

Health in Islam

(part 1 of 4): A Holistic Approach



Islam comes from the root word “sa-la-ma”, as do the words Muslim (one who follows the message of Islam) and “salaam” (peace). The root word “Sa - la - ma” denotes peace, security, safety as it does submission and surrender to Almighty God. This security is inherent in the submission to the One God. When a person submits to the will of God he will experience an innate sense of security and peacefulness. He must also understand that God is the Creator of all that exists or will come to exist, and has power over all things. With this surrender and understanding comes peace – real, easily attainable, and everlasting peace.

From the beginning of time, God has revealed Himself through Prophets and Messengers, who have come with one message. Worship God, without partners, without offspring and without intermediaries. The rules and laws were sometimes different, because they were applicable for the people of a particular time or place, but the creed of each Messenger was the same. Worship Me, and your reward will be contentment in this life and in the hereafter. When Prophet Muhammad came, in the 7th century, BCE, his message was slightly different. He called to the worship of the One God, but his call was for all of humankind. The message was now complete and revealed for all places, and in all times.

Islam was completed for the benefit of all who will exist, until the final Day of Judgement. It is not a religion belonging to the Arabs, although Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, was an Arab, nor is it a religion for the Asian countries or the third world. Muslims exist in all continents and come from all races and ethnicities. There are Muslims in New York, Sydney, Cape Town and Berlin as well as Cairo, Kuala Lumpur and Dubai. Muslims are as diverse as this magnificent planet. Islam is also not a religion that accepts part time or halfhearted commitment. Islam is a way of life; Islam is a holistic way of life.

When God created the world He did not abandon it to instability and insecurity, quite the contrary, He sent guidance. He sent a rope, firm and steady, and by holding tightly to this rope an insignificant human being can achieve greatness and eternal peace. A Muslim strives to obey God's commandments and does so by following God's guide to life - the Quran, and the authentic teachings and traditions of Prophet Muhammad.

The Quran is a book of guidance and the traditions of Prophet Muhammad explain and in some cases expand on that guidance. Islam, as a complete way of life, stresses the importance of maintaining good health and offers the ways and the means to cope with ill health. The Quran is a book of wisdom. It is a book full of the wonder and glory of God, and a testament to His mercy and justice.

Through His infinite mercy, God has provided us with a holistic approach to life, one that covers all aspects, spiritual, emotional and physical. When God created humankind, He did so for one purpose – to worship Him.

“And I (God) created not the jinn and humankind, except to worship Me (Alone).” (Quran 51:56)

The comprehensiveness of Islam allows every aspect of life, from sleeping and washing, to praying and working, to be an act of worship. One who is truly submitted to God is grateful for the countless blessings in his or her life and wants to thank and praise God for His generosity, kindness and mercy. Prophet Muhammad explained that we should be thankful to God in every situation, whether we perceive it to be good or bad. The reality is that God is just, therefore, whatever situation a believer finds himself in, he knows there is goodness and wisdom embedded in it.

“Indeed amazing are the affairs of a believer! They are all for his benefit. If he is granted ease then he is thankful, and this is good for him. And if he is afflicted with a hardship, he perseveres, and this is good for him.” (Muslim)

The life of this world is not stable. Every person goes through stages and phases; happiness is followed by sadness and then relief or joy, one's faith is strong and unconquerable, and seemingly, for no reason it plummets, next, by the will of God it slowly rises again. Periods of great fitness and health are followed by injury or, sickness, but with each twinge of pain or suffering a true believer feels some of his sins fall away.

“Whenever a Muslim is afflicted by harm from sickness or other matters, God will expiate his sins, like leaves drop from a tree.” (Bukhari and Muslim)

Islam teaches us to be concerned, about the whole person. Following the guidance and commandments of God allows us to face illness and injury with patience. Complaining and bemoaning our situation will achieve nothing but more pain and suffering. Our bodies and minds have been given to us as a

trust, and we are responsible for them. The guidance of God covers every aspect of life and there are specific ways of dealing with health issues, which we will begin to explore in the next article.

(part 2 of 4): Quran is a Healing

Islam takes a holistic approach to health. Just as religious life is inseparable from secular life, physical, emotional and spiritual health cannot be separated; they are three parts that make a completely healthy person. When one part is injured or unhealthy, the other parts suffer. If a person is physically ill or injured it may be difficult to concentrate on anything but the pain. If a person is emotionally unwell, he or she may not be able to take care of him or herself properly or find their minds distracted from the realities of life.

When speaking to his followers Prophet Muhammad spoke of the strong believer being better than a weak believer, in the eyes of God.^[1] The word strong here can mean strength in faith or in character, but it can equally mean health. Our bodies are a trust from God and we are accountable for how we look after our health. Although physical and emotional health is important, spiritual health needs to be the first priority in our lives. If a person is in spiritual difficulty then life can begin to unravel and problems may occur in all areas.

Injury and illness can happen for many reasons, however it is important to acknowledge and accept that nothing happens in this world except with the permission of God.

And with Him are the keys of the unseen; no one knows them except Him. And He knows what is on the land and in the sea. Not a leaf falls but that He knows it. And no grain is there within the darknesses of the earth and no moist or dry [thing] but that is [written] in a clear record. (Quran 6:59)

This world is but a transient place, beautified for us by the things we covet, spouses, children, wealth and luxury. Yet these are just passing pleasures and temporary joys compared to the contentment and extreme beauty that is Paradise^[2]. To help us secure a place in Paradise God places trials and obstacles in our way. He tests our patience and gratitude and provides us with ways and means of overcoming the obstacles. God is also merciful and just, so we can be sure that whatever trials we face God designed them to help us secure a place of eternal bliss. Injury and ill health are trials and tests that we must face with patience, forbearance and above all acceptance.

Accepting a trial does not mean that we do nothing, of course we try to overcome it and learn from it. Accepting means facing the trial patiently armed with the weapons God has provided for us. The greatest of these weapons is the Quran, a book of guidance, filled with mercy and healing. The Quran is not

a textbook or book of medicine, but it does contain guidance that promotes good health and healing.

“O mankind! There has come to you a good advice from your Lord (i.e. the Quran), and a healing for that which is in your hearts.” (Quran 10:57)

“And We send down from the Quran that which is a healing and a mercy to those who believe...” (Quran 17:82)

There is no doubt that the words and verses of Quran contain a healing for humankind’s woes and ills. It was narrated in the traditions of Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, that certain verses and chapters by God’s will could bring about healing from disease and distress. Slowly over the years, we have begun to rely more on medicines and physical remedies rather than the spiritual remedies prescribed by Islam. If faith is strong and unwavering, the effect of spiritual remedies may be fast and efficient.

From the traditions of Prophet Muhammad comes the story of the man whom the Prophet sent on a mission. He camped close by to some people who did not show him any hospitality. When the leader of the nearby camp was bitten by a snake, they went to Prophet Muhammad’s companion for help. He recited the opening chapter of the Quran over the afflicted man and he arose “as if released from a chain”.^[3]

It is important to seek a cure from the Quran, in the manner prescribed by the Prophet Muhammad, but it is equally important to understand that it is permissible and at times obligatory, to seek help from medical practitioners. Our bodies are ours, only in trust; we are obligated to treat them with respect and to maintain them in the best way. In accordance with the holistic approach Islam takes to health, there is no contradiction in seeking a cure from both medical science and permissible spiritual means.

The Prophet said: “There is no disease that God Almighty has created, except that He also has created its treatment.”^[4]

He also said: “There is a remedy for every malady, and when the remedy is applied to the disease it is cured with the permission of Almighty God.”^[5]

Quran is a healing for the body and the soul. Whenever life becomes too difficult or we are beset by injury, illness or unhappiness Quran will light our way and lighten our burdens. It is a source of solace and ease. In the world today many people have untold wealth and luxury but little contentment. Those of us in the West have access to doctors and medicine, to traditional healing, medical breakthroughs and alternative cures but many lives are full of emotional pain and listlessness. What is missing is belief, faith in God.

In the past several decades, it has become widely accepted that religious belief and practices have a significant impact on both physical and emotional

health. Medical and scientific research has demonstrated that religious commitment aids in the prevention and treatment of emotional disorders, disease and injury and enhances recovery.^[6] Belief in and submission to the will of God is the most essential part of good health care. The words and recitation of Quran can cure hearts and minds, as well as overcome illness and injury, however complete trust in God does not negate the healing effects of medical science provided we use them only in lawful ways. Indeed, God has power over all things, therefore we need to put our trust in Him, develop a lasting relationship with His book of guidance – the Quran, follow the authentic teachings of Prophet Muhammad and seek a cure, wherever it may be.

Comment

Footnotes:

[1] *Saheeh Bukhari.*

[2] For Muslims heaven and Paradise are not the same place. Heaven (sa ma, in Arabic) is part of the sky above us that will be destroyed on the Day of Judgement. Paradise (al Jennah in Arabic) is what Muslim's believe is the opposite of Hell; an eternal abode of everlasting peace and contentment. .

[3] *Saheeh Al-Bukhari*

[4] *Saheeh Al-Bukhari*

[5] *Saheeh Al-Bukhari, Saheeh Muslim*

[6] Matthews, D. (2000) Is Religion Good for Your Health in Stannard, R. (Ed) *God for the 21st Century* Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press.

(part 3 of 4): Diet and Nutrition

Islam is a code of life. Muslims do not practice only during the weekends or festive seasons; rather religion is an ongoing part of daily life. Islam is organised in a spiritual and moral way, taking into account humankind's innate needs and desires. The tenets of Islam are derived from the Quran and the authentic traditions of Prophet Muhammad, known as the Sunnah, These two sources of revelation are a guide, or a manual for life.

Although, it may, at first, seem like a rather strange analogy; let us compare Islam's life instructions with the manual that comes with a computer. Imagine buying a new laptop without ever having seen any of the technological advances of the last several decades. Would you know where the on/off button was? If you managed to turn the computer on would you know how to look after it, do a system restore, run an anti-virus scan, or generally maintain it? Without a manual, the computer would be not much more than a useless piece of technology.

The computer's designers also designed a manual or guide, knowing that without specific instructions the computer would not be put to the best possible use or do what it was designed to do. Technology usually comes with guarantees and warranties that become useless, unless you follow the manufacturer's instructions. Therefore because we want to get the best possible use from our expensive technology we read the manuals and follow the guidelines.

Islam also offers a specific set of instructions that come with a guarantee, a promise of eternal Paradise. There is no 'use by' date on this guarantee and it allows unlimited extensions. If you make a mistake or 'click' the wrong button the instructions clearly advise you how to make amends and restore normality.

God designed and created humankind for the specific purpose of worshipping Him and sent Prophets and Messengers with specific guidance to make our task easy. However, without God's guide to life, humankind can become lost and adrift in a world that does not make a lot of sense or offer any real security and contentment. Lives are lived without purpose or meaning and many people eek out an existence that provides little or no real sense of having a *life worth living*.

The traditions of Prophet Muhammad teach us to cherish good health and realise its true value as one of God's countless bounties.

“And when your Lord proclaimed, “If you give thanks, I will give you more; but if you are thankless, lo! My punishment is dire.” (Quran 14:7)

Islam's holistic approach to health includes treating our bodies with respect and nourishing them with, not only faith, but also with lawful, nutritious food. A major part of living life according to the Creator's instructions is implementing a suitable diet. Choosing wholesome food and avoiding the unwholesome is essential to good health. God says in the Quran, **“Eat of the good things which We have provided for you.” (Quran 2:172)** **“Eat of what is lawful and wholesome on the earth.” (Quran 2:168)**

The Quran contains many verses of advice about healthy eating that relate to the interconnectedness of physical and spiritual health. Encouragement to eat only good and pure food is often combined with warnings to remember God and avoid Satan. Healthy eating not only satisfies hunger but also has an effect on how well we worship.

“O mankind, eat from whatever is on earth [that is] lawful and good and do not follow the footsteps of Satan. Indeed, he is to you a clear enemy.” (Quran 2:168)

If one becomes obsessed with food or indulges in too much unwholesome or junk food he or she may become physically weak or distracted from his primary purpose of serving God. On the other hand, if one concentrated

exclusively on spiritual endeavours and neglected their health and nutrition, weakness injury or illness would also result in failure to carry out obligatory worship. The guidance found in the Quran and the traditions of Prophet Muhammad advise humankind to maintain a balance between these two extremes.

A healthy diet is balanced with a mixture of all the foods God has provided for His creation. The variety satisfies all the body's needs for carbohydrates, minerals, vitamins, proteins, fats and amino acids. Numerous verses of Quran mention the foods God has provided for us to nourish and maintain our bodies. It is not an exhaustive list of dietary requirements but rather a general idea of the types of food that maintain a healthy body and prevent illness.

“He created cattle that give you warmth, benefits and food to eat.” (Quran 16:5)

“It is He who subdued the seas, from which you eat fresh fish.” (Quran 16:14)

“It is He who sends down water from the sky with which He brings up corn, olives, dates and grapes and other fruit.” (Quran 16:11)

“In cattle too you have a worthy lesson. We give you to drink of that which is in their bellies, between the undigested food and blood: pure milk, a pleasant beverage for those who drink it.” (Quran 16:66)

“There emerges from their bellies a drink, varying in colors, in which there is healing for people. Indeed in that is a sign for a people who give thought. .” (Quran 16:69)

“And it is He Who produces gardens trellised and untrellised, and date palms, and crops of different shape and taste (its fruits and its seeds) and olives, and pomegranates, similar (in kind) and different (in taste). Eat of their fruit when they ripen...” (Quran 6:141)

“...and from it (the earth) we produced grain for their sustenance.” (Quran 36:33)

God has also provided us with a list of foods that are forbidden and apart from these everything else is considered lawful.

“Forbidden to you (for food) are: dead animals - cattle-beast not slaughtered, blood, the flesh of swine, and the meat of that which has been slaughtered as a sacrifice for other than God...” (Quran 5:3) “...and intoxicants.” (Quran 5:91-92)

While sweets and junk food are not forbidden they must be eaten sparingly as part of a balanced diet, designed to maintain optimum health. Many of the most common chronic illnesses today derive from unhealthy eating habits.

Coronary heart disease, hypertension, diabetes, obesity and depression have all been linked to inadequate diets. The traditions of Prophet Muhammad praise moderation as a way of maintaining good health and the Quran stresses the need to strike a balance between any extremes.

True believers need healthy bodies and minds in order to worship God in the correct way. To maintain a sound mind, a pure heart and a healthy body special attention must be paid to health. The heart and the mind are nourished by remembrance of God, and worship performed in a lawful way, and the body is nourished by partaking of the good and lawful food God has provided.

Attention to diet and nutrition is a part of the holistic health system inherent in Islam.

(part 4 of 4): Fitness and Exercise

Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, said a strong believer was better than a weak believer.^[1] He was talking in terms of faith and character but also indicating that physical strength i.e. optimum health and fitness were desirable, providing God gave us the ways and means of attaining such strength. Islam's holistic approach to life and thus health offers us the ability to remain strong and healthy. If God decrees that illness or injury are to be part of our lives then Islam provides us with the ways and means of accepting and even being grateful for the tests and trials that envelope us.

This article, the final in a four part series on Islam's holistic approach to health, will examine what Islam, Prophet Muhammad, and the scholars of Islam have mentioned about fitness and exercise. In a separate series of articles, we will look at how Islam suggests we behave when struck by illness or injury.

Believers in Islam must take care of their spiritual, emotional and physical health. Our bodies, the most complex of machines, are given to us by God as a trust. They should not be abused or neglected but maintained in good order. As previously discussed, diet and nutrition play a big part in maintaining the best possible health, so does a lifestyle incorporating exercise. Islam lays emphasis on a simple diet combined with physical exercise.

Fulfilling the obligations of three of the five pillars of Islam requires that Muslims be of sound health and fitness. The daily performance of five prayers is in itself a form of exercise, its prescribed movements involve all the muscles and joints of the body, and concentration in prayer relieves mental stress. Good health is necessary if one intends to fast the month of Ramadan and the performance of the Hajj (or pilgrimage to Mecca) is an arduous task that requires many days of hard physical effort.

Prophet Muhammad advised his followers, to work, to be energetic, and to start their day early, all of which are conditions for a healthy body. He said “O God, make the early morning hours blessed for my nation.” [2] Obesity or an inadequate diet, laziness and weakness are all afflictions for which we will be called to account. Even though preventing illness or injury is often out of our control, there are many conditions brought on or made worse by our own lack of attention to diet and fitness. Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, said, “Any action without the remembrance of God is either a diversion or heedlessness excepting four acts: Walking from target to target [during archery practice], training a horse, playing with one’s family, and learning to swim.”[3]

The Prophet Muhammad and his Companions were naturally physically fit. Life was tougher, long distances were covered on foot, men hunted and farmed their food to survive, and there were no useless recreations to produce laziness and waste many hours of otherwise constructive time. The 21st century contains many distractions and forms of entertainment that encourage laziness and induce ill health.

Although advanced technology has many benefits, it is important that time is not wasted in front of the television screen or game console to the detriment of our health. It has been conclusively proven that obesity in children increases the more hours they watch television.[4] Other studies have indicated that this is equally true for adults. Exercise on the other hand has many benefits.

Exercise increases muscle tone, improves flexibility, enhances endurance, strengthens the heart and fights depression. Exercise also helps achieve significant weight loss. Aerobic exercise fights heart disease and high blood pressure, and reduces the risk of diabetes, while weight training increases muscle strength and reduces fat, increases bone density, fights back pain and arthritis, and improves overall mental health.

Respected Islamic scholar Imam Ibnul-Qayyem stated that movement helped the body get rid of waste food in a very normal way and strengthened the body’s immune system. He also stated that each bodily organ has its own sport (or movement) that suited it and that horse riding, archery, wrestling and racing, were sports that benefitted the whole body.[5]

Exercise and fitness play an integral part in the life of a Muslim, however it should not come at the expense of religious obligations, nor should it infringe upon the time spent with family members. In accordance with the holistic approach to life, which is Islam, every thing must be done in moderation. There is no allowance for extreme or fanatical behaviour. Letting an exercise regime or a sport take over your life is against the teachings of Islam that call for a middle path and a balanced approach. Exercise and fitness should also not involve unnecessary mixing of the sexes or wearing clothing that exposes the parts of the body that should be kept hidden.

Islam encourages anything that promotes refreshing the mind or revitalising the body provided it does not lead to or involve sin, cause harm, or hamper or delay religious obligations. The traditions of Prophet Muhammad undoubtedly encourage involvement in sporting activities as a way to promote a healthy lifestyle and encourage brotherly love and family togetherness.

In a narration recorded by Imam Bukhari (a scholar who compiled Prophetic Traditions) it states that “The Prophet passed by some people from the tribe of Aslam while they were competing in archery (in the market). He said to them, **‘Shoot children of Ishmael (Prophet) your father was a skilled marksman. Shoot and I am with so and so.’** One of the two teams therein stopped shooting. The Prophet asked, **‘why do not you shoot?’** They answered, ‘How could we shoot while you are with them (the other team). He then said, **‘Shoot and I am with you all.’** In another tradition Prophet Muhammad’s beloved wife Aisha mentions their love of games and sports. She said, “I raced with the Prophet and I beat him. Later when I had put on some weight, we raced again and he won. Then he said, ‘this cancels that (referring to the previous race).’”^[6]

A true believer recognises the wonder of the human body and is grateful to the Creator. This gratitude is shown in the care and attention given to maintaining optimum health. Islam’s holistic approach to health covers all aspects of the mind, body and soul. A truly health conscious person blends diet, nutrition and exercise with the remembrance of God and an intention to fulfil all their religious obligations.

Footnotes:

^[1] *Saheeh Muslim*

^[2] Imam Ahmad

^[3] *At Tabarani*

^[4] These results were reported in a study by researchers from the University at Buffalo, Johns Hopkins University, The National Cancer Institute, and the Centers for Disease Control and reported in Crespo, Carlos J. DrPH, MS; Smit, Ellen, PhD; Troiano, Richard P., PhD, RD; Bartlett, Susan J., PhD; Macera, Caroline A., PhD; Andersen, Ross E., PhD (2001, March 15). Television watching, energy intake and obesity in US children. *Archives of Paediatric and Adolescent Medicine*, 155, 360-365.

^[5] *Zad-Al-Ma`aad*

^[6] *Saheeh Al-Bukhari*