

The Qur'ān and the Bio-Psychological Aspects of the Elderly

Ahmad H. Sakr, Ph.D.
Lombard, Illinois

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Abstract

The Qur'ān stated the stages that a person has to go through during his/her life cycle; fertilization, fetal stage, infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, old age, death, life in grave, and life after death. The Qur'ān even stated in depth the stages that the fetus has to go through, before becoming a full human being and before its birth. The Qur'ān also explained some of the biological changes that a person has to go through in life. It explains some of the social, religious and psychological aspects that many have to pass through. The Qur'ān and Ḥadīth state in depth the life in the grave, the life after resurrection and the life in Paradise or in Hell. No one book of history or of wisdom has had all of this information in depth as much as the Qur'ān has.

In this expose, the author reports directly from the Qur'ān the biological, the physical and the psychological changes that a person has to go through, and especially those changes that take place in the elderly. The author, then, wishes to render some general advice as to how a person can prolong his happy life before he is struck with any of those changes. In so doing, a person may live a longer and happier life.

Key Words: Senility, biological aspects, psychologic aspects

I. Biological aspects of aging

When a person ages, his/her biological processes do change. At old age the rate of metabolism is decreased, activities are reduced, mental capacity is minimized, and sexual potency is diminished if it has not yet stopped.

Sexual potency and fertility

It is understood that women at the age of 45-50 pass through menopause. Their fertility is reduced and is finally lost. Man's sexuality varies from person to person, but after a certain age, it is diminished and finally he becomes impotent too.

These two conditions; menopause and impotence have been reported in the Qur'ān in many places:

1. The Qur'ān states the example of Prophet Zakariyyā. He was an old man without offspring. He knew at that time that his old wife could not bear children during her youth. He also knew that he himself being old was unable to have children. First he prayed to Allāh requesting Him to give him off-

spring. In Surah Maryam, Allāh says on behalf of Zakariyyā:

"... So give me an heir as from Thyself,— One that will truly represent me, and represent the posterity of Ya'qūb (Jacob)..."

The story of Zakariyyā and his du'a' to Allāh has been reported in another verse:

"There did Zakariyyā pray to his Lord, saying: O my Lord! Grant unto me from Thee a progeny that is pure..."

As to the prayer of Zakariyyā, Allāh accepted it and gave him glad tidings of an offspring. Prophet Zakariyyā came back from his spiritual emotions to the reality of life. He was shocked at such happy but unrealistic news. He expressed his shock by saying in Sūrah Āl-'Imrān:

"He said: O my Lord! How shall I have a son, seeing I am very old, and my wife is barren?"

This expression of shock was also mentioned in Sūrah Maryam:

"He said: O my Lord! How shall I have a son, when my wife is barren and I have grown quite decrepit from old age?"

2. The Qur'ān relates the story of Prophet Ibrāhīm and his first wife Sārah. Ibrāhīm knew that he was an old person and that he had reached the age of sexual impotency. He also recognized that his wife was old too and that she could not bear children even when she was young. However, glad tidings were given to both of them; that Allāh was to rejuvenate their sex-

From the Foundation for Islamic Knowledge
P.O. Box 665
Lombard, IL. 60148

Reprint Requests: Ahmad H. Sakr, Ph.D.
Foundation for Islamic Knowledge
P.O. Box 665
Lombard, IL. 60148

ual organs so that the wife would be able to bear a child. In Sūrah al-Ḥijr (The Rocky Tract), we are informed that Prophet Ibrāhīm was shocked with the good news. His shock was expressed to the Angels who brought him the good news.

*"He said: Do you give me glad tidings that old age has seized me? Of what, then, is your good news?"*⁵

In another place, his wife Sārah was doubly shocked. She could not believe such news was to be true. She knew that she had become too old to bear children and that she was not even able to bear children when she was young. Her expression of shock was in the form of surprise with a cry of a crisis.

*"... seeing I am an old woman, and my husband here is an old man? That would indeed be a strange thing!"*⁶

The wife of Prophet Ibrāhīm reconfirmed her biological impotence in Sūrah al-Dhāriyāt (The Winnowing Winds) in a strange way after she smote her forehead, and said:

*"But his wife came forward laughing aloud: she smote her forehead and said: A barren old woman."*⁷

Physical inability

An old person cannot do much of the hard work that a young one is able to do. It is obvious that he may lose the capacity of depositing calcium into the bones, or the rate of deposition of calcium is slow while the rate of excretion is high. A person may have osteoporosis, osteomalacia or even arthritis. Hence his bones would become weak, and he would not be able to do the same routine work as before. He will not be able to carry heavy loads as before. He may use a cane to help him move. The Qur'an narrates two incidents in this regard:

1. The Qur'an informs us about Prophet Shu'ib who was an old person. He could no more take care of his daily work and especially of the animals on the farms. His two daughters had to take care of them and to take them to the fountain spring. They had to carry the jugs of water from the spring to their houses. In Sūrah al-Qaṣaṣ (The Narration), the Qur'an states the story in detail. The two daughters informed Prophet Mūsā (Moses) that their father was an old person and he was unable to take care of the animals; he was unable to bring them to the spring water; and he was unable to carry the jugs of water. For these reasons, they were doing the job of their father. The Qur'an states the following:

*"They said: we cannot water our flocks until the shepherds take back their flocks; and our father is a very old man."*⁸

Musa was still young and strong. The daughters were impressed with his masculine strength and his shyness.

One daughter requested her father to employ him as he was strong and honest. The Qur'an states the following in Sūrah al-Qaṣaṣ (The Narration):

*"Said one of the damsels: O my dear father! engage Him on wages: truly the best of men for thee to employ is the man who is strong and trustworthy..."*⁹

2. The Qur'an also explains the physical condition of Prophet Zakariyyā. He became old, his bones were weak, his hairs turned grey, and he could not have children. He expressed his problem to Allāh by saying in Sūrah Maryam:

*"Praying: O my Lord! infirm indeed are my bones, and the hair of my head doth glisten with grey..."*¹⁰

Mental incapacitation

At old age, there is a certain degree of loss of mental capacity and understanding commonly referred to as senility. There is no specific age for senility. The Qur'anic terminology for senility is "Ardhal al-'umr." A person with senility may not be able to comprehend, to understand, to interpret, to communicate, or even to make decisions. He may not remember things too.

This idea of senility has been mentioned explicitly in the Qur'an in both Sūrah al-Naḥl (The Bee) and al-Ḥajj (The Pilgrimage).

In Sūrah al-Naḥl; Allāh explained the age of senility in the following way:

*"It is Allāh Who creates you and takes your souls at death; and of you there are some who are sent back to a feeble age, so that they know nothing after having known much..."*¹¹

In Sūrah al-Ḥajj, Allāh explains the whole process of fertilization, embryonic development, sex determination, delivery, child development, adolescence, adulthood, senility, death, etc. The way it is explained is to reconfirm that Allāh, the Most Powerful, is certainly able to create us again during the Day of Judgement. The 'Ayat goes as follows:

*"O mankind! if ye have a doubt about the Resurrection, consider that We created you out of dust, then out of sperm, then out of a leech-like clot, then out of a morsel of flesh partly formed and partly unformed, in order that We may manifest Our power to you; and We cause whom We will to rest in the wombs for an appointed term, then do We bring you out as babes, then foster you that ye may reach your age of full strength; and some of you are called to die, and some are sent back to the feeblest old age, so that they know nothing after having known much, and further, thou seest the earth barren and lifeless, but when We pour down rain on it, it is stirred to life, it swells, and it puts forth every kind of beautiful growth in pairs."*¹²

II. Psychological aspects of aging

The psychological feelings of the elderly are sometimes too high and above the limits of thresholds. The elderly may express themselves with high emotions, love, concern and sympathy. Their sentiments, if continued to be carried, may lead to nervous breakdown and/or blindness.

Allāh gave us a story in the Qur'ān about Prophet Ya'qūb (Jacob), concerning his expressions and his sentimental feelings toward his two lost sons: Yūsuf (Joseph) and Benjamin.

In one place in Sūrah Yūsuf we are told about the loss of his sight:

*"And he turned away from them, and said: How great is my grief for Yūsuf! And his eyes became white with sorrow, and he fell into silent melancholy."*¹³

When Prophet Ya'qūb was criticized for his crying, sorrow, anguish and depression, he answered the people by saying:

*"He said: I only complain of my distraction and anguish to Allāh, and I know from Allāh that, which you know not . . ."*¹⁴

What should be done

In all these cases we are taught as Muslims, that we should respect the elderly even if they are senile. Our respect of the elderly is more confirmed toward our parents. In Sūrah al-'Isrā' (Night Journey), Allāh says to us:

*" . . . and that ye be kind to parents. Whether one or both of them attain old age in thy life, say not to them, a word of contempt, nor repel them, but address them in terms of honour."*¹⁵

Our beloved Prophet (PBUH) instructed us to respect all those who are old, and at the same time we are to have mercy on the young. In one Ḥadīth, it is said:

*"I advise you to be good to the elderly, and to have mercy on the youth."*¹⁶

We are informed that any young person who respects the elderly, is to be respected when he becomes old. In a Ḥadīth narrated by 'Anas (May Allāh be pleased with him), the Prophet (PBUH) said:

*"Any young person who is kind to an elderly person because of his age, Allāh will send him someone who will be kind to him when he becomes old."*¹⁶

In another Ḥadīth, Prophet Muḥammad (PBUH) denounces the young if they do not respect the elderly in as much as the elderly are denounced if they do not have mercy on the young. 'Amr ibn Shu'ib through his father and from his grandfather (May Allāh be pleased with them), narrated that the Messenger of Allāh said:

"He is not of us, the one who does not have mercy on our young ones, and the one who does not

*know the respect of our old ones."*¹⁶

The respect that the Prophet (PBUH) instructs us to give to the elderly is also in the field of prayer itself. We are to feel sympathy and concern for the elderly while we are performing the prayer. We should not extend or prolong the congregational prayer especially if there are elderly among the faithful. In a Ḥadīth narrated by 'Abū Hurairah (May Allāh be pleased with him), the Prophet (PBUH) said:

*"When a person leads a congregational prayer, let him make it short, as there may be weak, sick and elderly people around. However, when a person prays by himself, he may extend his prayer as much as he wishes."*¹⁶

Allāh Himself gives, among other things, respect to the elderly Muslims. 'Abū Mūsa (May Allāh be pleased with him) narrated that the Messenger of Allāh said:

*"Among the respect that Allāh bestows is to the Muslim who is elderly, grayhaired, to the one who memorizes the Qur'ān without bragging or deserting it, and to the just ruler."*¹⁶

I hope and pray that present day Muslims will do their best to respect the elderly and especially their own parents. It is not befitting Muslims to send their elderly to senior citizens' homes, or to get rid of their parents by sending them to nursing homes. One feels sorry for the elderly who are living in nursing homes, they feel that they are not wanted in the society, and that they are deserted. One can imagine the impact of these feelings on their psychological and emotional health. The presence of parents in our own houses is a blessing from Allāh (SWT). Their presence will bring peace, happiness, concord, tranquility, mercy and reward from Allāh. We should try our best to request our parents to stay with us at our own houses so as to receive the blessings of Allāh. We should give a good example to the non-Muslims to do the same with their parents. If we take the initiative and practice this good habit in the American society, we will establish a better society where there is no generation gap. There will not be animosity between the young generation towards the elderly. Instead, there will be kindness, respect, sympathy, concern, and love toward one another.

Conclusion

It is requested that the readers think seriously about themselves when they will be old. They should think seriously about what is going to happen to them in this part of the world when they will become senior citizens. I am sure none of us want to be deserted, unwanted or to be thrown away in those nursing homes. None of us want to think that he is a liability when he is still an asset to the society.

We should do something good as of today to improve the situation. Once it was said: "Treat people

the way you wish them to treat you.” Also it was once said: “The way you treat people, you will be treated.”

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