



## Ridding the Heart of Stress

By Imam Muhammad Magid with Samuel Ross

**A**s Muslims living in America, life can feel extraordinarily stressful. Not only are we subject to the same pressures affecting other Americans – deadlines at work and in school, a twenty-four-hour economy, bills, traffic congestion, etc. – but also the unique pressures of being Muslim after September 11th.

According to the American Institute of Stress, an estimated 75 percent of all visits to the doctor in the US are caused or worsened by stress. Within the Muslim community this rate may be even higher. A recent study at Yale University, for example, found that Muslim Arabs living in the US experienced “significantly higher” levels of anxiety and depression than Christian Arabs.<sup>1</sup> Stress can weigh heavily upon us, affecting our hearts and weakening our sense of connection with God, the source of our succor. What can we as Muslims do to reduce our levels of stress and achieve a qalb saleem (a sound heart)?

The first step is to recognize that stress has always been a part of human experience; as man’s nature has remained constant, so too have his woes. God says: “Verily We have created man into toil and struggle” (90:4).

Second, we must recognize that stress in itself is not a bad thing. Rather, it is a gift from God that, when functioning properly, can be a positive force in our lives. Consider the example of a traveler whose plane is departing at noon. Were he not worried about missing his flight, he might go about sluggishly packing and arrive at the airport too late. Since he is worried, however, he rushes about, requesting the help of his family members and constantly monitoring the clock. In a sense, his condition is our condition, for we too are travelers in this world. However, our task is far more urgent; we do not know when we will depart. For this reason, God says in the Qur’an: “Rush to forgiveness from your Lord” (57:21). Similarly, Prophet Muhammad (salla Allahu ‘alayhi wa sallam) once said, “Whoever is not concerned with the affairs of his fellow Muslims is not of them” (Al-Tabarani). Were we not worried about the condition of our fellow Muslims – indeed of all human beings, plants, and animals – injustice and suffering would become pandemic.

A problem occurs when this gift from God ceases to function properly. In this regard, excessive worries can be likened to the malfunctioning car alarm system that will not shut off; though designed for the positive purpose of deterring theft,

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<sup>1</sup> Greer, Mark. “Investigating the Pain of Integration”, “GradPsych”, American Psychological Association of Graduate Students. Vol. 3, No. 1, Jan. 2005.

they can just as easily drive us crazy.<sup>2</sup> One of the most common areas of excessive worry relates to our material possessions. Though God encourages us to enjoy what He has apportioned for us out of his Generosity – “beautiful gifts... He hath produced for His servants” (7:32) – but we must not become preoccupied with their attainment. The simplest reason is that nothing lasts forever, and therefore our attachments will eventually leave us disappointed when lost. As God says: “Know that the life of this world is ...like vegetation after rain; it grows and delights the hearts of the tillers but soon it withers. You will see it grow yellow. Then it becomes dry and crumbles away” (57:20). God even informs us that we will be tested through loss: “And surely We shall try you with something of fear and hunger, and loss of wealth and lives and crops; but give glad tidings to the steadfast” (2:155).

Third, we can learn from the best example, our beloved Prophet, and how he reduced stress. In times of difficulty we can begin, as he did, by turning to God in prayer, remembrance, and supplication. When the Prophet was visited by difficulty, he would often supplicate, “O Living, O Self-Sustaining, I seek help by Your mercy. Put all my affairs in order for me. Do not entrust me to myself for the blink of an eye” (an-Nasa’i). As many researchers in the West are now discovering, meditation and prayer are highly effective ways of reducing anxiety. Unfortunately, we may sometimes deprive ourselves of their benefits by believing that our time is too tight to pray or supplicate. However, in so doing, we forget that our problem is rarely with the prayer itself but rather with our own time management.

Next, we can seek to purify our intentions; we can strive to have our intention be only for God and to regularly seek God’s guidance. When we do so, we know that even if our intentions are not realized, we will be rewarded according to our intention. We can also be consoled by the fact that God, in His wisdom, grants what is best for us.

We can also seek out the company of those who we love and who share our values and beliefs. After the overwhelming experience of receiving Divine revelation, the Prophet went running, shivering, to his wife Khadija (‘alayha rahmat) and asked her to hold and cover him. She offered words of consolation and encouragement, reminding him of his good nature and reassuring him that God would not forsake him. If we are married, we too can seek such comfort from our spouses.

Lastly, we can seek, when necessary, professional help. After the stress of the first revelation, Khadija took Prophet Muhammad to see her cousin, Waraqa ibn Naufal, a Christian and expert on previous revelations and scriptures, who confirmed that the angel who came to the Prophet was the same angel who came to Prophet Moses (‘alayhi as-salaam). In certain situations, we should also consider

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<sup>2</sup>       Hallowell, Edward. “Worry”, NY: Ballantine Books, 1998, p. xiii.

visiting reputable psychologists and therapists, who are familiar with Islam and who can use their expertise to help us to better manage stress.

Stress and worries can weigh heavily on our hearts, distracting us in our lives and weakening our sense of connection with God. As God reminds us, the purpose for our hearts' creation is to become conscious of Him, for there will come a "day when wealth and sons avail not any man, but only he will prosper that brings to Allah God a sound heart" (26:88-89). May God grant us sound hearts and the understanding that the true loss is not loss in this world but loss in the Hereafter.

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Below are some Prophetic invocations we can employ in times of difficulty and stress:

"O Living, O Self-Sustaining, I seek help by Your mercy. Put all my affairs in order for me. Do not entrust me to myself for even the blink of an eye." (an-Nasa'i)

"There is no god but You, glory be to Thee; surely I am among those who wrong themselves." (Qur'an, 21:87)