

Mental Health Khutbah for Imams

Firstly, in order to understand what Islam says about mental illness and its reality, we have to understand what mental illness is as an independent issue without the social attachments. Many a time people do not know what mental health is nor do they know how to respond to its sensitivity, which is why you may have come across phrases such as "Why are you being so anorexic", "stop having a nervous breakdown" as a common response when you see people talking to those with mental illnesses such as depression, anxiety, mood and eating disorders. Some may try to brush it off as a "joke" or even try to "normalise" it, but in reality, it's humiliating for those who are suffering from mental health problems and degrading for individuals that use such language. We would never in a million years use cancer or paralysis in the same way. Imagine people saying "Stop having cancer!", and, "life is so disabling". We'd think "how could anyone ever say something like that?" and we would pass them off as ignorant and heartless, because someone who has cancer or is disabled did not bring it on themselves. So what difference does it make when someone has a mental health problem?

Of all the people we Muslims should know what it feels like to be stigmatised, misunderstood and humiliated. People turn their heads and raise their eyebrows at anyone whose name is Muhammad, has a beard or wears the niqab and the hijab (especially at airports). But why is it that we cannot sympathise with people who have mental health? Mental illnesses and symptoms have been used and abused so much out of their rightful context, they are either not taken seriously or have serious stigma attached to them when truthfully – they are just like every other illness the human body and mind may experience. The causes are sometimes unknown, but the illness itself can be detrimental and life threatening, and the road to recovery is not always as simple as prescribing antidepressants, or "just" providing counselling – sometimes, some people may also need a good, solid support network around them, and this is what most communities are slacking on.

On discussing mental health (problems) and Islam, it's important to accept the fact that it does exist and they do affect people in various ways as mentioned before but most importantly to understand that Islam did not come to eliminate depression, sadness or grief, rather it came to regulate it. This is supported by ample evidence from the Quran and Sunnah, which has been later backed by western thoughts and ideas of mental health and general wellbeing.

We have all heard the line "just make dua", and we are by no means debasing the value and power of dua, but in this particular context, for someone suffering from severe depression, trauma or anxiety that line really doesn't suffice – because Islam's purpose is not to eliminate our feelings and thoughts, therefore just using an Islamic tool does not rid the problem. If Islam was to eliminate sadness, then we should not feel sad, ever, because as followers of Islam we should be happy, cheery and the best we can be all the time. However, this would be asking too much from people, and Allah does not burden us with more than we can tolerate. We are supposed to be sad, we are supposed to ask for help, we are supposed to be desperate, and we are supposed to surrender our imperfection which is why Allah says:

"Verily in the remembrance of Allah do hearts find rest"

(Qur'an 13:28)

Therefore, when sadness is not regulated and gets out of control extra help/support is needed. This extra help and support may also be out of the framework of Islam. But anything that does not contradict the Islamic teaching can and should be utilised, thus we should seek and receive the right support and help when needed, whilst keeping Allah our first point of contact. Just because anti-depressants and counselling are not strictly Sunnah, it doesn't mean it's not supposed to be done. So simply saying to someone who is on the verge of a breakdown that all they need to do is make dua and rely on Allah can shatter their confidence even more.

In order for us to understand better what mental health is and its importance, we can look back to the lives of the most noble and blessed people before us. They too experienced extreme sadness and grief. Take Yaqub (AS) who mourned over the loss of Yusuf A.S for many years and eventually became blind from excessive crying. Then there is our Prophet (saws) who has a year in his life called “The year of grief” where he experienced the loss of close people as well as feelings of isolation and rejection. Fatima (RA) was extremely grieved when her father died and then passed away 6 months later. Zainab (RA) experienced heartbreak and separation for many years until her husband became a Muslim.

Such great Islamic figures experienced sadness and depression, but Allah or the Prophet (Saw) didn't advise the companions to only call upon Allah. In fact the Prophet (saws) was described to be the best of listeners and would give hope and help to those who were hopeless and helpless; we could even say he was the best of advisors, counsellors and supporters. There is recognition of needing help and support in Islam, even if there is no explicit hadith or ayaat saying “Muslims can experience mental health problems, and there are other cures beside Islamic help” – this sort of concept can be applied to other areas of Islam. Allah has made haram explicitly and clear, but the halal and the permissible has been left vast and great i.e chemotherapy wasn't around the time of the Prophet but no one says to a cancer patient that they should just make dua and get on with life.

Finally, we can conclude that low imaan is not the only cause of mental health problems and making dua is not the only solution, because Islam has not come to eliminate depression or emotions such as sadness and grief, but to regulate it, direct it and make it a learning process to develop and grow as a Muslim. However, the only way we can do that is together as a community. We need to collectively understand what mental health is and how to deal with it alongside current and Islamic interventions.

*Anas ibn Malik reported: A man said, “O Messenger of Allah, should I tie my camel and trust in Allah, or should I untie her and trust in Allah?” The Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, said, “Tie her and trust in Allah.”

(Tirmidhi)