

Counseling the Family of the Terminally Ill During Sickness and Death

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Abstract

A center for counseling is practically nonexistent in the Muslim world. Likewise, Muslims living in the West, on many occasions, tend to seek the services of non-Muslim counselors when confronted with specific emotional social problems. This article serves to evolve a method of counseling the Muslim family, based on the teachings of the Glorious Qur'ān and Ḥadīth during three specific stages: upon news that the loved one is terminally ill, during his or her sickness, and after his or her death.

Keywords: Counseling, the family, the terminally ill Muslim, death.

The process of dying can be quick; but in many instances, it may take a long time. Many healthy people take life for granted and tend to forget that they, too, are in the process of dying. Every night they retire and every morning they awake to find themselves alive. This reality makes them ignore the precariousness of life.

Learning to live in the midst of death will bring meaning to life and a change in the attitude toward death. One would find time to give diligent care to the terminally ill in anticipation that when they are in the process of dying, someone else would be there to take care of him or her.

If we were to accept that we would in due course die, we would waste no time in finding meaning and fulfillment

in life. To accept death means to take charge of one's life, losing fear, and realizing the urgency of concentrating on life's essentials.

Life: A Test

Allāh (SWT) tells us in the Glorious Qur'ān that, during our allotted span of existence on the earth, He (SWT) would test us in various ways. For example, the following verse may be considered:

"Be sure that We shall test you with something of fear and hunger, some loss in goods or lives or the fruits (of your toil), but give glad tidings to those who patiently persevere - who say when afflicted with calamity: 'To Allāh we belong and unto Him is our return.'"

Thus, the news that a loved member of our family is terminally ill should be taken as a test from the Almighty. The news, however, hard as it may be, ought to be accepted by resigning ourselves to the will of the Almighty as the Qur'ānic verse above suggests.

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Moral Support

None of us is in a position to protect the terminally ill from the impending fate as the Qur'an explicitly states: "Wherever you are, death will find you out, even if you are in towers built up strong and high."²

But, nevertheless, we must realize that the terminally ill person needs our moral support. We must urge him not to become despondent of the mercy of Allāh (SWT). Undoubtedly, Allāh (SWT) is the ultimate healer as Prophet Ibrahim (AS) affirmed: "And when I am ill, it is HE who cures me."³

Medical research is an ongoing reality. One can never dismiss that, through the grace of the Almighty, cures for the so-called incurable disease may, in the near or distant future, be found. Our terminally ill loved one should be reassured of this. After all, the Prophet [PBUH] is reported to have said: "No disease Allāh created, but that HE created its treatment."⁴

Once diagnosed as terminally ill, the loved one will need moral support more than ever. We must, therefore, stand by him or her. If we succeed to give him or her the courage to resign himself to the providence of the Almighty, he or she will most certainly be in a better position to respond positively to treatment procedures however rigorous they may turn out to be. The Glorious Qur'an reminds us that by virtue of being believers in Allāh (SWT) we are members of one large brotherhood (i.e., that of the Islamic ummah).⁵ In the Hadith literature, we come across the following saying of the Prophet [PBUH], which inspires us to assist the one who is in need of our help:

"The believers in their love and sympathy for one another, are like a whole body; when one part of it is affected with pain, then the whole of it responds in terms of wakefulness and fever."⁶

Visiting the Terminally Ill

The 'Adab (manner) of visiting the ill has been outlined by the Prophet Muḥammad [PBUH]. He [PBUH] used to reassure the sick by saying, "Do not worry, Allāh willing, (your sickness) will be an expiation of your sins."⁷

It ought to be borne in mind that while visiting the terminally ill, we should always say things that would cheer them up. Moreover, we should make du'ā' (supplicate) for them as this was done by the Prophet [PBUH]. Whenever he [PBUH] paid a visit to a patient, or a patient was brought to him, he would invoke Allāh saying:

"Take away the disease, O Lord of the people! Cure him as YOU are the ONE who cures. There is no cure but yours, a cure that leaves no disease."⁸

The Prophet [PBUH] also encouraged visitors to request the sick to pray for them because the state of sickness and helplessness is so pure that Allāh hears their prayers. This advice of the Prophet [PBUH] assists in boosting the morale of the terminally ill. At least the dying person would feel that he or she can also contribute something by supplicating for the living, rather than being only a passive agent, awaiting the inevitable to happen.

Near-Death Signs

Muslim "Fuqahā" (jurists) make use of empirical knowledge and cite some signs that signify the approaching of death. Ibn Qudāmah, for example, states in his *"al Mugnī"* that death is imminent when the legs of the dying person become slack or limp, the jaws separate, the nose crooked, and the facial skin becomes flabby and the temples collapse. Nowadays, physicians have the ability to determine with a reasonable degree of accuracy signs of near death.

At this time, the terminally ill should be laid on his or her back, the head slightly raised, facing in the direction of the qiblah. If someone is present at this moment, he or she should recite the "Shahadah" (the Declaration of Faith) loudly so that the dying person can hear it and the dying person should be urged to recite the Shahadah as well. Once that person has recited the Shahadah, everyone should remain silent. The objective is that the last statement uttered on earth should be the verbal declaration of one's faith in the oneness of Allāh (SWT) and the prophethood of Muḥammad [PBUH]. When the final moment arrives and the person breathes in rapid gasps, then everyone who is present should recite the Shahadah audibly. Sūrat Yāsīn could also be recited because it lessens the pangs of death.

After Death

A piece of cloth should be tied from under the chin above the head to ensure that the mouth does not remain open. Both eyes are to be closed. The feet are to be placed together and the two big toes are to be tied with a ribbon of cloth to prevent the legs from spreading apart. The hands are to be placed at the side, and the body should be covered with a sheet.

When arranging the body one should recite: "Bismillāhi wa'alā millati Rasūlillāh (In the name of Allāh and on the path of the Messenger of Allāh)."

In the event that the terminally ill passes away at home, arrangements should be made to contact a doctor in order to obtain a death certificate. Thereafter, the "mayyit" (dead person) should be given the "ghusl" (ceremonial bath). Phone numbers for this service should be available from every mosque or Islamic center.

Death: An Instruction

Having witnessed the death of a loved one should serve as a reminder that the living, too, have an appointment with death. The Holy Qur'ān affirms this:

*"Every soul shall have a taste of death."*⁹

Moreover, the Holy Qur'ān instructs us that when we are afflicted with any form of calamity we should say:

*"To Allāh we belong and unto Him is our return."*¹⁰

The death of a fellow being should be viewed as a form of instruction for us to mend our ways and to surrender ourselves to the will of the Almighty, our Creator, to whom we would have to render account of our deeds.

Coping with the Loss

All of us experience real and undeniable loss in the death of a loved one. It is human to grieve for the one of whom death has robbed us. Allāh has made it natural for us to shed tears, which operate as a safety valve to release emotional pressure. Prophet Muḥammad [PBUH] shed tears and said when his son Ibrāhīm passed away:

*"The eyes are shedding tears and the heart is grieved, but we will not say except what pleases our Lord, O Ibrahim! Indeed we are grieved by your separation."*¹¹

However, the grief must not turn into an hysterical outburst. The Prophet [PBUH] ordered the people to not be allowed to cry out loudly. He is reported to have said:

*"The deceased is tortured for the wailing of the living ones for him."*¹²

Mourning for the dead should not lead the survivors to engage in what the Prophet [PBUH] had prohibited us from such as slapping the cheeks, tearing the clothes, throwing dust on the head, and crying out aloud.¹³ They should endeavor to exercise patience at the first stroke of calamity¹⁴ and their faith in life after death will reassure them that one day, by the grace of the Almighty, they will be reunited with

their departed loved one. At this moment of extreme sorrow and feeling of emptiness, they should find inner peace and comfort by resorting to the reading of the Glorious Qur'ān:

*"For without doubt in the remembrance of Allāh do hearts find satisfaction."*¹⁵

Conclusion

The living in the midst of death every day, yet their engrossment in material pursuits conditions them to regard the end of life as an unfortunate and catastrophic event. Thus, when news reaches them that a member of their family is terminally ill, a sense of fear grips them. Many of them visit that person only once. This should not be the case. The dying person needs comfort and prayers and the living should also bear in mind that the Du'ā' of the sick is answered by Allāh (SWT). The living can learn a lot from the dying. For example, they will come to terms with the precariousness of life. The notion the living generally have is that they will die only when they get old. Interaction with the dying will make us mend their ways and allow them to be conscientious Muslims so that when death comes, they will leave this world with "Imān" (faith) in their hearts.

References

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14. *ibid*, 2;384:216.
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