

# Islamic Spirituality and Mental Well-Being

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## **Author Bio**

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*In the name of Allah, the Most Merciful, the Grantor of Mercy*

## Introduction

Modern science has recently taken a keen interest in the wisdoms found in the ancient eastern traditions such as Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism and Hinduism. In the new field<sup>1</sup> of positive psychology, many of these eastern traditions are utilized to enhance general well-being.<sup>2</sup> The Buddhist practice of mindfulness meditation is a great example of a modern psychological intervention that has been taken directly from the East. A browse through the literature will reveal a plethora of studies that have studied its neurobiological effects and therapeutic benefits.<sup>3</sup> The promising results found in these studies have led to the incorporation of mindfulness meditation into a wide variety of treatment protocols for both physical and mental illnesses.

However, the tradition of spirituality within Islām is arguably the least examined of all the world's major spiritual philosophies in terms of its potential effects on well-being. In the modern era, the Islāmic tradition tends to be spoken of solely in terms of dogma, emphasizing its political, ritual and legal doctrines, while neglecting its profound spiritual and moral dimensions. Historically however, many Muslim scholars dedicated their lives to exploring spiritual and psychological questions of human well-being and flourishing. This paper attempts to uncover some of this lost heritage to demonstrate its relevance to modern discussions in mental health. It is divided into 2 sections: (i) The Role of Spirituality in Emotional and Mental Well-Being (ii) A Psycho-spiritual Analysis of a Prophetically Prescribed Prayer for Anxiety and Depressive Symptoms.

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<sup>1</sup> Positive Psychology represents a movement within psychology recognizing the need to move beyond abnormal psychology (mental illness). It focuses on strengths and virtues rather than disorders and pathology. It was founded by Martin Seligman, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Christopher Peterson in the year 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Snyder C., Lopez S.J., & Pedrotti, J.T. (2010). *Positive psychology: The scientific and practical explorations of human strengths*. Sage Publications. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition.

<sup>3</sup> Chiesa, A., & Serretti, A. (2010). A systematic review of neurobiological and clinical features of mindfulness meditations. *Psychological Medicine*, 40(8), 1239-1252.

## The Role of Spirituality in Emotional and Mental Well-Being

Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456 AH), the famous Andalusian scholar of Islām said, “I searched for a common goal amongst humankind, to which all would agree to strive for excellence. I have not found anything other than the vanquishing of anxiety [*hamm*].”<sup>4</sup>

The pursuit of emotional balance and the dissipation of anxiety is indeed universal and continues until today. Despite the immense scientific progress and medical advancements that have been achieved in the last few centuries, there seems to be a decline in mental health. Rates of depression have dramatically increased between 1988 to 2008 in the United States.<sup>5</sup> It has been found that the use of antidepressants in the population rose 400 percent within this time frame.<sup>6</sup> The rate of suicide tripled in the young (ages 15-24) between 1950 and 2000.<sup>7</sup> For the middle-aged population, rates of suicide have increased 40 percent from 1999 to 2016.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps surprisingly, suicide rates are much higher in wealthier nations than in poorer countries.<sup>9</sup> A cross-cultural study involving 132 countries and close to 140,000 people found that, although there were higher rates of reported happiness in wealthier regions, there were much lower rates of perceived meaning in life compared to poorer countries.<sup>10</sup> People in poorer countries like Niger and Togo reported some of the highest rates of meaning but also the lowest rate of happiness.<sup>11</sup> This suggests that happiness does not explain the disparity in suicide rates rates.<sup>12</sup> A key factor that could explain the variance between countries was the ability of the population to achieve meaning and purpose in life<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibn Ḥazm. *Akhlāq wa as-Sīr*, p. 76.

<sup>5</sup> Smith, E.E. *The power of meaning*, p. 22.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Oishi, S., & Diener E. (2013). Residents of poor nations have a greater sense of meaning in life than residents of wealthy nations. *Psychological Science*, 25, 422-430.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

Abstracting meaning from the world is one of the core features of spirituality.<sup>14</sup> Thus, these studies point to the tremendous value spirituality brings to regulating emotional imbalance. Developing one's spirituality is more important than financial achievements. People often believe that transient states of happiness obtained through entertainment, wealth and possessions will enable them to escape their *hamm* (anxiety). Ibn Ḥazm comments,

“When you think very deeply about all the affairs [of this world], you will be at a loss. Your contemplation will inevitably lead to the understanding that everything in this worldly life is temporary. Thus, one must recognize that true purpose lies in only working for the hereafter [which is eternal]. This is because at the end of all your dreams and aspirations in this world is the eventuality of *huzn* [grief] – Either your ambitions are taken away from you, or you are forced to give up your goals [both pathways will lead to grief]. There is no escape from these two ends except in striving towards God. In this case, a person achieves happiness in this life and for eternity. Their *hamm* is a lot less compared to the *hamm* of humankind. They are respected by friend and foe alike and as for their eternity, then it is paradise.”<sup>15</sup>

Ibn Ḥazm points out that the temporal nature of this world will inevitably lead a person into an existential crisis. Seeking meaning is our way out of the abyss. It is a spiritual endeavor that centers around discovering what makes our life worth living.

### **Spiritual intelligence and the ability to process life events**

Some people tend to think about mental illness and emotional states in purely biological terms. While it is true that there are biological components to our emotions and our mind, they are not the only components. Modern psychology has recognized that a core aspect of the human mind involves spirituality. In fact, Dr. Robert Emmons, a leading researcher in the psychology of spirituality, proposed that spirituality should be thought of as a separate type of human intelligence<sup>16</sup>. Spiritual intelligence is essentially the

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<sup>14</sup> Emmons, R.A. (2000). Is spirituality an intelligence? Motivation, cognition, and the psychology of ultimate concern. *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 10(1), 3-26.

<sup>15</sup> Ibn Ḥazm. *Akhlāq wa as-Sīr*, p. 75.

<sup>16</sup> Emmons, op cit., pp. 3-26.



ability of a person to process the world around them and discover meaning and significance. In the Islāmic tradition, this process involves contemplating the *ayaat* (signs) of God that exist in the world and extracting knowledge to inform us on how to act, think and feel. For example, when a person witnesses the change in trees during the season of fall, he sees it as an *ayah* from God. Perhaps it reminds them of the temporal nature of this world, inspiring them to strive for loftier aims in life. Or perhaps the different colors inspire them to recognize the beauty of the diversity of humankind. When a person with high spiritual intelligence goes through life, his mind is constantly abstracting positive meaning and significance from the events that unfold around him. This fuels positive spiritual states such as inspiration, optimism, gratitude and perseverance.

People with lower levels of spiritual intelligence will either abstract false meanings from the world around them or fail to recognize the *ayaat* of God altogether. This will fuel states such as anger, jealousy, arrogance and conceit. The Qurān provides us with an excellent example of this reality through the story of the man with two gardens. After describing the beautiful nature of these gardens, The Qurān quotes the false notions this man abstracted from it due to his poor spiritual intelligence:

“He said, ‘I do not think this will ever end. And I do not think that the hour will be established, and even if I am returned to My Lord then I will find in with Him an even better placing.’”<sup>17</sup>

As the years in the garden passed, this man failed to recognize the *ayaat* of God manifested in the changing of seasons and the continuous cycle of death and rebirth. This should have directed him to realize the temporal nature of his own life and the fragility of what he possessed. Furthermore, the cycle of death and rebirth should have been an *ayah* of the reality of the hereafter. The righteous companion of this man who had a high level of spiritual intelligence explains what should have been abstracted from these *ayaat*,

“And why didn’t you say when you entered your garden, ‘[This is] What God Wills and there is not capability except through God.’”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Qurān, 18:35.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 18:39.

In the fields of clinical psychology and psychiatry, many practitioners are also starting to recognize the role of spirituality as an essential part of both prevention and treatment for mental illness. In a paper in the *Medical Journal of Family Practice*, the author concludes, "...When appropriate, spiritual issues should be addressed in patient care since they may have a positive impact on health and behaviour, and recommend that the medical model be expanded to a biopsychosocial-spiritual one."<sup>19</sup> A systematic review of multiple studies (which represents one of the highest levels of clinical evidence)<sup>20</sup>, showed that increased levels of spirituality and religiosity in adolescence correlated with better mental health.<sup>21</sup> As we can see, spirituality and the quest for meaning appear to be very important in providing optimal mental healthcare. [

Spiritual stations and strengths also have very strong protective and therapeutic properties. Ibn al-Qayyim (d. 751 AH) explains, "The past can never be changed or corrected with sadness [*ḥuzn*], but rather with contentment [*riḍā*], gratitude [*ḥamd*], patience [*ṣabr*], a firm belief in destiny [*imān bil qadar*] and the verbal recognition that everything occurs by the Decree of God [*qaddarAllāhu wa mā shā wa fa'l*]."<sup>22</sup>

There is a very large body of literature in the field of positive psychology that correlates self-regulation and gratitude with lower incidence of mental illness. Self-regulation is the will power that enables people to act in accordance with their values and long term benefit despite costs to energy or short term pleasure.<sup>23</sup> This construct seems to be represented in the Islāmic spiritual tradition as *ṣabr*. Ibn al-Qayyim mentions that linguistically *ṣabr* has three connotations: (1) restraining, (2) strength and (3) building.<sup>24</sup> He explains that *ṣabr* is the strength of will that enables people to act in ways that brings them benefit.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> McKee, D.D., & Chappel, J.N. (1992). Spirituality and medical practice. *Journal of Family Practice*, 35, 201-205.

<sup>20</sup> Guyatt, G. H., Mills, E. J., & Elbourne, D.(2008). In the era of systematic reviews, does the size of an individual trial still matter? *PLoS Med*, 5(1): e4.

<sup>21</sup> Wong, Y. J., Rew, L., & Slaikeu, K. D. (2006). A systematic review of recent research on adolescent religiosity/spirituality and mental health. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, 27(2), 161-183.

<sup>22</sup> Ibn al-Qayyim, *Zād al-M'aād*, vol 2. p. 325.

<sup>23</sup> Baumeister, R.F., & Vohs, K.D. (2007). Self-regulation, ego depletion and motivation. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 1, 115-128.

<sup>24</sup> Ibn al-Qayyim, *Iddat as-Sabireen wa Dakheerat ash-Shakireen*, p. 35.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, p. 49.

This concept of self-regulation is so significant that Dr. Timothy J. Strauman has proposed that clinical depression is actually a disorder of self-regulation.<sup>26</sup> Regarding gratitude (*shukr*), a study was done correlating gratitude with many different measures of subjective well-being and demonstrated an inverse relationship with several unpleasant states. It showed the strongest negative relationship with depression.<sup>27</sup>

Spirituality is an important component in the healing and protection of the mind. The Islāmic spiritual tradition contains a wide variety of practices and beliefs that can be analyzed for therapeutic benefit. Rather than presenting a comprehensive overview, we have elected to focus on one prescribed practice for anxiety and depressive symptoms: a specific *dua* (prayer) designed to ward off anxiety and depression.

## A Psycho-spiritual Analysis of a Prophetically Prescribed Prayer for Anxiety and Depressive Symptoms.

اللَّهُمَّ إِنِّي عَبْدُكَ، ابْنُ عَبْدِكَ، ابْنُ أَمَتِكَ، نَاصِبِي بِيَدِكَ، مَاضٍ فِي حُكْمِكَ، عَدْلٌ فِي قَضَائِكَ، أَسْأَلُكَ بِكُلِّ اسْمٍ هُوَ لَكَ سَمَّيْتَ بِهِ نَفْسَكَ، أَوْ أَنْزَلْتَهُ فِي كِتَابِكَ، أَوْ عَلَّمْتَهُ أَحَدًا مِنْ خَلْقِكَ، أَوْ اسْتَأْذَنْتَ بِهِ فِي عِلْمِ الْغَيْبِ عِنْدَكَ، أَنْ تَجْعَلَ الْقُرْآنَ رَبِيعَ قَلْبِي، وَنُورَ صَدْرِي، وَجَلَاءَ حُزْنِي، وَذَهَابَ هَمِّي

The Prophet *ṣallAllāhu ‘alayhi wa salam* (SAW) said, “Whoever is afflicted with grief or anxiety, then he should pray with these words, ‘Oh Allāh, certainly I am your slave, the son of your male slave and the son of your female slave. My forehead is in Your Hand. Your Judgment upon me is assured and Your Decree concerning me is just. I ask You by every Name that you have named Yourself with, revealed in Your Book, taught any one of Your creation or kept unto Yourself in the knowledge of the unseen that is with You, to make the Qurān the spring of my heart, and the light of my chest, the banisher of my sadness and the reliever of my distress.’<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Strauman, T. J. (2002). Self-regulation and depression. *Self and Identity*, 1(2), 151-157.

<sup>27</sup> Watkins, P.C., Woodward, K., Stone, T., & Kolts, R. L. (2003). Gratitude and happiness: Development of a measure of gratitude, and relationships with subjective well-being. *Social Behavior and Personality*, 31(5), 431-451.

<sup>28</sup> *Musnad* Imām Aḥmad #3712. Shu‘ayb al-Arnaūt (d. 1437 AH) declared its chain of authorities (*isnād*) to be authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) in his publishing (*taḥqeeq*) of the *Musnad*.



Before delving into the analysis of this prayer we would like to clarify the usage of key terms. When we refer to states such as anxiety and depression we are not necessarily referring to them in the clinical context of mood or anxiety disorders. Anxiety and depression are not considered to be indicative of mental illness unless certain clinical criteria are met. In fact, anxiety and depressed moods can often be useful emotional responses to difficult life circumstances.

It should also be clarified we are not proposing that the psycho-spiritual therapy found in this prophetic prayer should be a replacement for modern therapy. We do not intend to minimize the biological component of treatment. This delicate balance was surprisingly understood by Islāmic scholar Ibn al-Qayyim centuries before the advent of modern psychiatry: “The second category of diseases of the heart are based on emotional states such as anxiety, sadness, depression and anger. This type of disease can be treated naturally by treating the cause or with medicine that goes against the cause...And this is because the heart is harmed by what harms the body and vice versa.”<sup>29</sup>

This disclaimer notwithstanding, it is worth noting that, given the neuroplasticity of the brain, often a profound change in thoughts, attitudes, and emotions as a result of cognitive and spiritual therapy can produce neurochemical alterations that may reduce the need for extensive pharmacologic interventions.<sup>30</sup>

### ***Du'aā* as Psychotherapy**

Unlike other notions of prayer that are often reduced to mere incantations or wish lists, *du'aā* is much more profound. In fact, many of the most powerful *du'aās* in the Qurān do not even contain a request to God. Instead, they are humbling expressions of truth in response to trial and tribulation. For instance, when the Prophet Ayyūb was afflicted with severe disease and poverty he called out, “Indeed, adversity has touched me and you are the Most Merciful of the merciful.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ibn al-Qayyim, *Ighāthat ul-Laḥfaan fī Maṣāyid ash-Shayṭān*, p. 26,

<sup>30</sup> Porto, P.R., Oliveira L., Mari J., Volchan E., Figueira I., Ventura P. (2009) Does cognitive behavioral therapy change the brain? A systematic review of neuroimaging in anxiety disorders. *Journal of Neuropsychiatry & Clinical Neuroscience*, 21, 114-125.

<sup>31</sup> Qurān, 21:83.

In the Islāmic tradition, *du'aās* represent a medium for individuals to strive against the chaos they find in life, recognizing the truths behind it that bring order. It is a method by which believers find meaning which strengthens their underlying belief structures as a means of coping with the events unfolding in their lives.

Clinical psychology recognizes the therapeutic importance of altering the belief structures of a patient experiencing mental illness. One of the most widely used methods of psychotherapy is called Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). It is a therapy designed to encourage positive beliefs and behaviours while altering negative ones: "(it) is essentially a collaborative and individualized program that helps individuals to identify unhelpful thoughts and behaviours and learn or relearn healthier skills and habits."<sup>32</sup>

## Analysis

The *du'aā* can be divided into 4 components. We will explore the deep spiritual themes in each component and examine their relevance to mental well-being.

### ***1 - Oh Allāh, certainly I am your slave, the son of your male slave and the son of your female slave***

One of the most important factors involved overall well-being is having a strong sense of self-awareness. The *du'aā* starts with gaining true self-awareness and understanding of one's fundamental role in the world. Human beings understand themselves in relation to other people. We are embedded in complex social networks and play different roles based on who we are interacting with. We act and think differently when we are with our parents compared to when we are with our friends. We wear different versions of "Us" according to the situation. The process by which a person shifts their personality to correctly align with the social situation at hand is referred to as self-monitoring.<sup>33</sup> This begs the question, who is the real "You"? Is it the "friend You" or the "work You"? Perhaps it is the "family You"? We are reminded in this *du'aā* that the true "You" is the "Slave of God You". This

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<sup>32</sup> <https://www.aacbt.org.au/resources/what-is-cbt/>

<sup>33</sup> Snyder, M. (1974). Self-monitoring of expressive behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 30, 526-537.

“You” is not a separate identity, it is personality that should influence and form all other versions of “You”.

Having said that, the shift in personality that occurs based on the social context is not necessarily a negative thing. Enacting different roles in the world generally enables us to attain what we wish to achieve. We play the employee role and can accomplish our daily tasks and get paid. We play the friend role and the positive interactions result in laughter, joy and fun. We play the father role so we can teach our children. If you acted as an employee to your son, then it would result in a failure of parenting. If we acted as a father to our friends, then it would result in a failure of friendship. It is vital that we know what role we are meant to play for our relationships and our lives to thrive.

What happens when we don't know what role to play? That is usually what results in the onset of anxiety. When a person is anxious about the future it is because they do not know how to act in a way that fulfills their needs. All the versions of themselves fail to work. They are unsure what role to play. As mentioned, we are guided in this *du'aā* to recognize that the fundamental role that permeates all our roles is servitude to God. When we act in the world as a slave of the Most High, we gain clarity on how we are meant to respond in any life situation. When we are wronged we respond with forgiveness as slaves of the Most-Forgiving (*Al-Ghafūr*). When there is oppression we spread justice as slaves of the Most Just (*Al-Muqsit*). When ignorant people are vulgar with us we respond with words of peace as slaves of the Most Merciful (*Ar-Raḥmān*). When we are unsure what the future holds we rely on the One controls everything as slaves of The Disposer of all affairs (*Al-Wakīl*).

### **The Islāmic concept of servitude to God**

A person may see such ideas of servitude and submission as self-deprecating or humiliating. However, servitude and surrender to God are some of the most empowering concepts in the Islāmic tradition. They constitute the source of our true freedom in this world and our escape from its shackles. As we declare our servitude to God, we declare our independence and freedom from everything else in this world. By doing so, we recognize our independence and freedom from whatever we may be grieving over. The relationships we hold dear, the loved ones we cherish, the property we own, the career we have toiled for, the respect we have earned; all of this can be lost in an instant. The

Qurān references this reality with a beautiful parable, “Know that the life of this world is but amusement, diversion, adornment, boasting to one another and competition in increase of wealth and children. The example of this is like a rain that results in plant growth, immediately pleasing the farmers. Then it inevitably turns yellow and then becomes scattered debris...”<sup>34</sup>

As the Qurān mentions, everything in life that we are attached to will eventually leave us. Once they “turn yellow,” we may find ourselves frozen in time. Our conception of ourselves can be so anchored to this world that when it fades, we can lose ourselves. Our attachment to God is meant to be central and our ultimate anchor in life. When we submit and surrender to God, we become content with what we have lost and free ourselves from our own psychological slavery.

Dr. Nazir Khan, a contemporary thinker on Islāmic spirituality, expounds on the various manifestations of psychological slavery in the modern age, “Beautifying one’s appearance would seem to be a healthy expression of freedom, until of course, we witness the alarming devaluation of the self that has become rampant in the modern cosmetic culture...The striking proportion of society willing to go under the knife to change themselves may represent physical freedom to some, but it may also suggest a worrying degree of psychological enslavement.”<sup>35</sup>

“What we are supposed to want and desire is programmed and conditioned into our thoughts by a cultural and marketing tsunami that engulfs our minds right from childhood.”<sup>36</sup>

“Psychological slavery also manifests in an obsession with entertainment, illusion and fantasy. Two decades ago, one author noted that the average American child watched more television by the age of 6, than the amount of time one speaks to one’s father in an entire lifetime.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Qurān, 57:20

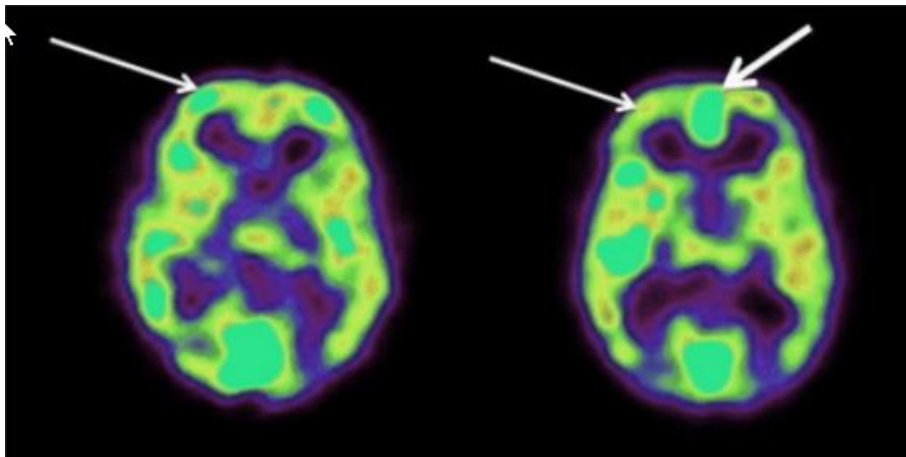
<sup>35</sup> <http://spiritualperception.org/true-freedom-1-escaping-psychological-slavery/>

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

## Neurophysiology of Worship

Interestingly, the freedom and relief that comes with surrendering one's will to God has been found to have profound effects on our brain biology. Some preliminary work that has focused on investigating the neurophysiological effects of *ṣalah* and *dhikr*.<sup>38</sup> By conducting neuroimaging of Muslims performing both actions, the researchers demonstrated that they were associated with a decrease in frontal lobe activity, as measured by cerebral blood flow. The prefrontal cortex is thought to play a role in executive functioning, which includes willpower and decision making. The authors suggested that the act of surrendering to God found in Islāmic practices may underlie the decreased frontal lobe activity found in this study.



*Figure 1: Radionuclide brain imaging (using Technetium-99m exametazime) provides a precise snapshot of regional cerebral blood over five minutes of uptake during Islamic prayer (ṣalah). On the left, the brain activity when ṣalah was performed in an automatic rote manner without khushu' (spiritual focus), and on the right with khushu'. Activity decreases in the frontal cortex and increases in the anterior cingulate gyrus and basal ganglia. Image from Newberg et al. 2015.*

One of the most fascinating features of this investigation was the comparison of prayer performed in an automatic manner without *khushu'* (spiritual concentration) versus prayer performed in a deliberate manner with *khushu'*. The automatic manner of performing prayer had minimal effects in altering the pattern of brain activity and was comparable to daily activity. It was only

<sup>38</sup> Newberg, A. B., Wintering, N. A., Yaden, D. B., Waldman, M. R., Reddin, J., & Alavi, A. (2015). A case series study of the neurophysiological effects of altered states of mind during intense Islamic prayer. *Journal of Physiology – Paris*, 109, 214-220.

when the individual performed prayer in a deliberate focused manner, internalizing the feelings of surrender and submission to God, that a profound neurophysiological change was witnessed with hypofrontalization (decreased activity in the frontal lobes of the brain), as well as increased activity in the basal ganglia (involving the brain's reward system) and the anterior cingulate gyrus. With respect to the latter, the researchers commented, "The anterior cingulate is involved with emotional regulation, learning, and memory, and plays a major role in lowering anxiety and irritability, and enhancing emotional and social awareness."<sup>39</sup>

The feeling of submission produced by *dhikr* and *ṣalah* is significant to our discussion on mental health because of its association with hypofrontality. The transient hypofrontality hypothesis developed by Arne Dietrich in 2006 asserts that decreased activity in the frontal regions can produce a therapeutic effect in certain mental illnesses such as depression, anxiety, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).<sup>40</sup>

The prefrontal cortex is associated with attentional and emotional responses. Thus, hyperactivity in this region can be correlated with hyper awareness and hyper vigilance, leading to an increased level of anxiety. The theory asserts that decreasing activity in the prefrontal region can provide symptom relief. This same model can be used to explain depression and OCD.<sup>41</sup>

It is quite fascinating that this prescribed *du'aā* by the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) starts with very strong themes of surrender. Badr-Ad-Deen al-'Ayni (d. 855 AH) in his explanation of this *du'aā* comments on its unique emphasis on submission, "And in this [statement] is the perfection of submission, humility and gnosis through [the expression of] servitude to God. This is because it was not simply stated 'I am your servant,' but it was further emphasized through 'son of your male servant and son of your female servant.' This indicates a hyperbolic emphasis on submission and servitude to God. This is because the solitary servant is not the same as a servant, whose father is also a servant."<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Dietrich, A. (2006). Transient hypofrontality as a mechanism for the psychological effects of exercise. *Psychiatry Research*, 145, 79-83.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Badr ad-Deen Al-'Ayni, *Al-'Ilm al-Hayyib fī Sharḥ al-Kalima at-Ṭayyib*, p. 343.



Spiritually, submission produces strong feelings of relief and reliance on God (*tawakkul*). Biologically, this correlates to a decreased blood flow in the frontal region, resulting in the suspension of one's will to control and manipulate their environment. The neurological study on *ṣalah* also showed a correlation with increased blood flow in the caudate nucleus.<sup>43</sup> This region is implicated in the reward system of the brain.<sup>44</sup> This may be associated with the pleasure that is felt by believers when they submit their will to God. Thus, *ṣalah* itself can represent a strong form of therapy as indicated in the following narration about the Prophet Muhammad (SAW).

Ḥudhayfah said, "When the Prophet (SAW) would be in an overwhelming situation, he would pray *ṣalah*."<sup>45</sup>

*Ṣalah* is a practice that allows the human being to enter into the presence of the divine with full submission and to spiritually leave this world. The system of *ṣalah* itself includes expressions of independence from the world and surrender to God, as it is recited "You alone we worship and from You alone we seek aid." It includes a prayer for the light of guidance to bring a person out of the darkness, "Guide us to the straight path." Ibn al-Qayyim in his book, *Asraar as-Ṣalah* (The secrets of the *ṣalah*) explains how the postures of the *ṣalah* are physical manifestations of its impact on our spirit. It is a system that aligns the tongue, the limbs and the spirit in perfect harmony. The bowing and prostration are physical manifestations of our spiritual submission to and reliance upon God. Our standing represents the strength that we gain from God, when we turn to Him. This harmony of the body and spirit through submission relieves the stress of the mind and allows individuals to truly recognize their purpose in life and connection with all existence. When one stands in front of one's Lord, one can truly see oneself as interconnected with the rest of creation, all as servants of the Most Merciful.

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<sup>43</sup> Newberg, A. B., Wintering, N. A., Yaden, D. B., Waldman, M. R., Reddin, J., & Alavi, A. (2015). A case series study of the neurophysiological effects of altered states of mind during intense Islamic prayer. *Journal of Physiology – Paris*, 109, 214-220.

<sup>44</sup> Haruno, M., Kuroda, T., Doya, K., Toyama, K., Kimura, M., Samejima, K., Imāmizu, H., Kawato, M. (2004). A neural correlate of reward-based behavioral learning in caudate nucleus: A functional magnetic resonance imaging study of a stochastic decision task. *Journal of Neuroscience*, 24, 1660-1665.

<sup>45</sup> Sunan Abī Dawūd #1319. Ibn Ḥajr al-Asqalānī (d. 852 AH) declared its authenticity as good (*Ḥasan*) (*Takhrij Mishkāt al-Maṣābīḥ* vol. 2, p. 77).

Fundamentally, the theme of submission permeates the entire belief and behavioral system of the Islāmic spiritual tradition. It is the linguistic meaning of “Islām” and the foundation of worship. This powerful concept can be both protective and therapeutic in the context of mental health.

## ***2 - My forehead is in Your Hand. Your Judgment upon me is assured and Your Decree concerning me is just***

In addition to continuing the theme of submission in the previous section, this part of the *du'aā* invokes the concept of Divine Destiny (*qadar*). Destiny is a powerful concept in Islām that allows a person to truly move on from the mistakes they have made and the calamities that have befallen them. This phrase of the *du'aā* reminds the individual that everything that has occurred in one's life is by the decree of God. Necessarily, whatever God decrees is Wise, Just, and Compassionate. Al-'Ayni explains, “Everything You judge concerning me is necessarily just, because justice is Your attribute.”<sup>46</sup> One particular Prophetic narration also speaks to this reality,

Ṣuhayb reported: The Prophet (SAW), said, “Wondrous is the affair of the believer as there is good for him in every matter, and this is not true for anyone but the believer. If he is pleased, then he thanks Allāh and there is good for him. If he is harmed, then he shows patience and there is good for him.”<sup>47</sup>

We are comforted that our pain is not in vain, and that it is all part of the plan of God in our lives. This crucial belief in Divine Decree provides us with the ability to shift our cognitions away from the agitating questions of “Why me?” “What did I do to deserve this?” which only serve to create more distress in our lives. Instead, we recognize that the One who decrees with Wisdom and Justice has decreed it and so there is meaning and purpose in what is occurring and what has occurred. We shift our cognitions towards discovering “What can I learn from this?”, “How can I use this to grow?”

The ability to find meaning in adversity is a key quality that protects against depressed mood and anxiety during intense trials. Viktor Frankl, a holocaust survivor at an Auschwitz concentration camp outlines the meaning-based

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<sup>46</sup> Badr ad-Deen Al-'Ayni, *Al-Ilm al-Hayyib fī Sharḥ al-Kalima at-Ṭayyib*, p. 343.

<sup>47</sup> Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim #2999.

psychotherapeutic approach that helped him and others cope with the horrors they experienced in his book, “Man’s Search for Meaning.”<sup>48</sup>

The realization of truth and development of virtue is the method by which a person perseveres through hardship and finds meaning in it. The Islāmic stories of resilience in the face of adversity capture this reality. When Prophet Yūnus was thrown into the middle of the vast ocean in the darkness of the night, he called out, “There is nothing worthy of worship except you, Exalted are You! I have been of the oppressors.”<sup>49</sup> When Prophet Ibrahīm was being catapulted into the pit of fire, he called out, “God is sufficient for me and the Best Disposer of Affairs.”<sup>50</sup> When Prophet Ādam was expelled from paradise, he called out, “Our Lord, we have wronged ourselves, and if you do not forgive us and have mercy on us, then we will be lost.”<sup>51</sup>

It is intriguing that in such dire circumstances, there are no requests made in any of these *du’aās*. In all of these incredible situations the prophets were able to realize truth in the face of calamity. From these stories we learn about truths we are meant to recognize in our own life experiences. The realization that this life is chaotic and pointless unless one submits to the Divine as seen in the story of Yūnus (AS). The realization of God’s Perfection is stirred when we are in the most intense states of vulnerability as witnessed in the tremendous courage of Ibrahīm (AS). And our extreme destitution and neediness before God is realized in our worst failures as shown in the story of the fall and rise of Ādam (AS). It is through these realizations and expressions of truth that we are delivered from darkness into light.

***3 - I ask You by every Name that you have named Yourself with, revealed in Your Book, taught any one of Your creation or kept unto Yourself in the knowledge of the unseen that is with You***

Charles Snyder, a leading positive psychologist in the study of hope, defines hope as “a positive motivational state that is based on an interactively derived

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<sup>48</sup> Frankl, V. E. (2006). *Man’s search for meaning*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

<sup>49</sup> Qurān, 21:88.

<sup>50</sup> Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī #4563.

<sup>51</sup> Qurān, 7:23.

sense of successful agency and pathways.”<sup>52</sup> This definition essentially states that hope involves possessing agency and pathways. Agency refers to the belief that a person can affect the future and pathways refer to the belief that one has the resources to obtain one’s objectives. In the previous sections of the *du’aā*, we sought strength in our agency through the Power of God. We surrendered our will and capacity to God’s Decree. In this section, we realize the pathways that are available to us to change our situation. The Names and Attributes of God represent the solution to all of our problems. When we are overcome with grief and remorse for what we have done in the past, we recognize that God is *Al-Ghafūr* (The Eternally Forgiving). If we are on the brink of losing our home, unable to provide for our family we call out to *Ar-Razzāq* (The Provider). When we can’t seem to put our life together after being hit with calamity after calamity, we recognize our strength lies in *Al-Qadīr* (The One with Ultimate Power). When we just feel like we are at the bottom of a pit, we never lose hope in the mercy of *Ar-Rahmān* (The Most Merciful).

Hopeful thinking has been associated with higher levels of academic success, physical and psychological health.<sup>53</sup> It provides people with a powerful tool to move through life at times of adversity. One of the strongest spiritual states in the Islāmic tradition is *rajā* (hope) in God’s Mercy. It is described by Ibn al-Qayyim as one of the wings of the believers, “Fear and hope [in God] are like two wings of a bird that are used to fly.”<sup>54</sup>

Hope allows a person to transcend the current situation and live for a better future. Thus, when our backs are against the wall and we feel alone in our fight, we realize that the person who has no one, has Allāh.

This part of the *du’aā* emphasizes the Names and Attributes of God that evoke powerful feelings of awe. As the various epistemic and ontological categories of Names are described, a person is guided to ponder on the majesty of God. This strong feeling of awe also plays a positive role in mental health. Dr. Jonathan Haidt investigated the significance and reality of awe and described

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<sup>52</sup> Snyder, C. R., Harris, C., Anderson, J. R., Holleran, S. A., Irving, L. M., & Sigmon, S. T. (1991). The will and the ways: Development and validation of an individual-differences measure of hope. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 60, 570-585.

<sup>53</sup> Cheavens, J. S., Michael, S. T., Snyder, C. R., & Elliott, J. A. (2005). Interdisciplinary perspectives on hope. *Nova Science Publishers*, 12, 119-132.

<sup>54</sup> Ibn al-Qayyim, *Madārij as-Sālikīn*, vol. 1, p. 517.

it as involving a two-step cognitive process.<sup>55</sup> The first step is experiencing vastness. Vastness is anything experienced or brought to the mind that is larger than one's self or one's ordinary level of experience. The second step is accommodation. When a person experiences vastness beyond what a person's current mental structures are capable of processing, the mind accommodates. There are adjustments made to one's mental structures that allows them to accommodate truths never known or experienced before. In times of hardship, existing knowledge structures are not sufficient. Experiencing awe allows a person to experience rebirth and enlightenment, learning new knowledge that can be used to solve the crisis at hand.

This relates to our previous discussion on truths realized during hardships. As people call upon the Names and Attributes of God, pondering upon their manifestations in their lives, their chests expand through the awe they experience. This expansion provides them with insights and wisdoms that aid them on their journey away from struggle into felicity.

***4 – To make the Qurān the spring of my heart, the light of my chest, the banisher of my sadness and the reliever of my distress***

As our hearts were once filled with sadness and distress, we seek to eliminate these feelings with the illumination of the Qurān. The Qurān is God's guidance for humankind. It is through the light of this guidance that all things are made clear in our lives.

“And We have sent down to you the Book as clarification for all things and as guidance and mercy and good tidings for the Muslims.”<sup>56</sup>

It is through this light that the darkness of our distress is vanquished and all that remains is the radiance of faith.

“A book which We have revealed to you so that you might bring humankind out of darkness into the light by the permission of their Lord to the path of the Exalted in Might, the Praiseworthy.”<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Haidt, J., & Keltner, D. (2003). Approaching awe: A moral, spiritual and aesthetic emotion. *Cognition & Emotion*, 17, 297-314.

<sup>56</sup> Qurān, 16:89.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 14:1.

A regular relationship with this book of guidance further enables our maladaptive thought patterns to transform into a cognitive worldview of optimism, hope, and meaning. There are stories in the Qurān of unimaginable tragedy and hardship that we can resonate with. There are powerful expressions of the power and mercy of God that engender strength and hope. And there are vivid descriptions of the next life that give us the realization of the temporal and insignificant nature of this world compared to the next. The Qurān is the rope that can pick us up after we have fallen.

The positive spiritual and emotional states that were produced in the first parts of the *du'aā* are meant to be continued through a relationship with the Qurān. Feelings of surrender, reliance and hope can become imprinted on us during difficult times through the words of the Qurān. Our belief structures are also built by the Qurānic narrative. This informs us of how to look at the world and how to act in it. It rejuvenates our hearts, inspires us with wisdom, and vanquishes our sorrow.

## Conclusion

The Islāmic tradition sees hardship and adversity as opportunities for establishing absolute dependency on God, submitting to Him, learning truth, and building virtue. It is important for us to realize the profound psychological insight our tradition has and extract this timeless guidance for all to benefit. The Islāmic literature on the field of spirituality is full of writings that focus on building an Islāmic personality. The current paper focused primarily on one Hadīth narration. We recommend further research focus on (1) a more comprehensive study of the Qurān, Hadīth and Sīrah traditions in regards to spirituality and mental health; (2) a critical analysis of theories of mental health, human psychology and personality provided by the classical tradition of Islām; and (3) examining links among various forms of Islāmic worship and Islāmic theology and underlying psycho-spiritual states and mental well-being.