

How Islam Deals With Sadness and Worry

كيف يتعامل الإسلام مع الحزن

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The average human being in the developed world battles sadness and worry on a daily basis. While the majority of the world's population confront extreme poverty, famine, conflict and despair those of us privileged to lead relatively easy lives must tackle fear, stress, and anxiety. Why are those of us blessed with riches beyond compare immersed in loneliness and desperation? We are living in a time of confusion, we try as we might, yet gathering material possessions can do nothing to mend broken hearts, and shattered souls.

Now, more than at any other time in human kind's history, stress, anxiety, and psychological problems are taking a tremendous toll on the human condition. Religious beliefs should afford a sense of comfort however; it seems that 21st century man has lost the ability to connect to God. Pondering the meaning of life no longer overcomes a feeling of abandonment. This desire to acquire material possessions, which in some way validates our reason for being, has become the balm that soothes our troubled souls. Why is this so?

We have the best of everything readily available, yet the reality is we have nothing. Nothing that comforts the soul. Beautiful

furnishings do not hold our hand in the darkest night. The latest entertainment centre does not wipe our tears or soothe our furrowed brow. Those of us living with pain and grief, or afflicted with hardship feel abandoned. We feel rudderless on an open sea. Huge waves threaten to engulf us at any given moment. Our desires and debts stand at the apex and loom over us, like great avenging angels, and we search for comfort in addictions and self-destructive behaviour.

How do we step away from the precipice? In Islam, the answer is remarkably simple. We turn back to our Creator. God knows what is best for His creation. He has complete knowledge of the human psyche. He knows of the pain, the despair, and the sadness. God is whom we are reaching for in the darkness. When we put God back on our agenda, the pain will subside.

“Verily, in the remembrance of God do hearts find rest.”
(Quran 13:28)

Islam is not a religion filled with empty rituals and hypercritical rules and regulations, although it can seem so if we forget just what our real purpose in life is. We were created to worship God, nothing more and nothing less. However, God, in His infinite mercy and wisdom did not abandon us to this world filled with trials and tribulations. He armed us with weapons. These weapons are more powerful than the arsenals of the great 21st century armies. God gave us the Quran, and the authentic traditions of His Prophet Muhammad.

The Quran is a book of guidance and the traditions of Prophet Muhammad explain that guidance. The religion of Islam is all about making and keeping a connection with God. This is how Islam deals with sadness and worry. When the wave is about to come crashing down or the world begins to spin out of control God is the one stable factor. The biggest mistake a believer can make is to separate the religious and material aspects of his or her life.

“God has promised those who believe (in the Oneness of God) and do deeds of righteousness, that for them there is forgiveness and a great reward (i.e. Paradise).” (Quran 5:9)

When we accept with full submission, that we are no more than slaves of God, put on this earth, to be tried, tested and tempted, life suddenly takes on a completely new meaning. We recognize that God is the one constant in our lives and we recognize that His promise is true. When we are overwhelmed by worry and sadness, relief comes from turning to God. If we live our lives according to His guidance, we gain the means and the ability to overcome any despair. Prophet Muhammad declared that all the affairs of a believer are good.

Indeed amazing are the affairs of a believer! They are all for his benefit. If he is granted ease then he is thankful, and this is good for him. And if he is afflicted with a hardship, he perseveres, and this is good for him. ¹

Islam has the answer to all the problems that afflict humankind. It asks us to look beyond the need for self-gratification, and further still, beyond the need to acquire possessions. Islam reminds us that this life is but a transient pause on the way to life everlasting. The life of this world is but a fleeting moment, sometimes overflowing with moments of great joy and happiness but at other times filled with sadness, sorrow, and despair. This is the nature of life, and this is the human condition.

In the following three articles, we will examine guidance from the Quran and the authentic traditions of Prophet Muhammad in an endeavor to discover just how Islam suggests that we deal with sadness and worry. There are three key points that will allow the believer to free himself from the shackles of 21st century life. They are patience, gratitude, and trust in God. In the Arabic language, *sabr*, *shukr* and *tawwakul*.

1 Saheeh Muslim

“And certainly, We shall test you with something of fear, hunger, loss of wealth, lives and fruits, but give glad tidings to the patient ones.” (Quran 2:155)

“Therefore, remember Me (God) and I will remember you, and be grateful to Me (for My countless Favours on you) and never be ungrateful to Me.” (Quran 2:152)

“If God helps you, none can overcome you; and if He forsakes you, who is there after Him that can help you? And in God (Alone) let believers put their trust.” (Quran 3:160)

Sadness and worry are part of the human condition. Life is a series of moments. At the two extremes are joyful moments that make our hearts sing with gladness and dark moments that plunge us into sadness and worry. In between is real life; the highs, the lows, the mundane and boring, the sweetness, and light. It is in these times that the believer must try to establish a connection to God.

The believer must forge a bond that is unbreakable. When the joy of life fills our hearts and minds we must not forget that it is a blessing from God and equally when we are faced with sadness and worry we must realize that this too is from God, even though at first glance we may not see the blessing.

God is the Most Wise and the Most Just. Whatever condition we find ourselves in, and no matter what we are forced to confront, it is imperative that we open our eyes to the fact that God knows what is good for us. Though we shy away from facing our fears and worries, it may be that we hate a thing that is good for us and desire something that can only lead to ruin and damnation.

“...and it may be that you dislike a thing that is good for you and that you like a thing that is bad for you. God knows but you do not know.” (Quran 2:216)

The life of this world was designed by our Creator to maximize our chances of living a blissful life in the Hereafter. When we face trials, they help us grow and mature into human beings who are able to function effortlessly in this transient world.

God has not abandoned us in face of the temptations and trials we face in this world, He has equipped us with potent weapons. Three of the most important are patience, gratefulness, and trust. The great Islamic scholar of the 14th century CE, Ibnul Qayyim said that our happiness in this life and our salvation in the Hereafter depend on patience.

“Verily! I have rewarded them this Day for their patience; they are indeed the ones that are successful.” (Quran 23:111)

“...to be firm or patient in pain or suffering, and adversity, and throughout all periods of panic. Such are the people of truth, the God fearing.” (Quran 2:177)

The Arabic word for patience is *sabr* and it comes from a root word meaning to stop, detain, or refrain. Ibnul Qayyim explained² that having patience meant having the ability to stop ourselves from despairing, to refrain from complaining, and to control ourselves in times of sadness and worry. Prophet Muhammad’s son in law Ali ibn Abu Talib defined patience as “seeking God’s help”.³

Whenever we are beset by sadness and worry our first reaction should always be turning to God. By recognizing His Greatness and Omnipotence, we begin to understand that God alone can ease our troubled souls. God Himself advised us to call on Him.

2 Ibn Qayyim al jawziyyah, 1997, *Patience and gratitude*, English translation, United Kingdom, Ta Ha Publishers.

3 Ibid. P12

“And (all) the Most Beautiful Names belong to Allah, so call on Him by them, and leave the company of those who belie or deny (or utter impious speech against) His Names.” (Quran 7:180)

Prophet Muhammad encouraged us to call on God by all of His most beautiful names. In his own supplications, he is known to have said, **“Oh God, I ask you by every name that You have named yourself, or that You have revealed in Your book, or that You have taught any of Your creation, or that You have kept hidden in the unseen knowledge with Yourself.”**⁴

In times of sorrow and stress, contemplating the names of God can bring great relief. It can also help us focus on being calm and patient. It is important to understand that although the believer is encouraged not to thrash about in grief and anguish or to complain about the stresses and problems, he is allowed to turn to God and supplicate to Him and to ask Him for relief.

Human beings are frail. Our tears fall, our hearts break and the pain is sometimes almost unbearable. Even the prophets, whose connection to God was unbreakable, felt their hearts constrict in fear or pain. They too turned their faces to God and begged for relief. However, their complaints were surrounded with pure patience and pure acceptance of whatever fate God had decreed.

When Prophet Jacob despaired of ever seeing his sons Joseph or Benjamin he turned to God, and the Quran tells us that he beseeched God for relief. Prophet Jacob knew that there was no point in raging against the world, he knew that God loves and protects those who are patient.

“He said: ‘I only complain of my grief and sorrow to God, and I know from God that which you know not.’” (Quran 12:86)

Quran also tells us that Prophet Job turned to God begging of His mercy. He was impoverished, stricken with disease, and he

4 Ahmad, classified Saheeh by Al Baniv.

lost his family, friends, and livelihood yet he bore all this with patience and forbearance and he turned to God.

“And (remember) Job, when he cried to his Lord, ‘Verily, distress has seized me, and You are the Most Merciful of all those who show mercy.’ So We answered his call, and We removed the distress that was on him, and We restored his family to him (that he had lost), and the like thereof along with them, as a mercy from Ourselves and a Reminder for all who worship Us (God).” (Quran 21: 83-84)

Patience means accepting what is beyond our control. In times of stress and anxiety, being able to surrender to the will of God is a relief beyond measure. This does not mean that we sit back and let life pass by. No! It means that we strive to please God in all aspects of our life, in our work and play, in our family life and in our personal endeavors.

However, when things don’t go the way we planned or the way we wanted, even when it seems that fears and worries are pushing us under, we accept what God has decreed and continue to strive to please Him. Being patient is hard work; it does not always come naturally or easily. Prophet Muhammad, may God praise him, said, **“Whoever tries to be patient then God will help him to be patient”.**⁵

It becomes easy for us to exercise patience when we realize that it is impossible to count all the blessings God has bestowed upon us. The air we breathe, the sunshine on our faces, the wind through our hair, the rain on the parched earth and the glorious Quran, God’s words to us are all among the innumerable blessings of God upon us. Remembering God and contemplating His greatness is the key to patience, and patience is a key to Paradise

5 Ibn Qayyim al jawziyyah, 1997, *Patience and gratitude*, English translation, United Kingdom, Ta Ha Publishers. P15.

everlasting, God's greatest blessing for the fragile creatures called humankind.

As fragile human beings, we are often swamped by fears and anxiety. At times sadness and worry threaten to take over our lives. These emotions can become so consuming that we forget our primary purpose in life, which is to worship God. When pleasing God is at the centre of all our thoughts, actions and deeds, then sadness and worry can have no place in our lives.

In the previous article, we discussed about dealing with sadness and worry by striving to be patient. We also talked about counting the blessings God has bestowed upon us as a way of encouraging patience. Another way of overcoming sadness and worry is by being grateful to God for His countless blessings. God explains in the Quran, that true worshippers are those who are grateful and give thanks.

“Therefore, remember Me (by praying, glorifying, etc.). I will remember you, and be grateful to Me (for My countless Favors on you) and never be ungrateful to Me.” (Quran 2:152)

There are many ways to express gratitude. The first and foremost way is to worship God in the manner that He has prescribed. The Five Pillars of Islam⁶ were ordained upon us by God and they guide us to worship Him easily. When we fulfill our obligations towards God, just how truly blessed we are becomes obvious.

When we bear witness that, there is no god worthy of worship but Allah and that Muhammad is His final messenger we are being grateful for being blessed with Islam. When a believer prostrates before God in quiet, joyful prayer, we are expressing gratitude. During the fast of Ramadan, we become thankful for food and water by realizing that God provides our sustenance. If a believer

6 Testimony of faith, Prayer, Fasting in Ramadan, Compulsory charity, Pilgrimage.

is able to make the pilgrimage to the House of God in Mecca, it is indeed a cause for thankfulness. The Hajj journey can be long, difficult, and expensive.

The believer also expresses gratitude by giving charity. Prophet Muhammad, may God praise him, advised his followers to give charity everyday to express gratitude to God for every single joint or faculty in his body. ⁷ *Imam Ibn Rajab*, a noted Islamic scholar of the 7th Islamic century said, "Human beings are obligated to give thanks to God every single day for His blessings on them by performing acts of virtue and charity on a daily basis"

If we remember God by reading the Quran and contemplating its meanings, we gain a greater understanding of the life of this world and the hereafter. Consequently, we begin to understand the transient nature of this life and the fact that even the trials and tribulations are blessings from God. God's wisdom and justice is inherent in even the direst situations.

How often have we heard people with debilitating diseases or terrible disabilities thank God for their conditions, or speak about pain and suffering bringing blessings and goodness into their lives? How often have we listened to others speak about horrific experiences and ordeals, yet continue to thank God?

In times of sadness and worry, when we are feeling alone and distressed, God is our only refuge. When sadness and worry become unbearable, when there is nothing left but, stress, fear, anxiety, and misery, we instinctively turn to God. We know His words are true, we know His promise is true!

“..if you are grateful, I will add more favors unto you.” (Quran 14:7)

God knows the wisdom behind why good things happen to bad people, or why bad things happen to good people. In general,

7 Saheeh Bukhari

whatever causes us to turn to God is good and we should be grateful for it. In times of crisis, people are drawn closer to God, whereas in times of comfort we often forget from where the comfort originated. God is the Provider and He is the Most Generous. God wants to reward us with life everlasting and if pain and suffering can guarantee Paradise, then trials and tribulations are a blessing. Prophet Muhammad, may God praise him, said, **“If God wants to do good to somebody, He afflicts him with trials.”**⁸

Prophet Muhammad also said, “No misfortune or disease befalls a Muslim, no worry or grief or harm or distress – not even a thorn that pricks him – but God will expiate for some of his sins because of that.”⁹ We are imperfect human beings. We can read these words, we can even understand the sentiment behind them, but acknowledging the wisdom behind every situation and being grateful for our trials is very difficult. It is much easier to fall into sadness and worry. However, God, the Most Merciful, gives us clear guidelines and promises two things, if we worship Him and follow His guidance we will be rewarded with Paradise and that with hardship comes ease.

“So verily, with hardship, there is ease.” (Quran 94:5)

This verse is part of a chapter of the Quran revealed when difficulties in Prophet Muhammad’s mission were weighing him down and causing him distress. The words of God comforted and reassured him just as they comfort us today. God reminds us that with hardship comes ease. Hardship is never absolute; it is always accompanied by ease. For that, we should be grateful. For that, we need to express our gratitude.

We must accept the trials, triumphs, and tribulations that are part of being alive. Each one of them, from the highest highs to the

8 *Saheeh Bukhari*

9 *Ibid*

lowest lows is a blessing from God. A blessing designed uniquely for each individual person. When we are overcome by sadness or worry we must turn to God, strive to be patient and grateful and put our trust in God. For God is the most trustworthy. By trusting Him, we can overcome any moment of anxiety and conquer any sadness or worry that tries to creep into our lives.

As we move into the new century, those of us privileged to live above the poverty line are faced with a unique set of challenges. We have food enough to eat, shelter from the elements and most of us can even afford life's little luxuries. Physically we have all that we need, but spiritually and emotionally, we are bereft. Our minds are filled with sadness and worry. Stress and anxiety mount. As we gather possessions, we wonder why we are not happy. As we embark on yet another holiday we feel alone and desperate.

A life that is far removed from God is a sad life indeed. No matter how much money we accumulate, or how grand our house is, if God is not the centre of our lives then happiness will elude us forever. True happiness can only be found when we at least attempt to fulfil our purpose in life. Human beings exist to worship God. God wants us to be happy, in this life and in the Hereafter and He has given us the key to real happiness. It is not a secret or a mystery. It is not an enigma or a puzzle, it is Islam.

“And I (God) created not the jinn and humankind except that they should worship Me.” (Quran 51:56)

The religion of Islam explains clearly our purpose in life and gives us guidelines to follow to make our search for happiness easier. The Quran and the authentic traditions of Prophet Muhammad, may God praise him, are our guide books for a life completely devoid of sadness and worry. This however does not mean that we will not be tried and tested because God states very clearly in Quran that He will test us. Our lives will be filled with situations that require us to reach out for God and depend upon Him. God promises us that He will reward those who are patient,

He asks us to be grateful to Him, and He tells us that He loves those who put their trust in Him.

“...put your trust in God, certainly, God loves those who put their trust in Him.” (Quran 3:159)

“The believers are only those who, when God is mentioned, feel a fear in their hearts and when His Verses (this Quran) are recited unto them, they increase their Faith; and they put their trust in their Lord Alone.” (Quran 8:2)

Life is filled with triumphs and tribulations. Sometimes it is a roller coaster ride. One day our faith is high and sweet, the next it has plummeted and we feel sad and worried. The way to even out our journey is to trust that God knows what is best for us. Even when seemingly bad things happen, there is a purpose and wisdom behind them. Sometimes the purpose is known only to God, sometimes it is obvious.

Consequently, when we realise that there is no power or strength except from God, we can begin to relax. Prophet Muhammad, may God praise him, once reminded one of his young companions that God was all-powerful and nothing happens without His permission.

"Young man, uphold the commands of God, and He will protect you in this life and in the next. Uphold the commands of God and He will help you. When you ask for anything, ask it from God, and if you seek help, seek help from God. Know that if people were to unite to do you some benefit, they could benefit you only what God has recorded for you, and if they were to unite to do you some harm, they could harm you only with what God has recorded for you. The pens are withdrawn and the pages are dry." ¹⁰

10 *Ahmad & at-Tirmidhi*

When we are mindful of the fact that God has control over all things and that He ultimately wants us to live forever in Paradise, we can begin to leave our sadness and worry behind. God loves us, and wants what is best for us. God has given us clear guidance and He is the Most Merciful, and the Most Forgiving. If things do not go according to our plan, if we do not see the benefits of the challenges we face in life it can become very difficult not to despair and fall prey to stress and anxiety. At this point, we must learn to trust God.

“If God helps you, none can overcome you; and if He forsakes you, who is there after Him that can help you? And in God (Alone) let believers put their trust.” (Quran 3:160)

“Say: "He is my Lord! None has the right to be worshipped but He! In Him is my trust, and to Him will be my return with repentance.” (Quran 13:30)

“And we shall certainly bear with patience all the hurt..., and in God (Alone) let those who trust, put their trust.” (Quran 14:12)

As believers, our trust in God must be constant, in all situations, good, bad, easy, or difficult. Whatever happens in this world happens by the permission of God. He provides sustenance and He is able to withdraw it. He is the master of life and death. God determines whether we are rich or poor and whether we are healthy or ill. We thank God for granting us the ability to strive and to go out and acquire that which is good for us. Whatever our circumstances may be we need to thank and praise God for them. If need be we must bear our difficulties with patience and above all we must love and trust God. When life becomes dark and difficult we must love God more; when we are overcome by sadness and worry we must trust God more.