

Islam and Mental Health (part 1)

In our increasingly interconnected and complex world, full of time-pressures, high impact events, and increasingly high costs of living, stress and other mental health-related issues are reaching concerning levels. It seems there is no shortage of stressors in our 21st century lives. What can we do to manage the stress? Do the negative thoughts and feelings we experience reflect a weakness in our faith? I will be exploring these questions and more in this series in shaa Allah.

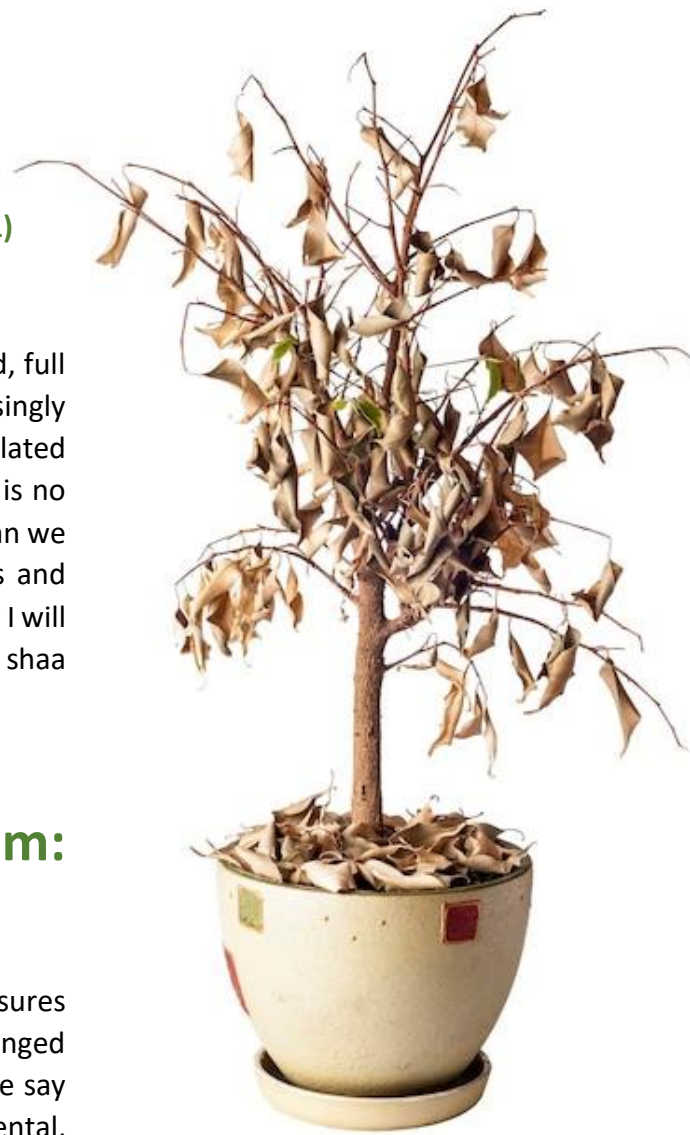
Stress Management in Islam: An Introduction

We have all experienced times where we feel the pressures of life weighing heavily upon us. If the pressure is prolonged and persistent, we can start to feel overwhelmed. We say we feel “stressed”, and we may begin to feel mental, emotional, and physical consequences. A term that has been adopted to describe these feelings is “psychological (or emotional) distress”. It is described as:

Unpleasant feelings or emotions that affect a person’s level of functioning and interfere with the activities of daily living. This distress can result in having negative views of the environment, others and oneself, and manifest as symptoms of mental illness, including anxiety and depression.¹

If allowed to persist, prolonged and unaddressed stress can contribute to depression, and experts believe stress can suppress the production of new neurons in a part of the brain called the hippocampus, which, among other things is responsible for memory and learning².

This article won't stress the connections between different mental health conditions. It will be focusing on psychological distress.



¹ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/mental-health/overview/mental-illness>

² <https://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/what-causes-depression>

Psychological Distress

Although the complexities of modern living may have resulted in psychological distress being more pronounced and widespread today, it is certainly not a new phenomenon. We see evidence of this in our Islamic literature. The definition of psychological distress would certainly fit the condition of Abu Umamah in the below narration:

عَنْ أَبِي سَعِيدٍ الْخُدْرِيِّ، قَالَ دَخَلَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ ذَاتَ يَوْمٍ الْمَسْجِدَ فَإِذَا هُوَ بِرَجُلٍ مِنَ الْأَنْصَارِ يُقَالُ لَهُ أَبُو أُمَامَةَ فَقَالَ " يَا أَبَا أُمَامَةَ مَا لِي أَرَاكَ جَالِسًا فِي الْمَسْجِدِ فِي غَيْرِ وَقْتِ الصَّلَاةِ " . قَالَ هُمُومٌ لَزِمْتَنِي وَدُيُونٌ يَا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ . قَالَ " أَفَلَا أَعَلَمْتُكَ كَلَامًا إِذَا أَنْتَ قُلْتَهُ أَذْهَبَ اللَّهُ عَزَّ وَجَلَّ هَمَّكَ وَقَضَىٰ عَنْكَ دَيْنَكَ " . قَالَ قُلْتُ بَلَىٰ يَا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ . قَالَ " قُلْ إِذَا أَصْبَحْتَ وَإِذَا أَمْسَيْتَ اللَّهُمَّ إِنِّي أَعُوذُ بِكَ مِنَ الْهَمِّ وَالْحَزَنِ وَأَعُوذُ بِكَ مِنَ الْعَجْزِ وَالْكَسَلِ وَأَعُوذُ بِكَ مِنَ الْجُبْنِ وَالنُّحْلِ وَأَعُوذُ بِكَ مِنَ غَلَبَةِ الدَّيْنِ وَقَهْرِ الرِّجَالِ " . قَالَ فَفَعَلْتُ ذَلِكَ فَأَذْهَبَ اللَّهُ عَزَّ وَجَلَّ هَمِّي وَقَضَىٰ عَنِّي دَيْنِي .

One day the Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings upon him, entered the mosque and saw a man from the Ansar called Abu Umamah.

He said: O Abu Umamah, why do I see you sitting in the mosque outside of the time of prayer?

Abu Umamah said: I am entangled in worries and debt, O Messenger of Allah.

He replied: Shall I not teach you words by which, when you say them, Allah will remove your worries, and settle your debt?

Abu Umamah said: Yes, O Messenger of Allah

He said: Say in the morning and evening:

"O Allah, I seek refuge in You from worry and grief,

I seek refuge in You from inability and laziness,

I seek refuge in You from cowardice and stinginess,

and I seek refuge in You from being overcome by debt and being oppressed by men."

Abu Umamah said: When I did that Allah removed my worry and settled my debt.³

³ Sunan Abu Dawud, Book of Witr (prayer), Chapter Regarding Seeking Refuge, Hadith 1555, link: <https://sunnah.com/abudawud:1555>

The attitude and character of the Prophet peace and blessings upon him are clearly apparent in this narration. He observed distress in one of his companions, approached him and addressed him in a curious but gentle manner. What is also curious, although not entirely unique to his interactions, is that he made an offer of a remedy before outlining the remedy. In this way he involved his companion in the process. The companion agreed, and the remedy was offered.

Some of the many lessons that can be understood from the hadith include:

- The *dua* (supplication) mentions several factors that could be considered as either contributors to psychological distress, or inhibitors of recovery. This includes internal factors (grief, worry, inability, laziness, cowardice, and stinginess) and external factors (being overwhelmed by debt and being oppressed by men).
- The *dua* is a reminder that regardless of what you are going through and how alone you may feel, you can always turn to and rely upon Allah.
- Abu Umamah was not rebuked for his distress.
- Abu Umamah's feelings were not dismissed. Instead, they were acknowledged, and a remedy was offered.

This *hadith* is evidence that overwhelming thoughts and emotions are not connected to the strength of our faith or our level of trust in Allah, otherwise it would have been suitable for the Prophet, peace and blessings upon him, to raise it in the above interaction. The companions who experienced psychological distress were not treated in a way that indicated this. Instead, they were treated with understanding and a confident yet gentle reception.





This Worldly Life

It is exceptionally rare that a person will not feel psychological distress during their lifetime. In fact, as Muslims we learn this is all part of the worldly test. Allah says in the Quran:

((وَلَنَبْلُوَنَّكُمْ بِشَيْءٍ مِّنَ الْخَوْفِ وَالْجُوعِ وَنَقْصٍ مِّنَ الْأَمْوَالِ وَالْأَنْفُسِ وَالتَّمَرَّتِ ۖ وَيَشْرَ الْأَصْبِرِينَ. الَّذِينَ إِذَا أَصَابَتْهُمُ مُصِيبَةٌ قَالُوا إِنَّا لِلَّهِ وَإِنَّا إِلَيْهِ رَاجِعُونَ. أُولَئِكَ عَلَيْهِمْ صَلَوَاتٌ مِّن رَّبِّهِمْ وَرَحْمَةٌ وَأُولَئِكَ هُمُ الْمُهْتَدُونَ)) – سورة البقرة 155-157.

We will certainly test you with something of fear and hunger, and loss of property, life, and crops. Give glad tidings to those who patiently endure. Those who, when faced with a calamity, say, “Surely to Allah we belong and to Him we will (all) return.”. They are the ones who will receive Allah’s blessings and mercy. And it is they who are (rightly) guided –
Al Quran 2:155-157.

These verses teach us to make the supplication “*innaa lillaahi wa innaa ilaihi raaji’oon*” (indeed we belong to Allah and indeed we will return to Him) whenever calamities strike.

Unfortunately, today this supplication has been confined for use only when somebody passes away. In the verse Allah uses the *nakirah* (non-specific) form when mentioning calamity. This indicates its relevance to “any” calamity that befalls a person, including the feeling of psychological distress.

These few words exemplify the following:

- The pain that we feel in this life is temporary. We will all one day return to Allah.
- They remind us to remain focused on building our everlasting future in the afterlife, so we refrain from doing things that are compromising to our health or our place in Paradise.
- They are a reminder not to be too attached to matters of this world. The best attachment is to Allah, our Creator.

Imam Qurtuby mentions the following when discussing the verse:

جعل الله تعالى هذه الكلمات ملجأ لذوي المصائب، وعصمة للممتحنين

*Allah has made these words the refuge of those afflicted with calamities,
and a sanctuary for those who are tested.⁴*

He then mentions the hadith narrated by Um Salamah:

قَالَ سَمِعْتُ ابْنَ سَفِينَةَ، يُحَدِّثُ أَنَّهُ سَمِعَ أُمَّ سَلَمَةَ، زَوْجَ النَّبِيِّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ يَقُولُ "مَا مِنْ عَبْدٍ نُصِيبُهُ مُصِيبَةً فَيَقُولُ إِنَّا لِلَّهِ وَإِنَّا إِلَيْهِ رَاغِبُونَ اللَّهُمَّ اجْزِنِي فِي مُصِيبَتِي وَأَخْلِفْ لِي خَيْرًا مِنْهَا إِلَّا أَجْرَهُ اللَّهُ فِي مُصِيبَتِي وَأَخْلَفَ لَهُ خَيْرًا مِنْهَا " . قَالَتْ فَلَمَّا تُوْفِّيَ أَبُو سَلَمَةَ قُلْتُ كَمَا أَمَرَنِي رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ فَأَخْلَفَ اللَّهُ لِي خَيْرًا مِنْهُ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ .

I heard the Prophet, peace and blessings upon him, say: If any servant (of Allah) who suffers a calamity says:

"We belong to Allah and to Him shall we return; O Allah, reward me for my calamity and replace (what I've lost) with something better."

Allah will give him reward for (enduring) his calamity and will give him something better than it in exchange. She (Umm Salama) said: When Abu Salama (her husband) died, I uttered (these very words) as I was commanded (to do) by the Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings upon him. So Allah gave me better in exchange than him. i. e. (I was married to) the Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings upon him.⁵

These words and prayers are a reassurance and a comfort to the heart. They are a connection with the Creator, the One who truly knows and understands us. These words are great companions as we navigate psychological distress or other mental health related issues.

Prolonged and escalating Distress

With prolonged and symptomatic distress, it is important to understand the individual case and present a holistic approach to treatment. Psychological distress does not always entail a diagnosable mental illness. In cases where it does, it would be appropriate to include a specialist in discussions about treatment and management.



⁴ Abu Abdillah Al Qurtuby, Al Jaami' Li-ahkaam Al Quran, tafsir of verse 2:156

⁵ Sahih Muslim, the Book of Funeral (prayers), Chapter on what should be said when a calamity strikes, hadith 918b



Conclusion

Psychological distress was acknowledged and handled with a caring and confident approach at the time of the Prophet, peace and blessings upon him. The supplications mentioned in this article are effective remedies encouraged in Islam for people who experience psychological distress. They offer the following:

- Alleviation of the symptoms of psychological distress.
- A reminder of Allah's reward for those who patiently endure.
- A reminder that the pain and loss endured will be compensated with something better than what was lost if the person turns to Allah with the stated supplication.

In addition to other relevant aspects to the topic of psychological distress, this series will include further remedies as well as exploring healthy and harmful ways of managing stress.

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