

## Impact of Islamic Spirituality on Psychosomatic Illnesses

<sup>1</sup>Bulus Y. M., <sup>2</sup>Abiola T.

<sup>1</sup>University of Maiduguri Teaching Hospital Hematology and Blood Transfusions Laboratories. Borno State; <sup>2</sup>Department of Medical Services, Federal Neuro-psychiatric Hospital, Kaduna. Kaduna State.

Corresponding author:

Bulus Y. M. University of Maiduguri Teaching Hospital Hematology and Blood Transfusions Laboratories. Borno State. Email:

[yusufmustaphab@yahoo.com](mailto:yusufmustaphab@yahoo.com).

### Abstract

**Background:** The quest for meaning and purpose has gained traction as a vital component of obtaining, preserving and sustaining optimal mental health and wellbeing. One of the most recent and interesting tradition and custom to have championed this is Islamic Spirituality. How does the Islamic Spirituality achieved this is the focus of this study, and especially in offering strong protective and therapeutic benefits against psychosomatic diseases.

**Methods:** The study explored the rich sources of Islamic theology, the belief system and the manner it conceptualizes and influence Islamic Spirituality to mitigate against psychosomatic diseases.

**Results:** The paper identified how believers conceptualized Islamic Spirituality, and utilized Islamic religious rituals like observing regularly 5 daily prayers, contemplative meditation, recommended supplications, giving charity, fasting, practicing forgiveness, Quranic recitations, etc. to directly mitigate and/or offer buffering against the pains of psychosomatic illnesses.

**Conclusion:** The reviewers concluded that Islamic Spirituality functions for believers as both a source of intangible and ritualistic behaviors that might reduce and/or cushion the sufferings from psychosomatic illnesses. Implications of these are discussed to help highlight the need for the proper understanding and application of Islamic Spirituality.

**Key words:** Islamic Spirituality, Religious Rituals, Psychosomatic Illnesses

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### Introduction

One of the most common mental health challenges among individuals seeking care in Primary Health Care setting in Nigeria is psychosomatic illnesses<sup>1</sup>. The psychosomatic illnesses appeared to have been first recognized in medieval Islamic world by Ahmed ibn Sahl al-Balkhi and Haly Abbas<sup>2</sup>. They described psychosomatic illnesses as a function of how the human mind (i.e. the psychospiritual entity) and body (i.e.

physiology) influence one another. This in recent time is broadly referred to as the mind-body medicine.

Psychosomatic illnesses like migraine, asthma, chronic pain, hypertension etc. are theorized to be bodily manifestation of mental malfunctioning and/or the associated impoverished meaning<sup>3</sup>. In other words, psychosomatic illnesses are bodily manifestation of dysregulated homeostasis

from constant mental allostatic overload<sup>4</sup>. This understanding suggests that some factors, especially the psychospiritual stressors, could influence the intensity of psychosomatic illnesses' symptoms. For emphasis, psychospirituality has a major therapeutic value for dealing with the pains of psychosomatic symptoms.

Psychospiritual stressors are triggers of spiritual crisis as it relate to beliefs, values, meaning and most importantly life purpose and connectedness to supreme being<sup>5</sup>. It hence follows that distress from psychospiritual crisis is an important contributor to psychosomatosis. Therefore, it is worthy of note to study psychospirituality and its impact on psychosomatic illness. Specifically, this study examined the role of psychospirituality from an Islamic perspective, considering that available studies<sup>3,5-8</sup> and applied instrument of studying spirituality are from the Euro-American Christian world view.

### **Methodology**

This study explored available data from the rich sources of Islamic theology, the Islamic belief system, the Islamic religious rituals and practices, and identified the manner Muslims conceptualize and utilize Islamic Spirituality to mitigate against psychosomatic symptoms and diseases.

These rich sources were gotten from the two main reservoir of Islam (i.e. the Quran and Hadith) and other published materials available and relevant to the aim of this review.

### **Results/Discussion**

The survey identified how believers conceptualized Islamic Spirituality, and utilized Islamic religious rituals like observing regularly 5 daily prayers, contemplative meditations, recommended supplications, giving charity, fasting, practicing forgiveness, Quranic recitations, etc. to directly mitigate and/or offer buffering against the pains of psychosomatic illnesses.

### **Conceptualizing Islamic Spirituality**

The concept of spirituality in Islamic belief is likened to as having a "Sound Heart"<sup>9</sup>. This is by possessing a calm, confident and optimistic soul, the hope for God's mercy, and satisfaction with destiny as a divine ordain. A study identified Islam and spirituality has not two independent entities commonly proposed by the Euro-American philosophy. In Islam, both religion and spirituality are complementary of each other<sup>10</sup>. Hence, making Islamic belief as the zeal of understanding and practicing intentional enlightenment in reality and fulfilling life purposes extending to the ethereal. This empowers Islamic Spirituality

with the transcendental capacity to influence different dimensions of wellness and vitality. A unique aspect of Islamic Spirituality is to rely solely on Allah i.e. the sealing attachment to God. This help to further the understanding of Islamic Spirituality as “the presence of a relationship with Allah that affects the individual’s self-worth, sense of meaning, and connectedness with others and nature<sup>11,12</sup>. It is this sublime relational quality that pushes every Muslim to be closer to Allah and in the process attain self-worth, personal actualization and transcendence. That is Islamic Spirituality help in the attainment of a balance among the physical, psychological and social aspects of the material and non-material life<sup>13</sup>. Such is the value of Islamic Spirituality that can help in preventing the onset of psychosomatosis and in reducing the related sufferings arising from psychosomatic illnesses.

### **Basics of Islamic Spirituality**

The five pillars of Islam (shahada, Salat, Saumul Ramadhaan, Zakat, and Hajj) and the six articles of Faith (i.e. belief in existence and unicity of Allah, and in His Angels, Revealed Books, Messengers and the seal of them Muhammad [SAW], Day of Judgment and Divine Decree) set the minimum basic for having the right Islamic Spirituality. These basics rightly influence: 1) the spiritual

principles of God consciousness in strengthening the willpower and self-control that predict positive thoughts, emotions and behaviors; 2) the spiritual preferences that influence rational reasoning, good decision and moral choice; 3) and the spiritual education that motivates the acceptance and adaptation to inevitable challenges, constant changes and unavoidable predestinations in life.

### **Some Features of Islamic Spirituality**

Islamic spirituality comprise belief, faith, values and practices in cascades of intellectual and transcendental experiences that often manifest as: 1) sublime connectedness with Allah and His creations; 2) becoming on to God (i.e. breathed in spirit of God) in growth, meaning, development, values and purpose; 3) expressing ones soulfulness as the peaked dimension of moral principles; 4) harmonizing the will of the soul to the Will of Allah; 5) living beyond the existential and in the essential; 6) attaining the state of conviction, hope and trust in Allah that bequeaths inner peace and ultimately well-being i.e. ability to regulate psycho-emotors related to psychosomatosis and/or trigger the psychophysiological process related to synthesis of stem cells, cellular repair, healing, restoration and sustenance of normal body functions.

### **Contextualizing Islamic Spirituality to Psychosomatosis**

Contextually, Islamic Spirituality is a peacefulness of the mind in positively beneficial belief, thinking and emotions as employed in our day to day encounters. It encompasses the easiness of the mind-body in positive attitudes, behaviors and lifestyles through submission to the “Wills” of Allah (SWT) and adoption/adaptation to the “Models” of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Practicing the principles of Islamic Spirituality in: performing obligatory and supererogatory acts of worship; granting the rights of self, family, relations, neighbors and the needy; avoiding resentments of envy, anger, and jealousy; practicing forgiveness; praising and contemplating about God; and expressing gratitude etc. provided context for living Islamic Spirituality. Figuratively, the seat of Islamic Spirituality in the mind-body context has been traditionally referred to as the “heart”. This is excellently illustrated in the ending sentence of the following hadith:

*Beware! There is a piece of flesh in the body if it becomes good (coherent) the whole body becomes good (ease/healthy) but if it gets spoilt (incoherent) the whole body gets spoilt (diseased/unhealthy) and that is the heart.*<sup>14</sup>

The above hadith seem very relevant to psychosomatic illnesses using the analogy of the “intelligent heart” and its function in health and illness. This appear to have been broaden in the strict sense of illness by the scientific maxim of the 4<sup>th</sup> Caliph Ali ibn Abu Talib (ra) that:

*The disease of the heart (psychosomatic disease) is worse than the disease of the body (somatic)*

Such is the richness of Islam that contextualizes wellbeing as a value of Islamic Spirituality. This is because Islamic Spirituality provides coherency of the mind, a universal mindset ingredient in preventing, buffering and/or limiting the misfortunes of diseases, especially that arising from psychosomatosis. How Islamic rituals and practices (like Faith, five daily prayers, praying for healing, listening to Qur’anic recitation, meditation (Zikr), alms-giving, practicing forgiving, fasting and remote and touching intercessory prayers) help in achieving the value of Islamic Spirituality as health promotive will be further discussed.

### **Impact of Faith on Health**

The benefits of living faith according to the basics of Islamic Spirituality confers as feedback spiritual health, wisdom, chastity, justice, kindness, and sincerity. Faith

promotes both remembrance and attachment to Allah that caution against adopting and living unhealthy lifestyle, risky behaviors, and destructive excitements, while eliminating fear, anxiety, sadness and disappointment in individuals with psychosomatic illnesses<sup>9</sup>. This is the theme of the following verses from the Glorious Quran (i.e. 16:97; and 58:22)<sup>15</sup>:

*Whoever works righteousness, man or woman, and has faith verily, to him (or her) will we give a new life (change in life) a life that is good (happier) and pure (wholeness) and we will bestow on such their reward according to the best of their actions (behaviors). (Qur'an 16.97)*

*...It is they (those who lived a spiritual life) in whose hearts Allah has inscribed faith and has strengthened (healed, protected and motivated) them with a spirit of His own... (Qur'an 58:22)*

Several studies have demonstrated the theme of the verses above as the positive impact of Islamic Spirituality on physical health, mental health, subjective well-being, health-related quality of life, coping skills, recovering from physical and mental illness, and less addictive and suicidal behaviors<sup>16-20</sup>.

### **Impact of Five Daily Prayers on Health**

Salat as practiced at least in the five daily prayers offer unique postures and routine exercises in that promotes physical fitness associated with improved muscle flexibility, strength and endurance<sup>21</sup>. Also, the peri-salat activities like ablution (which promote hygiene), distance walked to meet up with congregational prayers (that offers exercise, intra-salat recitations, listening and heeding to the rhythm and meanings of the Glorious Qur'an) and after-salat azkars, all resonating the heart to the state of God-consciousness, self-control and self-restraint. In other words, all the peri-salat activities, compliment the salat to confer some prevention against psychosomatosis and/or relief to the suffering emanating from the psychosomatic diseases. Thus, the five daily prayers is primarily worship that also confers protectiveness against loneliness, sedentary lifestyle, and other life stressors<sup>22</sup>. It also buffers against worries, fears and distress, thereby bring a sense of peacefulness<sup>23</sup> characteristics of the Islamic Spirituality. All these have been re-emphasized several years ago in the Glorious Quran (i.e. 29:45)<sup>15</sup> and in the Hadith of Noble Prophet Muhammad SAW (e.g. in Sahih Muslim 668)<sup>24</sup> as follows:

*...For (five daily) prayer restraint from shameful and unjust deeds*

*(health risk behaviors); and remembrance (meditation/zikr) of Allah is the greatest (stress coping strategy) without doubt. And Allah knows the deeds that you do. (Qur'an 29: 45)<sup>15</sup>*

*The similitude of five daily prayers is like an overflowing river passing by the gate of one of you in which he washes (detox) five times a day. Hassan said: No filthiness (negativities) can remain on him. (Muslim 668)<sup>24</sup>*

### **Impact of Dua (i.e. invocation and supplication) for Healing on Health**

Dua is a prayer to invoke or supplicate for help from Allah (SWT). This act of worship is universal and in specific needs, like request to ease the suffering of psychosomatic illness or contemplate on the process, intercessory prayers are invoked. In Islam all prayers entail the following: the art and act of supplication as modeled by the ideal man, Prophet Muhammad (SAW) (see the Hadith collected by Sahih Muslim below)<sup>24</sup>.

*Place your hand at the place where you feel pain in your body and say: (pray) Bismillah (in the name of Allah) three times, and seven times: I seek refuge with Allah and with His*

*Power from the evil that I find and that I fear. Muslim 1033.*

*When the prophet (pbuh) visited any ailing member of his family, he would touch the sick person with his right hand and supplicate: O! Allah the Lord of mankind, remove this disease and cure him (or her)! You are the Great Curer. There is no cure but through You, which leaves behind no disease. –Bukhari and Muslim (Riyad as-Salihin 902)*

Using this model has been observed to help switch off the fight-or-flight response and turn on the rest-and-repair mode. This mode supercharge the immune system to incredible healing process, whether under stress or having actual illness or in trying to prevent illness or stress<sup>25</sup>. The divine basis to seek help from Allah has been well illustrated in the Glorious Quran (26:78-81; 12:92)<sup>15</sup>.

*"Who (Allah) created me and it is He Who guides me; "Who gives me food and drink; "And when I am ill it is He Who cures me; "Who will cause me to die and then to live (again). (Qur'an 26.78-81)*

*Go with this my shirt, and cast it over the face of my father: he will come to see (clearly) (Qur'an 12.92)*

### **Impact of Listening to Qur'anic Recitation on Health**

Studies have discovered that exposing the brain to certain wave sounds can affect it positively or negatively. The rhythmic recitation of the Holy Quran has a soundwave of positive frequency and wave length. These soundwaves resonates the brain positively and restore its balance<sup>26</sup>. Studies on cell culture suggests that Qur'anic recitation can be a healing medium within the context of sound healing technique. The positive effects of sound on biological and physiological processes that were depicted in various researches could be further studied<sup>27</sup>. These studies hereby affirm the message of the Glorious Quran about how to use it to seek healing (see 10:57 and 20:124)<sup>15</sup>.

*O mankind! there hath come to you a direction from your Lord and a healing (psychotherapy) for the (causes of psychosomatic diseases) in your hearts and for those who believe a Guidance and a Mercy. (Qur'an 10:57)*

*But whoever turns away from my message, verily for him is a life*

*narrowed down (distressed and depressed life), and we shall raise him up blind on the day of judgement. (Qur'an 20:124)*

### **Impact of Meditation (Zikr) on Health**

Some studies have shown that 10 to 20 minutes of meditation twice a day moderated the following vital functions of the body: heart rate, respiratory rate, metabolism and brain waves. In the same vein, the meditative practices will also confer some benefits for the treatment of sufferings related to chronic pain, insomnia, anxiety, depression, premenstrual syndrome, infertility, stress-related irritable bowel syndrome, post-traumatic stress disorder, fibromyalgia, cancer or HIV<sup>28,29</sup>. A proposed mechanism was deduced from the reduction in inflammatory response to stress, a process vital to reducing psychosomatosis. All these have been recommended to the Muslims and all humanity since the dawn of Islam as the following verses of the Glorious Quran<sup>15</sup> show:

*Those who believe, and whose heart found satisfaction in the remembrance of Allah: for without doubt in the remembrance (meditation) of Allah do hearts find satisfaction. (Qur'an13.28)*

*Those who fear Allah, when a thought of evil (negative thought) from Satan assault them, brings (meditates) Allah to remembrance, when lo! they see (inspired with positive thoughts and ideas). (Qur'an 7.201)*

### **Impact of Alms-Giving on Health**

Giving alms, a process of reaching out to help others with tangibles, stimulates brain's pleasure circuits that release positive emotion molecules such as endorphins (which gives a sense of euphoria), and oxytocin (that promotes to some extent tranquility and inner peace). Also, giving (in)tangible assistance has been proven to decrease blood pressure and reduce stress. The intention, art and act of alms-giving reducing stress, alleviates pains, promotes longer life and confers better health<sup>30,31</sup>. These recent understanding have been echoed far longer than now to the Muslims and humanity to emulate and practice for its spiritual, social, economic, health and wellbeing benefits<sup>15,15,24</sup>.

*Nor can Goodness (giving, forgiving, kindness, volunteerism) and Evil (niggardliness, resentments, wickedness) be equal. Repel Evil with what is better: then will he between whom and you was hatred become as it were your friend and intimate (in healthy relationship)! (Qur'an 41.34)*

*Those who spend (give) their wealth for increase in self-purification. (Qur'an 92.18)*

*The Messenger of Allah, upon whom be peace, said: ... and a gift to strengthen the ties of relationship (socialization) increases one's life span (longevity). (Figh-us-Sunnah Vol.3 No.97b)*

### **Impact of Forgiving on Health**

Chronic anger activates the fight-or-flight mode, which results to unhealthy changes in heart rate, blood pressure and immune system, an important pathway in psychosomatosis<sup>3-5</sup>. These changes, might increase the risk of infections, depression, cardiovascular disease, diabetes and other inflammations. The art and the practice of forgiveness, have been found to however, calms stress

levels, leading to improved health<sup>32</sup>. Hence, an intentional and purpose-driven disposition of forgiveness reduces negative affect, improve discerning sensibilities of spiritual growth, and in facilitate the identifying of a sense of meaning and purpose in life, as well as a greater sense of empowerment<sup>14,15,24,33</sup>.

*Those who spend, whether in prosperity, or in adversity; who*



*restraint anger, and pardon (all) men,  
for Allah loves those who do good.  
(Qur'an 3:134)*

*...So overlook (any human faults)  
with gracious forgiveness (letting go)  
(Qur'an 15:85)*

*...let them forgive and overlook, do  
you not wish Allah should forgive  
you? For Allah is Oft-Forgiving,  
Most Merciful. (Qur'an 24:22)*

### **The Impact of Seeking Forgiveness on Health**

The following effects of seeking forgiveness on health are identified: peace of mind, reassurance, and joy (mental health); strong and healthy body free of diseases and disabilities (physical health); life free from disasters, accidents, Fitnah (trials) and afflictions (social health)<sup>14,15,24,33,34</sup>.

*Seek Forgiveness of your Lord and  
repent to Him, and He Will Let you  
enjoy a good provision  
(socioeconomic health). (Qur'an  
11.3)*

*Ask Forgiveness of your Lord and  
then repent to Him. He will send [rain  
from] the sky upon you in showers*

*and Increase you in strength [added]  
to your strength. (Qur'an 11.52)*

*Whatever misfortune (illness,  
disaster, accidents, failures, etc.)  
happens to you, is because on the  
things your hands (sins) have  
wrought, and for many (of them) He  
grants forgiveness. Qur'an 42.30;*

*But Allah would not punish them  
while you, [O Muhammad], are  
among them, and Allah would not  
punish them while they seek  
forgiveness, (Qur'an 8.33)*

### **Impact of Fasting on Health**

Fasting, a modern miracle of health promotion, but an integral aspect of Islamic worship and spirituality<sup>14,15,25,37</sup>, regulates the following changes: drop in body insulin that facilitates increase in growth hormone (for fat burning, muscle gain, cellular repairs); facilitating detoxification in the body; enhancing gene expression related to longevity; and protection against disease<sup>35</sup>. In addition, fasting is associated with a wide array of potential health benefits, including: weight loss, improved blood sugar control, heart health, brain function and cancer prevention. Intermittent fasting helps promote weight loss and help in lowering the

risk factors related to heart disease and type 2 diabetes<sup>36</sup>. The followings are showing how, fasting serves as an anecdote for reducing food intake i.e. emptying the stomach, and by so doing promoting health that hinders psychosomatosis and relief the suffering of psychosomatic illnesses

*Narrated Al-Miqdam ibn Ma'dikarib: Al-Miqdam heard Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him) say, "A human being has not filled any vessel which is worse than a belly. Enough for the son of Adam are some mouthfuls which can keep his back straight (body fitness): but if there is no escape he should fill it a third with food, a third with drink, and leave a third empty." (Tirmidhi No.1355)<sup>37</sup>*

*"Do not overeat; that invites disease."*  
(Khalifa Umar (RA))

### Conclusion/Recommendations

The review conceptualizes what Islamic Spirituality is and contextualizes how it is position as a main spiritual health boosting ingredient helpful in understanding psychosomatosis and in reducing the suffering from psychosomatic illnesses. The reviewers concluded that Islamic Spirituality functions for the believers as both a source of

intangible and ritualistic behaviors that might reduce and/or cushion the sufferings from psychosomatic illnesses. To this end, the study recommended that: 1) Islamic Spirituality is vital to understanding psychosomatosis and in relieving pains of psychosomatic illnesses; 2) it very necessary to fill the spiritual vacuum of needs of patience with psychosomatic diseases, and all other diseases; 3) health practitioners and institutions need to incorporate Islamic Spirituality in medical curriculum and clinical practices; 4) there is a need to intensify health literacy for the health practitioners and the public on the scientific benefits of Islamic Spirituality both in health and illness; 5) more research needs to be carried out to provide further insights into the proper understanding and application of Islamic Spirituality as it relates to faith-based healings, especially on the value of the God's Spirit breathed into man.

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Conflict of interest: Nil

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