

The Missing Link in Rising Depression Rates?

We're currently in the throes of winter. Or perhaps that's second winter, or even third. With the multiple rounds of snow and cold, it's easy to lose track of where we are.

For those of us in northern climes, it's easy to get the winter blues. A lack of sunshine and yet another snow day can do that to a person. Fortunately, the sun will soon be showing its face for longer periods, thus dissipating the depression of the cold months.

But for many individuals, depression will not disappear with the snow and cold. Indeed, it's no secret that depression is on the rise. [According to](#) a Columbia University study from late 2017, "depression increased significantly among persons in the U.S. from 2005 to 2015, from 6.6 percent to 7.3 percent." Given that this is a "significant" increase, it's even more alarming to hear the depression numbers for teens. In that same time frame, teen depression rates rose from 8.7 percent to 12.7 percent.

What's driving this increase?

Many would guess social media and the comparison and fear of missing out that accompany it. Others would suggest high academic pressure and the explosion of extra-curricular activities.

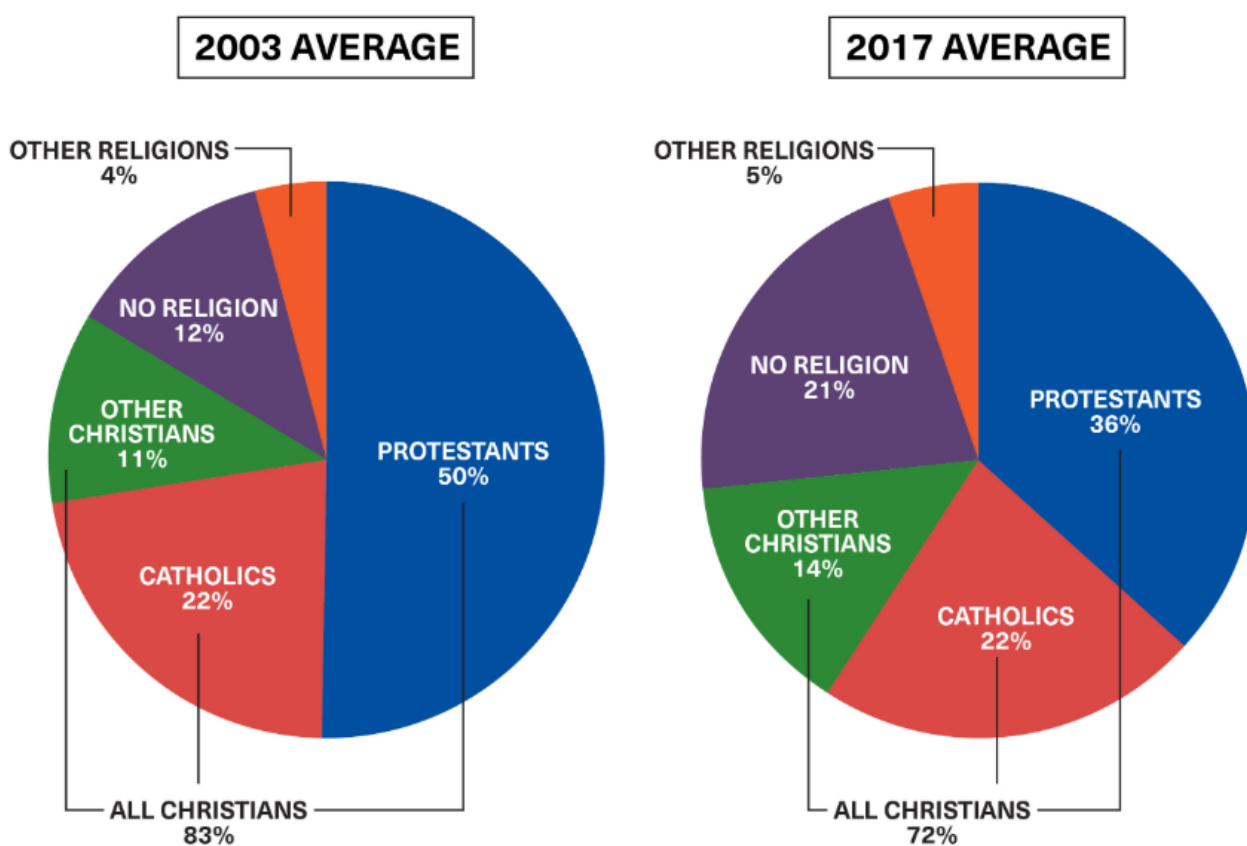
But a [new study](#) gives another interesting explanation: depression may be related to a lack of religion.

According to the study, researchers examined individuals with a family history of depression. Brain imaging showed that when these same individuals placed a high emphasis on religion and spirituality, their brains were structured more like

individuals who had a minimal history of family depression. In other words, religion appears to greatly minimize an individual's tendency toward depression.

This is interesting, particularly as religion has been rapidly declining in recent years. As the [ABC News](#) graphic below demonstrates, those claiming "no religion" rose nine percent between 2003 and 2017.

RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION



SOURCES: ABC NEWS/WASHINGTON POST AND ABC NEWS POLLS



As this is roughly the same time frame as the one in which teen depression skyrocketed, I dug deeper to find out which demographic was experiencing the greatest loss of religion. Perhaps not surprisingly, those in the 18-29 age range were the most likely to move into the "no religion" category.

RELIGIOUS CHANGE OVER TIME

	Protestant			No Religion		
	2003	2017	Diff.	2003	2017	Diff.
ALL	50%	36%	-14	12%	21%	+9
MEN	47	32	-15	14	25	+11
WOMEN	53	41	-12	10	17	+7
AGE 18-29	34	22	-12	19	35	+16
50+	63	47	-16	8	13	+5
WHITES	52	39	-13	12	22	+10
BLACKS	64	61	-3	11	15	+4
HISPANICS	22	14	-8	10	20	+10
COLLEGE GRADUATES	46	34	-12	15	25	+10
NON-COLLEGE GRADS	52	38	-14	11	20	+9
DEMOCRATS	48	36	-12	12	23	+11
REPUBLICANS	60	49	-11	6	10	+4
INDEPENDENTS	44	31	-13	18	25	+7
LIBERALS	40	25	-15	19	35	+16
MODERATES	49	37	-12	12	21	+9
CONSERVATIVES	58	44	-14	8	12	+4

SOURCE:
ABC NEWS/WASHINGTON POST AND ABC NEWS POLLS, BASED ON ANNUAL AVERAGES



Is there a connection? Is it possible that this major decline in religion amongst young people was occurring even during the teen years and is in fact closely related to the rising teen depression rates from the same time frame? And if so, why?

In his book, [Coming Apart](#), sociologist Charles Murray notes the overall decline in American religion and explains how this decline has a ripple effect, influencing participation drop-off in other civic organizations. It seems that without religion, individuals lose their outlet, their community, and their chance of giving back to others, not to mention their

sense of purpose and hope.

Do we need to reconsider our ready dismissal of religion? When we push it aside, do we also push aside many other valuable benefits that it offers?

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