

European Network of Research on Religion, Spirituality and Health

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Editorial

Dear colleagues, dear friends

After a break of about two years, caused by COVID and its consequences, we are back »on stage«. The present European Newsletter gives an outlook to our upcoming European conference on »Mental Health Care« in Amsterdam.

A short Dutch history on the *Federation of Meaning and Mental Health* as well as an exiting review on »Gratitude and Health« by our guest speaker Prof. Robert Emmons could (and should) strongly motivate you to be part of this event.

I am looking very much forward to meet many of you in person in Amsterdam at the beginning of June and to stay in closer contact for the months to come.

René Hefti, MD

Join us live in Amsterdam or online!
Even only for one day. All informations
here: > [Website ECRSH](#)

8th ECRSH-Conference

Religious, Spiritual and Existential Aspects in Mental Health Care

June 2-4, 2022, Amsterdam

After the involuntary break caused by the pandemic we are looking forward to this event, which finally allows personal encounters again without being divided by screens. Nevertheless the *Organizing Committee* offers online-participation as well for those who can't travel to the beautiful city of Amsterdam.

This will be the 8th *European Conference on Religion, Spirituality and Health* (ECRSH). Our *Research Institute for Spirituality and Health* (RISH), is organizing this event in close partnership with the *European Board* and the *Local Organizing Committee* led by Prof. Arjan Braam, as well as in cooperation with the *Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam* represented by Prof. Hanneke Schap-Jonker.

Probably you are interested in the program and speakers. See an overview right here: > [Program](#)

Religion and Psychiatry in the Netherlands

The national Dutch network *Federation of Meaning and Mental Health* (FZGG.com) is the main collaborator of the *European Network on Religion, Spirituality and Health* in organizing *ECRSH 2022* in Amsterdam. FZGG includes several professional interest groups on religion and mental health, active in The Netherlands and Flanders, Belgium. The initiatives originally represented religious diversity, with the formerly Roman Catholic 'KSGV' and the protestant 'KICG' and 'CVPPP' (see <https://fzgg.nl> for the abbreviations), but also served several professional disciplines such as psychologists, psychiatrists and chaplains. For decades, the Dutch initiatives have provided publications, scientific quarterlies, small scale symposia and even endowed

including seven well-balanced statements that facilitate to incorporate religion and spirituality within clinical psychiatry and psychotherapy (Moreira-Almeida et al., 2016).

From a cultural and religious point of view, societies are rapidly changing in Western Europe, the Dutch society not in the least, with growing secularization and cultural diversity. The clinical interest now finds support in empirical studies, providing insight into how mental health is affected by matters of spirituality, meaning in life, their religious roots, and their existential boundaries. With care and nuance, mental health professionals are able to address these highly personal and therefore highly meaningful subjects in their clinical, therapeutical or nursing practices. The *ECRSH 2022 conference* will provoke thoughts, questions and stimulate scientific exchange that will be fruitful for further research and development, across boundaries.

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Keynote Article Gratitude and Health

I have dedicated the past 20 years of my professional work to declaring and demonstrating one basic point: That gratitude is the deepest touchstone of human existence. That statement may strike you as not particularly scientific, and possibly even hyperbolic. I assure you that in making such a strong claim, I am in good company. Historically, philosophers and theologians have considered gratitude essential to the smooth running of society and a mainstay of philosophical and religious accounts of the flourishing life. Praise abounds. Gratitude has been



professorships. The psychology of religion served as a shared scientific basis. Over the years, the collaboration was growing, promoting dialogue across traditions and disciplines.

International conferences offer an outstanding chance to enrich this dialogue. In 1994, the first international conference was organized, focusing on views by patients and professionals on religion in mental health care (Verhagen & Glas, 1996). In 2002, also in Amsterdam, another international conference was organized on the "*psychological aspects of biblical concepts and persons*" (Glas et al., 2007). One of the co-organizers was the psychiatrist *Herman van Praag*. Within the *World Psychiatric Association* (WPA), it was Van Praag who established the *WPA Section on Religion, Spirituality and Psychiatry* in 2003. Stimulated by psychiatrist *Piet Verhagen*, this section edited a concise '*Position Statement*' on '*Religion, spirituality and psychiatry*', in-

deemed not only the greatest of the virtues, but also the ‘parent of all others’, ‘the secret to life,’ ‘the most powerfully transformative force in the cosmos’, and ‘a virtue as vast as life itself.’

In 1998, I was invited to attend a small conference focused on what were deemed the “classical sources of human strength”: Wisdom, hope, love, spirituality, gratitude, and humility. Each scientist was given the charge of presenting the known body of knowledge on his or her topic and developing a research agenda for the future. My first choice, humility, was taken; instead, I was assigned gratitude. I canvassed the theological, philosophical, and social science literatures, culling insights from these disciplines in an attempt to understand the essence of this universal strength. I discovered that there was virtually no scientific research on it. I set out to alter this state of affairs by conducting the first randomized controlled trial on the effects of gratitude journaling.

We randomly assigned participants one of three tasks, each of which created a distinct condition. We encouraged some participants to feel gratitude, encouraged others to be negative and complaining, and created a third, neutral control group to compare the others with. Every week, the participants kept a short journal. The experiment lasted for ten weeks. A wide range of experiences sparked gratitude: cherished interactions with other people; awareness of physical health; their ability to overcome obstacles; and simply being alive, to name a few. At the end of the 10 weeks, we examined differences between the three groups on all of the well-being outcomes that we measured at the outset of the study. Participants in the *gratitude condition* felt better about their life as a whole, and were more optimistic about the future than participants in either of the other control conditions. To put it into numbers, according to the scale we used to calculate well-being, they were a full 25% happier than the other participants. Those in the *gratitude condition* reported fewer health complaints and even spent more time exercising than control participants did. The gratitude group participants experienced fewer symptoms of physical illness than those in either of the other two groups. We discovered scientific proof that when people regularly engage in the systematic cultivation of gratitude, they experience a variety of measurable and sustainable benefits: Psychological, physical, interpersonal and spiritual. Health and wholeness and wellness and fullness is the result of a grateful mind and a grateful heart. You really cannot overplay the hand of gratitude.

The healing power of gratitude has garnered considered traction, particularly in the field of medicine. A host of published studies have examined the effects of gratitude on health outcomes using state-of-the-art measures of biomarkers of health and disease. Clinical trials indicate that the practice of gratitude can lower blood pressure, improve immune function, and facilitate more efficient sleep. Gratitude reduces lifetime risk for depression, anxiety, and substance abuse disorders. It is a key resiliency factor in the prevention of suicide. Gratitude has been shown to be associated with markers of cardiac health. Grateful people engage in more exercise, have better dietary behaviors, are less likely to



Robert A. Emmons

smoke and abuse alcohol, and have higher rates of medication adherence. Simply stated, gratitude is good medicine.

Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote “In ordinary life we hardly realize that we receive a great deal more than we give, and that it is only with gratitude that life becomes rich.” Gratitude elevates, it energizes, it inspires, it transforms. Without gratitude, life can be lonely, depressing, impoverished. In the face of demoralization, gratitude has the power to energize. In the face of brokenness, gratitude has the power to heal. In the face of despair, gratitude has the power to bring hope. Science reveals these truths that originated centuries ago.

As we turn the page to the next generation of gratitude research, big questions remain. Is there a natural human impulse to express gratitude – to others, to nature, or to God? Will we live grateful lives – both as persons and as a society?

And what will that mean for the quality of our lives, for the lives of those around us, and for our planet? Answering questions such as these will likely require a deep engagement between practitioners, researchers, stakeholders – anyone and everyone with an interest in understanding what it means to be a flourishing human.

Robert A. Emmons, Ph.D.

Professor of Psychology,
University of California

Meetings & Conferences

8th European Conference on Religion, Spirituality and Health

Main Topic: *Religiosus, Spiritual and Existential Aspects in Mental Health Care*
June 2-4, 2022, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, **online-participation possible!**
[Further information see www.ecrsh.eu](http://www.ecrsh.eu)

Online Preconference Research Workshop with Prof. Koenig and European Experts

Basic knowledge and training in religion, spirituality and health research.
May 31 - June 1, 2022, **online by Zoom**
[Further information see www.ecrsh.eu](http://www.ecrsh.eu)

Workshop Empirische Forschung zu Glaube, Psychotherapie und Seelsorge

Internationale Hochschule Liebenzell, (IHL), Bad Liebenzell, Germany,
October 15, 2022
[Further information: rene.hefti@rish.ch](mailto:rene.hefti@rish.ch)

IGGS-Annual Meeting

Topic: *Implementation of Spiritual Care in Health-Institutions*; Salzburg, Austria;
November 4-6, 2022,
[Information see www.iggs-online.org](http://www.iggs-online.org)

Imprint

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