

# Mechanism for Coping With Moments of Grief in Islam

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## Abstract

This paper offers pragmatic religious approach to handling moments of grief. It examines the mechanism for coping with distress in Islam. Though inferences were drawn from the Muslim Scripture (i.e. the Glorious Qur'an) and the experiences of the prophets of God, the paper posits that every human being in today's world experiences moments of grief that are similar to those experienced by those prophets and as such, strategies adopted by them could still be found useful in the contemporary times. The paper has six parts. The introduction forms part one and this is followed by an examination of the causes of distress. In part three, the different signs and manifestations of distress in individuals are discussed while part four looks at the conventional or scientific ways of coping with moments of grief. The section that follows critically discusses the Islamic paradigm for coping with moments of grief. Thereafter the conclusions were drawn and some recommendations were offered.

## Keywords

Grieving, distress, stress management, coping strategies, Islam

The reality of human existence shows that life is full of problems and challenges. These vary in forms and degrees. From loss of good job to death of a loved one, from lack of good health to want of a child in marriage, people face one challenge or the other at different times of their lives. However, as varied as problems and challenges are, so also are their manifestations on and reactions to by people. No two individuals are exactly alike in the way they respond to challenging situations and environments. In other words, challenging situations and conditions have diverse effects on people and the way a person reacts or adjusts is an indication of his personality and mental health. This is because a person's mental health is measured by how well he or she is able to cope or adapt to the strains and stresses of life. Hence, a person is said to be mentally ill or mentally balanced. The essence of religion, particularly Islam has,

however, for many years been queried by people who, using Bartholomew (2000: 149) presume that there is very little left for any God to do in today's world. But as Nottingham (1964: 29) observed, religion can be thought of as one of the most important means used by man to adjust to situations of stress. She contended that in all human societies, there are stretches of time when things run smoothly and men and women play their social roles reasonably to secure that their fellow will reciprocate. People can plan and then look forward to their plan's fruition. But there are also situations of stress in the life of all societies when the means available to their members are insufficient to enable

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them to attain their most cherished goals. If this situation arises, then the development and application of scientific techniques might, in fact, be expected to produce a utopian world. Nottingham (1964: 29) wrote:

There is always a gap, of greater or lesser extent, in all societies between the culturally grooved hopes and expectations of men and their fulfillment. Hence, practical scientific techniques, however, highly developed, can never be adequate to meet all human situations. Men, every where must adjust to events that they cannot adequately foresee or control. These adjustments may, at times, be practical but they are always emotional. Human beings cannot just take it; means must be found to adjust to both emotional and the practical aspects of the situation... (and these) have been important focal points for religious behaviours in all societies. (Nottingham 1964: 29-30)

If Nottingham's words above are anything to go by, the pressing question will be: "What are the mechanisms for coping with moments of grief in religion"? The focus of this paper, therefore, is to examine what religion has to offer as a fortress in such times of distress, using Islam as the unit of analysis. This study is to help people attain a good mental health through harmless religious practices especially in today's technological and materialistic age in which people daily experience fears, anxieties, and frustration tied up to physical and social problems as against the use of tranquilizers, pep pills, and sleep portions which, together with the initial strain or stress, culminate in chronic illness or mental health and eventual death.

## **CAUSES OF DISTRESS OR MOMENTS OF GRIEF**

There are various reasons why people grieve but basically these result from individual level of satisfaction of his/her basic human needs. According to Udoh (2006), man's actions are general indications of attempts to satisfy his needs. When these needs are

satisfied, Udoh contends, man's behaviours are seen to engender feelings of success and happiness. But unsuccessful attempts to satisfy these needs trigger off actions which lead to moments of grief resulting in people becoming misfits, trouble-makers, alcoholics, and sociopaths which are indices of poor mental health. It results in people's inability to adapt and function responsibly. In Udoh's words, "this simply means that a person's mental status can be measured by the degree which (sic) he is able to satisfy his basic human needs" (Udoh 2006: 55).

Although, several attempts have been made to develop a kind of checklist of what constitute the most salient human needs, Abraham Maslow's list tends to be popular. They have, therefore, become indices for measuring human mental health. These are physiological needs, safety (security) needs, need to love and be loved, self esteem needs, and need for self actualization. Others include the need to know and understand as well as the aesthetic need. According to Udoh (2006: 61), physiological needs in Maslow's hierarchy of basic needs encompass need to satisfy hunger, thirst, sexual urge, etc. while safety needs concern times of illness, civil unrest, natural disaster, or injuries. The need for love and belonging entails affection, companionship, and a feeling of acceptance. As for self esteem need, every normal person has need for self esteem, self respect, and recognition. He contends further that the need for respect from others is seen in the striving for status, dominance, attention, and appreciation. Self actualization need emerges from the satisfaction of all the previous needs. It is about an individual becoming what he can be. While the need to know and understand is about impulses to satisfy one's curiosity, the aesthetic need is about the admiration of beauty.

Summarily therefore, man's mental status is occasioned by the level of satisfaction of the above listed needs. If one loses his job, for example, he may not be able to satisfy most of his physiological need like hunger, sex, etc. Even if he has a wife who is

supportive, the feeling of being a failure or being an irresponsible husband to his wife and father to his children will create a feeling of guilt in him. Similarly, experiencing the loss of loved ones such as a child, parent, a marriage partner, or even a close friend or associate can create a moment of grief or distress for one. Marital disharmony, child's misbehavior, economic dislocation, mutual misunderstanding, lack of compatibility, etc. also constitute reasons why people grieve or find themselves in distress.

From the above, one can see that the needs are basic in the life of individuals and one's mental health is eternal by the stress created by an unfulfilled need. Put differently, the lower the hierarchy of unfulfilled basic needs is, the greater effect it has on the mental health and behaviour of an individual. Hence, the person is said to be distressed or in moments of grief.

### **MANIFESTATIONS OR SIGNS OF DISTRESS/MOMENTS OF GRIEF**

In times of distress, it is natural to go through period of discouragement and as noted earlier, no two individuals react or respond to problems and challenges the same way. People exhibit different signs. Among the very many signs or manifestations of moments of grief are eating disorder, weight loss, disturbed or lack of sleep, feeling of emptiness, feeling of being cut off from other humans, paranoia, loss of enjoyment of previously enjoyed activities, sexual infidelity, impaired judgement, poor academic performance, anti-social behaviours, bad mood, and aggression. Other signs or symptoms include bad dreams and nightmares, a pounding heart or trouble breathing, emotional numbness, memory loss, sweatiness, and a tendency to be startled by loud voices. The one in moment of grief or in distress may also experience accelerated pulse, dryness of the throat and mouth, the overpowering urge to cry, run, or hide, trembling, nervous ticks, high pitched, nervous laughter, stuttering, and other speech

difficulties. There could also be grinding of the teeth, frequent need to urinate, headaches, pre-menstrual tension or missed menstrual cycles, and general irritability. These are some of the signs seen in normal people who have been through a terrifying situation in which they could not control what was happening. The effects of these symptoms on man require that distress or moments of grief must be kept in the right duration. It is generally agreed that everyone has an optimal threshold for stress beyond which it could cause very serious problems either physically or psychologically. According to Udoh (2006: 86), virtually every organ as well as chemical constituent of the individual's body is involved in these reactions and that most people do not know that they have triggered those intense reactions when they grieve. Hence, Udoh concludes: "Keeping stress for the right duration is most important because prolonged stress arising from frustration results in distress which is devastating to mental health" (Udoh 2006: 86).

### **COPING WITH MOMENTS OF GRIEF: THE CONVENTIONAL/SCIENTIFIC WAY**

Having examined the various ways by which one expresses the grief of distress, it is also necessary to consider the various ways or strategies which people adapt to cope with such situations. According to Udoh (2006: 96), there are three categories of coping strategies in moments of grief. These are: (1) less desirable coping activities; (2) aimless and unproductive coping activities; and (3) desirable and helpful coping activities.

The less desirable coping activities are those which are very harmful both physiologically and psychologically. They include over eating, alcohol consumption, smoking, and use of drug. While over eating will lead to obesity and hypertension resulting from inactivity, alcohol consumption causes both psychological and physiological problems like

cirrhosis of the liver, reduced appetite, malnutrition, as well as impaired normal mental activities. Tobacco smoking on its own causes cancer of all kinds, bronchitis, emphysema, stroke, heart attack, ulcer, and heart disease. The use of drugs like depressants and stimulants, tranquilizers, opiates, and narcotics has implications such as drug dependency, addiction and tolerance, mental disorders, impaired functioning of the organs, as well as death. Because of the very many health hazards and implications of these coping strategies, they are categorised as “less desirable”.

The aimless and less productive coping strategies, however, are those though harmless, appear to reduce tension on the depressed person but have been found to be unproductive. These include floor pacing, hand wringing, nail biting, teeth grinding, finger tapping on an object, scratching the body, day dreaming, and other aimless activities. Day dreaming, which is a retreat from reality to fantasy in which a person's problems do not appear to exist or appear to have been solved, is, however, said to be dangerous when it is for long duration or becomes chronic, thus hampering the opportunity to face the reality of the situation.

Desirable and helpful coping activities, however, include laughing, crying, and sneering. One can also talk out a problem or think through a situation as a way of coping with moments of grief. Sad occasions for example, could create such tension that they are expressed in crying which invariably lets out the tension. It is better to cry it out when one is in distress such as when one is grieving for the loss of loved one rather than bottle the emotion within. In view of the value of crying therefore, people should not be unduly restrained from crying when an occasion calls for it. Similarly, laughing helps in the reduction of stress as it signifies signs of good mental health. These are natural activities of everyday life and they significantly help in reducing effects of distress. Talking to others especially a trusted and mature person is also said to be a good coping strategy. Though the person may not have a ready solution to

the problems, the burden of carrying that problem would have been reduced because someone now shares part of it. It is better not to suffer in silence. In a similar vein, a few moments of unemotional thinking through situation may put things in the right and better perspective and a process of reconstruction begins. An appropriate step towards solving a moment of grief may be taken by a few moments of rational thinking and analysis.

### **COPING WITH MOMENTS OF GRIEF: THE ISLAMIC PARADIGM**

A careful inspection of the two primary sources of law in Islam reveals that there are seven strategies of coping with moments of grief in Islam. These are:

#### *Accepting Grief as Part of Life*

The Glorious Qur'an is unequivocal in saying that situations of stress or grief are part of God's plan for man. The idea is such that many are the calamities of the righteous. Qur'an (2: 214), for example, says:

Did you suppose that you would go to paradise untouched by (the suffering) which was endured by those before you? Affliction and adversity befall them: and so battered were they that each apostle, and those who shared his faith, cried out: “When will the help of Allah come”? His help is ever near.

As if enumerating the various ways in which the affliction and adversity could come, the Qur'an in its characteristic way states in another verse of the same chapter: “We shall test you with some fear and hunger, with loss of life and property and crops” (Qur'an 2: 155). Thus, Islam believes grief and stress of life as parts of God's plan for man's earthly life perhaps also as partial requirements for admittance into paradise. When man experiences calamities and affliction which lead to moments of grief, therefore, he should see them as trying moments from God. He should accept them as something he has no control over and

therefore should worry less or not at all about them. In fact, it will not be an over statement to say that considering the way the Qur'an views calamities and affliction, every individual who takes Islam as his value system should expect them at different times of his life and in different forms. The Qur'an again says: "You shall be tried in your possessions and in your personal selves and ye shall certainly hear much that will grieve you..." (Qur'an 3:186). Again, the Qur'an says:

"O ye who believe, God doth but make a trial of you in a little matter of games well within reach of your hands and your lances, that he may test who fear him unseen. Any who transgresses thereafter, will have a grievous penalty" (Qur'an 5: 97).

Thus, loss of loved ones, loss of job, insecurity, economics dislocation, and even natural disaster are bound to happen to man. It is in this connection that Bushuri (2002: 98) wrote:

"Behold when thou art troubled by rage, and be patient when calamity befalleth thee; for the nights are pregnant with events, and give birth to every kind of wonder".

He also wrote: "What fortune bringeth thee affliction, console thyself by remembering that one day, thou must see prosperity and another day difficulty" (Bushuri 2002: 97).

If, as Bushuri posits, man is bound to experience good as well as bad sides of life, then a coping strategy as advocated by Islam will be prepared to experience moments of grief. Al-Ghazali (N.d.: 38) quoted Lin Yutang as saying: "True peace of mind corned from accepting the worst". He also quoted William James as having said:

"Be willing to have it so... Be willing to have it so because acceptance of what has happened is the first step in overcoming the consequences of any misfortune" (Al-Ghazali N.d.: 39).

### *Absolute Faith in God*

Sequel to the above as a coping strategy in times of

distress is absolute faith in God as the source of anything that happens to man. This in Islamic theology is called *tawakkul*. It is about accepting whatever happens to man as the wish of God. The Qur'an says:

If you ask them who created the heavens and the earth, they will reply "Allah". Say: "Do you think then that, if Allah be pleased to afflict me, those you called upon besides Him could relieve my affliction or that if He be pleased to show me mercy, they could withhold His mercy"? (Qur'an 39: 36-37)

From this verse, Islam holds that whatever happens to man, including moments of grief is from his creator. He is therefore expected to know that He (God) is also the only one who could remove the affliction. The Qur'an again says:

"If God touch thee with affliction, none can remove it but He, if He touch thee with happiness, He hath power over all things. He is Irresistible (watching) from above His worshippers and He is the Wise, Acquainted with all things" (Qur'an 6: 17-18).

The practice of some people therefore to consult spiritualists of all kinds—Muslim clerics, pastors, diviners, etc. to ascertain the cause of an affliction and probably proffer solution therefore runs contrary to the letter and spirit of Islam. Quadri (2003: 242), using the Yoruba as example, opined that this is part of the acculturation of some people with their indigenous culture and as Balogun (2003) also contended, few converts from one religion to another immediately forget their old ways. Conversely, however, Islam teaches that man should surrender totally to God including holding the belief that all that happen to him are not only known to God but also emanated from Him and can only be ameliorated by Him. The Qur'an again says:

"Say: 'my prayers and my devotions, my life and my death, all are for God, Lord of the Creation. Thus, am I commanded and I am the first of those who surrender'" (Qur'an 6: 162-163).

Such a belief will help hold the afflicted person in a moment of grief.

### *Patience, Perseverance, and Prayer*

Though, Islam teaches man to accept whatever befalls him as the making of his Lord, it does not leave him without a word of advice in times of distress. Major instruments of fortress in such times of distress being suggested are patience, perseverance, and prayer. Islam wants one in distress to call on his Lord who has promised to console him if he does so. Qur'an (2: 153) says: "O ye who believe, seek assistance with patience, perseverance and prayer for God is with those who patiently persevere". Ali (1975: 25) when commenting on the Arabic word *sabur* rendered patience in the verse and wrote that it implies many shades of meaning like patience, perseverance, constancy, steadfastness, firmness of purpose, a cheerful attitude of resignation, and understanding in sorrow, defeat, or suffering as opposed to murmuring. It is because of this that the Qur'an again says:

"Give good news to the patient, who in adversity say: 'We belong to Allah and to Him we shall return'. On such men will be Allah's blessing and mercy, such men are rightly guided" (Qur'an 2: 156).

Such is the position of Islam that moments of grief are to be handled by patience, perseverance, and prayer. Islam holds that it is natural to be sad and even probably shed tears when afflicted, but it is wrong to wail or make sacrilegious statements. Hence, Prophet Muhammad (SAW) said: "Real patience is to be found at the onset of a calamity" (Quadri 1995). Again he said:

"Certainly, Allah does not punish one because of the tears on one's eyes or the sadness in one's heart. But He punishes or shows compassion because of this—and he pointed to his tongue" (Quadri 1995: 76).

Thus, one can see that in the view of Islam, experiencing grief or being distressed is not something extraordinary. It is what one does in that

moment of grief that counts before God. This is because, as noted earlier, affliction and adversities are means by which He measures people's absolute faith in Him. If despite that warning, which is meant to prepare one against that time, one is still found wanting in faith, such a person is then not qualified for God's mercy and blessings after the moments of grief as he promised. In fact, he/she is liable to further calamities and affliction. The Qur'an says: "Follow thou the inspiration sent unto thee and be patient and constant, till God do decide for He is the Best to decide" (Qur'an 10: 109). Again, it reassures: "And be steadfast in patience, for verily God will not suffer the reward of the righteous to perish" (Qur'an 11: 115).

As one exercises patience, one is also expected to pray to God. The prayer could however, be in two ways—one to prevent the occurrence of calamities before they happen, the other to soften or ameliorate them if inevitable. Regarding the use of prayer in the first sense, the holy Prophet Muhammad (SAW) is reported to have said: "Prayer is the sword of a Muslim". And in the second sense, the Qur'an says:

"O ye who believe! If ye fear God, He will grant you a Criterion (to judge between right and wrong), remove from you (all) evil (that may afflict) you, and forgive you. For God is the Lord of grace unbounded" (Qur'an 8: 29).

Both the Qur'an and the holy Prophet Muhammad (SAW) have taught Muslims the forms of prayers to say to either prevent calamities or ameliorate them when they happened. The Qur'an for example says:

If good befalls thee, it grieves them, but if a misfortune befalls thee, they say, "We took indeed precautions before hand and they turn away rejoicing". Say (in prayer): "Nothing will happen to us except what God has decreed for us. He is our protector; and on God, let the believers put their trust". (Qur'an 9: 51)

The Prophet Muhammad (SAW) also teaches Muslims to say the following prayer to prevent calamities:

“O Allah, I seek refuge in you from grief and sadness, from weakness and from laziness, from miserliness and from cowardice, from being overcome by debt and from being overpowered by men” (Al-Qahtani 2005: 188-189).

Again, he teaches Muslims to say: “O Allah, there is no ease other than what you make easy, if you please, you ease sorrow” (Al-Qahtani 2005: 119). Again, he teaches: “We are from Allah and unto Him we return. O Allah, take me out of my plight and bring to me after it something better” (Al-Qahtani 2005: 126-127). Prayers/suplications like these are meant to prevent the occurrence of moments of grief in one’s life or ameliorate them if they happen. The efficacy of such prayers is, in fact, not in doubt as Allah promises to listen to those who believe in Him when they call on Him: The Qur’an says:

“And He listens to the prayer those who believe and do deeds of righteousness and gives them increase of His Bounty: but for the unbelievers, there is a terrible penalty” (Qur’an 42: 26).

Matthews (2000: 103) also wrote regarding the efficacy of prayer in coping with moments of grief:

“The medical effects of faith are not a matter not just of faith but also of science. More than three hundred scientific studies demonstrate the medical value of religion commitment (including worship attendance, prayer, scripture study and active participation in a spiritual community)”.

Ali (1975: 313) however, wrote on why some prayers are not answered:

It may be objected that all prayers even of good people are not answered? The reply is: (1) that even everyone who is good not necessarily know what is best for him, for the values in this life are curiously distorted; and (2) on account of their want of knowledge, if everyone got all he asked for, there would be chaos and confusion and transgression beyond bounds through the earth, for the different interests are so intermingled and balanced that some measures must be observed in granting people’s wishes. This measure is best supplied by the watchful care of God and His perfect knowledge of all our real needs.

## Charity

Another weapon Islam puts at Muslims’ disposal to cope with moments of grief is the giving of charity. In a number of Qur’anic verses and apostolic traditions, Islam urges Muslims to give out of what they legitimately earn to the poor. This is to achieve a number of purposes including warding off evils and grief. The Qur’an says:

“So fear God as ye can: listen and obey and spend in charity for the benefit of your own soul and those saved from the covetousness of their own souls—they are the ones that achieve prosperity” (Qur’an 64: 15).

Another verse says:

“Take alms from their wealth by means of which you may purify and sanctify them and pray for them, for your praying for them is a source of security for them” (Qur’an 9: 103).

From these two verses, one can understand that giving of alms is a source of security for the giver. The Prophet Muhammad (SAW) said: “*Sadaqah* (Charity) appease the anger of the Lord and ward off the agony of death” (Dabas and Zarabozo N.d.: 97).

Again, the Qur’an says:

“Those who (in charity) spend of their foods by night and by day in secret and in public have their reward with their Lord, on shall be no fear nor shall they grief” (Qur’an 2: 274).

And again it says:

“If ye disclose facts of charity, even so it is well, but if ye conceal them, and make them reach those (really) in need, that is best for you. It will remove from you some of your stains of evil. And God is well acquainted with what ye do” (Qur’an 2: 271).

Again, the Qur’an says:

“They ask thee how much they are to spend; Say: ‘What is beyond your needs’. Thus, doth God make clear to you His signs in order that ye may consider (their bearing on this life and the Hereafter)” (Qur’an 2: 219-220).

What is penetrating from these verses is that though charity is mainly understood to have implications for human life in the hereafter when God will reward the giver for helping the poor with what He provided him, it also has serious implications for one's earthly life as it is also a means of warding off evils. It is perhaps with this understanding that most Muslims give charity especially when desirous of something from God or when in adversity. It is also given on behalf of their sick ones. Some even speak their mind and rub currency notes all over their bodies with their intention before giving them out to the poor in the belief that whatever affliction they may be experiencing is being passed on to the recipient though this is wrong as Muslims are expected to give charity not only in adversity but also in prosperity. The Qur'an says:

"Be quick in the race for forgiveness from your Lord and for a garden whose width is that (of the whole) of the heavens and of the earth prepared for the righteous... those who spend (freely) whether in prosperity or in adversity... for God loves those who do good" (Qur'an 3: 133-134).

According to Qur'an (2: 265), charity is to be given in order to strengthen one's soul and it could be given to anybody including the rich, a thief, and even an adulterer/adulteress. According to the holy Prophet Muhammad (SAW), it may be that the charity might teach the rich the lesson to spend from what Allah has given him, it may be that the charity might refrain the thief from committing thief or that it might be the means whereby the adulteress might restrain herself from fornication (Siddiqi 1972: 490). The Qur'an also says:

(Charity is) for those in need, who, in God's cause, are restricted (from fraud) and cannot move about in the land seeking (for trade or work), the ignorant man thinks, because of their modesty, that they are free from want. Thou shall know them by their (unfailing mark). They beg not importunately from all and sundry. And whatever of good ye give be assured God knoweth it well. (Qur'an 2: 273)

Specifically, however, Islam wants charity to be given to parents, kindred, orphans, the needy, and the wayfarers (Qur'an 2: 215-217) thereby agreeing to the aphorism that says: "Charity begins at home".

### *Scripture Reading/Study*

Another strategy Islam provides for Muslims to use to cope with moments of grief is the reading of the Glorious Qur'an. It is described as the Book revealed to Prophet Muhammad (SAW) through archangel Jubril as the summary and concluding part of all the previous messages from God to mankind (Qur'an 2: 38). In Muslims' view and understanding, it is a complete code of conduct (Qur'an 6: 38) and therefore the World's Constitution. The Prophet Muhammad (SAW) who received it on behalf of mankind described it as follows:

The Book of God, in it, is the record of what was before you, the judgment of what is among you and the prophecies of what will come after you... Whoever speaks from it will speak the Truth, whoever rules with it will be just and whoever holds fast to it will be guided to the straight path. (Khalifa 1983: 5)

Because of this glorious and enviable position the Qur'an occupies among Muslims, it serves so many purposes for them. It is a book of Guidance on all issues, a text of daily, weekly, and seasonal prayers, as well as an instrument of prophecy. It is also a fortress in moments of grief which is our concern in this paper. The Qur'an itself says:

"We reveal of the Qur'an that which is a healing and mercy to the true believers, though it causes nothing but loss after loss to the evil doer" (Qur'an 17: 82).

It again says:

"O men there has come to you indeed an admonition from your Lord and a healing for what is in the breast and a guidance and a mercy for the believers" (Qur'an 10: 57).



And it again says:

Had We sent this as a Qur'an (in a language) other than Arabic, they would have said: Why are not its verses explained in detail? What! (a Book) not in Arabic and (a Messenger) an Arab? Say: "It is a guide and a healing to those who believe; and for those who believe not, there is deafness in their ears; and it is blindness in their (eyes). They are (as it were) being called from a place far distance"! (Qur'an 41: 44)

It may, however, be asked, how the Qur'an heals especially the afflicted person or one in distress? This can be explained in a number of ways. One is by reading the Qur'an for the purpose of praying for the afflicted soul. Another is to write it for the afflicted to drink. Yet, another is for the afflicted to understudy the Holy Book. As for the first explanation, portions of the Glorious Book are selected and read by Muslim clerics with the sole intention that God ameliorates the sufferings of the afflicted person. Portions commonly read in this manner include *Surat Yasin* (chapter 36), *Suratal-Path* (chapter 28), *Surat al-Waqi'ah* (chapter 56), and *Surat al-Mulk* (chapter 67) among others. The recitation is often accompanied by the sacrifice of animal of all kinds: goats, rams, fowls, etc. not compulsorily as a ritual but in the context which charity has been discussed above, even though the Muslim clerics often emphasise this unnecessarily. The belief of the Muslims in the efficacy of those portions of the Glorious Qur'an to ameliorate the sufferings of the afflicted lies both in what the Qur'an says about itself as well as the application of its verses in similar manner by the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) himself and other Muslims. For example, the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) is reported to have recited verse 9 of *Surat Yasin* (i.e. Qur'an 36: 9) when surrounded by enemies on the eve of his migration to Madinah. This was said to have been responsible for the enemies' inability to see him or do him any harm as a result of which he escaped being killed by a team of assassins hired by the people of Makkah (Haykal 1982). For the

purpose of relevance, we quote here that verse:

"And We have put a bar in front of them, and a bar behind them and further, We have covered them up so that they cannot see" (Qur'an 36: 9).

Thus, when Muslims recite one verse or portion of the Qur'an, they believe that it will work for them for the purpose for which they have employed it. Hence, the Qur'an itself says: "...and indeed it is a Book of Exalted power" (Qur'an 41: 41). The same purpose is aimed at when Qur'anic verses are written for the afflicted to drink. The Qur'an again says:

In whatever business thou mayest be and whatever portion thou mayest be reciting from the Qur'an—and whatever deed ye (mankind) may be doing, We are witnesses thereof when ye are deeply engrossed therein. Nor is hidden from thy Lord (so much as) the weight of an atom on the earth or in heaven, and not the greatest of these things but are recorded in a clear Record. Behold, verily on the friends of God, there is no fear nor shall they grieve. Those who believe and (constantly) guard against evil. For them are glad tidings in the life of the present and in the Hereafter. No change can there be in the words of God. This is indeed the supreme felicity. (Qur'an 10: 61-64)

The other way in which the healing powers of the Glorious Qur'an can be explained is with regards to reading and studying it. As noted earlier, the Glorious Qur'an serves many purposes for Muslims including that of being the mirror of all ages. Because it contains records of happenings and of the ancient civilizations, it affords Muslims the opportunity to know what the experiences of the previous generations in life were. Hence, Muslims are urged to read the Qur'an. The Holy Book itself says: "Recite what is sent of the Book by inspiration to you and establish regular prayers" (Qur'an 29: 45). Another verse of the Qur'an says: "(It is) a Qur'an which we have divided into parts in order that ye might recite it to men at intervals" (Qur'an 17: 106). And elsewhere, it says again: "And recite the Qur'an in slow, measured rhythmic tones" (Qur'an 73: 4).

Thus, the reading or recitation of the Glorious Qur'an is a spiritual exercise. The reading, however, also has a healing power as it is said to cause tranquility. The Prophet Muhammad (SAW) is reported to have said that the devil flees from the house in which *Surat al-Baqarah* is read. He is also reported to have said that the devil is also driven out of a house by the invocations for morning and evening, those that are said before sleeping and upon waking up, those for entering and leaving the house, including those for entering and leaving the mosque, and by many other authentic invocations taught by the Prophet such as the reading of *Ayatul Kurisiyy* (i.e. Qur'an 2: 255) and the last two verses of *Surat al-Baqarah* (i.e. chapter 2: 285-286) before going to sleep (Al-Qahtani 2005: 120-121).

Apart from reading the Qur'an, studying it too has a healing power for the afflicted. This is because it affords the one studying it to learn about the experiences of the people of the past generations and how they reacted to such moments of grief in the times. The Qur'an says: "Therefore, patiently persevere as did (all) apostles of inflexible purpose, and be in no haste..." (Qur'an 46: 35).

The above verse indicates that even the Prophets of God were not immune from moments of grief. Since they are to serve as models to believers in God, they also suffered one thing or the other. The essence of this was for those who will follow them to see in them good examples when they are also afflicted. Thus, Prophet Ibrahim (i.e. Abraham) was barren for several years (Qur'an), Prophet Ya'qub (i.e. Jacob) lost touch with his beloved son—Yusuf (i.e. Joseph) for many years, and Prophet Muhammad (SAW) lost six of his seven children during his life time. All these experiences were recorded in the Glorious Qur'an so that when a believer reads and studies them, he/she will, as the above verse puts it, "patiently persevere as did (all) the apostles". And as the apostles/prophets overcame their moments of grief, the afflicted who reads the Qur'an and also studies the lives of these

prophets will also overcome his moments of grief. The Qur'an says:

Thus, have We made for every prophet an enemy among the sinners, but enough is thy Lord to guide and to help. Those who reject faith say: Why is the Qur'an revealed to him all at once? Thus, (is it revealed), that We may strengthen thy heart thereby and We have rehearsed it to thee in slow, well-arranged stages, gradually. (Qur'an 25: 31-32)

Thus, reading and/or studying the Scripture (i.e. the Qur'an) is a means of strengthening the heart of the afflicted in his/her moment of grief. It is, therefore, a coping strategy in Islam. Dale Matthews, a professor of medicine attested to the effectiveness of Scripture reading/studying therapy in moments of grief when he wrote:

In my office, I encourage everyone to exercise regularly, eat properly, cease smoking and excessive alcohol use, take medicines correctly, and even wear seatbelts. Should I tell them to pray, read Scripture, attend worship, or work at a soup kitchen? My answer is yes! The documented health benefits of religious beliefs and practices and the burgeoning spiritual interests of patients compel us to address matters of faith with our patients. All medical professionals can learn to recognize the medical impact of faith and to encourage, when appropriate the healthy use of spiritual beliefs and practices. (Matthews 2000: 104-105)

### *Standing by One Another*

Though Islam recommends various religious/spiritual instruments as weapons of coping with moments of grief, it does not lose focus of the social aspect of human life in this respect. It recommends standing by one another in moments of grief as a coping strategy for the afflicted. The Qur'an says: "O ye who believe! Persevere in patience and constancy; vie in such perseverance, strengthen each other and fear God that ye may prosper" (Qur'an 3: 200).

Victims of moments of grief, as noted earlier, exhibit certain behaviours such as emotional numbness, anxiety, and even anger. People who are

distressed can be wounded in many ways in body, mind, and spirit. They may be troubled by disquieting thoughts which can become, at times, an overwhelming torrent of panic or rage. They may feel emotionally paralyzed. They may feel lonely which is often painful. At such times, they need someone to lend them an ear; to offer them reassurance; or possibly to echo their deep feelings or inner thoughts; and to understand them as persons. They need someone who is sensitive to their emotions. It is this sensitivity that the Qur'an addresses when it says "strengthen each other". This is where the social significance of *As-salat* (Ritual Prayer) comes in. Muslims are enjoined to observe *As-salat* (Ritual Prayer) five times daily at appointed times and in congregation too. Among the very many purposes that congregational prayers are to achieve in Islam are social relations between the different sections of the Muslim community. As Ali (1986: 361) posited, differences of rank, wealth and colour vanish within the mosque, and quite a new atmosphere of brotherhood, equality, and love, totally differing from the outside world, prevail within the holy precincts. He wrote further:

Man has to work amidst inequalities, amidst strife and struggle, amidst scenes of hatred and enmity and yet he is drawn out of those five times a day and made to realize that equality, fraternity, and love are the real sources of human happiness. The time spent on prayer is not, therefore, wasted even from the point of view of active humanitarianism; on the contrary, the best use is made in learning those great lessons which make life worth living... In fact, the five daily congregational prayers are meant, among other things, to carry into practice the theoretical lessons of equality and fraternity for which Islam stands... (Ali 1986: 361)

Thus, when one is afflicted or distressed, the love and affection shown him/her in the mosque during the five daily prayers help neutralize the pains. Thus, instead of being lonely, he/she enjoys companionship. Instead of emotional numbness, he interacts with his fellow Muslims at regular intervals, exchanging

greetings and pleasantries before and after the prayers. The victim gets better if he could discuss the problem with his *Imam* (i.e. missionary) rather than suffer in silence. As the spiritual leader, he is positioned to see to the welfare of his subjects who he has been appointed to lead. The *Imam*, in helping the afflicted, must, however, realize that healing, whether physical, mental, or spiritual—is a gradual process. He must, therefore, understand that one who is depressed or afflicted is not overreacting or deliberately being difficult when he or she is not able to respond as he (i.e. the *Imam*) would wish to the efforts he is making to be supportive. He needs not give up. Rather, he should show a high level of understanding. According to the holy Prophet Muhammad (SAW), Muslims should visit one another, at regular intervals and especially during illness. He said:

When a man goes to visit his sick Muslim brother, he walks along a path of paradise until he sits and when he sits, he is cloaked in mercy. If he comes in the morning, seventy thousand angels pray for him until evening and if he comes in the evening, seventy thousand angels pray for him until morning. (Al-Qahtani 2005: 124)

A distressed person is also a "sick" person. So, when the *Imam* or any Muslim visits him/her in the moment of grief, he/she is also working towards receiving God's mercy. He/she is to offer the afflicted a helping hand, giving him/her a smile, expressing a kind word, sharing a thought from the Qur'an and even life experiences. Hence, Qur'an says "strengthen each other".

When one visits the afflicted, the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) teaches that one should say the following: "Surely, Allah takes what is His, and what He gives is His, and to all things He has appointed a time So have patience and be rewarded" (Al-Qahtani 2005: 133). He also teaches Muslims to say: "May Allah magnify your reward, and make perfect your bereavement and forgive your departed" (Al-Qahtani 2005: 133). The one visiting is also advised to say to

himself: "Praise is to Allah who has spared me what He has afflicted you with, and preferred me greatly above much of what He has created" (Al-Qahtani 2005: 148).

Thus, Islam wants Muslims to strengthen one another in moments of grief, showing interests and empathy when one is distressed.

### *Living a Moderate Life*

Islam also teaches that Muslims should live a moderate life as a coping strategy in moments of grief. As noted above, unfulfilled needs, often lead to distress. In other words, it is a major source of moments of grief in human life. When individuals set goals that are not only difficult to achieve but practically impossible to attain, they end up being frustrated. Although there are philosophies of life which encourage high goal and teach that practically nothing is impossible in life, Islam, in its own view, believes that people are created and blessed in categories. It thus urges Muslims to set goals that are realistic. Hence the Qur'an says:

"Do not strain your eyes towards the worldly benefits. We have bestowed on some of them, for with these We seek only to try them. Your Lord's provision is better and more lasting" (Qur'an 20: 131).

The truism of this Qur'anic verse can be seen in unending craving for wealth in people and for which they will never be satisfied and will consequently be distressed or end up in moments of grief. It is in this connection that the holy Prophet Muhammad (SAW) also said:

"Look at those who are below you and do not look at those who are above you. This is much better so that you will not belittle Allah's favour on you" (Quadri 1995: 74).

This position of Islam plays a dual role. It teaches Muslims to be moderate in their perspective about life so as not to be distressed due to frustration arising from unfulfilled ambitions. It also puts the thought of someone who is distressed as a result of economic

dislocation or a desire to satisfy certain worldly things in the right perspective.

## CONCLUSIONS

In today's world, many people experience moments of grief just as people of past generations did. It is even greater in today's world because of lawlessness and lovelessness. It affects people of all races, social strata, and creeds. Even religious men and women are not immune from it. Every one at one time or the other has felt and could probably still feel the need for reassurance or echoing his/her deep feelings or inner thoughts. The feeling of grief is so powerful and can be extremely painful. People who undergo moments of grief or are distressed are far more common than most people realize. What can be done religiously to help several millions of people who experience moments of grief daily is, therefore, the focus of this paper and efforts in this direction have been quite revealing and rewarding.

Away from "a sense of doing something about it" posited by Nottingham (1964: 34), this paper has shown that religion and particularly Islam recommends steps to be taken so as to comfort the afflicted person in his moment(s) of grief. The strategies are so practical and effective that they are not only considered from religio-spiritual perspective but also from socio-economic viewpoint. Although scars of moments of grief may seem permanent, their power to disturb or cow one down will be entirely gone with the Islamic mechanism. It is on this note that this paper recommends that a collaboration between religion particularly Islam and medical science is established in the care of the distressed. Koenig (2000: 107) wrote:

Religion is commonly relied upon to cope with the stress caused by health problems... Medical science is now beginning to substantiate this claim... Religious beliefs provide a worldview that gives meaning and purpose to life, helps make sense of tragedy and suffering, and often enables

people to transcend even the most difficult of circumstances.

He continues:

These mental health benefits of religious faith have physical health consequences. Mind/body medicine is one of the fastest growing areas of medical science, as investigators throughout the world have turned their attention to the effects of mental stress, emotional disorder, and social isolation on the human body. When persons experience stress are socially marginalized, or become depressed, there are physiological processes that if allowed to continue over time result in blood pressure elevation, heart attacks, stroke, stomach ulcers, irritable bowel and impaired immune function... Thus, any resource that helps reduce stress, relieve depression or increase social support will help reduce or prevent these negative health consequences. Among the most powerful of such resources is religion (Koenig 2000: 107-108).

Koenig is not alone in this thought. Matthews (2000: 105) also shared his view when he wrote:

“In this health-conscious age, patients are demanding more from medical professionals. They want more compassion and less dispassion, more listening and less lecturing; they seek healers of the mind and spirit, not just mechanics of the body”.

He concludes:

“Perhaps clinicians of the twenty-first century will join with clergy to develop a new synthesis of scientifically based and religiously meaningful medical care to help persons who suffer and seek our aid. Shall we pray” (Mathews 2000: 105-106)?

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