

AN INNOVATIVE ISLAMIC COUNSELING

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1. Introduction

Although we all talk about stress, but still it is not clear to many people what stress is really about. Psychology books talk about stress as an emotional and physical reaction to change. It is normal physical and emotional responses to events that make the person feel threatened or upset his/her balance in some way. Along with, stress, in psychology books, it has also been defined as an unpleasant state of emotional and physiological arousal that people experience in situations that they perceive as dangerous or threatening to their well-being. Moreover, the word stress itself means different things to different people. Some people define stress as events or situations that cause them to feel tension, pressure, or negative emotions such as anxiety and anger. Others view stress as the response to these situations. This response includes physiological changes—such as increased heart rate and muscle tension—as well as emotional and behavioral changes. However, most psychologists regard stress as a process involving a person's interpretation and response to a threatening event (Microsoft Corporation 2000).

Stress and coping are interrelated words, when psychologists talk about how people respond to stress; they generally use the word cope. Coping refers to the cognitive, behavioral, and emotional ways that people deal with stressful situations and includes any attempt to preserve mental and physical health even if it has limited value (Moss-Morris & Petrie, 1996). Coping is a dynamic process, not a one-time reaction—it is a series of responses involving ones interactions with the environment. The concepts of stress and coping are neutral. Although people commonly see stress as negative and coping as positive, the relationship is not that simple. Stress can be psychologically positive or negative, and the means of coping can be effective or ineffective in meeting the challenge presented by the stressful situation. The vocabulary of modern science and religion are differ markedly in defining many psychological terms related to human behavior, but they might be agreed with the term of stress and coping as unlikable state of emotions that people experience. Islamic view is not far from the above, to be more clearly let us see to gather stress and coping in Quran.

2. The Usages of Stress in Quran

When the term stress was mentioned in the Quran, it was more related to what people are experiencing in this life. It is the nature of this life that people will suffer from worries and stress, because this world is the place of disease, hardship and suffering. Hence among the things that distinguish Paradise from this world is the fact that there is no worry or stress there:


 لَا يَمَسُّهُمْ فِيهَا نَصَبٌ وَمَا هُمْ مِنْهَا بِمُخْرَجِينَ

“No sense of fatigue shall touch them, nor shall they (ever) be asked to leave.” (Al-Hijr: 48).

Stress is only found on this life, because life is full of stressors; stress is anything that causes mental, physical, or spiritual tension. There is no way people can run from it. All those matters are how one deals with worries and tensions. No doubt that stress is the most common ailment of modern age. It has been implicated in the causation of different diseases as ulcer, heart, depression, hypertension, diabetes and even cancer. Common medical problems like tension headache, insomnia, and obesity are also attributed to unusual stress. None of us are free from stress but some deal with it better than others.

Many scholars agreed that stress results from fear of the unknown and trying to see through and control the destiny, losses in our life for people and things treasured to us and to our inability to recover those losses. And finally, inner conflict between our heart and mind between what is known to be the truth and our failure to accept it as truth.

Let us examine how Quran deals with such situations. But before we go into that point, I would like to highlight the mystic that Islam had made as an intensive study of stress and it is terminology for the term stress. They used words like “*Qalaq*” (worry), “*Ya’s*” (despair), and “*Qunut*” (helplessness) to explain the psychological term of “stress.”

Now the question is why these three words are used for the explanation of the term stress? What are the differences between them? And how are they related to one another? To answer all these questions let us see together in detail the meaning of those words first.

The first word for the term stress in the holy Quran is “**Worry (*Qalaq*)**”. It is a universal human experience, a normal concomitant of living in a world which threatens existence and which struggle against environment, both internal and external, is part of man’s lot. Thus it is conditioned response to fear (Almothwahi, 1990).

﴿٤٦﴾ وَلِمَنْ خَافَ مَقَامَ رَبِّهِ جَنَّاتٍ

“But for such as fear the time when they will stand before (the judgment seal of) their Lord, there will be two Gardens” (Ar-Rahmān: 46)

Whatever the type of fear is, it is always connected with worry. This worry will disappear by the time, if it does not disappear the stress will occur and the person will fail to get the certainty of its life.

The second word for stress in Islam is “**Despair (*Ya’s*)**”. Despair not only directs man on the wrong path, but also affects the powers of the mind, and weakens them gradually, to the point of their destruction (Hussain, 1984). To make this point clearer, let us see what Allah (swt) said in the holy Quran. In surah Yusuf Allah (swt) said:

يَذَّبِنِي أَذْهَبُوا فَتَحَسَّسُوا مِنْ يُوسُفَ وَأَخِيهِ وَلَا تَأْيَسُوا مِنْ رَوْحِ
اللَّهِ إِنَّهُ لَا يَأْيَسُ مِنْ رَوْحِ اللَّهِ إِلَّا الْقَوْمُ الْكَافِرُونَ ﴿٨٧﴾

“And despair not of Allah’s mercy; surely none despair of Allah’s mercy except the unbelieving people” (Yusuf: 87)

A person, who is in the state of disorder and illness, is one from who good is not expected. Allah fearing man, who is mobbed on all sides by the calamities, and misfortunes, and does not find any way out of them, he does neither loose heart, nor does he feel desperate. He rather takes the situation as an outcome of physical and material exigencies; he does not allow the inferiority complex to enter his mind. He is the man who never gets desperate of Allah’s mercy, and who is sure that his share in life is attainable.

On the other hand, a man of materialistic concept of life, who finds himself in such a situation, looses heart, and gets totally frustrated; he often commits suicide, for seeing no value in life. He totally depends on the material or external causes and means of life. So, when he loses every thing, he is frustrated. But the possibilities of human mind have no bounds. Thus a man believes in the gift of the divine mercy, never thinks that he can do nothing now. This, in fact, is the abnegation of his own self. Man should never bow to the exigencies of material conditions (Hussain, 1984).

Allah (swt) said:

إِنْ يَمَسُّكُمْ قَرْحٌ فَقَدْ مَسَّ الْقَوْمَ قَرْحٌ مِثْلُهُ وَتِلْكَ الْأَيَّامُ
خُدَاوِلُهَا بَيْنَ النَّاسِ وَلِيَعْلَمَ اللَّهُ الَّذِينَ عَامَنُوا وَيَتَّخِذَ مِنْكُمْ شُهَدَاءَ
وَاللَّهُ لَا يُحِبُّ الظَّالِمِينَ ﴿١٤٠﴾

“Such days (of varying fortunes) we give to men and men by turns” (Al-E-Imran: 140)

The last word for the term stress in Islam is “**Helplessness (*Qunut*)**”. The man experiences “helplessness” when he or she gets totally frustrated, and has no hope of getting any thing good done in their life. As Allah (swt) said in the holy Quran:

﴿قُلْ يَاعِبَادِيَ الَّذِينَ أَسْرَفُوا عَلَىٰ أَنفُسِهِمْ لَا تَقْنَطُوا مِن رَّحْمَةِ اللَّهِ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَغْفِرُ الذُّنُوبَ جَمِيعًا إِنَّهُ هُوَ الْغَفُورُ الرَّحِيمُ﴾

“Say: O my servants who transgress against their souls; despair not of the mercy of God: for God forgives all sins; he is oft-forgiving, most merciful. Turn ye to your lord (in repentance) and bow to his (will), before the penalty comes on you; after that you will not be helped” (Az-Zumar: 53)

3. The Stress during Prophet’s ﷺ

The Prophets had felt stress in different occasion during his *Da’awah*. And it was mentioned in the book of *Serah*, there was a time when ‘Aa’ishah (R.A) told her nephew ‘Urwah that she asked the Prophet ﷺ: “Did you ever suffer any day worse than the day of Uhud?” He said:

“I suffered what I suffered at the hands of your people, and the worst that I suffered from them was on the day of ‘Aqabah, when I had made an appeal to Ibn ‘Abd Yaalayl Ibn ‘Abd Kalaal and he did not respond in the way I had hoped for. I left him, hardly knowing where I was going, and I did not realize where I was until I had reached Qarn al-Tha’aalib. I raised my head, and saw a cloud, which was shading me. I looked in it, and saw Jibraa’eel, who called to me and said: ‘Allah has heard what your people have said to you, and their response to you. He has sent to you the Angel of the Mountains, to do whatever you tell him to do to them.’ Then the Angel of the Mountains called to me, greeted me, and said, ‘O Muhammad, if you wish, I will crush them between two mountains.’” The Prophet ﷺ said, “Rather, I hope that Allah will bring forth from their descendents people who will worship Allah alone and not associate anything with Him.”

The Prophet ﷺ suffered similar distress when his people disbelieved his account of his Night Journey (Israa’). It was difficult for him to tell the truth, and people do not believe. Abu Hurayrah told us that the Messenger of Allah ﷺ said:

“I found myself in the Hijr (an area in the Haram in Makkah, near the Ka’bah), and Quryash were asking me about my Night Journey, questions about Bayt al-Maqdis that I was not sure of. I felt more distressed and anxious than I had ever felt, and then Allah raised it for me so that I could see what they were asking me about and answer all their questions...”

Based on the above, our prophet was not free from stress, so how about us a normal people whom always having problems. Sure men are not free from stress; they face different kind of stresses in this life. It is usual to see a person who is worry about his/her daily hassles as health problems, financial security, physical safety, social acceptability, performance at work and so on. This pressure with the self is probably one of the most serious forms of worry because it prevents individuals from living stress free conditions. However, you might also see an individual who feels despair of everything in life, he/she feels difficulty to success in an education or in a job, and even winning possessions is difficult to them. Furthermore, seeing a hopeless individual is another issue. You may see a person who loses the hopes in anything and believes that he/she is trapped in misery with no expectation of things ever getting better.

Now is the question how to cope with all those types of stress? How dose our prophet ﷺ cope with his stressors? What Islam says about stress management? As being Muslim scholars we need to answer all those questions in order to help the Muslims Ummah find the best coping mechanisms. Let us now discuss some of the different kinds of remedies and treatments taught by Islam.

4. An Islamic Counseling Skills and Techniques

Individuals cannot remain in a continuous state of tension and emotional strain. We saw spirituality as potentially important because individuals report regular use of religion and spirituality as one strategy for coping with emotional stress (Johnson & Spilka (1991); (Carver, et al (1993)).

Particularly for those undergoing difficult circumstances, we considered that meaning would be facilitative for positive emotions, and serve as a counter for feelings of depression, despair, aimlessness, and hopelessness that might occur. Whether they are conscious of it or not, all individuals have meaning in their lives. Variation in degree among individuals would be expected and likely relate to differential levels of psychological distress (Beck, et al (1979); Brewin, & Power (1997)).

Allah (s.w.t) has given us tools and techniques to solve our problems, by using the Quran and Sunnah. However, Islamic counseling was used earlier and still being used now. It was offered for many issues, for mental health cases, and for religious guidance. Its techniques are based on confidentiality, trust, respect, loving what is good for self and others, good listening habits, understanding, and the ultimate goal of connecting individuals with Allah (s.w.t) and offering spiritual solutions to them. In deed, those skills and techniques was the best used by the Prophet Muhammad. His implementation to those techniques showed him as being the best model and the good example in applying better counseling skills and techniques. In addition, Islamic counseling emphasizes spiritual solutions, based on love and fear of Allah and the duty to fulfill our responsibility as the servants of Allah on this earth. It was reported that Prophet Muhammad was a good listener. Allah has described his patience in listening to others in the Holy Quran.

وَمِنْهُمْ الَّذِينَ يُؤَدُّونَ النَّبِيَّ وَيَقُولُونَ هُوَ أُذُنٌ قُلْ
أُذُنٌ خَيْرٌ لَكُمْ يُؤْمِنُ بِاللَّهِ وَيُؤْمِنُ لِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَرَحْمَةٌ
لِّلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا مِنْكُمْ وَالَّذِينَ يُؤَدُّونَ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ



And say, "He is (all) ear." Say, "He listens to what is best for you: he believes in Allah, has faith in the Believers, and is a Mercy to those of you who believe." At-Tawbah: 61"

Islamic counseling is offered for many issues as marriage and family, mental health, religious guidance and other issues. Allah has indeed heard (and accepted) the statement of the woman who pleads with thee concerning her husband and carries her complaint (in prayer) to Allah:

قَدْ سَمِعَ اللَّهُ قَوْلَ الَّتِي تُجَادِلُكَ فِي زَوْجِهَا وَتَشْتَكِي إِلَى اللَّهِ وَاللَّهُ
يَسْمَعُ تَحَاوُرَ كُفْرًا إِنَّ اللَّهَ سَمِيعٌ بَصِيرٌ ﴿٦١﴾

And Allah (always) hears the arguments between both sides among you: for Allah hears and sees (all things). (Surah Mujadilah: 1)

Quran reminds us that in any form of counseling, or private talks, Allah is present and hears what we are saying. (58:7)

أَلَمْ تَرَ أَنَّ اللَّهَ يَعْلَمُ مَا فِي السَّمَوَاتِ وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ مَا يَكُونُ مِنْ نَجْوَى
ثَلَاثَةٍ إِلَّا هُوَ رَابِعُهُمْ وَلَا خَمْسَةٍ إِلَّا هُوَ سَادِسُهُمْ وَلَا آدْنَى مِنْ ذَلِكَ وَلَا
أَكْثَرَ إِلَّا هُوَ مَعَهُمْ آيِنَ مَا كَانُوا ثُمَّ يَنْبِئُهُمْ بِمَا عَمِلُوا يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ إِنَّ
اللَّهَ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمٌ ﴿٥٧﴾

There is in no private conversation three but that He is the fourth of them, nor are there five but that He is the sixth of them – and no less than that and no more except that He is with them [in knowledge] wherever they are. Then He will inform them of what they did, on the Day of Resurrection. Indeed Allah is, of all things, Knowing (58:7).

Quran also teaches us that the private talk in our counseling is to help others to be righteous and to be obedient to Allah.

يَتَأْتِيهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا إِذَا تَنَجَّيْتُمْ فَلَا تَتَنَجَّوْا بِالْإِثْمِ وَالْعُدْوَانِ
وَمَعْصِيَةِ الرَّسُولِ وَتَنَجَّوْا بِالْبِرِّ وَالتَّقْوَىٰ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ
الَّذِي إِلَيْهِ تُحْشَرُونَ ﴿٩﴾

O you who have believed, when you converse privately, do not converse about sin and aggression and disobedience to the Messenger but converse about righteousness and piety. And fear Allah, to whom you will be gathered (58:9).

As seen above, Islamic counseling is based on great skills and techniques that lead to best coping skills. And now let us see Islam and coping mechanisms.

5. Ways to cope with stress: An Islamic point of view

People often rely on clinical means to deal with stress; nonetheless there are many other natural ways of dealing with it as well. Some Islamic or Quran based tips to deal with stress can be useful. According to Almothwahi (1990), our prophet's (saw) advice was the best to be explained at this point. Our prophet (saw) said:

“Leave what makes you suspicious to what makes you not.”

Almothwahi (1990) added that *Salat* and *dhiker* are the best way to prevent such feelings like worry. Therefore, Allah said:

الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَتَطْمَئِنُّ قُلُوبُهُمْ بِذِكْرِ اللَّهِ أَلَا بِذِكْرِ اللَّهِ تَطْمَئِنُّ
الْقُلُوبُ ﴿٢٨﴾

“For those who believe and work righteousness, is (every) blessedness, and a beautiful place of (final) return” (13:28)

According to Karim (1984), the best way that Islam chooses to treat it is Ummah in the generation of chemicals through the mediation of dhikr “stag”, the tasbih “magnification,” and the Salat “prayer” for mental stability and for curing the mentally ill. He also added, religious basis was recognized by the Prophet (saw) and confirmed by the latest work, where Allah generates in man a tremendous spiritual energy, which changes his attitude toward life and alters his attitude toward the world. From looking inwards he begins to look outwards and thus he enters society (Karim, 1984). It is this faith, which the Quran alludes to the prophet (saw) knew that the emotions have a profound effect upon health, which is evident from the Hadith, that when a man came for advice, he was told never to be angry. This is confirmed in the Quran where “those who restrain their anger” are promised the rewards of paradise.

الَّذِينَ يُنْفِقُونَ فِي السَّرَّاءِ وَالضَّرَّاءِ وَالْكَنُظُمِينَ الْعَظِيمِ وَالْعَافِينَ عَنِ
النَّاسِ وَاللَّهُ يُحِبُّ الْمُحْسِنِينَ ﴿١٣٤﴾

“Who spend [in the cause of Allah] during ease and hardship and who restrain anger and who pardon the people - and Allah loves the doers of good” (3:134)

The act of wudu ‘ablution’ and the salat “prayer,” plus the mental preparation and participation, lead to the development of one’s state of calmness, peace, and relaxation, since it entails forbearance, tolerance, and forgiveness and nobility.

The Prophet (saw) also prescribed unique remedies for the treatment of sorrow, apprehension and fear, the major components in stress. He prescribed the reading of the holy Quran specially the Mu'wadhatayn (surat al-Nas and al-Falaq), which teach man how to seek refuge in Allah and ask his protection. These are anchors in the present-day treatment of the neurosis that base is in security and helplessness (Karim, 1984).

Of the Islamic rituals the most important is the salat. The salat engenders a state of homeostasis in the body, since the period of work stress is interrupted to allow the body to come to rest again. It has been found that during stress, hormones are released which are of the corticosteroid group responsible for hypertension with its sequel of heart attacks and cardiac failure, gastric ulcers, and nervous disorders. In mental sphere, salaah, which requires a reliance on one's creator, will prevent and cure most of neuroses, depression, and major psychosis (Karim, 1984).

It is agreed in Islamic books that salat has physical benefits as well as psychological benefits. Psychologically, the salat promotes mental stability and calmness; it also leads to the mental relaxation and emotional well being. Moreover, the function of the salat is to prevent the person from Al-Fahsha' (i.e. great sins of every kind, unlawful sexual, and other bad behavior). It also makes the person behave well in all matter of life. Physically, the salat leads to good health as person exercise while performing the prayer five times a day.

6. Conclusion

The huge literatures on stress, coping, counseling, religious and health are evidence of the extensive belief that the way people cope is somehow linked to their believes and faith. It is linked to what they see and believe to be coping mechanisms. Medicine and medication proven to neither be inefficient in dealing with the original causes of stress, nor can it adequately eliminate all of its symptoms. Muslim counselors try to find out religious ways of managing stress. Islamic counseling increasingly becomes more popular in Muslim communities. Therefore, Islam is a way of life that guides human beings to the right way, it guides to the level of even how to manage stress and cope with its difficulties. Latest development in psychiatry both in causation and therapy suggest a chemical basis for all mental illness. But the Islamic counseling as way of life and based on the above mentioned as salaah, "dhikr", wudu' and tasbeeh produce mental changes and even psychotic behavior has been demonstrated several decades ago.

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