
REFLECTIONS

Finding Center in the Heart (of the Pandemic): Practical Tools from the Islamic Tradition for Building Resilient Families in Times of Disruption and Trauma

Abdallah Rothman, PhD*
Cambridge Muslim College

Abstract

When the COVID-19 pandemic drastically altered how people lived their lives, many called it a “wake up call.” Within the global Muslim community, many shared the sentiment that the coinciding of the lockdown with Ramadan presented an opportunity for khalwa (spiritual retreat and reflection). Although Muslim religious leaders sought to frame the Islamic tradition’s wisdom in light of the pandemic, much of this remained theoretical and abstract. The pandemic’s extended impact revealed that Muslim families lack guidance on how to employ the resources found in the Qur’ān and Sunnah practically for their own well-being and resilience.

This paper outlines how one Muslim mental health professional and his network of colleagues responded to this crisis by tending to the well-being needs and collective trauma of Muslim families in the U.S. using online webinar platforms to address increased anxiety, family conflict, depression, and existential grief. A detailed framework of an Islamic psychology used as a psycho-educational tool to orient families to indigenous Islamic tools for building resiliency and decreased anxiety is also presented.

From this user-friendly theoretical framework, a daily routine of psychological, physical, and contemplative exercises is mapped out and was amended to comply with the particular resources and restrictions imposed by the pandemic. The tools offered, while grounded in the Islamic tradition, provide contemporary and pragmatic solutions that many Muslims have used to build resiliency and engage with the dīn (Islamic religion) in a transformational, rather than a simply transactional, way during these trying times.

Keywords: *Islamic Psychology, resilience, coping mechanisms, mental health, spiritual growth, family dynamics*

* Dr. Abdallah Rothman is the Head of Islamic Psychology at Cambridge Muslim College, founder of Shifaa Integrative Counseling, co-founder and President of the International Association of Islamic Psychology, and visiting professor of psychology at Zaim University Istanbul, International Islamic University Islamabad, and Al-Neelain University Khartoum. He holds an MA and a PhD in psychology and is a Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC) and a Board Certified Registered Art Therapist (ATR-BC), licensed in the United States and currently living in the UAE.

Introduction

In 2023, almost four years after the COVID-19 outbreak first appeared in Wuhan, China, the world, to some degree and for better or for worse, has collectively returned to “regular” daily life. We no longer see a majority of people wearing masks or advertisements depicting social distancing, and no longer assume that a “meeting” is an online video conference. Many of us have put the pandemic behind us and found a normal routine again. However, at its beginning we were in crisis mode, as we experienced the collective trauma of having our comfort bubbles ruptured, our sense of normalcy destroyed, and our own mortality brought into focus.

While some of this hasty return to “normal” can be the result of healthy resilience and positive attitudes, it can also be a false sense of security and attachment to our need to be in control to feel safe. From an Islamic perspective, our goal as Muslims, and what is at the core of the meaning of that title, is to be in a state of surrender to God’s will. A fundamental aspect of Islam’s creed (*‘aqīdah*) is to believe in destiny (*qadr*), that God has a plan, and that He is indeed the “best of Planners” (Winter 2008). To embrace this reality and live accordingly takes a significant amount of inner struggle, for one must fight against the self’s tendency to personal preference, comfort, and a sense of independence and control.

A natural condition of the self (*nafs*) is to attempt to self-direct one’s life. We live with a perception that our free will alone is responsible for our destiny and that we must attempt to control all factors to ensure a safe, comfortable, and happy life. From an Islamic perspective, this perception leads us to an imbalance as we over rely on our free will and become fearful of the unknown (Al-Ghazālī 2014). We perceive that it is more comfortable to live in a reality in which we know what to expect, so we try as hard as we can to control our environment and, in effect, “pull the wool over our eyes” to shield ourselves from the reality that God has ultimate control over our situation.

We do, in fact, have free will and must assert it while changing and controlling something in our world. But the extent to which we have control is a much smaller radius around us than we often are willing to admit. We can only change and/or control what is within ourselves. And this is our responsibility, not the rest. We can “tether our camel” by working to ensure that we are using our intellect and resources to set ourselves up for a good end. But ultimately, we have to trust in God (*tawakkul*) and surrender to His plan. This is the key to attaining balance within the self and mental health and well-being. When we focus on trying to assert control over that which we cannot control, we wind up feeling out of control and begin to pass through the ensuing process of caving in on ourselves, which can be experienced as anxiety, depression, and a number of mental health concerns.

The COVID-19 pandemic created a worldwide situation that tested our need to be in control of our environment and exposed our tendency to over rely on our own self-made structures of comfort and perception of safety. As with everyone else, for American Muslim families this phenomenon brought into acute focus our collective state of resilience and resources as the grounds of safety and reliability were ripped out from underneath us.

The Pandemic Crisis: Viral Trauma

At the very start of the pandemic during the spring of 2020, the reactive public safety measures confined most of the world's families to their homes for months on end. This drastic alteration of norms and lifestyle halted many people's entire routines or, at the very least, significantly altered them. This turn of events resulted in a string of mental health crises across communities as people experienced a collective trauma of loss, fear, and grief, in addition to confronting their own mortality (Pfefferbaum and North 2020) and increased pressure on dysfunctional family systems.

Human beings tend to create reliable patterns of comfort to convince themselves that they are in control of their lives as an instinctive coping mechanism to deal with the reality of having very little control over it (Ben-Zur and Zeidner 1995). While Islam asserts that God is the one in control and that people should turn their affairs over to His will, Muslims were not spared from the collective sense of despair and grief brought about by COVID-19. Many Muslim communities, like all communities, were faced with viral outbreaks of panic, job loss, and existential crisis (Dein et al. 2020).

While our *dīn* (religion) directs us to identify more with our spiritual identity and to live for the afterlife (*ākhirah*) more than the temporal world (*dunya*), for many Muslims this does not translate into a practical pathway for navigating the reality of contemporary life. We tend to buy into the capitalist promise of comfort and success, just like everyone else in modern societies. Thus, whereas Muslims read about the lofty ideals of relying on God and faith, many put more faith in pursuing success as defined by society and focus on career, accumulating wealth, and asserting identity based on our place in society. When all of that was threatened and, in many cases, taken away, there was a shared experience of trauma from the loss of those things in which we had invested our identity.

This breakdown of these structures tended to put a particular strain on family life, as financial stability and the notion of providing for a family through individual or collective effort were destabilized. In parallel with this shift, many families were left spending more time together at home than usual, causing already tumultuous relationships to become even more strained and tested under pressure. These factors exposed an underlying issue: Many families rely on distraction and avoidance as coping mechanisms to manage difficult relationships, because they lack the knowledge, guidance, and discipline to nurture the healthy interpersonal communication required for a functional family life. The result of all this was a breakdown of mental health experienced by many Muslim American families.

The Aftershock: A Mental Health Breakdown

When those parameters that we cling to were stripped away – our jobs, which provide a sense of identity; our daily routines, which help us know what to expect; a sense of purpose and plan – so were our coping strategies and mechanisms for meaning-making. Without these constructs of identity, we were left facing our selves, forced to define our existence without the jobs, the routines, and the distractions. This revealed a gap in resources and guidance among the Muslim community, as many found that the ground underneath them had crumbled. Even the most religious discovered that underneath the façade of their

projected identity in the world (*dunya*), they had little connection to a deeper self-knowledge and thus struggled with maintaining their connection to God.

For those of us with tools for meaning-making and self-reflection, this was an opportunity; however, for those of us without such tools, it was an existential crisis and, even worse, a catalyst for a mental health breakdown. This resulted in high increases of suicide ideation, domestic violence (families were confined to small spaces for extended periods of time), and overall increased stress levels (Loades et al. 2020). Muslim faith leaders found themselves at the fore of this fallout, as Muslims looked to them for answers, guidance, and direction on how to cope and get through such trying times (Dein et al. 2020). Scholars with training in theology were able to provide inspirational material from Islamic sources such as Qur'ānic passages and *aḥādīth* of the Prophet (peace be upon him), and general uplifting or encouraging words imploring Muslims to cling to their faith. Many found these sources of inspiration helpful at first. But as the pandemic continued, people were left needing more specific guidance and tools for coping and adapting effectively to this “new normal.”

The Lockdown: Forced Retreat (*Khalwa*)

At first, the lockdown was often referenced as an opportunity for a spiritual retreat (*khalwa*). There is a long tradition among early Muslim scholars and spiritual aspirants of going into retreat, shutting out the world, and being alone with God and oneself to engage in self-examination and contemplation (Erkaya 2016). In fact, the month of Ramadan, which came soon after the lockdown restrictions, marks the time when Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), even before God appointed him as His prophet, retreated to the cave of Hira for an extended period of time and, during one of these retreats, received the first revelation. Thus, it was a reasonable and apt connection to suggest that we were all in a sort of forced *khalwa* and could approach this circumstance from a spiritual perspective: seeing it as an opportunity for growth and/or worship.

But for many, this forced retreat was neither welcomed nor something familiar. Many were not equipped to handle it. Muslim faith leaders across the world called upon the community to look to the Qur'ān's accounts of the prophets or referenced prophetic traditions (*aḥādīth*) that relate how Muslims are supposed to respond in challenging times. For example, the ḥadīth:

How amazing is the affair of the Believer! Indeed, his entire affair is good. And this is not the case with anyone except the believer; should prosperity come his way, he is grateful (*shukr*) and that is good for him, and should adversity come his way, he patiently perseveres (*sabr*), and that is good for him. (Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, no. 2999)

This beautiful saying of the Prophet (peace be upon him) speaks of the Muslims' blessed station, as they see their existence as totally dependent upon God, and thus essentially all is well because of this. However, what this speaks to is the ideal state of the believer (*mu'min*), and not necessarily to the expectation that all those who self-identify as Muslim should automatically experience. The reality is that we are always striving to be in the state of a believer, more than simply being guaranteed such a station based on our belief

in Islam. And yet without this explanation and understanding, many uninformed Muslims assume that they should naturally or automatically be in this state of surrender and when they find that they are not, they easily fall into blaming themselves and others for not having “strong enough faith (*imān*).”

This tendency to use religious sayings, axioms, and ideals to hold up as an expectation rather than a goal can amount to what John Welwood, an American clinical psychologist and psychotherapist, has termed “spiritual bypassing” (Welwood 1984), meaning that one bypasses the inner work on the self required to achieve such spiritual or self-actualized states and jumps to overarching religious concepts and axioms without truly having reached such stations. Welwood defines it as “spiritual ideas and practices to sidestep personal, emotional ‘unfinished business,’ to shore up a shaky sense of self, or to belittle basic needs, feelings, and developmental tasks” (Welwood 1984). Essentially, it means to use religion and spirituality as avoidance behavior and neglecting the essential self-responsibility required for spiritual development. This type of avoidance can lead to multiple mental health problems, for it creates an imbalance in the psyche due to a rejection of parts of the self.

In the early days of the pandemic, while many of our knowledgeable and well-meaning scholars gave talks and sent messages about *shukr* (giving thanks), *sabr* (patience), and how Muslims are patient with what God wills, these idealistic axioms did not give the needed instructions for how to cope with such a situation. Instead of a time for spiritual retreat and reflection, for many Muslims being stuck at home with family and away from the world’s distractions left them facing parts of themselves that they had never faced before. Even though the Islamic tradition encourages self-reflection and self-accountability, these aspects of our *dīn* tend not to get focused on and thus Muslims are not given the practical tools they need to guide them through a process of self-reflection and psychospiritual development.

We tend to have a disconnect between religious knowledge and personal processes of growth and struggle. We all need to cultivate and struggle with mental health to some degree if we lack the tools to cultivate it. Without practical understanding, these religious axioms can easily become spiritual bypassing. We know and often quote the verse “Allah does not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves” (Qur’ān 13:11), but as a community we have done a poor job of defining what is in ourselves. From an Islamic perspective, the notion of the self and how to develop it is lacking as a pragmatic guide to life’s struggles. The reality of the human condition, and very much so the reality of Islam’s teachings, show us that we must do the inner work of struggling, striving, and taking the self into account – an inner process of self-reflection and self-growth.

We have a vast history of scholarly explication that provides the tools for such work drawing directly from the Islamic tradition.¹ Unfortunately, that vast resource has neither received enough attention, nor has it been properly translated into an easy-to-follow framework for contemporary Muslims.

¹ See *Treatise for the Seekers of Guidance: Al-Muhasibi’s Risala al-Mustarshidin* by Zaid Shakir (Shakir 2008) and *On Vigilance and Self-Examination: Kitab al-muraqaba wa’al muhasabah* by Al-Ghazālī (Al-Ghazālī 2015).

The Response: Reorienting to Self, Reorienting to the *Dīn*, and Reorienting to Zoom

In an effort to address the mental and spiritual health crises that seemed to be a parallel pandemic to the public health crisis, this author took to the popular Zoom and other livestreaming platforms to address the community and orient its members toward the Islamic approach to self-help. Many were using these online platforms for motivational talks and to connect with other people while in isolation. Both of these reasons were most definitely warranted and proved to be extremely beneficial in terms of enabling connection, albeit in a different way. They also provided some motivation to look to the *dīn* and spirituality as coping mechanisms and as a way of trying to make sense of what was going on. However, we also saw an opportunity in these online forums for addressing a crucially important issue that seemed to be missing.

Through audio/video channels such as the Path and Present podcast out of the U.S., hosted by Baraka Blue (Blue and Rothman 2020); the Soul Inquiry podcast out of the UAE, hosted by Yusuf Jha (Jha and Rothman 2020); and the Cambridge Muslim College's (CMC) Ramadan Live program out of the U.K. (Cambridge Muslim College and Rothman 2020), we were able to educate a wide international audience with an Islamic framework for self-help.

Unlike popular conceptions within modern psychology, as well as the dominant discourse of self-help and self-improvement that identifies the notion of the self as being centralized in the mind and in thought, an Islamic perspective of self includes multiple aspects of the whole being. Cartesian philosophy, which posits the notion of "I think therefore I am," has pervaded contemporary Western thought to the extent that most conceptions regarding the self within popular psychology are framed around the mind as the central location of human identity. We see this represented graphically in just about any poster or textbook that references psychology being accompanied by a picture of the brain and by the name of the clinical field being termed "Mental Health."

Often, we see this brain or mind pictured in isolation, seemingly severed from the rest of the body, just as there is a similar tendency to see the body only as a housing for the mind, as the person's core identity. An Islamic perspective, conversely, necessarily posits that the human is a whole, integrated spiritual being that includes the body, mind, heart, and spirit.

Based on the writings and teachings of our learned scholars, who have maintained an unbroken chain of transmission on how to interpret the Qur'ān and understand the prophetic tradition, we learn that within Islam's ontological paradigm a person's true identity is his/her soul, which is one integrated spiritual being, including the body (Rothman and Coyle 2018). Thus, Islamic psychology makes an important distinction: A person's central identity is his/her soul rather than the more narrowly defined notion of the self, which is primarily conceived of as the construction of an identity based on personality and memories confined to the temporal world.

A fundamental aspect in this regard is that the starting point in the soul's journey is not limited to its moment of birth, but includes its pre-existence. This goes back to the point of origin of all souls. When they were created, the following exchange took place: "And [remember] when your Lord brought forth from the loins of the children of Adam their descendants and had them testify regarding themselves. [Allah asked,] 'Am I not your

Lord?’ They replied, ‘Yes, You are! We testify.’ [He cautioned,] ‘Now you have no right to say on Judgment Day, ‘We were not aware of this’’ (Qur’ān 7:172).

This critical moment in every human soul’s trajectory distinguishes the human identity as a soul witnessing that God is One and that they (each human being) are servants of the Lord. In other words, it is within our true nature to be dependent on the One God for subsistence and to recognize that God (glorified and exalted be He) controls everything – a very different picture than the self that is in control of its own destiny, as many popular narratives go in the self-help industry.

By adopting an approach to personal development that is informed and guided by the Islamic model of the soul, we have an opportunity to unlock the secrets of the meaning of life and integrate our religious belief system and worldview with our daily life struggle. In fact, this is the necessary pathway to both deepening our understanding of and relationship to Islam and truly advancing our psychospiritual development. This involves not only reorienting our approach to the *dīn* to be that of a path of self-development, but also reorienting our notion of self to be one that is centered in the heart (Rothman 2019).

Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said, “There is a piece of flesh in the body and when it is sound the whole body is sound and when it is corrupt the whole body is corrupt, and indeed that is the heart” (Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, no. 1599a).

The Method: Presence and Self-Awareness

In an effort to address the core of what people were struggling with during this time of lost norms and stability, this author sought to connect people and families with practical solutions that would orient them to their heart. Part of the problem is that people neither experience the heart, nor do they live from a place where they can access this central aspect of their being. We have collectively become oriented to self as thoughts and spend a great deal of time in our heads. Thus, rather than spending more time in our heads by trying to understand complex theoretical and philosophical constructs of the self from an Islamic perspective, the first step was to guide people toward an experiential discovery of the center of the self: the heart.

Sessions were conducted via Zoom, in both a large audience format like CMC’s Ramadan Live program, and a small group format like Productive Muslim Company’s Advanced Masterclass. In the first format, viewers were given a step-by-step process on how to “drop in” to their hearts by cultivating a state of presence (*ḥuḍūr*). This concept was first briefly introduced from an Islamic perspective and framed as both a practice of being present with oneself and a doorway to being present with God. Viewers were then guided to focus on and try to physically experience being present in the center of their chest (*ṣadr*), where the heart (both physical and spiritual) is located. In the second format, participants were guided more specifically through a guided practice of connecting to the heart and using breathing practices to deepen their experience of being present in the center of the chest and the center of the self.

The primary objective of this stage was to shift people away from identifying with their thoughts and staying in a world of cognitive processes in relation to their identity so they could begin learning how to experience the self more holistically. This included resting the body, not just the head or “mind,” which we tend to perceive as being located

in the head. This process and practice helped people actually experience what it feels like to be present and began to give them a sense of grounding in a spiritual practice that more closely aligns with an Islamic notion of self, which is ultimately rooted in the soul that is connected to God.

The next phase consisted of introducing a process of self-awareness that guided people to deepen their relationship to self and further explore and familiarize themselves with the reality of their whole self. This involved an exploratory endeavor to investigate what is within oneself. Qur’ān 13:11 states, “God does not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves.” But to initiate this change, one must become aware of what is within his/her own self. Audiences were given a brief explanation of the Islamic model of the soul based on the research of Rothman and Coyle (2018). They were then encouraged to experience the reality of the inner self by honestly and bravely looking at their own motivations, tendencies, reactions, and preferences to take themselves into account. As ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb said, “Take yourself into account before you are taken into account” (Ibn al-Mubārak, n.d.).

Participants were then introduced to the Islamic concept and practice of *muḥāsabah* (self-introspection) through a brief exploration of the works of al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī and Imām al-Ghazālī (Shakir 2008; Al-Ghazālī 2015). Participants were instructed to keep a “*muḥāsabah* journal” to record their own self-accountability each day. Based on this guidance, the process involved a self-assessment of what our seven limbs – our eyes, ears, tongue, stomach, genitals, hands, and feet – have taken in to affect our hearts. This introduced an ongoing practice of self-introspection and self-accountability to instill a sense of self-awareness that allowed one to address or “work” on the soul in the struggle against the self (*jihād an-nafs*). These Islamic tools of self-introspection helped deepen the participants’ ability to stay grounded in the spiritual resource of relying on God in a practical way.

The third and final part of the method was to introduce Islamic contemplation (*tafakkur*). Once participants had oriented to a holistic experience of the self, with the heart as the central core of one’s identity and consciousness, the next step was to introduce a practice of connecting that conscious self to God. This practice was first framed within an Islamic worldview where, different to popular trends of meditation, the ultimate goal is to submit or surrender the self to God, more than just to find a place of inner peace (Badri 2018). This practice introduced was somewhat familiar and similar to what we generally expect with secular or Buddhist meditation, in that it stills the body and focuses inward. However, this stillness and presence is then cultivated to allow the heart to connect directly to its source: God. We have this direct connection to God within us and, through the *rūḥ* (spirit), the ability to receive illumination or spiritual knowledge and guidance directly from God.

A five-stage process, based on al-Ghazālī’s account of *tafakkur* from his *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn* (Al-Ghazālī 2015) was used to define Islamic contemplation:

1. Remembrance (*tadhakkur*) – “Who remember Allah while standing or sitting or [lying] on their sides...” (Qur’ān 3:191),
2. Contemplation (*tafakkur*) – “... and contemplate the creation of the heavens and the earth, [saying], ‘Our Lord, You did not create this aimlessly’” (Qur’ān 3:191),

3. Understanding – An understanding of the heart’s perception (*ya’qilūna*),
4. Illumination [of the heart] – whereby spiritual knowledge is impressed upon the consciousness within the heart, and
5. Transformation [of state, body, and limbs] – the experiential knowledge (*ma’rifah*) changes the state of the self towards self-actualization, or the reaching of the self’s higher potential in knowing God.

In order to provide practical steps to engage in *tafakkur*, participants were then given a five-step process based on the writings of al-Muḥāsibī (Shakir 2008):

1. Make the body still,
2. Close the eyes or look down, focusing on that which one is contemplating, and removing the distractions of sensory stimulation through looking at things,
3. Not busying the ears, still the hearing by focusing on one sound,
4. Not busying the hands, and
5. Be sincere. Actively shifting focus from concern with the world.

We found that participants not only found these steps clear and useful, and were able to quickly achieve results, but that they were astonished that these practices were part of their own tradition. Some common responses were: “This makes sense,” “It is so practical,” “You showed me how to do it in my daily life,” and “I tried it and it works.” Many people had tried to find similar practices in other religious and spiritual traditions, not realizing that Islam offers pathways and tools for cultivating presence and self-awareness in such pragmatic and easy-to-implement ways. Cultivating this practice of opening the spiritual heart to God enables Muslims to actually access His qualities (*asmā al-ḥusna*) and build an internal resource of resiliency. Thus, instead of simply paying lip service to the notions of *shukr* and *sabr*, this practice cultivates within the person a practical pathway to accessing gratitude, patience, and, in turn, guidance (*hidāyah*).

The Practice: Self Discipline, Familial Reinforcement, and Daily Routines

Once the method was established and people discovered these practical resources grounded in Islamic principles, the next step was to help them adapt to their new circumstances and implement systems to embed these new practices within their daily routines. During the lockdown, many of us were not only cut off from our routines and external resources (e.g., gyms, spas, and social venues), but also confined to smaller and often shared family spaces. Many people needed further guidance on how to adapt and apply some of these newly introduced practices so they could continue to be resourceful and adaptive. Whenever possible, we worked with people on an individual basis to coach them on what they could do specifically to make it work for them. Many families also took this on as a group project, where the entire family participated in sessions together and implemented and encouraged one another to implement this new routine.

According to Islam, it is a natural part of the self’s (*nafs*) tendency to avoid what is good for us and to find excuses to avoid doing the sometimes difficult work of disciplining the soul. Many of us allowed the lockdown’s confines to hinder us from making changes that would promote our mental health and enable us to commit to doing the work of self-

discovery and self-care. Doing so required further direction and helping people rethink their situations to encourage them to make the best of their situation and use whatever resources they had to keep themselves healthy.

This involved formulating a creative way of looking at even our physical spaces, such as how you could rearrange or reorient yourself to your dwelling so that you could create purposeful spaces for physical, emotional, and spiritual health. This could mean sectioning off smaller areas of the rooms available and making designated prayer, exercise, and work spaces. Or, based on size and spatial layouts, it may have meant rearranging spaces at different points throughout the day, where the study space converts into an exercise space by moving the table, laying out a yoga mat, and changing the lighting. In other words, it was about taking control of our immediate surroundings to promote taking control of our inner worlds.

While working to change one's inner state is ultimately the central focus and domain of what we have control over, we must also remember that social structures and familial reinforcement are important factors in building healthy communities and, in turn, healthy societies. As children clearly cannot be held responsible for their knowledge and actions to the same degree as adults, it is up to the adults to set the precedent for their children to learn how to self-reflect and the processes involved in assuming personal responsibility and accountability for changing what is within one's self. Thus, families play a crucially important role in developing healthy societies that have in place systems of resiliency and reliance on God. The saying "a family that prays together stays together" is true; however, it is also necessary for a family to struggle together internally and to engage in healthy communication to create a holistic container of support for healthy development. Thus, families also need to be cautious about avoiding the trap of spiritual bypassing by making prayer and religious worship a transactional behavior, rather than a transformational way of being.

Family life should be grounded in the emotional connection and honest communication that allows both children and parents to deal with life's trials. If we model coping through avoidance and distraction, we will pass these negative practices on to generations and thereby instill dysfunctional systems that only reinforce unhealthy patterns. Islamic family structures must be oriented to reliance on God as the core foundation for resiliency.

We cannot control what befalls us or the world around us, but we can control what is in ourselves: our thoughts, feelings, and intentions. We will be held accountable for what we do with the circumstances we are given. From an Islamic cosmological perspective, everything in this life is a test designed to bring us back to the knowledge that we have within us: that God is One and in control of everything. Remembering these two truths puts things into perspective so we can focus on what is ours to focus on – our inner self. Instead of trying to control our environment and outcomes, which we literally do not have any control over, if we direct our efforts toward cultivating these practices of presence and self-awareness, we can learn how to control the state of our heart and thus the state of our overall well-being in times of hardship and crisis.

Discussion

Assuming that the COVID-19 pandemic will not be the last traumatic event to befall the world and/or the Muslim community, and regardless of what tragedies are in store in the future, we stand to learn from this global experience. These unfortunate circumstances have both exposed a gap in the Muslim community's spiritual, emotional, and mental health provisions and provided the opportunity to learn what we need to do to strengthen our families, communities, and capacity for resiliency. Looking to the future, a number of lessons learned can form an agenda for future research and development.

Going forward, we need to approach and support our community from the theological and mental health perspectives. This means that scholars, religious leaders, social workers, and mental health practitioners need to work together in a more holistic fashion. Even further than partnership and cooperation between imams and therapists, we need to develop avenues for both roles to learn from one another and integrate elements of each other's domains within each of them. Religious scholars would do well to understand the practical applications of mental health resources found within Islam's tradition, as well as to understand common psychological experiences and terminology. Conversely, mental health practitioners serving the Muslim community would do well to study the Islamic tradition and familiarize themselves with its theories, concepts, and tools for understanding how the soul should be addressed in mental health² and how Islamic psychology³ is an important part of treatment for Muslim communities. These alliances and capacity-building efforts can be used to educate families on how to develop healthy communication styles and how to practically incorporate Islamic spiritual principles into child-rearing and family structures.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic presented us with a great challenge and a great opportunity. We must take care of our communities' public health needs and keep people physically safe and healthy, as it is our duty as citizens and as Muslims to do so for humanity as a whole. At the same time, we as a community must see these circumstances as a part of God's will and trust that they contain wisdom and, eventually, goodness (*khayr*). We cannot always see or understand the wisdom in everything, but part of faith is trusting that God is the best of planners. Our job as individual believers, families of believers, and as a faith community is to remind ourselves and each other that we must focus on what is ours to focus on within these trying times. We must collectively orient ourselves to the *dīn* as a resource for finding guidance as regards to self-reflection and self-accountability and then present these accessible and pragmatic resources, both of which are found within our tradition, in a way that is easy for people to implement in their lives. We have everything that we need within the *dīn* to be resilient individuals, families, and communities.

If we are to learn anything from this public health crisis and the tragedy of lost lives and livelihoods, it is that we need to be better prepared and equipped for future trials by

² See "Conceptualizing an Islamic psychotherapy: A grounded theory study" (Rothman and Coyle 2020).

³ See "What is Islamic Psychology?" (International Association of Islamic Psychology 2020).

grounding ourselves in the Islamic understanding of the self and the traditional pathways for healing and development through presence and self-awareness. Thanks to Islam's rich spiritual and intellectual heritage (*turāth al-Islām*), we have been able to galvanize the global Muslim community to look at these indigenous spiritual, emotional, and mental health tools to find its center in the heart of the pandemic.

References

- Al-Ghazālī, Abū Ḥāmid. 2014. *Imam Al-Ghazali Mukhtasar Ihya Ulum Ad-Din*, 2nd Edition. Lympia, Nikosia: Spohr Publishers.
- Al-Ghazālī, Abū Ḥāmid. 2015. *On Vigilance and Self-Examination: Kitab al-muraqaba wa'al muhasabah*. Translated by Anthony F. Shaker. Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society.
- Al-Naysāburi, Muslim Ibn Al-Ḥajjāj. n. d. "Sahih Muslim." Amrayn.com. Accessed October 30, 2023. <https://amrayn.com/muslim>.
- Badri, Malik. 2018. *Contemplation: An Islamic Psychospiritual Study*. Virginia: International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT).
- Ben-Zur, Hasida and Moshe Zeidner. 1995. "Coping patterns and affective reactions under community crisis and daily routine conditions." *Anxiety, stress, and coping* 8, no. 3: 185-201. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10615809508249372>.
- Blue, Baraka (Producer) and Abdallah Rothman (Guest). 2020. "A Ramadan in Retreat: Psychological/Spiritual Wellness in Isolation." April 29, 2020. *Path and Present* [Audio Podcast]. Retrieved from <https://soundcloud.com/pathandpresent/a-ramadan-in-retreat-psychological-and-spiritual-wellness-in-isolation-w-dr-abdallah-rothman>.
- Cambridge Muslim College (Producer) and Abdallah Rothman (Guest). 2020. *Midnight Moments*. Cambridge Muslim College, Video. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLjx2FfgGpKruHhLfDe2cJQREHBqicTRVO>.
- Dein, Simon, Kate Loewenthal, Christopher Alan Lewis, and Kenneth I. Pargament. 2020. "COVID-19, Mental Health and Religion: An Agenda for Future Research." *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 23, no. 1 (January): 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2020.1768725>.
- Erkaya, M. 2016. "Khalwa as a method of spiritual education (The case of Gümüşhanevi)." *International Journal of Social Sciences and Education Research* 2 (2016): 1217-1225. <https://doi.org/10.24289/ijsser.278997>.

- Ibn al-Mubārak. n. d. *Az-Zuhd*. Quoted in Islamway. 2014. "Account yourselves before you are taken to account." Published May 5, 2014. <http://iswy.co/e12c8v>.
- International Association of Islamic Psychology. 2020. "What is Islamic Psychology?" Retrieved from <https://www.islamicpsychology.org/what-is-islamic-psychology>.
- Jha, Yusuf (Producer) and Abdallah Rothman (Guest). 2020. "Corona Virus & Your Wellbeing Compiled: Your mind, heart & soul." April 18, 2020. *Soul Inquiry* [Video Podcast]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JG3rd4477X8&feature=emb_logo.
- Loades, Maria Elizabeth, Eleanor Chatburn, Nina Higson-Sweeney, Shirley Reynolds, Roz Shafran, Amberly Brigden, Catherine Linney, Megan Niamh McManus, Catherine Borwick, and Esther Crawley. 2020. "Rapid Systematic Review: The Impact of Social Isolation and Loneliness on the Mental Health of Children and Adolescents in the Context of COVID-19." *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 59, no. 11 (November): 1218-1239.e3. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2020.05.009>.
- Pfefferbaum, Betty, and Carol S. North. 2020. "Mental Health and the Covid-19 Pandemic." *New England Journal of Medicine* 383, no. 6 (April): 510-512. <https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJMp2008017>.
- Rothman, Abdallah. 2019. "What Islam Offers to Modern Self-Help: An Islamic Paradigm of Psychology." *The Productive Muslim*. Retrieved from <https://productivemuslim.com/what-islam-offers-to-modern-self-help/>.
- Rothman, Abdallah and Adrian Coyle. 2018. "Toward a framework for Islamic psychology and psychotherapy: An Islamic model of the soul." *Journal of Religion and Health* 57, no. 5 (June): 1731-1744. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-018-0651-x>.
- Rothman, Abdallah and Adrian Coyle. 2020. "Conceptualizing an Islamic psychotherapy: A grounded theory study." *Spirituality in Clinical Practice* 7, no. 3 (September): 197-213. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/scp0000219>.
- Shakir, Zaid. 2008. *Treatise for the Seekers of Guidance: Al-Muhasibi's Risala al-Mustarshidin*. United States: NID Publishers.
- Welwood, John. 1984. "Principles of inner work: Psychological and spiritual." *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 16, no. 1: 63-73.
- Winter, Tim, ed. 2008. *The Cambridge companion to classical Islamic theology*. Cambridge University Press.