

## Stigma, Suffering, and Human Flourishing

The stigma of help-seeking behavior around mental health amongst Muslims across continents has been steadily reducing over the last decade. This has been more evident amongst Generations Y and Z, particularly in Westernized societies. This normalization has been beneficial for many Muslims, as they are more able and willing to access counselling, and psychological services. The increasing awareness around mental health has been gradually built and supported by various Muslims practitioners, faith leaders, as well as governmental policies.

As a young adolescent growing up in a fairly conservative home, I used to wonder if there was anything between prayer and suicide. For some reason, I was adamant that there was something in between accepting one's suffering in silence, and forcing the self *not* to commit suicide. Having grown up in the Middle East, many of my female friends was self-harming or being abused (in every way possible), and there was no outside help. It was a dark reality. On the outside, we were children of diplomats or expats, carefree international students. But on the inside there was torment by our loved ones, our cultures, and misunderstandings of our faith. There was abuse under the pretext of faith. We were often ostracized, humiliated, gaslit. Since then, I had felt a deep awakening towards building a bridge between what was falsely masked as Islam, with knowledge, understanding, relief, and progress. I have painfully learnt to appreciate that in some places in the world, there are neither realistic nor safe solutions. But there are opportunities for help here. We actually *can* find realistic solutions.

In order to address the matter of stigma, let us establish what a mental health stigma is. In my personal and professional opinion, I tend to refrain from using the phrase 'mental illness' stigma. To me, the phrase 'mental illness' carries a negative connotation, implying a disorder. However, as humans, we experience various trials and tribulations during our lifetime. We are exposed to life's lessons and human suffering, from which we build resilience, make meaning, and transform towards personal growth. In some instances, we may cope better with support, whether formally or informally. Having said that, there are also instances whereby some individuals do indeed have psychiatric conditions which require

specialized care, medication, and support. Our internal worlds vary from one to another, as much as our external appearance vary. This means that our internal needs also vary, along with the ways they are met. Thus, for the purpose of this writing, I shall refer to the 'mental illness' stigma, as a 'mental health' stigma.

People with mental health concerns may face stigma, whereby they may be treated differently, rendered 'incompetent', 'crazy', or 'dangerous.' Such prejudices and mindsets can lead our fellow humans, and our Muslim brothers and sisters to be subjected to bullying, violence, various discriminations, and also miss out on appropriate support<sup>[1]</sup>.

A mental health stigma exists because of the lack of understanding towards psychological and emotional health. This is compounded by the negative attitudes and beliefs people have towards mental health<sup>[1]</sup>.

When discussing mental health stigma in Muslim communities, we must also be aware of the intersection of religion, culture, and the mental health stigma itself. Keeping in mind that the stigma can very well be coined as social stigma, we must appreciate that our socio-cultural world has a strong influence in the development of our personal world. We embody many of our values and beliefs through our environment. Not surprisingly, certain values and beliefs begin to shape even before we learn to walk or speak. We absorb them as we grow up, almost like osmosis.

The social stigmas pertaining to culture are well differentiated. For instance, some cultures express (and experience) mental health issues through physical aches and pains, we call this psycho-somatism.

A particular social stigma pertaining to Islam, the myth that the normative Islamic perspective infers to those experiencing emotional or psychological distress to having a compromised faith in Allah, and refuting Qadar (destiny), has been fiercely debated.

Indeed, there is a lot of emphasis on acceptance in Islam. Accepting that human suffering is part of life is essential. We do however have to recognize that we are not always

independently equipped to deal with all challenges independently. Islam recognizes that the human race is deeply social, whereby social support and community is valued. Islam recognizes that we prosper collectively, rather than alone. We can observe that individualist cultures tend to be fragmented with isolation, anxiety, and depression.\*

Furthermore, we tend to search for solutions and support once we have accepted that we have a troubling situation.

*“So, verily, with every difficulty, there is relief: Verily, with every difficulty there is relief.” (Quran, 94: 5-6)*

There is also a lot of evidence around the Messenger of Allah (pbuh), in guiding, teaching and helping those in distress.

Additionally, Abu Darda reported: The Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, said, *“Verily, Allah sent down the disease and the cure, and for every disease he made a cure. Seek treatment, but do not seek treatment by the unlawful.”*<sup>[21]</sup> Thus for the ailments of the mind, heart and soul, seeking treatment is encouraged.

Take depression for instance. Experiencing depression or depressive symptoms, can be judged as a reflection of ingratitude for the blessings that have been bestowed. However, our knowledge around depression is known to have multiple contributing factors such as genetics, hormonal and/ or biochemical imbalances, as well as socio-cultural, and socio-economic influences. Being clinically diagnosed with a mental health illness such as depression, or experiencing depressive-symptoms does not indicate weak faith. One may lack the desire to engage in Islamic practices, and withdraw from gatherings, but these may actually be *symptoms* of someone struggling with mental health. The stigma in this case could play out in further withdrawal and disengagement with the community, and possibly other faith-based practices.

There are many stigma-based fears that may be stirred in one's mind, creating barriers for help-seeking behaviors. Below are some snippets of what the internal dialogue can look like:

Mental health stigma relating to the self:

Am I crazy?

Am I mentally unstable?

I have always been able to handle stressors in life.

This is not me.

I am not weak, or am I?

I am not incompetent, or am I?

Mental health stigma relating to culture:

I can't let people know I am facing this.

They will think I am weak.

These are family matters, dirty laundry should not be aired.

They won't understand.

I don't have anyone I can talk to that would 'get it'.

Professionals are too secular, they won't 'get' my issues.

If I speak to someone in the community, word will get out because there's only a handful of us here in Australia.

My issues are too specific to my culture and my religion, no one's going to be able to help me.

I am not insane, I have problems like everyone else.

I can think fine, I don't hallucinate or hear voices, I just have stress and my body is always hurting.

Mental health stigma relating to faith:

This is a test given by Allah, and I must face this alone.

It is because I have sinned.

I have to suffer to cleanse my sins.

Allah has given me so much, I must tolerate this and not be ungrateful.

I must accept my struggle, it has been ordained so!

Mental health stigma relating to mental health professionals:

An Islamic scholar would be able to best help me, psychologists won't know where I am coming from- they can't meet my needs.

There's no space for therapy in Islam, my faith just needs to be stronger.

Once the social stigma has been internalized, and manifested into self-stigma. There is discomfort in seeking help to avoid being in conflict with culture and religious beliefs. Given the contemporary demographics of the Muslim population, where even Muslims with positive attitudes towards mental healing, the social stigma dies hard. Many researchers have found that this is due to concerns with family social standing, where the disclosure of mental illness or needing mental health support is considered shameful <sup>[3]</sup>.

But why is this even worth exploring on an individual level? Don't things eventually sort themselves out?

Because of human flourishing<sup>[4]</sup>.

The intellectual history of Islam is fascinating. The Islamic Golden Age was said to span from 8<sup>th</sup> century to 14<sup>th</sup> century, rooted in Baghdad<sup>[5]</sup>. When humans flourish, we are able to transcend our true purpose in life, to contribute not only to our families and our communities, but to the society, and humanity. If we allow our mental health issues and society's prejudices to consume us, without tackling them head on, we will constantly battle with them, inhibiting us from seeing past our noses, limiting our potential and influence into the world.

Because humans cannot flourish in a state of constant suffering. Imagine running a school whilst being hooked up to a dialysis machine for hours on end. Now imagine running a school with crippling social anxiety. One would find it very challenging to do more than meet the bare minimum. It would be a miracle to have the mental and emotional energy to develop, to discover, and to improve.

By steering away from seeking help, we are also limiting our knowledge. A lot of psychotherapy and mental health support is in psychoeducation, and coping strategies. Just as one would visit the physiotherapist for strengthening the muscles around a broken bone, consulting with a mental health professional can give insight into *why* a relationship is fractured and how to strengthen it. So without understanding our psychological and emotional ailments, and how to cope with them, we are directly shying away from seeking knowledge.

Seeking knowledge and learning does not only happen through tradition, through schools or scriptures. The active seeking of knowledge also encompasses learning how to navigate through life challenges through other learned ones, that can enlighten our way. Islamic tradition supports this.

Jabir reported that The Messenger of Allah (pbuh) had said, “Verily, the only cure for ignorance is to ask questions <sup>[6]</sup>.”

Ibn al-Qayyim had said, “The Prophet (ﷺ) designated ignorance as a disease and he designated the cure as asking the scholars <sup>[6]</sup>.”

In some of these areas, an Islamic scholar would definitely be able to provide one with his or her spiritual needs. However, the future calls for an integration of Islamic scholars and therapists to work together. In fact, there has been an explosion of interest, and material around Islamic psychotherapy in the last two decades. This simply acknowledges the notion that mental health has always been ingrained in Islamic philosophy. It has just been encrypted through the language and the culture of once upon a time.

Mental health practitioners, and Islamic scholars have concurred that Quranic recitation of *Alif-Lam-Meem* to alleviate the pressures of the *nafs al-lawwam*, the accusatory self, through mindfulness and by stretching the breath through the *harakas*<sup>[7]</sup>. There is also evidence of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) embedded in Islam whereby the Quran and the Hadeeths have articulated identifying unhelpful thoughts, and challenging them<sup>[8]</sup>.

So why then, do we deny ourselves the knowledge towards better versions of ourselves? Why sabotage our personal and spiritual development fearing what others say and think? Why limit our potential and possibilities for our loved ones, and the wider society, by not seeking help when we need it. Instead we should be sidestepping prejudices and stigmas ingrained in us reinforced through culture, media, and myths. Instead we could choose not to allow fallacy to interfere with our personal growth and healing. We should take a stand for the wellbeing of our future generations.

I pose yet another question- to the repercussions of these internalized stigmas:

At what cost?

Although Islam is the largest growing faith worldwide, it still remains a minority in Western societies, and it still remains misunderstood. Thus, discrimination and scrutiny against Muslims continues, particularly after the Christchurch and September 11 attacks, not to mention the ongoing war between Palestine and Israel<sup>[3]</sup>. The disparities in mental health within the Muslim community impacts society as a whole. Muslim people owe it to the *ummah*, and to the reputation of the faith on a global scale. Gradually detangling from unhelpful internalized self and social stigmatization, can not only give room for practitioners and researchers alike to work on robust interventions that are culturally specific, but also unique to the local population, particularly in this vibrant transcultural setting of Australian Muslims. Australia can be the new fertile ground for Muslims to flourish.

*\*I recommend a deeply insightful book called **TRIBE** by **Sebastian Junger** on human social evolution and PTSD. It is also available on Audible.*



**Amirah Shah** is a practicing counsellor and a researcher. She is a member of the **Australian Counselling Association (ACA)**, and does research at the **University of Queensland**.

Her work has predominantly been with culturally diverse populations, addressing anxiety, depression, trauma, end-of-life spiritual care, intergenerational family therapy, and grief.

Her dissertation aims to understand the spiritual experiences of Muslims in the face of grief, in the unique transcultural tapestry of secular Australia.

She runs a practice called **Road to Recovery**: [www.roadtorecovery.org](http://www.roadtorecovery.org). She can be reached via email at [roadtorecovery12@gmail.com](mailto:roadtorecovery12@gmail.com), or through social media at <http://facebook.com/roadtorecovery0/>.

<sup>[1]</sup> Mental Health Stigma. *Trusted Health Advice | Healthdirect*, 18 Feb. 2020, [www.healthdirect.gov.au/mental-health-stigma](http://www.healthdirect.gov.au/mental-health-stigma).

<sup>[2]</sup> Hadith on Medicine: Seek Cure for Disease from What is Lawful." *Daily Hadith Online*, 15 May 2019, [abuaminaelias.com/dailyhadithonline/2016/07/24/seek-healing-not-haram/](http://abuaminaelias.com/dailyhadithonline/2016/07/24/seek-healing-not-haram/).

<sup>[3]</sup> Ciftci, Ayse, et al. "Mental Health Stigma in the Muslim Community." *Journal of Muslim Mental Health*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2013.

<sup>[4]</sup> McEntee, Melanie L., et al. "Human Flourishing: A Natural Home for Spirituality." *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2013, pp. 141-159.

<sup>[5]</sup> History of Islam." *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, Inc, 11 Nov. 2001, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_Islam](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Islam). Accessed 22 Sept. 2020.

<sup>[6]</sup> Hadith on Knowledge: Cure for Ignorance is to Ask Questions." *Daily Hadith Online*, 7 July 2019, [abuaminaelias.com/dailyhadithonline/2019/07/05/cure-ignorance-ask-questions/](http://abuaminaelias.com/dailyhadithonline/2019/07/05/cure-ignorance-ask-questions/).

<sup>[7]</sup> The Qur'an and Mental Health." *The Psychologist*, [thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/volume-31/june-2018/quran-and-mental-health](http://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/volume-31/june-2018/quran-and-mental-health).

<sup>[8]</sup> Islamic Integrated Cognitive Behavior Therapy: A Shari'ah-Compliant Intervention for Muslims with Depression. *M J Psychiatry*, 2 Jan 2019.