Suicide and Church Attendance among African Americans and Black Caribbeans

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An article published in Archives of Suicide Research reports on a study that examined the relationship between suicidal behavior and church attendance by African Americans and black Caribbeans. This research found that (1) a sense of closeness to other members of the congregation helps protect churchgoers from suicidal ideation, (2) frequent interaction with church members is higher among those who have made suicide attempts, (3) frequency of church attendance is not protective against suicidality, and (4) negative interactions with other church members are not related to suicidal behavior. This research used data from the National Survey of American Life to explore the relationship between church attendance, social support, and suicidality among African Americans and black Caribbeans (that is, black people of Caribbean heritage living in the United States).

The authors of the article based on this research write that “Research on suicidal behavior has clearly established that religion, and in particular, religious service attendance serves as a protective factor for suicidality.” They point out that the relationship between suicidality and religion has often been used to explain the relatively low rate of suicide among African Americans. The study sought to clarify the relationship of church attendance and social support to suicidal behavior among both African Americans and black Caribbeans, given the similar role that the church plays in both communities. The research did not find any significant differences between the two groups.

The authors identify two of their findings as being particularly interesting. The first is that a sense of being close to other members of the church protected against suicidal ideation. Receiving emotional support from other church members also helped protect people against suicide, but does not appear to be as powerful an influence as the sense of closeness. The authors maintain that these results support other research that indicates that social support functions as a protective factor against suicidality.

The second finding, which the authors called “surprising,” is that frequency of interaction with other church members was positively associated with suicide attempts. Respondents who more frequently saw, wrote to, or spoke on the telephone with other members of their church had a higher rate of lifetime suicide attempts than those who less often interacted with fellow churchgoers. The authors propose that this finding does not imply that interaction with other church members contributes to suicide risk, but that people who have attempted suicide in the past may be more likely than other people to turn to fellow church members for support in coping with emotional difficulties and other problems. It is important to note that the survey asked about suicide attempts and ideation over the respondents’ lifetimes, while questions about churchgoing and interactions with other members of the church focused on current behavior.

The authors also note that two of their findings differed from those of previous research. The first difference is that, unlike some other studies, this study found that “negative interaction with [other] church members was not significantly associated with suicidal attempts or ideation.” The authors attribute this difference to the fact that their survey measured suicidality while other studies often measured psychological distress or health satisfaction.

The second difference is that this study did not find that attendance at religious services protected people from either suicidal ideation or suicide attempts. In fact, a bivariate analysis that excluded some of the other factors discussed here found that “Respondents who attended religious services at least once per week had the lowest likelihood of ever having a suicidal attempt, while those who attended nearly every day had the highest likelihood.” The authors suggest that this difference between their research and previous research on this issue resulted from the fact that most studies compare people who attend church regularly with people who never attend church. Their research excluded people who went to church once a year or never went to church. Thus, their research does not
contradict research which found that people who attend church regularly have lower suicide rates than those who never attend church.

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