

A Brief Look at the Role of Fasting in Mental Health and its Correspondence with Advances in Psychology

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p><i>Article type:</i> Review Article</p> <hr/> <p><i>Article History:</i> Received: 6 Sep 2015 Revised: 16 Oct 2015 Accepted: 17 Oct 2015 Published: 20 Nov 2015</p> <hr/> <p><i>Keywords:</i> Health Mental health Psychiatry Psychology Shabaniyah Sermon</p>	<p>The robust increase in mental disorders, elevated use of sedatives and increased number of psychiatric hospitals, even in developed countries, indicate the need for preparing the human mind against tribulations. Although industrial advances have provided mankind with comfort, they have also increased the level of stress and psychological traumas. Here, the question arises as how we can free individuals from mental damages and stress in order to sustain mental health and pave the way for growth and excellence. In this article, we aimed to investigate the influence of fasting on mental health, according to "Shabaniyah Sermon" by Prophet Muhammad and new psychological findings. It should be mentioned that such comparison requires comprehensive research and further studies. In this article, we evaluated various cognitive measures such as "faith in God" and "worship", as well as behavioral strategies, e.g., "repentance" and "honoring kinship". These practices are based on humans' spiritual needs and psychologists' ideas and have great impacts on human health and prevention of psychological traumas. The main purpose of this study was to identify factors which harm the human spirit and deprive an individual of mental health. By identifying these factors, we can provide the grounds for growth and prosperity.</p>

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Mental health

Health is one of the important factors for one's success in life and attainment of peace and prosperity. Health is defined as "well-being, liberation and salvation" (1). Maintenance of good hygiene is a prerequisite of health and personal health care. Programs by World Health Organization (WHO) are based on two major principles of prevention and treatment, with prevention surpassing treatment. This is due to the fact that damages to the human body and spirit are sometimes beyond repair, and mental disorders can be incurable or recurrent in some cases. Hence, prevention is the most important principle in health (2). In fact, "prevention is better than treatment" is the slogan of WHO (3).

Human existence is comprised of physical and mental aspects. Jung also believed in the duality of human nature. As he stated, there is an inner truth in each human being, alongside the physical dimension, with evident effects on senses and their components (4). These two aspects of human existence interact with each other, and according to psychologists, psychiatrists and physicians, the well-being or illness of each aspect can reflect upon the other.

Many psychological disorders arise from physical factors. In fact, it is difficult to find a physical disorder with no mental illness as the origin (5). Therefore, physical and mental aspects of health are inextricably interconnected. Although they are two separate entities, they manifest as one single unit in the real world. Jung also believed in the unity of reality (i.e., the mind and body), which can indicate the mechanisms of psychosomatic diseases (6).

The mentioned slogan of WHO applies to both psychological and physical aspects, with their specific needs. As psychologists believe, proper response to these needs is the first step to maintaining health, since human life is constantly affected by them and one reacts to negligence or attention to these needs. In fact, psychiatrists view knowledge of the basic needs as a prerequisite of mental health (7).

Maslow considered spiritual needs to be similar to humans' need for food. As the body requires minerals and vitamins for health, the human soul also has certain needs, which should not be neglected (8). To ensure human health,

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both physical and emotional needs appear as human desires, each requiring its own unique response. If not responded properly, these desires can create crisis for humans.

According to Freud, suppressed desires do not disappear, but remain in the unconscious mind and find their way back to the conscious mind after some time (9). Freud regarded suppressed desires as a source of psychological traumas (10). With regard to humans' vulnerability to mental disorders, Jung said (11): As a matter of fact, we are constantly living on the edge of a volcano, and there is, so far as we know, no way of protecting ourselves from a possible outburst that will destroy everybody within reach. The mob is moved by impersonal, overwhelming forces. A mental illness can give rise to a condition, which might not be overcome by reasonable means (5). Vicissitudes of life, either pleasant or unpleasant, will create challenges to which one must adequately respond. Individuals who are competent enough to deal with stressors are less prone to mental disorders and in case they are faced with such conditions, they are able to easily recover (5). We all experience stress in our lives to some extent. One's inability to manage or oppose these stressors could be the starting point for psychiatric disabilities, since a common sign of mental disorders is decreased resistance to the problems of everyday life.

Here, the question arises as how one can withstand crises such as despair, disappointment, frustration, stress, anxiety and failure, which affect every man's life and impose great burdens on one's mental health. Psychiatrists believe that training on cognitive and behavioral skills and use of religious relaxation techniques can be effective, considering the adverse effects of psychiatric drugs on the functioning of the human body (5).

Frankel claimed that the main task of physicians is to deliver their patients from a crisis and guide them towards hope and excellence. Therefore, patients should not be bombarded with sedative drugs (12). In most cases, the visible signs of mental disabilities arise from treatment, not the disease itself, since all medications have specific side-effects (13). Considering the cognitive and behavioral approach of Prophet Muhammad in "Shabaniyah Sermon (The sermon of shbaniyya is a sermon

delivered by the prophet in the last jumea (friday) of the month of sha'ban as a preparation for entering the month of ramadan)", which emphasizes on the role of fasting in response to spiritual needs, we aimed to evaluate the related psychological terminology.

Concepts of cognitive and behavioral therapies

Cognitive therapy, similar to cognitive skills, is defined as altering inefficient modes of thinking and behaviors. This mode of therapy is based on the fact that intellectual and emotional traumas are the origin of many psychological disorders. Aaron believed that distorted and inefficient thinking can be traced among various psychological disorders. Realistic evaluation and modifications lead to mood and behavioral improvements. In fact, permanent healing can be attained by changing the patient's unproductive thoughts (14).

If one's belief system is built upon strong faith and true beliefs, his/her willpower will function according to these beliefs and perceptions. Individuals with psychological disorders are unable to manage their intellectual power. Therefore, their thoughts become autonomous and they feel disempowered to disentangle themselves from these negative thoughts (10).

Regarding true beliefs, one must accept the claims of modern psychology regarding the dependent roles of instincts and spiritual needs in controlling one's life. As Frankel stated, the human unconsciousness does not limit its search to instincts, but also seeks for spiritual truth. Despair and depression of mankind are not a result of poor mental health, but a sign of spiritual deprivation (12). Overall, behavioral therapy helps one think differently, leading to changes in one's way of thinking in face of unfavorable events (15).

Shabaniyah sermon

In Shabaniyah sermon, Prophet Muhammad invites people to fast during the holy month of Ramadan. He eloquently points out the significant advantages of this religious practice for mankind (16). This sermon proposes an effective response to the sublime needs of human spirit and facilitates mental health from a cognitive and behavioral approach. This

sermon sheds light on a way of living, through which one can ensure his mental health. Knowledge of the goals of fasting and emphasis on humans' exalted behaviors in this sermon incite enthusiasm and motivation for fasting and make thirst and hunger tolerable for people on long hot days

As Nietzsche stated, those who have a 'why' to live, can bear with almost any 'how' (12). In addition, religious practices can give meaning to life. According to a survey by Frankel, the number of people who feel a sense of emptiness and absurdity in life has risen from 30% to 80% among the youth (12).

The Prophet's statements, as mentioned earlier, are in accordance with cognitive and behavioral strategies, emphasized by psychiatrists for mental health (15). Fromm confirms that psychoanalysis, as a means of healing the soul, has a religious function (17).

Reinforcement of religious beliefs

Shabaniyah sermon aims to guide and correct human thoughts and deeds through raising awareness about spiritual and psychological factors and motivating mental and psychological health. The sermon starts with the following line:

"O people! The month of Allah (Ramadan) has approached you with His mercy and blessings."

A cognitive solution suggested in this sermon is cementing humans' religious beliefs, which can protect their soul against harms. Faith in God and religious practices are recommended by many post-Freudian psychologists for promoting health and meeting humans' spiritual needs. Although Jung based his studies on experience and phenomena, not metaphysics and philosophy, he believed that a scientific theory, no matter how accurate, is worthless compared to religious beliefs from a psychological perspective (11).

Jung considered faith in God as a powerful psychological means in the subconscious mind. He believed that "God" manifests as the most powerful spiritual truth and unconsciously governs man. Although he acknowledged mankind's unawareness of subconscious factors only realized by their effects, yet he believed that one can consciously accept these strong psychological factors which subconsciously govern man.

According to Jung, new developments in human psychology have provided a better understanding of the reality of human kind. He admitted that most of his patients had dismissed the presence of God (11). Not only Jung considered "faith in God" as a guide for humans in face of disasters, but also he believed in the role of faith in maintaining one's spiritual and moral independence. As he believed, those who have no faith in God in the stormy sea of life do not feel supported in times of crisis. He regarded religious beliefs as a great barrier against one's descent into social downfall (4).

Humans' spiritual needs are so strong that even materialist philosophers such as Arthur Schopenhauer (4), who denied immaterial and non-intuitive truths, have justified this sense of dependence on God, considering the unbreakable chain between God and human. Undoubtedly, faith in God not only keeps the human spirit away from various psychological traumas, but also it can be effective in the treatment process, based on clinical observations.

In this regard, we can refer to the confessions of William James about the psychological traumas which afflicted him and led him to the brink of suicide. He related his healing to Bible recitation and believed that one must keep faith in God even if his/her mind is clouded with skepticism. He believed that faith itself can create the concept of God in life; therefore, human faith can be regarded as a spiritual wealth (18). One who uses this asset will profit in life, whereas one who loses it due to skepticism will face difficulties and hardship. He also believed that humans lack a credible source to depend on. Nevertheless, religion could serve a supporting role for overcoming these adversities (4).

Moreover, Kierkegaard believed that by faith, one would lose nothing and gain everything. As commonly said, those who have a tiny amount of faith in heart can move mountains (19). A force that emanates from the inside can help and comfort an individual, create a spiritual balance and guarantee his/her health.

Encouraging fasting

In Shabaniyah sermon, Prophet Muhammad asks people to adhere to fasting true-heartedly. Religious ceremonies such as fasting can strengthen faith in humans. Through fasting, one

feels the presence of the creator. Understanding this status will re-motivate the person in a way that depression can no longer be a threat to the individual's health.

Religious practices are not rigid, meaningless commands, but are in accordance with the fundamental nature of mankind and are essential for maintaining health, wellbeing and development of the spiritual aspect; this point has been approved by psychologists and psychiatrists, as well. Jung regards religious rituals to be rooted in human nature. As he claims, inner instincts dictate adherence to these rituals, although they may not be in congruence with one's thoughts and ideology (4). From his perspective, religious practices are not only reinforcing, but also therapeutic.

Jung believed that convictions and religious practices are of pivotal importance in mental health and patients are recommended to follow religious practices unexceptionally (11). Fromm also considered religious practice as a way to meet humans' psychological needs, since they are rooted in human psyche, based on psychoanalysis (17). Jung even took a step forward and introduced adherence to religious practices as obligatory. In his opinion, submission leads to one's acceptance of God's will (4).

Jung believed that non-adherence to religion is associated with mental disorders. He had encountered educated individuals, who had abandoned the church under the light of science and enlightenment (11). However, faith in God as an infinite power can be a shelter in times of crisis. In fact, reliance on this infinite source can affect one's health, strengthen his/her spirit and immunize him/her against harms. Elahi believed that we may not all have access to psychiatrists in times of spiritual crisis, but we all can resort to God, who is accessible to all of us, regardless of the limitations of time and place. We only need to recite his name and learn how to interpret his signs; in fact, the main thing is to be true-hearted (20).

Fasting makes one feel the presence of God and be emotionally reinforced. Carrel believed that the desire to worship and pray is a human instinct, reinforcing his/her spiritual balance. He believed that the desire to worship and pray is as natural as humans' need to love. Prayer can in fact strengthen the spiritual equilibrium (21). It seems that there is a remarkable power within

human beings, which can save them in times of despair.

Religious practices can empower individuals to attain true tranquility. Carrel believed that prayers can establish mental balance. In praying, people feel as if a greater power can hear them and respond to their demands. Once in need, one can pray and the help will arrive; this will in fact remain an eternal truth (21). In addition, religious deeds make human life purposeful and meaningful. Frankel helped his patients find meaning in life by using logotherapy, since he believed that the main problem of patients, who refer to psychiatrists, is not mental but rather philosophical; these issues were resolved by clerics in the past (12).

An invitation to God's feast

All human beings are cherished and respected by God and are invited to his divine feast of Ramadan; therefore, great emphasis has been placed on using this opportunity. In fact, all humans have been invited to participate in this spiritual feast and everyone is invited with no exceptions. All human beings, regardless of their social status, wealth, family roots, race and color are invited, with no discriminations. It should be mentioned that humanity is what distinguishes mankind from other creatures.

Fasting is an invitation to a feast filled with spiritual pleasures and joyfulness. Disregard of unequal privileges and respect for equity lead to the elimination of feelings such as humiliation and incite a sense of pride and confidence. As Maslow pointed out, one of the spiritual needs of mankind is the sense of being honored and respected by others. In fact, fulfillment of this need enhances confidence and self-sufficiency in mankind (8).

Respect for others can raise their self-esteem and self-confidence and help them overcome feelings of inferiority and flourish. Jung believed that psychological disorders are closely associated with a sense of inferiority (11) since patients lose confidence in their own competence, which provides the grounds for mental disorders.

Repentance or deliverance from wrongdoing

Prophet Muhammad said: "Repent of your sins and ask God to forgive you for your

misdeeds". Happiness or misery of human beings depends on their deeds. Right and wrong actions are inter-related, i.e., right deeds have positive outcomes, whereas misdeeds lead to negative consequences. If one does not refrain from wrongdoing, he will have to face the consequences. Also, if one insists on misbehavior, his future will be destroyed. As Jung stated, everything depends on one's deeds and functions (11).

Repentance is defined as deliverance from sins and wrongdoing. From the religious perspective, repentance is confession of errors and repenting of wrongdoing in order to overcome feelings of remorse and reach salvation. One can benefit from repentance at any given point; this in fact highlights the importance of repentance from the religious view. God always opens the door of repentance for mankind, and one should never lose hope in God's mercy. Instead, he should repent and correct his behaviors.

By honest intentions, one will be no longer punished or reprimanded. After repentance, there is no reason to feel guilty or blame oneself; hence, self-blame subsides and self-acceptance becomes more tangible. Although no human being is exempt from error, the human spirit is not indifferent to foul deeds. Wrongdoing incites a feeling of remorse and blame and leads to an instinctive fear of punishment.

In Kaplan's book of psychology, repentance is described as an emotional state, accompanied by self-blame and need for punishment. In psychoanalysis, the conflict between the ego and superego and intensified feelings of guilt are the characteristics of many mental disorders (5). As Freud pointed out, unconscious guilt is a significant phenomenon and a cause of fear (10). In fact, remorse and regret deprive an individual of inner peace.

Fromm believed that the role of sin in psychoanalysis is not less important than its role in religion. Sometimes, this feeling develops as a symptom of a disease and imposes pressure on the mind (17). No other measure but repentance can set one free from his turmoil, which leads to mental disorders. If mankind confesses to his errors and asks for God's forgiveness, God will ignore his sins and have mercy on him. Therefore, inner peace will be restored in a way that no sedatives or

medications could ever do. Kierkegaard believes that regret results in return from wrongdoing, which can be a rebirth for an individual (19).

According to Fromm, forgiveness of sins is the main purpose of one's adjustment with the true self (17). One of the useful and unique methods to overcome the feeling of remorse is repentance, since it can remove the deleterious effects of sins from the spirit and cleanse the soul from the harms caused by wrongdoing. In fact, repentance can reinforce a sense of tranquility, alleviate internal traumas and encourage one to function properly. As Jung pointed out, disregarding the reactions of the unconscious mind and ignoring the facts are detrimental to our health and life (19).

"Sele-ye Rahem" or honoring of kinship

Prophet Muhammad in this sermon emphasizes on the importance of "Sele-ye Rahem", which refers to honoring of kinship. Islam is built upon kindness and forgiveness, and honoring kinship includes bonding with relatives (17). Connotatively, "Sele" refers to friendship and kindness and "Rahem" refers to relatives and family (4). The need for love and security is considered as part of humans' psychological needs (22). According to the book of "Mental Health Principles", communication is a basic psychological need and healthy relationships can lead to emotional growth (7). In fact, communication fulfills our need for love and contact with others.

In this regard, William James believed that one can feel fully satisfied by spending time with family. He regarded family as a great source of love and compassion (7). Emphasis on relationships with relatives and friends contributes to solidarity and empathy in the family and increases an individual's ability to deal with problems. One of the main instructions of Quran is honoring kinship, since people can help each other out in times of crisis. Moreover, the ability to establish positive relationships is indicative of a healthy personality.

As mentioned in Verse 25 of Surah Al-Ra'd, those who break bonds with their relatives and friends will be deprived of God's mercy and no fruitful end will await them (18). Fromm believed that people should interact and bond

with their fellow men, otherwise they will be hollow entities (23). Since rejection of others' companion is one of the indicators of mental illness, emphasis on communication with family and friends can have significant impacts on mental health.

Conclusion

In Shabaniyah sermon, Prophet Muhammad announced the beginning of Ramadan and invited Muslims to fast during this holy month. In this sermon, suggestions about the conduct and behaviors of believers were provided, which were in line with their spiritual needs and cognitive-behavioral strategies. These suggestions could give meaning to religious practices, encourage fasting and help overcome hardships. In fact, psychologists consider these practices as a prerequisite of mental health. Regarding the congruence between post-Freudian psychology and religious instructions, we can conclude that prophets were the first guides of human spirit. In fact, what man needs for spiritual health has been stated by the prophets. However, due to the limitations of the present study, we could only briefly discuss some of these instructions.

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