



“How Can I Ever Get Past This?” Reclaiming Your Future After the Abuse Has Ended

NAJWA AWAD
SARAH SULTAN

YAQEEEN™
INSTITUTE FOR ISLAMIC RESEARCH

Author Biography

Najwa Awad is a psychotherapist who is passionate about helping Muslims heal, grow, and thrive after adversity. She has over a decade of experience providing online and in-person counseling to children, adults, and families at her practice, Amanah Family Counseling. Najwa also enjoys giving workshops to destigmatize mental illness, address current mental health issues within the community, and promote psychological health from an Islamic perspective.

Sarah Sultan is a licensed professional counselor who strives to empower her clients through achieving healthier, more fulfilling lives and relationships while reconnecting with Allah during the healing process. Sarah obtained a Master's Degree in Mental Health Counseling and has practiced therapy for over 10 years. She is also an instructor with Mishkah University, where she teaches a course about the intersections between Islam, psychology, and counseling.

Disclaimer: *The views, opinions, findings, and conclusions expressed in these papers and articles are strictly those of the authors. Furthermore, Yaqeen does not endorse any of the personal views of the authors on any platform. Our team is diverse on all fronts, allowing for constant, enriching dialogue that helps us produce high-quality research.*

Copyright © 2020. Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research

Only when we're brave enough to explore the darkness will we discover the infinite power of our light.

-Brene Brown¹

TRIGGER WARNING

This section contains information about sexual assault, which may be triggering to survivors.

Muna came from a religious, traditional family. She grew up with a solid foundation of Islamic learning and practice. When Muna was 12 years old, her uncle came to live with the family from overseas. The touches started off subtly. At first, she wasn't sure if she was imagining things so she didn't say anything. She tried to avoid her uncle as much as possible as she began to feel more and more uncomfortable. One day Muna got home and neither of her parents was there. She felt trapped and unable to do anything when her uncle touched her more than he ever had. When she tearfully told her mother what happened, her mother was in disbelief and said, "He couldn't have done that! He's a good man! How were you acting? Don't tell your father about this—he couldn't bear it." Muna was devastated and felt even more hurt after her mother's response. She thought, "I'm a dirty and worthless person. I'm a bad Muslim now. How can I ever get past this?"

What is happening to me?

After experiencing something traumatic, particularly traumas like abuse, sexual assault, physical violence, or even the threat of harm, it's hard to know how to react. You may be physically hurt, emotionally drained, and unsure of what to do next. The mix of emotions you may be experiencing after something so traumatic can make everything seem incredibly confusing. You may be scared, angry, and/or shocked. You may also find yourself feeling guilty despite this experience not

¹ Brene Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are* (Center City, MN: Hazelden Publishing, 2010), 6.

being your fault. It is never ok for someone to hurt you, take advantage of you, or do anything that makes you feel uncomfortable or scared.

When we go through a traumatic experience, we may experience self-doubt and we may inadvertently start to identify ourselves and the rest of our lives through the lens of what we've endured. Our minds try to make sense of what has happened so we scan for evidence that something fundamentally wrong within us is the reason we have experienced something so painful. You may find yourself thinking:

I've always been a loser, so it's no wonder I haven't been able to keep any friends.

I got laid off from my job; well, there's another example of how inadequate I am.

My parents always told me no one would want to marry me; that explains why my marriage failed—because I've always been worthless and ugly.

If we imagine we deserve the pain we're enduring, it might hurt more but at least it makes the world predictable. Sometimes it can be scarier to deal with unpredictability, so we begin to base our identities on the negative events that have happened in our lives. We scan our lives and ourselves for evidence that we are failures, sinners, victims, worthless, or inadequate in some way. When you think negatively about yourself, your mind will inevitably find evidence to support your thoughts.

This negative self-perception can lead every day to begin with a cloud of distress over our heads as we live our lives based on the incorrect assumption that we are not good enough.

Understanding your thoughts and emotions

What is labeling?

This negative thought pattern of basing our self-image on a negative trait or incident in our lives is called labeling. **Labeling** is a cognitive distortion in which we overgeneralize by taking one incident or characteristic of a person and applying it to the whole person. For example:

I can't believe I lost my car keys again. I'm such an airhead.

Why has my wife been so distant lately? I'm unlovable.

My husband is late again. He's such a jerk.

My son failed his math test. I don't spend enough time going over his homework. I'm a bad mother.

Rather than considering the situation or behavior objectively, when we engage in labeling, we globally describe *the whole person*. This results in viewing ourselves, and others, through a label that is inaccurate, causing us to ignore any evidence that doesn't fit under the umbrella of the picture we've painted.

For example: If you have been passed over for a promotion, rather than focusing on the positive feedback your supervisor gave you last month, you label yourself a *failure* and an *inadequate worker*. By viewing yourself in this way, you lose motivation at work, which perpetuates these negative emotions and patterns and can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Making an overgeneralization about ourselves or someone else based on one isolated data point, or just a few data points, is inherently problematic. Learning that you did not get a promotion would likely lead to feeling some disappointment, whereas labeling yourself a complete failure results in the disempowering feelings of despair and hopelessness. Thus, labeling yourself negatively will prevent you from working towards solutions to the problem since it fuels a belief that the problem is, fundamentally, *you*.

How are our identities impacted by the labels we ascribe to ourselves?

The narrative and labels that run through our heads screaming that we are inadequate or that we are defined by our struggles can further advance a negative self-fulfilling prophecy. The “I am” that we say to ourselves are an incredibly important factor in terms of how resilient we are during times of stress. This can be seen through *labeling theory*. Labeling theory is the theory of how our identities and behaviors are influenced by the way we describe ourselves.

Researchers Wright, Gronfein and Owens² found that stigmatization of mental illness labels resulted in social isolation and negative self-concepts in patients who had been discharged from a psychiatric hospital. The way these individuals labeled themselves resulted in them isolating themselves socially, which perpetuated a cycle of low self-esteem and feelings of rejection by others.

For example, someone who is suffering from depression may label themselves as a depressed person. When you begin each day with the perception that being depressed is the core of who you are, it will be difficult to engage in activities that are not in line with depression. Therefore, as a depressed person, you may stay in bed rather than go to work and ruminate on negative thoughts about yourself rather than focusing on your positive traits. The way we define ourselves can be incredibly powerful.

The impact of labeling on spirituality

The labels we create for ourselves can also impact us spiritually. We have all sinned, but should we constantly label ourselves as sinners? If you define yourself

² E. R. Wright, W. P. Gronfein, and T.J. Owens, “Deinstitutionalization, Social Rejection, and the Self-Esteem of Former Mental Patients,” *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 41, no. 1 (2000): 68–90.

as a sinner, you lose hope in the mercy of Allah and this can lead you to further sins. If you label yourself a failure, when something goes wrong you think, *“Of course Allah is sending me hardships as a punishment because I’m a sinner and beyond hope no matter how hard I try.”*

Imagine, instead, thinking of yourself as a repentor because you sin but turn back to Allah (swt). With this label, you may think to yourself, *“Allah is testing me with this trial as an opportunity to get closer to Him and as an indication of how strong I am to be able to handle this.”* That shift in how you define yourself makes all the difference.

Happiness starts from the inside out, not the outside in. If, at the core, you believe yourself to be worthless, hopeless, inadequate, or a bad Muslim, external factors will be unable to change that. A person complimenting you for a job well done will not make you feel accomplished if you label yourself a failure. No matter how many pages of Qur’an you recite, you will never feel closer to Allah (swt) if you label yourself a bad Muslim. No matter how happy your children are, you will never feel a sense of fulfillment in motherhood if you label yourself an inadequate mother. Even if you are loved deeply, you will be unable to accept it if you believe yourself to be undeserving of love—including the love of Allah (swt).

Learned helplessness after victimization

***Note:** *In the following sections, steps to begin the recovery process after victimization are discussed. While the idea of re-labeling oneself as a survivor rather than a victim is mentioned below, it is important to note that not every victim of abuse survives. And those who do live through their trauma are faced with the arduous task of moving forward after the loss of a piece of themselves and the life for which they had hoped. When exploring the idea of shedding the victim label, it is important to remember that it was not your choice to become a victim. This was something forced upon you. Rather, it is intended as a step forward in reclaiming your power and redefining your life on your own terms. May Allah*

(swt) grant you healing and peace on this journey. Your strength is immeasurable and something unfathomable to most.

After experiencing a traumatic incident, particularly at the hands of another person, feelings of helplessness and victimization can arise. After a boundary has been violated, knowing that you were helpless to stop this from occurring is a disturbing realization. It shakes your view of everything—including yourself. Even when you are no longer powerless, you may find yourself unable to let go of this feeling.

Furthermore, this feeling may lead you to label yourself as a victim and live your life through this lens. This is called *learned helplessness*. Learned helplessness³ is a concept that was developed by Martin Seligman and first seen in animals; however, the same phenomenon occurs in people as well. Researchers discovered that when animals were repeatedly exposed to something painful that they could not avoid, they would eventually stop trying to escape. Even when the situation was changed and the animals were able to escape the painful shocks, they lacked the motivation to try and instead continued to passively accept the pain.

We find the same pattern in our own lives: we eventually stop trying to change things when we feel that control over a situation has been lost, even when the situation changes so that control might be taken back. There may have been circumstances in your life in which you felt completely powerless and this may have contributed to the development of negative beliefs about your abilities, a tendency to take on blame when things go wrong, and/or a sense of hopelessness regarding the possibility of change.

If abuse, bullying, or any type of violation occurs repeatedly, you may begin to believe that there is no way out and that you are someone who is doomed to be a victim. The feeling of powerlessness to change your life is attached to the victim label. Reclaiming control of your life and its different facets is a journey but one

³ S. F. Maier and M. E. Seligman, "Learned Helplessness: Theory and Evidence," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 105, no. 1 (1976): 3–46.

that is possible. Just as we can “learn” helplessness, we can “unlearn” it as well. The road to agency and self-empowerment is there if you’re willing to walk it.

Changing your mind, body, and heart

Unweaving the tapestry of our minds

Labeling can be deeply ingrained within us so it can take some effort to begin to release the grip of this cognitive distortion. The neurological network within our brain is like a blanket we have woven with multiple spools of wool. Imagine you’ve chosen to weave a tapestry—a picture of your life. Now imagine being asked to take the tapestry apart, thread by thread, in order to weave a new picture of your life. That is no easy feat! In the same way, retraining our brains to view our lives without the negative labels we have created can be a strenuous process but it is definitely possible—and definitely worth the hard work.

If the thought, *“This is just who I am. I’ve been through so much pain so how can I ever get past this?”* comes to mind, consider this: Our brains are *plastic*, which means they can change throughout our lives.⁴ It was once believed that the connections in our brains are fixed and unchangeable, making the idea of brain growth in adulthood an impossibility. However, research within the past 50 years has shown that substantial brain changes occur throughout our lives. Whenever something new is learned, our brain changes.⁵ Therefore, no matter how ingrained our negative thoughts become—even the ways we view ourselves and our identities—we are capable of change.

⁴ E. L. Bennett, M. C. Diamond, D. Krech, and M. R. Rosenzweig, “Chemical and Anatomical Plasticity of the Brain,” *Science* 146, no. 3644 (1964): 610–619.

⁵ P. Rakic, “Neurogenesis in Adult Primate Neocortex: An Evaluation of the Evidence,” *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* 3, no. 1 (January 2002): 65–71.

Sense of inadequacy

Why is labeling so hard to “unweave” from our minds? Labeling creates and solidifies a sense of inadequacy. The fear at the surface may actually indicate a deeper sense of inadequacy if we explore it. Consider this example where Ayah expresses her worries about her child tantruming in public:

Therapist: *Suppose your child has a tantrum in the grocery store. Why would that be particularly upsetting to you? Why is that such a big deal?*

Ayah: *Because then everyone would look down on me and think I was a bad mother.*

Therapist: *What would happen if people did look down on you?*

Ayah: *I would feel horrible.*

Therapist: *What about people looking down on you would weigh so heavily on you?*

Ayah: *I would be ashamed. It would mean that I’m failing at the one thing I should be good at. I’m failing at the one thing I’ve looked forward to being for so long: a mother.*

Therapist: *And if you failed at being a good mother? What would that mean?*

Ayah: *It would mean that I’m worthless.*

Here, we see that Ayah ties her child’s behavior to whether she is a “good” or “bad” mother and that she ties her self-worth to this role in her life. She believes that something that is outside of her control (her child struggling in a store), would mean she was a failure as a mother. She struggles to extricate her sense of

self-worth from the approval of others and the definition she imagines that society has of a successful mother. She labeled herself based on a measurement of the way others perceive her and based on unrealistic, impossible standards and expectations.

While this might be self-defeating and unhealthy, it's important to realize that it feels real and logical to someone in Ayah's shoes. No matter how these labels are defined, they will never be realistic. **Labeling ourselves results in an inability to change because we imagine that we are beyond solutions.**

In order to overcome labeling, we have to come to the conclusion that our lives are complex and constantly changing so our sense of self cannot be equated with any one thing we do or any one situation. Labeling a human being is overly simplistic. David Burns⁶ explains this by asking, "Would you think of yourself exclusively as an 'eater' just because you eat, or a 'breather' just because you breathe? This is nonsense, but such nonsense becomes painful when you label yourself out of a sense of your own inadequacies."

Relinquishing the victim mindset: From victim to survivor

Why do I still feel like a victim?

Feelings of helplessness and powerlessness do not develop in a vacuum. Your experiences of feeling incapable in difficult circumstances can be factors that lead to labeling yourself as a victim. It can continue to be a struggle to let go of this label even when you are no longer being victimized. Although you may currently be safe, your brain and your body may struggle to realize this.

⁶ David D. Burns, *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1999), 40.

A traumatized brain maintains a mindset of impending harm. There is always a fear that something bad will happen again. These feelings of fear maintain the victim label and the threat patterns in our minds. It is not your fault that this happened to you. And it is not your fault that these patterns have developed in your mind and that you're struggling to undo them. If you have been abused in any way, your human rights have been violated. It is your right not to be hurt or harmed and that right was taken away from you. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said, ***"Shall I not tell you what distinguishes the best of you from the worst of you? The best of you are those from whom goodness is expected and people are safe from their evil. The worst of you are those from whom goodness is not expected and people are not safe from their evil."***⁷

What can I do to see myself as a survivor rather than a victim?

1. **Build Awareness:** What happened to you is not ok. Your mind continues to hold on to familiar patterns of fear even after the threat has passed; it is a compilation of your experiences and the ways these experiences have affected you. There are so many aspects of your life that you did not choose—from your eye color to your parents to the traumas you have experienced. Your job is not to blame yourself for what happened to you or what you are mentally, physically, spiritually, and emotionally struggling with right now. Your responsibility is to get to know the programs that are running in your brain that were developed because your environment was threatening. Building awareness is the first step to regain control of your choices, actions, and responses to situations.
2. **Acknowledge the Struggle with Compassion:** There is often shame, anger, fear, disgust, and self-doubt associated with experiences of abuse. Acknowledge all of the different thoughts and emotions you are experiencing without judgment. There is nothing wrong with anything you

⁷ *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*: no. 2263.

may be feeling. “Naming” the emotion you are feeling helps to tame it; it reduces the hold it has on you and normalizes it. Criticizing yourself for struggling or being hard on yourself because you expected yourself to have “gotten over it by now,” will only hurt you more. Remind yourself that what happened to you was not ok, that pain is a normal human experience, and verbalize the intention: “I want to be helpful, not harmful to my pain.”

3. **Focus on What You Can Control:** Making a conscious choice to no longer give your struggles the power to define you is an empowering step forward. When it comes to shedding the victim label and viewing yourself as a survivor, focusing on the things you can control in different situations—even minuscule details—is key. Begin by focusing on small steps you can take toward accomplishing something. This can be as simple as acknowledging the choices you make in preparing something to eat when you feel hungry. When you feel stuck and as though you’re unable to control any aspect of your life, ask yourself what you would tell a friend in your situation: What small aspect of your friend’s situation can they change at this very moment? You likely wouldn’t tell them to give up; you’d likely help them to walk through all of the different choices they have at their disposal. Treat yourself as you would treat this friend.
4. **Regain Control of Your Body:** Survivors of abuse, particularly physical violations, struggle with an additional feeling of powerlessness—an encroachment on the privacy of one’s own body. Regaining ownership of your body is an empowering step. It can be beneficial to engage in forms of physical activity that lead to a sense of regained body control. Exercise, including martial arts, running, and yoga can help you reconnect with your body in a powerful way to relieve feelings of helplessness as a sense of control over the body is regained. Furthermore, recognizing the capabilities of your body, the way it functions, and what it gives you shifts your focus to the strengths and power of your body to regain a sense of power and control.

5. **Remember the Ultimate Justice:** Allah (swt) says, *“That is a nation which has passed on. It will have [the consequence of] what it earned, and you will have what you have earned. And you will not be asked about what they used to do.”*⁸ You may be bearing the burden of your abuser’s choices; however always remember that *they* will be asked by Allah (swt) about every single choice, every single consequence of that choice, and every single ounce of pain you are currently experiencing. *“They will have what they earned.”* On the Day of Judgment, you will not be asked about the faults and abuses of others. Focus on what is in your control today and know that the accountability of the soon-to-come tomorrow will be weighed by Allah (swt) Who has seen all you have suffered.

Dismantling negative labels

Here are some steps to consider when dismantling the negative labels we assign to ourselves:

What label do you use to describe yourself? (e.g., bad Muslim, loser, failure, etc.)

Example: I really believe I’m a bad Muslim because of everything I’ve done and everything that’s happened.

What is your evidence that this label is accurate?

Example: I know I’m a bad Muslim because I couldn’t stop my uncle from touching me. Now I feel so dirty so I can’t bring myself to pray, which proves I’m a bad Muslim.

If someone asked you to describe the opposite label (e.g., “a good Muslim,” “an intelligent person,” “a winner,” etc.), what would you say?

⁸ Qur’an 2:141.

Example: A good Muslim is someone who follows the rules of Islam all the time. It's someone who was never abused because a good Muslim wouldn't be punished that way.

Look back at your description and see if it includes words like *always*, *never*, *should*, or *shouldn't*. Is your definition attainable and realistic?

Example: My definition of a good Muslim necessitates perfection. I know that Allah didn't create human beings to be perfect and that it's impossible for a person not to make a mistake. We are also not responsible for what others do. So we cannot be responsible for someone else abusing us. Remember that even the prophets experienced emotional, verbal, and physical abuse and they were the best Muslims.

Labels often hurt us and hold us back from growth rather than helping us to cope with pain. When you hear the label you use to describe yourself when you think about a difficult past experience, how do you feel?

Example: When I think of myself as a bad Muslim because of what happened to me, I hate myself.

How do you want to feel when you think back to that experience?

Example: I want to feel safe and reassured that it's not my fault and that I'm not dirty. I want to feel loved by Allah and to feel sure that I didn't do anything wrong.

What needs to happen for you to feel like that?

Example: I need to focus on the feelings of warmth, care, and compassion I have for myself and on the feeling of knowing that I am honored and loved by Allah (swt). I need to let myself feel sad and hurt about what happened to me and to understand how hard this was for me.

Can you hold those feelings in your mind, body, and heart? Experience it for a moment. How do you feel?

Example: I feel stronger. I know I'm safe and I know Allah (swt) is always there to care for me. I feel soothed knowing that He (swt) has given me the strength to survive this.

Self-compassion, warmth, and safety

When our minds are in “anxious mode,” our thoughts and our physical sensations can create a loop that causes us to perpetually remember the worst times in our lives. At random times throughout your day, your thoughts may naturally seem to drift back to the pain you’ve experienced, plunging you back into feelings of fear, despair, self-criticism, and loneliness. When these thoughts make you think horrible things about yourself, it can be helpful to remember times when you felt the opposite.⁹ Were there times in your life when you experienced a sense of safety? Times when you felt happy? Can you recall times when you experienced compassion and warmth from yourself or someone else?

To change the path your thoughts take when they lead you down the path of reliving the trauma you’ve experienced, try out this exercise to change the ending of your story. This exercise includes components that have been shown to lead to reductions in depressive symptoms and self-criticism as well as to an increase in self-compassion.¹⁰

Change the ending of your story

Imagine seeing a child in front of you who is sitting all alone, crying into her arms. You can tell she’s feeling lonely and hopeless. She’s not sure what to do and feeling scared about whether she can get past these huge, difficult feelings. You feel the urge to comfort her. What do you say? What do you do? You may say

⁹ M. Matos, J. P. Gouveia, and C. Duarte, “Constructing a Self Protected against Shame: The Importance of Warmth and Safeness Memories and Feelings on the Association between Shame Memories and Depression,” *International Journal of Psychology and Psychological Therapy* 15, no. 3 (2015): 317–335.

¹⁰ C. J. Falconer, A. Rovira, J. A. King, P. Gilbert, A. Antley, P. Fearon, and C. R. Brewin, “Embodying Self-Compassion within Virtual Reality and Its Effects on Patients with Depression,” *British Journal of Psychiatry Open* 2, no. 1 (2016): 74–80.

something like, “I know you feel broken now but it won’t be like this forever.” Or, “You are a wonderful person and what happened to you was not ok.” You may choose to take her by the hand and walk somewhere peaceful and beautiful together. You may choose to sit down next to her and wrap your arms around her.

Now, remember something that happened to you that you are struggling to get past. Can you give yourself or tell yourself what you needed at that moment? Just as you were able to show compassion for this child, can you say to yourself exactly what you said to her? Can you imagine the feeling of holding a hand, receiving a hug, or hearing words of reassurance? Picture what you need and allow yourself to imagine receiving that. Pay attention to how you feel emotionally and physically as you visualize this.

Imagine your best possible future self

The “Imagined Self” technique¹¹ is an exercise that can get us to start moving toward the life we want to live rather than remaining stuck in our current negative labels. When you can picture the best possible version of yourself, it paves the way for negative labels to be replaced with positive ones. It is an opportunity to learn about yourself, restructure your priorities, and gain insight into the obstacles that may be preventing you from regaining control of your life. Research has also found that writing a description of your best possible future self for a few minutes each day for a few days in a row was associated with a significant immediate increase in positive mood and increased sense of well-being for 3 weeks after engaging in this exercise.¹²

Try it out for yourself by following the instructions in the following section.

¹¹ K. M. Sheldon and S. Lyubomirsky, “How to Increase and Sustain Positive Emotion: The Effects of Expressing Gratitude and Visualizing Best Possible Selves,” *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 1, no.2 (2006): 73–82.

¹² L. A. King, “The Health Benefits of Writing about Life Goals,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, no. 27 (2001): 798–807.

The Imagined Self technique¹³

Imagine yourself in the future, after everything has gone as well as it possibly could have. You have worked hard and succeeded in accomplishing all of your life goals. Think of this as the realization of your life dreams and of your own best potential. In all of these cases, you are identifying the best possible way that things might turn out in your life in order to help guide your decisions now. You may never have thought about yourself in this way before so it might feel strange, but allow yourself a few moments to visualize this.

As you do this, think about the small details that make your future self and your future life wonderful. Who is there with you? What are you struggling with now that you have achieved in the future? How did you get to this point—what did you need to do to achieve all of this? Immerse yourself in your future self. What feelings do you experience as you imagine this?

Inspirational *ayāt* and hadith for reflection

Consider the following *ayāt* and when you label yourself negatively think about how Allah (*subhānahu wa ta'ālā*) describes the honor of human beings:

O you who have believed, let not a people ridicule [another] people; perhaps they may be better than them; nor let women ridicule [other] women; perhaps they may be better than them. And do not insult one another and do not call each other by [offensive] nicknames. Wretched is the name of disobedience after [one's] faith. And whoever does not repent—then it is those who are the wrongdoers.¹⁴

¹³ K. M. Sheldon and S. Lyubomirsky, "How to Increase and Sustain Positive Emotion: The Effects of Expressing Gratitude and Visualizing Best Possible Selves," *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 1, no. 2 (2006): 73–82.

¹⁴ Qur'an 49:11.

This verse prohibits us from using negative labels in referring to others so we should also avoid labeling ourselves in disrespectful ways. Through this command, we see how Allah (swt) honors us through ensuring that the words we use with ourselves and others build us up rather than tear us down.

And We have certainly honored the children of Adam and carried them on the land and sea and provided for them of the good things and preferred them over much of what We have created, with [definite] preference.¹⁵

Do you not see that Allah has made subject to you whatever is in the heavens and whatever is in the earth and amply bestowed upon you His favors, [both] apparent and unapparent? But of the people is he who disputes about Allah without knowledge or guidance or an enlightening Book [from Him].¹⁶

In these verses,¹⁷ Allah tells us that He prefers us above so many other creations and He treats us accordingly. He also reminds us of the blessings He bestows upon us. The amazing sky you see above you has been subjugated to us through stars to give us light during the night and day and clouds to bring us water. The earth grants us sustenance through its rivers, trees, crops, and animals. When you label yourself negatively—as a “failure,” as “worthless,” or as “nothing,” remember that Allah (swt) is talking about *you* in these verses. Think about how He (swt) sees you, rather than your negative view of yourself.

And [mention] when We said to the angels, “Prostrate before Adam”; so they prostrated, except for Iblees. He refused and was arrogant and became of the disbelievers.¹⁸

The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: “Allah created Adam in His image, and he was sixty cubits tall. When He created him, He said, ‘Go and greet that group of angels who are sitting and listen to how they greet you, for that will be your greeting and the greeting of your descendants.’ So he said,

¹⁵ Qur’an 17:70.

¹⁶ Qur’an 31:20.

¹⁷ Ibn Kathīr, Ismā‘īl ibn ‘Umar, Ṣaḥīḥ al-Raḥmān Mubārakfūrī, and Ismā‘īl ibn ‘Umar Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr ibn Kathīr*, abr. ed. (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2000).

¹⁸ Qur’an 2:34.

‘*Al-salāmu ‘alaykum* (peace be upon you),’ and they said, ‘*Al-salāmu ‘alayka wa rahmat Allah* (Peace be upon you and the mercy of Allah).’ So they added (the words) ‘*wa rahmat Allah.*’ Everyone who enters Paradise will be in the form of Adam, but mankind continued to grow shorter until now.¹⁹

When you read this *āyah* and hadith, remember that you are a descendant of Adam and that you, too, were created in the image of the Almighty Allah (swt). What greater honor could there be than to be from amongst creation who Allah created in His image and to whom Allah (swt) commanded the angels to prostrate? When you find yourself doubting your worth or allowing the inner critic to take over, remind yourself of the honor Allah (swt) has bestowed upon you. If He deemed you worthy of such an honor, doesn’t that say something pretty incredible about you?

Practical exercises

A. Dismantling negative labels

What label do you use to describe yourself? (e.g., bad Muslim, loser, failure, etc.)

What is your evidence that this label is accurate?

¹⁹ *Sahīh al-Bukhārī*: no. 6227; *Sahīh Muslim*: no. 2841.

If someone asked you to describe the opposite label (e.g., “a good Muslim,” “an intelligent person,” “a winner,” etc.), what would you say?

Look back at your description and see if it includes words like *always*, *never*, *should*, or *shouldn't*. Is your definition attainable and realistic?

Labels often hurt us and hold us back from growth rather than helping us to cope with pain. As you hear the label you use to describe yourself when you think about a difficult past experience, how do you feel?

How do you *want* to feel when you think back to that experience?

What needs to happen for you to feel like that?

Can you hold those feelings in your mind, body, and heart? Experience it for a moment. How do you feel?

B. Memories of safety, warmth, and compassion

Our negative memories often stand out, leading us to relive them repeatedly.

Instead of fear, describe a time in your life when you experienced a sense of safety.

Instead of despair, describe a time when you felt happy.

Instead of criticism, describe a time when you experienced compassion from yourself or someone else.

Instead of loneliness, describe a time when you felt warmth from others.

C. Change the ending of your story

When a difficult memory comes up in which you remember feeling scared, hurt, or helpless, ask yourself: What did I need at that moment? (This can be someone to protect you, words of reassurance and compassion, a hand to hold, etc.)

Can you imagine giving this to yourself at that moment? Picture what you need and allow yourself to imagine receiving that. What would that have been like and how do you feel as you picture this?

D. Imagine your best possible future self

Imagine yourself in the future, after everything has gone as well as it possibly could have. You have worked hard and succeeded in accomplishing all of your life goals. Think of this as the realization of your life dreams and of your own best

potential. In all of these cases, you are identifying the best possible way that things might turn out in your life in order to help guide your decisions now. You may not have thought about yourself in this way before so it might feel strange, but allow yourself a few moments to visualize this.

As you do this, think about the small details that make your future self and your future life wonderful.

Who is there with you?

What are you struggling with now that you have achieved in the future?

How did you get to this point—what did you need to do to achieve all of this?

Immerse yourself as your future self. What feelings do you experience as you imagine this?

Case revisited

Muna had endured a severely traumatic event involving inappropriate touch by a trusted family member. Her view of the incident and her perception of herself was further confused by her mother's negative and shaming reaction in response to what happened. Muna was devastated and began to wonder if there was something fundamentally wrong with her and how it would be possible to get past this.

Muna realized that she could do nothing to change what had happened and knew she would struggle with the aftermath of it for a long time. Although she did not have control over her uncle's choices or her mother's reaction, Muna realized that she could control the way she labeled herself.

Muna realized she had been labeling herself as a "bad Muslim," "worthless," and "dirty." She realized that the way she viewed herself was intensifying her negative emotions. She realized that, because of these labels, she considered the abuse she endured to be further evidence supporting the way she viewed herself. By working to develop a more compassionate and realistic image of herself and working toward differentiating who she was as a whole person from the experiences she endured, Muna's self-confidence increased and she was able to take greater control of her life and her identity.

Muna did the "Dismantling Negative Labels" exercise and realized that she had been viewing herself strictly through a lens based on her struggles, rather than her strengths. She discovered that, due to labeling herself as a "bad Muslim," she wondered if Allah had sent her uncle as a punishment for something. Muna realized that her definition of a "good Muslim" was someone who doesn't go through any hardships since she thought struggles were a punishment from Allah. When she was able to work on redefining this to understand that even the best of people (Prophets) went through hardships and pain, she realized that what happened to her didn't mean that she was a bad Muslim. She realized that she didn't need to identify herself based on her traumatic experience and that labeling

herself as “dirty” because of abuse perpetrated against her gave her uncle the power to define her life, which she definitely did not want. By separating the trauma from her perception of herself as a person, Muna felt empowered and was able to begin the healing process.

As Muna developed a new vision of her identity, her mood improved and she was able to speak with a therapist about the incident. Through therapy, she was able to process her trauma, talk to other family members about what had happened, and eventually reported her uncle for his crime.