

Suicide: its Pathway, Perception and Prevention Amongst Muslims

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Suicide is the thirteenth leading cause of death worldwide and the seventh leading cause of death in Australia. Suicide rates vary markedly across different ethnic and cultural groups. NOORIA MEHRABY explores how Islamic beliefs contribute to the low suicide rates observed in Islamic countries and how suicide is viewed by members of the Muslim community. Spirituality and religious beliefs can play a substantial role in suicide prevention and provide an essential framework of meaning that can sustain life in times of great distress. They can have a profound bearing on an individual's personality and their view of life, and provide influential guidance and direction on psychological and social dilemmas. Religion plays such a significant role in everyday Islamic culture that it is difficult to engage in psychotherapy and counselling without encountering cultural and religious values. Guidelines are given for sensitive cross-cultural counselling with Muslim clients when a suicide does occur.

Suicide is the thirteenth leading cause of death worldwide. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) at least one death by suicide occurs every minute, representing an annual global mortality rate of about 14.5 per 100,000 people. In Australia suicide is the seventh leading cause of death and approximately 21 percent of deaths due to suicide occur in people who were born overseas.

Research indicates a significant diversity in suicide rates across different ethnic and cultural groups of immigrants in Australia and other countries (Stewart, 2004). Of interest here is the general agreement in the literature that the rate of suicide is very low in Islamic countries. *

In considering the issues of suicide and suicide prevention the obvious questions that arise are:

- in what ways do Islamic beliefs prevent suicide?
- how do members of the Muslim community view suicide?
- when suicide does occur within a Muslim family what considerations arise for the provision of cross-cultural counselling that is sensitive to the client's frame of reference?

Muslims account for up to 1.6 billion of the world's population, but of these only about 20% are Arabs. Thus it must be noted that not all Muslims are Arab and vice versa. In fact, the largest population of Muslims live in Indonesia, Pakistan, India and China.

Over 70% of the world's refugees are Muslims and over 94% of the Middle East follows Islam. An estimated 16-17 million Muslims are living in western countries. Of these 6 million live in America, 10 million in the UK, 600,000 in Canada and 300,000 in Australia.

Islamic beliefs and suicide prevention

Islamic beliefs and traditions, like Christian and Judaic ones, can provide the individual with an essential framework

of meaning that can help to sustain life in times of great distress. Spirituality and religious beliefs play a substantial role in suicide prevention in Islamic culture. Suicide is strictly forbidden in Islam. The Qur'an says, 'Do not throw yourselves with your own hand into destruction' or an alternative translation 'Do not commit suicide, as God is merciful to you' (Qur'an: Surah 4, verse 29). Self-harm and other self-destructive behaviour are also prohibited in Islam.

There are many reasons that might lead a person to suicide. Among the problems linked to suicide are: severe clinical depression, mental illness, trauma, substance abuse, prolonged distress, social isolation, great loss, migration and dislocation, financial problems, family breakdown, sickness and disability.

The WHO annual statistics indicate low rates of suicide amongst Muslim people. For instance, in Iran during 1991 the suicide rates per 100,000 population were 0.3 for men and 0.1 for women. In comparison, Estonia (a predominantly Christian country) has a suicide rate of 56 for men and 12.1 for women per 100,000 population. When comparing these figures it must be kept in mind that it is difficult to obtain exact data because some Islamic countries do not provide suicide statistics to WHO. Al-Issa, (2000) argues that the actual rate of suicide might be two to four times higher than the official figures and that suicidal ideation and attempted suicide are relatively high in Muslim countries. Over the last decade there has been a substantial increase in suicide amongst Muslims living in non-

Islamic countries such as Britain and America. It is interesting to note that in many Islamic countries such as Malaysia, Pakistan, Qatar, Algeria and Saudi Arabia, a low rate of suicide is recorded during the holy month of Ramadan. These figures would suggest a link between suicide and religion. While the

Muslims believe that all suffering, life, death, joy and happiness are derived from Allah and that Allah is the one who gives them the strength to survive. Muslims also believe that Allah appoints a time for each person to pass from this existence into the next, that death is inevitable and will take

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rate of suicide is higher in men relative to women, attempted suicide is higher amongst young women mainly as a result of intergenerational conflicts.

There are also reports in some Islamic countries that the threat of rape is so ominous for some women that they suicide to avoid it. For instance, during the Russian occupation of Afghanistan several women in the Shamali district in North Afghanistan killed themselves in a hot tanoor (a clay oven) because they feared rape by the Russian soldiers attacking their village. They felt that loss of virginity would bring a lifetime of shame and wounded pride. Amnesty International also documented similar cases during the civilian war in Afghanistan (Mehraby, 2002).

In my professional experience of working for five years in a refugee camp as a medical doctor, and ten years as a counsellor at STARTTS, I have never experienced any of my Muslim patients, who were suffering from severe clinical depression and multiple losses, to attempt suicide or to successfully complete suicide.

Anecdotally, STARTTS's Muslim clients often report that their religious beliefs and divine decree, and cultural values prevent them from acting on suicidal thoughts. By contrast, last year's report of the suicide of an Afghan man holding a temporary protection visa in Adelaide, gives some indication of the extreme pressure that these people are placed under; such that they will even behave contrary to their religious and cultural standards. Procter (2004) states that TPVs holders are at high risk of suicide and mental illness. Feeling unsafe and living in limbo heighten the risk of suicide for a population who are already suffering from depression and posttraumatic stress.

While the low rates of suicide can be related to strong religious and cultural values, traditional family support systems also play a role. Muslims believe that Allah creates every soul and life, and that life is a gift from God. We are not its owner. Therefore, no one has the right to take one's own life, nor can they take another's life unlawfully. Both suicide and homicide are considered great sins. In Islam, suicide is an affront to Allah, the Giver of life.

It is unacceptable for a Muslim to say to Allah you give me life, but I choose to take it away. *'How can you reject faith in Allah, seeing you were without life and He gave you life; and He will cause you to die, and will bring you again to life'* (2:28).

place when the time is right, and that there is a life after death.

In Islamic belief a person who dies from suicide is nevertheless believed to have died at the appointed time, despite the fact that they killed themselves. It was their time. What is



wrong is the wilful act to end their own lives. Had they not formed the notion to do so, they might have died anyway, or Allah who controls all things may extend their lives on the basis of the decision they made. Allah tells us that He does not charge any soul with conditions that are greater than its capacity to bear. Even if the conditions are such that the person feels suicidal; no person is placed under such conditions until they are equipped with the capacity to cope with, and to overcome these conditions. This is part of our development as human beings; it is also a test for us from the creator. The ultimate failure of this test would be to take your own life, because this reflects a sense of despair in the mercy of Allah.

In addition, Muslims are expected to struggle constantly to better themselves. *'Surely God does not change the condition in which people are until they change that which is in themselves'* (Qur'an, 13:11). The emphasis on the concept of self change is important as it indicates clearly that people should take the initiative themselves to bring change into their lives and to not expect that Allah will bring changes without their efforts.

Muslims also believe that their losses and sufferings are part of a trial for them *'Be sure we shall test you with something of fear and hunger, some loss in goods, lives and the fruits of your toil, but give glad tidings to those who patiently persevere. Who say, when afflicted with calamity: To Allah we belong, and to Him is our return'* (Qur'an: 2:155). People who have patience in accepting Allah's decree will be given a reward from him because through their pain God removes some of their sins.

'I have no reward other than paradise for my believing servant who is patient when I take away one of his beloved from among his companions of the world.' (Qur'an: 63) In a Hadith (sayings and customs of the prophet Mohammed) the prophet says *'what ever trouble, illness, anxiety, grief, pain and sorrow afflicts a Muslim, even if it is the pricking of a thorn-Allah removes some of his sins because of it.'*

Maqsood (2002) states that people who commit suicide are in a terrible state of distress; they have lost patience or 'saber'. Life no longer seems worth living. However, Islam teaches that it is not realistic to believe that any human

being should expect to pass his or her entire lifetime without hardship and suffering. In fact, Muslims are told to expect hardship and suffering and be ready so that when they strike they can be faced with courage and strength. The trials and tribulations of worldly life are not pointless, but should be consciously regarded as a test for the afterlife. No one has knowledge of what new events, opportunities and joys will come to the distressed person. We might be in despair, but we do not know what work God still wants us to do or what reward in this world, as well as in the afterlife, Allah might give us after our patient suffering.

If their faith in God is genuine, not even the worst calamities should make a Muslim in despair consider suicide. Muslims who attempt to escape from stress and problems by taking their own life will not succeed as Muslims believe that there is life after death. The individual who suicides will be punished for their action in the next life. In a Hadith, the prophet says that a person who killed himself by hanging or poison, or threw himself off a mountain, may experience even more distress as they will be tormented on the Day of Resurrection with the very instrument that caused their death.

It is important to remind the depressed person of the mercy and help of Allah and that perseverance will reward them. A gentle reminder of life after death to the depressed person who is threatening suicide might make them think and see the terrible potential aftermath of their desperate action, and begin to consider ways to overcome their distress.

Muslims are advised to contemplate the worst and be aware of people who are less fortunate and in more difficult situations. In a Hadith the prophet Mohammed says, *'Look at those whose social status is lower than yours, and do not look at those with a higher status than yours.'* (Khater, 2001).

Muslims are also directed towards positive thinking, realistic expectations, and avoidance of unnecessary negative thoughts and suspicions. *'O you who believe! Avoid suspicion as much (as possible), for suspicion in some cases is a sin.'* (49:12). In this way the door of hope is opened for everyone. Thinking

about this in times of distress helps Muslims not to fall into disappointment or give up on life. As it is stated in the Qur'an *'So the fact is that along with every hardship there is also ease, indeed, with every hardship there is also ease'* (94:5-6), or *'It may well be that Allah brings about ease after hardship.'* (65:7). A Hadith says *'You should know that victory comes with patience, and relief comes after distress, and that with every hardship there is also ease'*.

Muslim strategies for grief, loss and difficult times

Muslims are advised to increase their devotion to Allah in times of distress, depression, loss and grief. The Qur'anic recitation, use of religious parables, the life story of the prophet Muhammad with the multiple losses of his loved ones, as well as Hadith and 'Surah' from the Qur'an are all beneficial in dealing with grief, loss and difficult times (Mehraby, 2003). They are also advised to pray for God's mercy and forgiveness for their sin and mistakes *'And I have said: seek forgiveness from your Lord. He was ever forgiving'* (71:10).

'He guides to Himself those who turn to Him in penitence, those who believe and whose heart has rest in the remembrance of Allah. Verily in remembrance of Allah, do hearts find rest.' (Qur'an 13:27-28). Daneshpour (1998) says that by sitting silently and praying, one gets in touch with the true self, which is intrinsically connected to Allah. This enables the person to accept the self and the pain because one is not an isolated existence, but rather a part of the total wholeness in relation to Allah. Praying is considered, traditionally and religiously, one of the best ways to heal distress.

The performances of regular prayer five times a day are also times to remember Allah, thank Him and ask for forgiveness and strength to correct and improve oneself. It also gives exercise to the whole body and is a source of mediation, relaxation and physiotherapy combined (Mehraby, 2002). Group prayer, especially Friday congregational prayer, contributes to the sense of identity and belonging. Both group prayer and fasting have substantial social elements that give Muslims a sense of identification with others as well as social support.

People's religious beliefs have a profound bearing on their personality and their viewpoint in life. When Muslims put their trust in God they minimize the stress on themselves, and find solace and comfort by trusting that God will give them strength to persevere, to purify themselves. Further, in life situations when nothing can be done except observe patience, a trust in God can help to reduce feelings of excessive responsibility and to find constructive methods to deal with, and perhaps overcome, the situation. Only God knows our ultimate destiny. With this sense of faith, the Muslim feels reassured that trust is well placed and that God will not forsake him.

In addition to spiritual healing, Muslims are encouraged to seek professional assistance. The Prophet Muhammad used to send his followers when they suffered from diseases to a doctor who was trained in the medical school of Jondishapour in Persia. He utilised various medications himself in the last years of his life (Mehraby 2002). In a Hadith the prophet says '*Seek treatment slaves of Allah, for Allah did not create a disease except He created a cure for it, except for one disease: old age*', or '*looking after your self is the obligation of each Muslim.*'

There is a strong emphasis in Islamic culture on unity, social justice, strong family ties, and community and social support. This culture is group oriented and individuals live in a symbolic relationship with their families. The basic needs of the individual are met within their extended family and communities. Children are considered a blessing and are cherished as a 'gift' from God. Both parents have an important role in the upbringing of their children and are legally responsible for their wellbeing. Children are commanded by Allah to respect and take care of their parents in old age. The prophet says '*be kind to your children and treat them equally*', and the Qur'an states '*Thy Lord hath decreed that ye worship none but Him 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*' (Qur'an 17:23-4). Social justice and support of those in need is stressed in the Qur'an and Hadiths. The concept

of justice in Islam is to attain truth, equity, balance and harmony and to practice mercy, fairness and to excel in doing good. The prophet Muhammad stated: '*What actions are most excellent? To gladden the heart of a human being, to feed the hungry, to help the afflicted, to lighten the sorrow of the sorrowful, and to remove the wrongs of the injured*'.

Muslims are also directed toward positive thinking, realistic expectations and avoidance of unnecessary negative thoughts and suspicions.

Therefore, individuals who experience difficult times are not left alone, but are held and supported by their family and community. Sufferers of mental illness are often cared for at home by their families rather than being sent to mental institutions. These cultural and religious values, and social support systems, all contribute to suicide prevention. The community is expected to address the needs of its people. For example, when there is a death, a collective grief system supports the bereaved family through frequent visits, offerings of food, congregational pray, reciting the Qur'an and strengthening their faith by returning them to Allah. Or where there is a financial crisis, or other kind of social welfare issue, the community as a whole helps individuals by collecting money.

Perception of suicide amongst Muslims

Although suicide is forbidden in Islam, as it is with most other religions and cultures, suicide does occur. A survey in Sauda Arabia (Elfawal, 1999) indicated that between 1986 and 1995, 221 cases of suicide were examined at the Medical-legal Center, Dammam, Saudi Arabia. The suicide rate per annum for the entire population was 1.1 in 100,000. Immigrants (Muslim and non Muslim) formed 77% of the cases, only 23% were Saudis.

Maqsood (2002) states that many Muslims consider a person who has committed suicide, as someone who has turned his/her back on Islam. Therefore, if a believer commits suicide it can be

regarded as a sinful act because it is against God's will. This can make it extremely unpleasant for those who are left behind. Suicide is the most difficult bereavement crisis for any Muslim family to face. Shame, guilt, anger, stigma and fear are some of the overwhelming feelings they often experience. Sometimes a family tries to find a way

out of guilt and disgrace in society by disguising the victim's behaviour not as suicide, but as accidental death. A myth is created to disguise what really happened. At the same time however, the family avoids the necessary stage of facing up to reality and this often leads to unresolved and complicated grief.

These views make it extremely difficult for Muslims to talk with other Muslims about what has really happened in a situation of suicide, partly because some people regard those who committed suicide as sinners to be 'cast off' from the mind and consigned to Hell.

Cross- cultural Intervention

Generally Muslims might not seek counselling from 'outsiders' in dealing with personal problems. Muslims are more likely to seek assistance from family, close friends, a community member, or a trusted Imam or scholar. However, where the bereavement is as a result of suicide they might be willing to talk with a mainstream therapist because of the taboo and shame within the community.

- *safety* - the first stage for these clients is to establish a safe environment where they can grieve, talk freely about their distress and release their emotions.

- *confidentiality* is the most important element of safety for Muslim clients and helps the therapist to establish trust and rapport. Muslims are more internalised rather than externalised. They are not open to outsiders and might feel ashamed to discuss their personal and family matters with a stranger. In

suicide bereavement, concerns about confidentiality are heightened. A strong emphasis on confidentiality will enable them to trust the therapist and explore the depth of their suffering.

- *impartiality* – Muslim communities are labelled in Western countries as terrorist, rigid, aggressive, militant, uncivilised, different, closed minded. Therefore it is important for a therapist to be impartial and open-minded. They need to re-assure their clients that ‘they are with them not against them.’ The therapist’s non-judgemental attitude will re-assure Muslim clients that they are not going to be judged, and enable them to explore matters they might not otherwise be able to talk about.

- *valuing religious beliefs and cultural norms*. The role of religious values in psychotherapy with Muslim clients has been recognised widely by mental health professionals. The significant role that religion plays in everyday Islamic culture makes it difficult to engage in psychotherapy and counselling without encountering cultural and religious values. Culturally sensitive psychotherapy requires an understanding and adaptation of Islamic principles as the core of therapeutic relationship. Many Islamic clients accept non-Muslim therapists, however, a Muslim therapist will be closer to the client’s reality. Similarly, it is preferable that counsellor will be the same gender as the client. It is important that the therapist shows respect for and accepts the client’s culture and provides reassurance that therapy is not a confrontation with culture and family, but rather an attempt to help the client within the context of their culture.

- *expectation of authority*. Since the concept of counselling with Muslim clients is direction, advice, and emotional and material support, clients may have expectations of the therapist as a person who symbolises authority. They may expect a dependent relationship where the therapist is directive, takes over and cares for them. The therapist can unload the burdens of the client’s grief by encouraging them to talk about their loved ones and to explore the painful reality of their suicidal death.

- *psycho-spiritual education*. In bereavement therapy where there has been a suicide, the bereaved need to

be ‘cured’ of distorted thinking, and counselled with generous empathy. It is crucial that the bereaved person accepts the fact that the suicide was not preventable and that the bereaved family is not at fault or held responsible. The family can pray to God for mercy and for the forgiveness of the deceased.

Maqsood (2002) states there is at least one record of a man committing suicide at the time of the Prophet. The Prophet did not offer the ‘janazah’ (a special congregational worship service is offered prior to the burial, and prayers are made for Allah’s mercy upon the dead person), but he did tell his companions to offer it. When they did, they obviously prayed to Allah to forgive the dead man. Therefore, it seems quite permissible to pray for those who have committed suicide. This is a great comfort for the bereaved, that if God wills, the suicide victim can be prayed for without the family needing to feel guilty. One main consolation to offer Muslims is to widen their appreciation of God’s mercy and compassion. To pray for the soul of the deceased can bring great emotional relief. It is also incorrect to assume that all suicide victims cannot be forgiven. People who commit suicide have usually had severe clinical depression and prolonged distress; hence, their minds were disturbed and they were unwell.

In a Hadith it is stated that the actions of a person who is acting out of a disturbed mind cannot be held against the person. The World Health Organization estimates that mental disorders are associated with more than 90% of all suicides. Allah can forgive and it is important to remember the promise given by Allah to the Prophet. *‘If a person has in the heart the goodness to the weight of one atom, and has said, there is no God but Me, he/she shall come out of Hell-fire’* (21:47) Maqsood (2002, p.79). Allah, not his servants, is the only one who can judge and decide what is wrong or right, to forgive or punish.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Islamic beliefs and spirituality make a profound contribution to suicide prevention in the Muslim community. However, if suicide does take place, along with the normal bereavement therapy, families need extra sensitive empathy consistent with

the shame and pain arising from their cultural and religious beliefs. Exploration of these beliefs and traditions within the therapeutic setting can facilitate a good therapeutic relationship and provide a safe place where client can talk about their loved ones and explore in depth of their suffering. If cultural norms are taken into account the application of western psychological interventions such as cognitive restructuring is also possible. For the Muslim who grieves, consolation is to be found in turning to Allah. *‘From Allah we come and to Allah is our return’* Qur’an 156. Amen.

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* Islamic Countries - Afghanistan, Algeria, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Brunei, Burkina Faso, Chad, Comoros Islands, Cyprus, Egypt, Eritrea, Gambia, Guinea Konakry, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, Libya, Malawi, Malaysia, Maldives, Mali, Morocco, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tajikistan, Tunisia, Turkey, Turkmenistan, United Arab Emirates, Uzbekistan.

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