

# European Network of Research on Religion, Spirituality and Health

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## Editorial

### Dear colleagues, dear friends

The European network is growing continuously. The Catholic University of Portugal/Lisbon will be our next host and partner for the ECRSH 2020. The conference focuses on "Aging, Spirituality and Health". Prof. Stephan Post will be one of the international keynote speakers. He talks about "Altruism as a pathway to better health in older populations" (see feature article below). More information about our exiting next conference you find on the conference website: [www.ecrsh.eu](http://www.ecrsh.eu).

Again a 4-day pre-conference research workshop with Prof. Harold Koenig, in collaboration with European experts, will be held (<https://ecrsh.eu/research-workshop>). This workshop is a unique opportunity for young researchers to get a highly qualified training in Religion, Spirituality and Health Research.

In this newsletter we also welcome Alexander Weidmann, our new research fellow at RISH. He will be involved in the organization of ECRSH 2020. You also find information about the Jean-Marc Fischer Prize. The topic is "Care and Spirituality" Seeing you all in Lisbon!

*René Hefti*

## Feature Article

### IT'S GOOD TO BE GOOD: ALTRUISM IN AGING AND HEALTH - THE RIGHT DOSE OF HELPING OTHERS

There is strong evidence that helping others in meaningful ways generally results in a happier, healthier, and more resilient life for the giver; and based on the strength of this evidence overall and in subpopulations including patient groups, it then asserts that the time has come for healthcare professionals to prescribe (or recommend) such behavior at sustainable levels generally in the range of two hours per week. I will present details on many studies, including on a population survey of 4,582 Amer-

ican adults 18 years and older, produced by United Healthcare/Volunteer Match Do Good Live Well showing that

- 96% of volunteers agree that volunteering "makes people happier"
- 68% of volunteers agree that volunteering "has made me feel physically healthier," 92% that it "enriches my sense of purpose in life," 89% that it "has improved my sense of well-being," 73% that it "lowers my stress levels," 77% that it "improves emotional health," 78% that it helps with recovery "from loss and disappointment"
- Volunteers have less trouble sleeping, less anxiety, less helplessness & hopelessness; better friendships and social networks, and sense of control over chronic conditions
- 25% volunteer through workplace, and 76% of them feel better about employer as a result



What shall we make of these numbers? Post will highlight the following:

First, Rx G2BG ("Good to be Good") dosage: 100 hours per year spread out to about two hours per week, which is time enough to get fully immersed in an activity on a regular and sustainable basis. Individuals differ psychologically and physically, and they must balance their varying commitments to the nearest and the neediest. Thus, there is no particular dose of volunteering to be prescribed for every individual, other than to

state that a couple of hours per week seems to make an impact on well-being. Going far beyond this threshold does not necessarily increase benefits. It is not the case that the more one gives the better one feels. Such a linear model is untrue. One achieves the "shift effect" through a couple of hours of helping actions that transform one's mode of being and feeling. The benefits begin to tail off once this emotional and behavioral shift occurs, and it is possible overdose at a point where helping becomes stressful and potentially harmful. This will be determined by individual constitution, circumstance, and meaning system.

Second, many are struggling with unhappiness and depression, so any activity that makes 96% of participants feel happier is worth taking seriously.

Third, 68% of volunteers indicate that it makes them feel "feel physically healthier." This is a robust finding. Many of these volunteers are doing work that requires ambulation or other forms of activity, and this frees them from a more sedentary culture.

Fourth, 73% of volunteers report lowered stress. So many of us are completely caught up in the pressures of making ends meet, paying the bills, running from point A to point B, or just handling challenging relationships and responsibilities families and at work. They get free of self-centered chronological time and move into the Now of helping. Getting the mind off the self and the problems of the self through focusing on the needs of others they break free preoccupation with chronos.

Fifth, 78% report that volunteering helps with recovery "from loss and disappointment,". Including widows and widowers.

Sixth, 25% of volunteerism occurred through the workplace. A very broad literature underscores that companies can and do encourage employee volunteerism, which is associated with positive relationships, better attitudes toward companies and employers, greater job satisfaction, strengthened work teams, greater competency and creativity, lower need for mental health care, easier employee recruitment, employee retention, and elevated interac-

tions with customers leading to a better bottom line after about six weeks.

The association between giving and happiness has become so widely accepted that the World Happiness Report 2016 (<http://WorldHappinessReport.com>) includes generosity as one of six categories measured, along with others such as life expectancy, political freedom, and health.

Increasingly, this connection has been taken seriously, even by government think tanks. For example, on October 22, 2008, the leading British governmental scientific group, Foresight issued a major report entitled *Mental Capital and Wellbeing*, in which a campaign for the improvement of mental wellbeing and health was described. One of the five key elements of enhanced wellbeing and prevention of mental illness was “giving to neighbors and communities” (Foresight Project, 2008).

Proverbs 11:15 reads, “those who refresh others will be refreshed.” Martin Buber (1923) described the moral transformation of shifting from “I-It” to “I-Thou,” from a life centered on self as the center of the universe around whom, like the sun, all others revolve. This “I” relates to others only as means to its own ends. But the spiritual and moral self of “I-Thou” discovers “the other as other,” and relates to them in compassion and respect. There is still an “I” of course, but a deeper and better I; science now shows a happier and healthier “I” as well. Every major religion recommends the discovery of a deeper and more profound human nature, designated in various ways as the “true self.” In Acts 20, we find the words, “Tis better to give than to receive,” and these echo down into the Prayer of St. Francis. Now science says it’s so.

*Stephen G Post PhD*

*Professor, Department of Family, Population & Preventive Medicine Stony Brook University School of Medicine*

## Alex Weidmann- Our New Research Fellow

Alex Weidmann studied theology in Switzerland and the United States. He graduated summa cum laude from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois, where he is currently a Ph.D. Candidate. His dissertation research focuses on the intersection of Anselm of Canterbury and the contemporary honor-shame-discourse.

From 2008-14 he served as a pastor in various Swiss churches. In addition to his

dissertation research, he is currently also engaged in several translation projects from English into German. His expertise is systematic and historical theology with an emphasis on atonement theory and inter-sectional liberation theology.



Since August 2019, he is the current fellow at the Research Institute for Spirituality and Health and supports the activities of the institute and will also be contributing to our upcoming special issue of the “Journal of Spiritual Care” by De Gruyter. He also helps to organize the 7th European Conference on Religion, Spirituality, and Health in Lisbon in May of 2020.

## J.-M. Fischer Prize

### Edition 2019-2020

Through the Jean-Marc Fischer Prize, the Doctor Jean-Marc Fischer Foundation encourages reflection in the field of human, social and theological sciences. Three prizes will be awarded in this third contest, which welcomes submissions in French and English from around the world. The theme is: *Care and Spirituality*.

For further information about the prizes (Scientific Prize CHF 3000.-, Special Jury Prize CHF 2000.- and “Culture, Care and Spirituality” Prize CHF 2000.- see <https://fondationdocteurjmf.ch/concours/>.

The deadline for submission of applications is March 31, 2020. If you have any questions contact: [philippe.huguelet@hcuge.ch](mailto:philippe.huguelet@hcuge.ch)

## Announcements

### Meetings & Conferences

#### La Clinique du Sens -The Clinique of Meaning, International Colloquium

On the topic of meaning & spirituality. November 14-15, 2019; Lausanne/Switzerland; [www.unil.ch/issr/clinique-du-sens](http://www.unil.ch/issr/clinique-du-sens)

#### 7<sup>th</sup> European Conference on Religion, Spirituality and Health

Main topic “Aging, Spirituality and Health” May 28-30, 2020; Lisbon/Portugal; for further information see [www.ecrsh.eu](http://www.ecrsh.eu) or download the [first announcement](#).

#### Pre-Conference Research Workshop with Prof. Harold G. Koenig and other experts

May 24-27, 2020; Lisbon/Portugal; for further information see <https://ecrsh.eu/research-workshop> or contact the organizer [rene.hefti@rish.ch](mailto:rene.hefti@rish.ch)

#### Médecine de la Personne, 72nd meeting

On the topic “Solitude in Isolation in Healthcare”. July 22-25, 2020 in Doorn, NL. For further information: <https://www.medecinedelapersonne.org/en/actualites>

#### IGGS-Jahrestagung 2020

On the topic “Spiritual Care in the Family Doctor’s Practice”. 25.-27. September 2020 Ludwigshafen/Rhein, Germany.

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