Islamic Concept of Mental Health

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Abstract

Some studies have indicated that psychological stress, an outcome of modern civilization, is associated with deterioration of mental health. In order to regain mental health, people in vain turn for help to the advocates of current psychological models viz. the behavioristic, the dynamic, or the humanistic ones. All these models have made limited contributions since they have an erroneous view of human nature. A need is felt for a model which is based upon "the original" nature of man. This model, having the divine teachings as its source, is the Islamic one. Man is created in the best of stature because he possesses godly qualities within him. He only falls from this status when he disregards the goals of his life. Since all creation obey the laws of nature, all are unconsciously Muslims. The difficulty arises when man, who has the conscious aspect as well, refuses complete submission to his creator. This conflict results in loss of mental health. The concept of repression has no place in this model because in it, human urges are neither neglected nor given undue importance. Some Muslim psychologists may perhaps find a reinforcement for this model by testing the hypothesis that the Muslim societies have far less mental health problems than the non-Muslim societies.

Key words: *Psychological stress, mental health, Islamic concept, psychological models.*

The present century is the age of science and technology; man no longer remains a slave of his environment. He has, with the help of his scientific achievements, created a new world, a world in which different goals of life with different value systems have emerged. The remarkable progress man has made has resulted in shattering his personal as well as his social life. The technical revolution has severely blocked his efforts to seek the "good life". It seems that modern civilization and its associated psychological stress has, in spite of its innumerable comforts, given man disordered behavior. This can be observed in the form of his personal distress,

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disabling behavior tendencies, poor reality control, depression, and psychosomatic disorders. In other words, he has lost his mental health and finds no peace of mind. In order to regain his mental health he is anxiously looking for devices that can give back and promote mental health.[1]

But what exactly is meant by "mental health"? In spite of its wide use, it is not easy to define this term. Psychologists generally emphasize its negative aspect, i.e., an absence of pathological symptoms like tension, anxiety, depression, emotional imbalance, antisocial habits, drug addiction, etc. A person who does not display these symptoms is regarded as mentally healthy. This operational definition of mental health seems to be quite good since it is tied up with normality. It is assumed that a normal person is well-adjusted and therefore must have good mental health. However, a difficulty arises about the term "normality" itself. It does not have an independent existence. It exits only with reference to a particular culture in which one lives. Since different cultures vary considerably, there is no common standard of normality. This argument leads us to the con-

clusion that a universally accepted definition of mental health is not possible.

Like the negative characteristics of mental health, some psychologists have also prepared a list of positive qualities of mental health. This method also is not very reliable. This is because one has to believe what a person says about himself, e.g., a mentally healthy person has a healthy outlook towards life. If he responds positively to the question, "Do you feel satisfied with your life?" we have no right to question his response. This is true of all other positive qualities like sociability, emotional maturity, effectiveness of human relationship, etc.[3]

In modern psychology several more or less independent systems explaining human nature have emerged. Each system tries to solve the complexity of human nature and many problems arising out of it. Most of these problems are concerned with mental health, especially with its negative aspect. These different systems of psychology can be grouped into three models viz. the mechanical, the dynamic, and the humanistic, briefly described as follows.

1. The mechanical model looks upon man as a reactive being. It considers man as merely one more creature of nature whose behavior can be understood, predicted, and controlled through processes such as conditioning, reinforcement, generalization. This model uses the stimulus-response (S-R) formula with its several modifications as its guiding principle in the study of various human problems, including mental health.[3] Most of the great experiments of this model are based upon laboratory animals, not on human beings. The model finds acceptance among scientists because of its claim to be a scientific method.[4] Its methodology is no doubt scientific, but its primary postulate that man is simply a reactive organism is not scientific. It has failed to give any effective solution to mental health problems.

2. The dynamic model is best represented by the analytical schools of psychology founded by Sigmund Freud. According to this model, behind the kindly exterior world of man there lurk impulses, urges and wishes which man is ashamed to recognize. Since man, by his nature is an animal, he is to repress such impulses for his social and cultural adjustment. Several defence mechanisms make such adjustment possible. Of great importance are the influences of childhood experiences, especially those which are sexual in nature and occur at different stages of development. Each stage is dominated by a special mode of achieving maximum pleasure. The secret of mental health is not to repress the animal desires so that the mental conflict, which is the root cause of maladjustments, is avoided.[5]

3. The humanistic model, which looks upon man as being in the process of "becoming", lays special emphasis on man's nature as tending toward self-direction and self-fulfillment. The significant factor which affects the individual is not so much reality, but rather what he experiences as reality. This means that reality for any individual is basically the private world of his own perceptions. The organized and consistent self is developed through his experiences, gained as the result of interaction with others. Unimportant experiences are ignored and those which are acceptable are incorporated into the self-structure. The unacceptable experiences later prove threatening to the self, which requires protection from such threats. The self becomes more rigid as more protection is needed. A person becomes maladjusted when he finds himself at odds with his important experiences. Tension makes the situation even worse and as a result he loses his mental health.[6]

If we examine these models carefully, it will become obvious that they are based upon the assumption that man is like all other creatures, a creature in this universe who has attained the highest state of development through the evolutionary process. In other words, the basic urges of man are common among animals and human beings. One modern system, at least, tries to remove the mask and let the person have free expression of his feelings and desires. Of course, all these models give appropriate attention to the problem of mental health, but fail to five any effective solution to the problem of maintaining or regaining mental health.

Another fact can not be ignored: in all advanced countries, especially in the United States, where different types of psychotherapies have been developed and used, the number of maladjusted and mentally disturbed people is increasing every year.[7] This shows that these current models, in spite of their experimental bases, have not been able to go very far in solving the mental health problem, either at individual or at national levels. The inadequacy of these models obviously is due to the fact that they have not been able to give a true picture of the human nature, specifically the spiritual aspect, without which psychologists cannot understand man's original nature. Hence, there is a need for another model which could explain human nature from a different angle.

The model that gives a true picture of human nature and explains the problems of mental health, giving proper attention to the spiritual aspect, is the Islamic model. We believe this model will find support not only from Muslim pscyhologists, who are blindly following the old models, but also from non-Muslim psychologists as well, who will discover many revealing facts.

Islam as we all know, is not a religion in the ordinary sense, but is a "Dīn", i.e., a way of living in accordance with the laws of God (Allāh). In the Qur'ān one reads,

"The religion before Allāh is Islam."[8]

Islam means complete submission to the will of Allāh, thus the enjoyment of peace. The Qur'ān clearly states,

"And to Allāh submits whosoever is in the heavens and the earth willingly or unwillingly . . ."[9]

In other words, every creature on earth is bound to obey the laws of nature by following the path of "Dīn-ul-fitrah". Deviation from this path results in maladjustment. This "fitrah" or "instinct" has been referred to in the Qur'ān:

"So set your face truly to the faith, according to the pattern on which he has made mankind . . ."[10]

In order to understand the nature of the Islamic model the following points are worth noting, since these are its basic principles.
1. Man is not a reactive being or a slave of his urges, but he is created in the best way:

"Surely We created man of the best stature."[11]

Indeed man is a viceroy. Allāh says:

"Behold Thy Lord said to the angels: 'I will create a vicegerent on Earth . . .' "[12]

As such, he (man) portrays godly qualities. Human nature cannot be explained without referring to his spiritual aspect. Indeed, that is the vital aspect of man that makes him "khalifah" or vicegerent on earth.
2. Man is created with some purpose. His life is not merely that of birth, eating, sleeping, maturing, mating, growing old, and dying. The Qur'ān says about man:

"Did you think that We had created you without purpose and that you would not be brought back to us 'for account'?"[13]

Later on we read in the Book that the real purpose of his creations is to seek Allāh's pleasure.
3. Man is not a machine as the mechanical model insists. He is given the gift of freedom to act in any way he likes. He is, however, warned that all his actions, right or wrong, will be judged in the next life and that he will be rewarded accordingly.

In light of these principles, the nature of mental health can be explained in a more effective manner. Allāh says:

" . . . All creatures in the heavens and on earth have willingly or will unwillingly bow to His will."[14]

Since the entire creation obeys the laws of Allāh, the whole universe literally follows "Dīn-ul-Islām", i.e., obedience and complete submission to Allāh, the Lord of the universe. This also implies that even in the human world the laws of nature are quite manifest. All the organs of his body, including his heart and brain, are following the path of Islam. This means that they follow the course that has been ordained for them. However, man has another position as well. On one hand, he is regulated by the Divine law and as such he is a born Muslim; but on the other hand he has been given the freedom of thought, choice, and action, and because of this he can chalk out his own course of behavior.

Both these aspects coexist in man's life. If he consciously decides to submit himself to the will of Allāh in the domain in which he is given freedom of choice, he experiences no conflict in his personality. He is a Muslim consciously as well as unconsciously.[15] Such a person belongs to what the Qur'ān describes as "Ummatan Wasatan", i.e., people who are justly balanced. These people are "muflihin", those who prospser in their lives. Allāh describes them as follows:

"They neither worry nor suffer from grief."[6]

On the other hand, those who despite being unconsciously Muslims, do not exercise their higher mental functions for recognizing their Creator, and misuse their freedom of choice by denying him and not submitting to His will are in a state of mental conflict. The inevitable consequences of this conflict is a failure in the ultimate ideals of life. Their personality becomes disintegrated and their mental health is shattered.

Islam does not consider mental health as only the absence of pathology, but also emphasizes the positive aspect by which mental health can be maintained and improved. The following points further explain the positive aspect of mental health.
1. The Islamic mental health program does not recommend the suppression of human urges but insists on keeping balance among them. This concept is best illustrated in the Qur'ān by use of the term "Sawā'-al-Sabil", or "right/straight path", which is the path of straightforwardness and moderation "I'tidāl". This means no urge is given undue importance at the cost of other urges. This results in a fully functioning personality, a personality which is able to deal with all personal and social problems adequately. A person is thus saved in many crisis producing situations."
2. One of the major precipitating causes of mental ill health is the feeling of frustration and despair due to the presence of envy and jealousy. As a result, man's life is shadowed by anxiety, enmity, depression, etc. As a Muslim, he is directed not to com-

pare himself with others. The Qur'ān says:

"And in no wise covet those things in which Allāh has bestowed His gifts more freely on some of you than on others... But ask Allāh of His bounty ..."[18]

In order to attain such a state of mind, the "muflihin" inculcate certain values like patience and gratitude. We read in the Qur'ān:

"Lo, verily man is in a state of loss, save those who believe and do righteous deeds and exhort one another to truth, exhort one another to endurance."[19]

When in utter grief and despair, reading the Qur'ānic verse,

"To Allāh we belong and to Him is our return"[20]

works like a miracle.

3. In the dynamic model, the concept of guilt plays an important role in repression, a mechanism that is the root cause of many troubles. Islam on the other hand, has introduced the concept of "tawbah" (repentance). In the Qur'ān one reads,

"Your Lord has prescribed from Himself mercy. Those whom of you doeth evil and repenteth afterwards and doeth right, for him Allāh is forgiving and merciful."[21]

4. Islam encourages certain spiritual values like straightforwardness, righteousness, etc. The importance of these values in promoting mental health cannot be denied.

5. Some emotions, like rage, are responsible for some types of psychosomatic illness. Muslims are directed to control their emotions. Allāh describes some of the qualities of believers:

"Those who restrain anger and pardon all men and Allāh loves those who do good."[22]

6. It is the obligation of every man to keep normal relations with his relatives and others. The secret of mental health lies in observing certain rights and obligations. These include rights of other people over him. A healthy person is one who fulfills his personal as well as social duties to the best of his effort.[23] The following beautiful verse is his code of conduct:

"Allāh commands justice, the doing of good, and liberality, as is kindness to kith and kin, and He forbids shameful deeds and injustice and

rebellion. He instructs you that you may receive admonition."[24]

By reading this verse again and again one will realize that a person whose behavior is motivated by these two goals, the development of some positive acts and avoidance of certain deeds, remains free from worries and anxieties. Psychologists agree on this point, that a well-adjusted person is one whose personal as well as social life is well-regulated.

7. Islam gives due importance to the spiritual aspect of life. Whenever a Muslim is in trouble, he is asked to turn to Allāh. Allāh says,

"Those who have believe, and whose hearts find rest and satisfaction in the rememberance of Allāh, Verily in the rememberance of Allāh do hearts find rest and tranquility."[25]

This is an attempt to give a brief outline of the Islamic concept of mental health. It is for young psychologists to develop these ideas further and to give them proper shape. In this age of fierce turmoils, when modern psychology has failed to give peace of mind, the Islamic viewpoint will be a God sent gift. I am sure both Muslim and non-Muslim psychologists will find the Islamic model more effective than any other model.

The test for the superiority of this model lies in a comparative study of Muslim and non-Muslim worlds with respect to mental health problems. It is assumed that Muslim societies face considerably less mental health problems than the non-Muslim societies.

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