Islamic Contribution to Mental Health

Conceptual Paper

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Good health is a vital part of the great experience of living. The truth of this has been known from early times. Every age has made new discoveries about health, thereby providing man with new weapons to fight disease. Health is commonly thought of as the absence of disease, and indeed, it is difficult to discuss one without the others.

Health is a common theme in most cultures. In fact, all communities have their concepts of health, as part of their culture. The oldest definition of health is the "the absence of disease". In some cultures, health and harmony are considered equivalent, harmony being defined as "being at peace with the self, the community, good health and cosmos". Webster defined health as "the condition of being sound in body, mind or spirit, especially freedom from physical disease or pain". The Dental dictionary defined health as: "a bodily state in which all parts are functioning properly and refers to the normal functioning of a part of the body. A state of normal functioning, maintaining equilibrium or homeostasis. Another definition, developed by specialists in preventive medicines, specifies some tangible components of health; calling it "a state characterized by anatomical integrity,; ability to perform personally valued family work, and community roles; ability to deal with physical, biological, psychological and social stress; a feeling of well-being; and freedom from the risk of disease and untimely death" [1].

However the widely accepted definition of health is given by the World Health Organization (1948) [2] in the preamble to its constitution, which is as follows:

"Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely an absence of disease or infirmity." This definition of health envisages three specific dimensions such as: (a) the physical health, (b) the mental health, (c) the social health. Many more dimensions may be cited, viz. spiritual, emotional, vocational and political dimensions. The dimension of mental health is considered as the most important one.

Mental health is defined as a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community. Mental health is a term used to describe either a level of cognitive or emotional wellbeing or an absence of mental disorder [3,4]. According to Hales and Hales [5] mental health is defined as "The capacity to think rationally and logically and to cope with the transitions, stresses, traumas and losses that occur in all lives, in ways that allow emotional stability and growth. In general, mentally healthy individuals value themselves, precise reality as it is, accept its limitations and possibilities, respond to its challenges, carryout their responsibilities, establish and maintain close relationships, deal reasonably with others, pursue work that suits their talent and training, and feel a sense of fulfillment that makes the efforts of daily living worthwhile.

Mental, or psychiatric, illness is a major public health concern. It adversely affects functioning, economic productivity, the capacity for healthy relationships and families, physical health, and the overall quality of life. The DSM-IV-TR (2004, p. xxxi) considered mental disorder such as "a clinically significant behavioral or psychological syndrome or pattern that occurs in an individual and that is associated with present distress. Thus, the DSM-IV-TR's (2004) conceptualization of mental illness tends to focus on mental illness as a manifestation of a behavioral, psychological or biological dysfunction in the individual. The National Comorbidity Survey of 1994 found nearly half of the individuals, in its random U.S. sample, had a psychiatric disorder over their lifetime, and almost 30 percent had one in the past year. The World Health Organization's World Health Report 1998 [6] lists mood and anxiety disorders among the leading causes of morbidity and mood disorders as the leading causes of severely limited activity. Mental disorders account for a quarter of the world's disability. Comorbidity (having more than one illness) is common and even further increases to risk of disability. Suicide is the eighth leading cause of death in the United States and the third leading cause in the fifteen-to-twenty-four-year-old age group. More people die by suicide than homicide.

Mental illness is a vast subject, broad in its limits and difficult to define precisely. There are major or minor illnesses. The major illnesses are called psychoses. In psychoses the person is "insane" and out of touch with reality. Three illnesses are considered as a major illnesses" (1) Schizophrenia (split personality), (2) Manic Depressive Psychosis and (3) Paranoia. The minor illnesses include: (1) Neurosis or Psychoneurosis and (2) Personality and Character disorder.

For improving our mental health, a large number of preventing measures have been given by psychologists. Psychologists suggest that if we wish to keep our brain healthy and functional for a long period then we must improve our mental health with the help of mental exercises. Mental exercises are essential if we want a healthy lifestyle and free from stress. Some other strategies to deal with mental health disorders are:

1. Early diagnoses
2. Rehabilitation
3. Group and Individual Psychotherapies
4. Mental Health Education
5. Use of Modern Psychoactive Drugs
6. Relaxation and Systematic Desensitization
7. After-Care services
8. Games like suduko cross words and electronic games
9. Meditation and Yoga

No doubt these techniques, as observed by numerous researchers, offer useful therapeutic approaches for helping people to improve their mental health. In spite of the various psychotherapies and other techniques available for the treatment of mental illness and for the improvement of mental health, mental disorders are spreading like an epidemic. This simply shows that these psychotherapies and other techniques are not as effective as was initially expected. Hence, researchers are in search of alternative therapies and techniques that may prove more effective and yield long lived positive results. As Hardy [7] has rightly observed "It is clear therefore that the challenges of mental health problems is immense and complex. Hence, the search continues for the development of more effective alternative treatment modalities with a more away from the limited psychoanalytical technique to the behaviouristic, to the humanistic and recently to the transpersonal and more holistic approach." This alternative approach may be found in the teachings of Islam as Islam is a religion that gives a complete way of life; it covers every aspect of human behavior. The teachings of Islam, as narrated in holy Qura'n and Hadiths, are universal, evergreen and relevant to all times. Thus the Holy Qura'n and Hadiths have recommended certain guidelines for the promotion of mental health [8].

Thus one of the golden principles to promote mental health is exercise in the form of different types of games. This principle is repeatedly emphasized in the sayings of the prophet Muhammad (SAW). For instance, Imam Ahmad has quoted the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) as saying:

"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 once family, and learning to swim".

In another Hadith as compiled by Imam Bukhari who has narrated: "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 did not you shoot?" They answered: How could we shoot while you are with them (the other team). He then said' shoot 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)" (Saheeh-Al-Bukhari).

Another significant principle, as given by Islam, to maintain good mental health is our "principled life". In other words we should pass our life systematically and not haphazardly. Thus the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) has strongly advised to his followers to work, to be energetic, and to start their day early. All these conditions help in keeping our body and mind healthy. Hence the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) prayed:
"O God, make the early morning hours blessed for my nation".

Imam Ibnul-Qayyum, a respected Islamic scholar who said, gives similar advice:
"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 benefited the whole body" (Zad-Al-Mad).

Apart from Hadiths, a careful and attentive study of Holy Qura'n reveals that there are numerous verses in Holy Qura'n, which provide vital guidelines for the promotion of mental health. In one place, the Holy Qura'n has clearly revealed that God has created "man" with sound body and sound mind. It is the "man" who himself responsible for deterioration of mental health by indulging those acts which are forbidden in Islam. Thus, the Holy Qura'n says:
We have indeed created man
In the best of moulds
(Sura95:4)

It has been proved beyond doubt that stress plays the vital role in the development of mental disorder. Stressors like pain, adversity are the main culprit of mental illness. If these stressors are, controlled stress may be eliminated resulting into good mental health. These stressors may be easily controlled if we have firm belief in the Almighty and bow our head to every decision of the God, hence the Holy Qura'n has said:

It is not righteousness
That ye turn your faces
Towards East or West;
But it is righteousness-
To believe in Allah
And the last day,
And the Angels,

And the Book,
And the Messengers;
To spend of your substance,
Out of love for Him,
For your kin,
For orphans,
For the needy,
For the wayfarer,
For those who ask,
And for the ransom of slaves;
To be steadfast in prayer,
And give Zakat,
To fulfill the contracts,
Which ye have made;
And to be firm and patient,
In pain (or suffering)
And adversity,
And throughout
All periods of panic.
Such are the people
Of truth, the God-fearing.
(Sura 2:177)

It is also commonly found that emotional stresses are essentially communicated through somatic or physical complaints. The upper body and mainly the hearts (ruh, qulb, nafs) is commonly indicated to be the location of emotional pain. Somatic symptoms have far more importance in the Muslims cultural system. Here the perception is one of the connections between "psyche" and "soma", the multiple ways in which physical and psychological problems interact. Therefore, the distressed person primarily notices and reports somatic symptoms. Mental unrest is thought to be the manifestations of an incongruent heart- an unstable soul- that is lost and so has become distant from his 'creator' Allah. In other words if we have full faith on Allah, then He will guide us to right path: a path that will keep us away from any mental distress. On the other hand if we don't have faith on Allah then Allah will not provide any guidance towards the right path resulting into mental unrest. Thus in the Holy Qura'n Allah says:

That is because they believed,
Then they rejected Faith:
So a seal was set,
On their hearts: therefore
They understand not.
(Sura63:3)

Similarly in other place the Holy Qura'n says:
Many are the Jinns and men
We had made for Hell:
They have heart wherewith they
Understand not, eyes where with

They see not, and ears wherewith
They hear not. They are
Like cattle, - nay more
Misguided: for they
Are heedless (of warning).
(Sura7:179)

As a matter of fact doubt, hypocrisy and lies are the main culprit for the development of mental illness. Thus if we intend to promote mental health then we have to remove doubt and suspicion, hypocrisy and lies from our lives. These are the diseases of heart and mind and prepare a futile ground for the development of mental illness. Thus the Holy Qura'n has clearly indicated toward these factors by saying:

In their hearts is a disease;
And Allah has increased their
disease:
And grievous is the chastisement
They (incure),
Because they lied (to themselves).
(Sura2:10)

These factors i.e. doubt, hypocrisy and lies which are the main cause of mental distress can only be overcome by remembering the Almighty, for He can only alleviate all sort of sufferings. This is what the Holy Qura'n has said:

If Allah helps you,
None can overcome you:
If He forsakes you,
Who is there, after that,
That can help you?
In Allah, then,
Let Believers put their trust.
(Sura3:160)

The Qura'n further says:
"Those who believe and whose
hearts
Find satisfaction in the remembrance
Of Allah: for without doubt
In the remembrance of Allah
Do hearts find satisfaction.
(Sura13:28)

Then do ye remember
Me; I will remember
You. Be grateful to Me,
And reject not Faith.
(Sura2:152)

Almost similar guidance is given in the following verses of Holy Qura'n:
If anyone does evil
Or wrongs his own soul
But afterwards seeks
Allah's forgiveness, he will find
Allah Oft-forgiving,
Most Merciful.
(Surah4:110)

It has been observed by numerous researchers that mental illness may be caused by reacting aggressively to any stressor such as loss of job, loss of beloved one, disease etc. It is therefore advised that we should patiently face the sufferings of this world so that we may maintain our mental health. This principle of science was advocated fifteen hundreds years ago by the Holy Qura'n. Thus the Holy Qura'n says:
O my son! establish
Regular prayer, enjoying what is
Just, and forbid what is wrong:
And bear with patient constancy
Whate'er betide thee; for this
Is firmness (of purpose)
In (the conduct of) affairs.
(Surah31:17)

Islam has encouraged the development of certain qualities such as patience and perseverance. These are the equalities which are unfailing cure for all kinds of illness including mental illness. The Holy Qura'n has repeatedly advised to develop these qualities. There are numerous verses in the Holy Qura'n which have advised human beings to develop these qualities. (Q2:153, 3:200, 3:146, 8:46, 8:66, 12:83, 16:96, 16:126, 23:111, 28:54, 31:17, 32:24). Besides these qualities, as mention above, other virtues which have been emphasized by Islam are gratitude and contentment. These virtues lead to satisfaction and satisfaction is a strong moderator of stress, which inurn leads to mental health. The Holy Qura'n has emphasized the importance of these virtues in bringing about satisfaction in our lives. (Q3:145, 4:147, 6:53, 14:5, 14:7, 14:32-34, 31:31, 34:19, 42:33, 93:11).

Another virtue of human being that may contribute in the maintenance of mental health is the concept of "justice" to all. Lack of justice is bound to induce stress among human beings resulting into mental illness. Hence the Holy Qura'n in surah Al-Rahman has strongly recommended that justice must be done to all living organisms. Thus in Surah Al-Rahman, 55 Ayat No.8 and 9, the Holy Qura'n has recommended:

In Order that ye my
Not transgress (due) balance
(Ayat 8)
So establish weight with justice
And fall not short
In the balance.

(Ayat 9)

The Islamic scholars have interpreted these Ayats as follows:
"To be taken both literally and figuratively. A man should be honest and straight in every daily matter, such as weighing out things which he is selling: and he should be straight, just and honest, in all the highest dealings, not only with other people, but with himself

and his obedience to Allah's Law. Not many do either the one or the other when they have an opportunity of deceit. Justice is the central virtue, and the avoidance of both excess and defect in conduct keeps the human world balanced just as the heavenly world is kept balanced by mathematical order".

The above mentioned Surah and Ayat of Holy Qura'n have given human beings a golden message which is one of the most effective way to keep stress and anxiety away. Thus the Holy Qura'n has identified discrimination and dishonesty as the other sources of stress. It is very logical to assume that if no discrimination is done to anyone and every decision made by each individual is based on honesty then there will be no room for stress in our life.

Other virtues that the Qura'n emphasizes are avoiding negative behaviour, e.g. avoiding extravagance that leads to a spendthrift character and other negative consequences (Q39:53); avoiding envy or jealousy that may lead one to anger and depression (Q2:109, 4:32); avoiding passionate bodily desires that will lead to illegitimate sex or other unhealthy behaviors leading to the destruction of one's overall health and family/social relationships (Q3:142, 21:102, 43:71). The Qura'n also stresses avoiding pride as it may lead to a sense of elation, which stops one from ahead and leads one to look down upon others (Q4:49); avoiding temptation as it may lead toward injustice for oneself or others (Q57:14); avoiding corruption because it is unjust for others and will lead to chaos in the society (Q91:7-8) and avoiding anger because it is major cause of physical illness and self destruction (Q3:134).

Being a scientific way of life, the Holy Qur'an has not only recommended certain ways and means to alleviate stress but also has recommended numerous principles by which psychological wellbeing as well as mental and physical wellbeing may be achieved. Thus in order to achieve both i.e. psychological wellbeing and mental wellbeing, it is suggested that further researches should be carried out to understand the teachings of Holy Qur'an. The understanding of the teaching of Holy Qur'an and implementation of these teachings will certainly help in solving the problems of life. As a matter of fact, the Holy Qur'an contains a complete code, which provides for all areas of life, whether spiritual, intellectual, political, social or economic. It is a code, which has no boundaries of time, place or nation. Thus, the Holy Qur'an itself claims:

Verily this Qura-n
Doth guide to that
Which is most right (or stable),
And giveth the glad tidings
To the Believers who works
Deeds of righteousness.
That they shall have
A magnificent reward;
(Sura:Al-Israa 17:9)

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