed in the curriculum with "Anatomy & Physiology," "Applied Nutrition," and other traditional-sounding courses are offerings that examine major world religions, how they share a version of the Golden Rule, and why it's good for health.

Donadio, who last year won an advocacy award from the Massachusetts Nurses Association, is a Roman Catholic and a host of a long-running show, "Woman to Woman," on Boston Catholic Television. A chiropractor with a doctorate in education, Donadio says "it is not a mysterious process



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Georgianna Donadio contends that physical health has emotional and spiritual aspects.

— religion, faith, and spirituality — in terms of how it affects our health. Not at all."

"If you're a spiritual person that gets up every day and says, 'Thank you for another day' . . . your nervous system and immune system is going to be affected."

She's not alone in that belief. Newsweek International reported that researchers from the University of Massachusetts Medical School in Worcester and the University of Wisconsin found that a group of people who practiced Buddhist meditation, by stimulating the left prefrontal cortex of the brain, developed a stronger resistance to the flu than those who didn't.

Buddhists needn't be the only beneficiaries. In other religions, prayer has the same power of "eliciting the relaxation response

of meditation," says Dr. Eva Selhub, medical director of the Harvard-affiliated Mind/Body Medical Institute.

Spirituality essentially means "the profound sense that you belong to a larger whole," said Selhub. "If you want to break it down to a science, [spirituality is] basically a bunch of very good behaviors. . . . It's the belief that you want to take care of yourself." That feeling comports with the way humans were designed as social creatures, she says. "When you feel like you're part of a whole, it's actually going to turn the stress response off."

Research into the flu-and-faith link is part of a broader inquiry in recent years into the possible health benefits of spirituality and religion. In 1988, Harvard researchers coined the term "Moth-

er Teresa effect" to describe how merely watching an act of altruism can be good for you.

Subjects were shown a film of the famous nun caring for orphans in Calcutta. The researchers found that the viewers' saliva had increases in immunoglobulin A, which defends against the cold virus. Some of the subjects, Donadio says, didn't even agree with Mother Teresa's religion.

"I don't want to attribute anything to any [particular] religion," Donadio says. Rather, it's the happiness that can come from being part of a community, religious or otherwise, that makes the difference — much the same way, says Donadio, that married people tend to outlive the unmarried. "Aspects of religious community [such as] optimism enhance your health."

Presumably, even Mother Teresa caught an occasional cold. Donadio doesn't advise parents to let their children ignore all the things our mothers and doctors have told us about taking care of ourselves.

If "you're just not sleeping and you're not eating the way you should, are you going to be vulnerable to getting sick? Of course you are. So while spirituality plays a big role, it doesn't mean all you have to do is have a positive attitude. . . . Wash your hands. Eat your fruits and vegetables. Get sleep."

Questions, comments, and story ideas can be sent to spiritual@globe.com.