



“Everything is Falling Apart”: Dealing with Unexpected Life Detours

NAJWA AWAD
SARAH SULTAN

YAQREEN™
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 nearly 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 © 2019. Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research

Gratitude is the healthiest of all human emotions. The more you express gratitude for what you have, the more likely you will have even more to express gratitude for.

-Zig Ziglar¹

Case study

The day of the doctor’s appointment that changed everything would remain ingrained in Salwa’s mind, causing her to relive it daily. She could vividly remember the feeling of the cold chair beneath her when the doctor sat across from her and began explaining the aggressive form of cancer that would be a part of her life—or a part of her death, as Salwa constantly thought. She was alone when she got the news—she and her husband had thought it would be a routine workup. Salwa remembered feeling shaky, feeling as though she was hearing the doctor’s words through a fog, and feeling overwhelmingly alone without someone to lean on as she processed this news. She began to think about her children and her husband and what this news would mean to them and the life they had built together. Salwa worried about finances and how they would pay for treatment since they didn’t have insurance. How do you choose between buying your children’s school supplies and paying for chemotherapy? As Salwa began chemotherapy, she tried to act as though nothing was happening. She could not quite accept the reality of the situation and tried to avoid it for as long as possible. Eventually, the pain and weakness were overwhelming. She could no longer do the things she took for granted—her husband dropped off the kids at school, a neighbor cooked meals for them, and she could no longer go to work. Everything had changed. As a sense of hopelessness overwhelmed her, she often thought to herself, “Everything is falling apart. There’s nothing good left in my life.”

¹ <https://www.ziglar.com/articles/the-gratitude-journey/>

What is happening to me?

One of the most terrifying aspects of our lives is how much of it is outside of our control. On most days, we don't pay attention to the fact that if one thing was different, our lives would be completely transformed within the blink of an eye. Every day you drive to work or school, you typically arrive there unscathed. It takes a split second of someone not checking their blind spot for your life to change drastically. If we were to sit and ponder everything that could possibly go wrong, we would probably stay in bed each morning.

When we are faced with the uncertainty that comes when something transformative happens, it can feel as though everything is falling apart. You no longer recognize your life; the things that were once familiar are now foreign and you yourself may have changed tremendously throughout all of this. When so much is changing, it is natural to feel overwhelmed and helpless. Your thoughts will reflect that as well. Some thoughts you might experience when it feels as though your life is spiraling out of control are:

I can't deal with this.

I've lost so much. What do I have left to appreciate?

There's nothing I can do to change this; it's hopeless.

When these thoughts permeate our minds and hearts, they can cause us to reduce ourselves and our capabilities to nothingness. When we view uncontrollable circumstances as an indication that *nothing* is within our control, we eventually succumb to feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. While this impacts our emotional, mental, and physical health, it also affects our spiritual health. In our relationship with Allah (swt), our thoughts may look something like this:

Allah is sending me hardship after hardship but He promises ease too. Where is the ease?

I just don't understand why Allah would deny me so many blessings.

There is no point in going through this—nothing good can come out of it.

When so much in your life feels uncontrollable, reclaiming control over your thoughts and the impact they have on your perception of your life and your faith can be incredibly empowering. This is within your reach so let's explore how to work on it.

Understanding your thoughts and emotions

When you view your problems as larger than life, while ignoring the positive aspects, it's only natural that negative emotions will follow.

Magnification and *minimization* are two of the most common forms of cognitive distortions. Most of us fall prey to them occasionally—even people with relatively healthy thinking patterns. Magnification² occurs when you look at imperfections in your life, your own errors, or the mistakes of others and exaggerate their importance. This involves looking at mistakes or the struggles you face as huge and insurmountable. Minimization occurs when you look at your strengths or positive things in your life as small and inconsequential. It's like wearing glasses that strictly enhance negativity rather than what is really present before you.

One of the biggest issues with these cognitive distortions is that they lead to more and more self-defeating thoughts. We tend to find what we search for. When we begin to scan our environment, relationships, and ourselves for negatives, the more our reality will be filled with darkness because that is what we are searching for.

² Burns, D. D. (1981). *Feeling good: The new mood therapy*. New York, N.Y: Penguin Books.

Furthermore, your relationship with Allah (swt) will also, inevitably, be impacted by this. As we feel more and more overwhelmed, we can easily feel disconnected from Allah (swt). Your thoughts may follow a trajectory such as this:

Everywhere I look, it just seems like tragedy follows me.

↓

There is nothing but bad in my life.

↓

No expectations means no disappointments. I'll just accept that Allah has cursed me so no matter how much I try or how much I pray, only bad things will come my way.

These thoughts perpetuate a *self-defeating cycle* featuring painful emotions, unhealthy behaviors, and more negative thoughts. Because you are convinced that nothing you do will make a difference, you don't even try to make a change. This results in living your life passively, which affects every aspect of your day-to-day life:

- It will impact your job since a lack of trying will impact future prospects in your place of employment.
- Your relationships will suffer since this negativity can permeate your marriage, parenting, and friendships—magnification of the bad and minimization of the good cause you to overlook things that can bring you closer to others while emphasizing things that can push you away from them.
- You may refuse to reach out to friends or put effort into relationships due to fear that your efforts will only result in more negativity.

This vicious cycle will go on indefinitely unless you know how to beat it.

Take a look at this self-defeating cycle and how it can impact our faith:³

³ Ibid.

Self-Defeating Thoughts:

There's no point in doing anything.
What difference will praying make?
What difference will making du'aa have on my life? They won't be accepted anyway since it's clear Allah's not listening to me since my life is so miserable. I must not be worth much to Him.
What's the point of trying if nothing ever changes?



Self-Defeating Thoughts:

You feel helpless, hopeless, worthless, overwhelmed, guilty, self-hating, overwhelmed and angry



Self-Defeating Thoughts:

You stay in bed and sleep as much as possible. You avoid acts of worship. You avoid people who might encourage you to do something you used to enjoy. You begin to procrastinate and avoid responsibilities.



Consequences of the Cycle of Self-Defeat:

You become isolated from others, which emphasizes another thing that is lacking in your life. Your productivity decreases and you get further behind on your tasks. This makes you feel even more overwhelmed and you interpret this as further evidence that you are inadequate and incapable. You become isolated from Allah, which strengthens your perception that He (SWT) does not care for you. All of this causes you to sink deeper and deeper into stagnation and feeling unable to regain control of your life.

As you can see in this diagram, our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are intertwined. When one changes, the others change as well.

We also find this concept in Islam:

Consider how Allah (swt) comforts the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ in the Qur’an: ***“We know how your heart is distressed at what they say. But celebrate the praises of your Lord, and be of those who prostrate themselves in adoration.”***⁴

Allah prescribed action to alleviate the anxiety of the Prophet ﷺ and the Muslims at that time. That is why it is reported that whenever the prophet faced a difficult time, he would rush to *salah* and say: ***“Give us comfort through prayer, Bilal.”***⁵

This shows that a change in our behaviors can be an effective way to transform our thoughts and emotions as well.

Also, consider the saying of Ibn al-Qayyim (*rahimahullah*):

*Ward off passing thoughts, for if you do not, they will become ideas. Ward off ideas, for if you do not, they will become desires. Fight them, for if you do not, they will become resolve and determination, and if you do not ward them off, they will become actions. If you do not resist them with their opposite, they will become habits and it will be difficult for you to get rid of them.*⁶

Here, again, there is an emphasis on the link between thoughts, emotions, and actions.

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said,

⁴ Qur’an 15:97-98.

⁵ *Sunan Abi Dawud* 4986.

⁶ Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyah, Muḥammad ibn Abī Bakr, 1292-1350 (1394/1974). *Kitab al-fawaid al-mushawwiq ilā ulum al-Quran wa-ilm al-bayan talif al-Imam ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyah*. Kujranwalah: Dar Nashr al-Kutub al-Islamiyah.

Allah the Most High said, ‘I am as my servant thinks (expects) I am. I am with him when he mentions Me. If he mentions Me to himself, I mention him to Myself; and if he mentions Me in an assembly, I mention him in an assembly greater than it. If he draws near to Me a hand’s length, I draw near to him an arm’s length. And if he comes to Me walking, I go to him at speed.’⁷

Here, consider one of the wisdoms of this hadith: Allah is to each of us what we expect Him to be because those who think well of Allah will *mention* Him, will *draw closer* to Him, and will *walk* to Him. All of these are behaviors that can change our perception of Allah—the more we reach out to Him, the more we move toward Him, the better our expectations of Allah will be. It is only when we give up hope, that we feel that Allah has abandoned us.

Furthermore, we tend to find what we look for. If we seek out examples of what is missing from our lives, our expectations of Allah (swt) diminish. However, if we seek out examples of the blessings within our lives, our perception of Allah (swt) is enhanced, which leads to further connection with Him.

Changing your thoughts

Now that we have an understanding of the self-defeating cycle that minimization and magnification can perpetuate, let’s explore different antidotes to these cognitive distortions.

Minimizing capabilities and magnifying shortcomings

Our brains tend to overestimate and amplify perceived flaws while underestimating our abilities and accomplishments. Magnification of shortcomings and minimization of our capabilities can result in the idea that whatever you do or qualities you have are not worth much. A helpful method to address this is called

⁷ *Sahih Muslim* 2675; *Sahih al-Bukhari* 7405.

the “self-endorsement method.”⁸ This technique involves writing down the self-defeating thoughts you are struggling with and responding to them by countering them with accomplishments you have achieved (by the will and grace of Allah) and the blessings you possess. This transforms distorted thoughts and grounds them in reality. When we discount the things we accomplish and convince ourselves that they don’t matter, we begin to believe nothing we do matters. Consider this example:

Cognitive distortion: *I’ve accomplished nothing in life.*

Antidote:

Step 1: Break down the self-defeating thoughts in order to address them one-by-one.

Step 2: Identify where you are minimizing the good and where you are maximizing the bad.

Step 3: Replace self-defeating thoughts with ones that are self-endorsing by objectively identifying accomplishments and positive qualities to counteract each of the negative thoughts.

Step 4: Turn this into gratitude to Allah (swt) for giving you the ability to accomplish these things, no matter how trivial they may seem.

Self-Defeating Thought	Identify Minimization/ Magnification	Self-Endorsing Thought: Identify Accomplishments	Gratitude to Allah (swt)
<i>I’ve accomplished nothing in life.</i>	It is impossible to live a life without accomplishing <u>anything</u> at all. Magnification: I am focusing on the moments when things have not gone the way I	Realistically, there wouldn’t be enough space here to list all of my accomplishments since even little things count like: • Helping my parents out by buying them groceries • Getting the car inspected before the registration expired	Allah rewards me for all of my efforts and I am grateful for His guidance in granting me the physical, mental, and spiritual capabilities to achieve all of these things.

⁸ Burns, D. D. (1981). *Feeling good: The new mood therapy*. New York, N.Y: Penguin Books.

	hoped they would and on all of my shortcomings. Minimization: I am ignoring every moment when things have been ok and I’ve put in effort to do something positive.	● Making my spouse smile with a kind text ● Every prayer I’ve done throughout my life ● Working hard to provide for my family and taking care of my family is something pleasing to Allah ● Choosing to be a worshipper of Allah each day	
--	--	--	--

This antidote can also be applied to cases in which we magnify the flaws (and minimize the good) of people in our lives and can help to enrich our relationships with them. For example:

Cognitive distortion: *My husband never helps with anything at home.*

Antidote:

Step 1: Break down the negative thoughts in order to address them one-by-one.

Step 2: Identify where you are minimizing the good and where you are maximizing the bad.

Step 3: Replace negative thoughts with ones that are healthier by objectively identifying the positive things this person brings into your life to counteract each of the negative thoughts.

Step 4: Turn this into gratitude to Allah (swt).

Negative Thought	Identify Minimization/ Magnification	Healthier Thought: Identify Positives	Gratitude to Allah (swt)
<i>He never helps with anything at home.</i>	“Never” is a very strong word. For him to never help at home would mean he refuses to lift a finger as soon as he gets home from work. I’m <u>minimizing</u> the things he does at home and for our family and <u>magnifying</u> the list of things I believe are lacking.	• My husband loads the dishwasher sometimes. • He takes care of any issues I have with my car. • He helps the kids with their homework. • He helps out with cleaning when we have guests coming over. • He works to provide the money needed to pay for home expenses.	Although I take on the majority of household tasks, I am grateful for the home we have and the income Allah (swt) has provided us with to be able to live here. I am grateful to Allah (swt) for granting me a husband who is responsive to my need for help at home.

One common deterrent people often face when they are attempting to consider self-endorsing thoughts is the fear of this being a form of arrogance or pride. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said,

‘He who has in his heart the weight of a mustard seed of pride shall not enter Paradise.’ A person (amongst his hearers) said: ‘Verily a person loves that his dress should be fine, and his shoes should be fine.’ He (the Holy Prophet) remarked: ‘Verily, Allah is Graceful and He loves Grace. Pride is disdaining the truth (out of self-conceit) and contempt for the people.’⁹

We should definitely be wary of arrogance; however, acknowledging our accomplishments does not need to lead us down that path. That is why a part of the antidote to self-defeating thoughts is turning our accomplishments into a form of gratitude to Allah. Acknowledging that every capability, accomplishment, and goodness in our lives is through the Will of Allah (swt) reinforces our understanding of the power of Allah and our dependence on Him. Rather than

⁹ Sahih Muslim 91.

self-endorsing thoughts being an indication of pride, they are a testament to Allah’s blessings in our lives.

Let’s consider how to further enhance a sense of gratitude by exploring another magnification/minimization issue.

Minimizing blessings and magnifying struggles

As human beings, we naturally tend to focus on what is lacking within our lives rather than shifting our focus to our blessings. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said, “If the son of Adam had a valley full of gold, he would want to have two valleys. Nothing fills his mouth but the dust of the grave, yet Allah will accept whoever repents to Him.”¹⁰ In this hadith, we see that even with a valley filled with gold, it is still easy to look at the valley we don’t possess rather than the one we do. This is why the cognitive distortions of magnification and minimization are so common. It is easy to minimize what we have and magnify what we lack; however, living our lives in this way will yield feelings of discontentment, sadness, and frustration.

After experiencing trauma, magnification of the bad and minimization of the good can become even more prominent. Fear can often be at the root of this. This fear could be a fear of failure, a fear of getting hurt again, a fear of rejection, or a fear of disappointment. Allowing our fears to dictate how we live our lives is a recipe for sadness and a lack of fulfillment. When our decisions are based on fear, we struggle to consider things rationally because we are thinking with the part of ourselves that is afraid rather than our entire self.

A certain degree of fear is natural; however, when it becomes a barrier toward living a happy and fulfilling life, it needs to be addressed. Allah (swt) reassures us,

Indeed, those who have believed [in Prophet Muhammad] and those [before Him] who were Jews or Sabeans or Christians—those [among them] who

¹⁰ *Sahih al-Bukhari* 6075; *Sahih Muslim* 1048.

*believed in Allah and the Last Day and did righteousness—no fear will there be concerning them, nor will they grieve.*¹¹

Part of our fears stem from doubts about ourselves but, beneath the surface, there may also be doubts about Allah (swt) and His plans for us. Here we see that faith can be an antidote to fear. Trust in Allah (swt) and take a leap of faith. Rather than minimizing your capabilities, rely on the fact that Allah is the Most Capable and that He has given you what you need to get through this.

A hidden blessing: Growth

Spirituality is a component that has been highly correlated with something called *posttraumatic growth*.¹² Posttraumatic growth is a positive change that occurs as a result of a major life crisis or traumatic event. It occurs when a person adapts to very difficult circumstances that would normally result in high levels of psychological distress.¹³ Posttraumatic growth is not a direct result of trauma; rather, it comes about as a result of how a person responds to their new reality and whether they allow themselves to be positively changed by life’s challenges.

Ibn al-Qayyim (*rahimahullah*) described posttraumatic growth when he said:¹⁴

His Wisdom (the Glorified) determined that happiness, pleasure, and comfort are not reached except by the bridge of difficulty and fatigue, and they are not accessed except through the gates of hardship, patience, and enduring difficulties.

What great disparity exists between the joy of someone He relieved after affliction, and enriched after poverty, and guided after being astray, and collected his heart after its dispersal, and the joy of someone who did not taste those bitter pains.

¹¹ Qur’an 5:69.

¹² O’Rourke, J.; Tallman, B.; Altmaier, E. (2008). Measuring post-traumatic changes in spirituality/religiosity. *Mental Health, Religion, & Culture*, 1, 719–728.

¹³ Tedeshi, R.G., & Calhoun, L.G. (2004). Posttraumatic growth: Conceptual foundations and empirical evidence. *Psychological Inquiry*, 15, 1-18.

¹⁴ Ibn al-Qayyim, *Shifā’ al- ‘Alīl fī Masā’il al-Qadā’i wal-Qadari wal-Hikmatī wat-Ta’līl* (pp. 448-449).

What is this bridge of turmoil leading you toward? Your joy is on the other side, waiting for you to find it as you journey through this struggle.

Without perceiving a struggle as traumatic, posttraumatic growth is not possible. A person who is rocked to the core by a traumatic event endures a tremendous psychological struggle and then ultimately finds a sense of personal growth. Posttraumatic growth cannot occur without pain and turmoil. Experiencing growth does not mean one will not suffer. It is actually through suffering that growth can happen. Sometimes the bad things that happen in our lives guide us toward the path that leads to the best thing that could possibly happen to us.

Researchers have found that posttraumatic growth can be measured through positive responses in five areas:¹⁵

1. Appreciation of life
2. Relationships with others
3. New possibilities in life
4. Personal strength
5. Spiritual change

There are so many examples of posttraumatic growth in our history. One is that of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. His uncle, Abu Talib, and his wife, Khadijah, died within days of one another. After this loss of his strongest supporters, circumstances became more difficult for the Muslims in Makkah, causing the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ to look for another, more welcoming community for his people. He ventured to Ta'if, hoping it would be a place where Muslims could live in peace. However, he was turned away and pelted with stones. When the Angel Jibreel stated that Allah (swt) would send the Angel of the Mountains to avenge the Prophet ﷺ, he said,

¹⁵ Tedeschi, R. G., & Calhoun, L. G. (1996). The Posttraumatic Growth Inventory: Measuring the positive legacy of trauma. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 9(3), 455-472.

*No, rather I hope that Allah will bring from their descendants people who will worship Allah alone without associating partners with him.*¹⁶

Consider how the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ responded to loss and devastation. With the option to avenge what had been done to him, he instead used this opportunity to hope for better possibilities for himself as well as for the people who had hurt him. This illustration of posttraumatic growth shows us the possibility of gaining greater emotional and mental strength as well as closeness to Allah (swt) through our struggles.

Posttraumatic growth occurs when we make our struggles a part of our life story without them controlling us or defining us. We cannot control what befalls us, but how we deal with our struggles can mean the difference between growth and decline. Here are some ways to encourage growth as we face difficult experiences:

- ❖ Acceptance: Accept the situation
- ❖ Trust: Trust in Allah that He is truly the Best of Planners
- ❖ Courage: Have the courage to put forth effort to change things within your control
- ❖ Confidence: Use strength-based words to describe yourself and your capabilities and understand that you are capable of handling whatever comes your way
- ❖ Identity: Understand that you are defined by much more than your struggles
- ❖ Process: Accept emotions and allow yourself to feel them rather than avoid them

The incredible thing about posttraumatic growth is the fact that, without an intensely difficult experience, you may never have had the opportunity to become your best self. Sometimes tragedy is what propels a person forward in gaining the greatest potential to live their best life and to bring out their best qualities.

¹⁶ *Sahih al-Bukhari* 3059; *Sahih Muslim* 1759.

It may be strange to think that something so painful is what you needed in order to become your best self but Allah sends us what we need, despite it being packaged in a form we don't want. As Asmaa Hussein says in her powerful book, *A Temporary Gift: Reflections on Love, Loss, and Healing*:¹⁷

The beauty of a gift has less to do with what's actually given, and more to do with the relationship between the gifter and the receiver.

Prophet Muhammad (saw) said, “Give gifts to one another and you will love each other.”

So it's not about gifts, really. It's about love. When you love someone, you want to show it - and one way to do that is through gifts.

Sometimes I think about the endless gifts that Allah (swt) gives us. We tend to think of the beautiful, happy things in our lives as ‘gifts,’ and the difficult, painful things as ‘tests.’

And so they may be! But what if we recalibrated our hearts a little and convinced them to believe that everything is a gift. Everything. The terribly painful to the unbelievably blissful.

I know it's hard, but gifting is about fostering love, right? It's about strengthening bonds and bringing hearts together.

Every happy thing you're given is a chance to be grateful to Allah. Every difficulty you're given is a chance to be patient and seek help and comfort from Him.

Everything you're given is either about fostering gratitude or patience - both of which are things that Allah loves and both of which strengthen your connection with Him.

So yes, everything from Allah must be a gift because it's an opportunity to do better and be better.

Our entire existence is about worshiping Allah. All that comes our way is calling us to this one, true purpose.

He is Allah, Al-Wahhab. The Giver of gifts.

¹⁷ Hussein, Asmaa. *A Temporary Gift: Reflections on Love, Loss, and Healing*. Toronto, Ontario: Ruqaya's Bookshelf, 2015.

Shift your focus: Big picture vs. pixel

One skill that can help us to cope and grow during difficult experiences is one that also overcomes the magnification/minimization thought process. Cultivating the ability to look at the whole picture through a lens of gratitude versus focusing on one pixel allows us to interpret our struggles as one facet of our lives, rather than using them to define our lives.

Imagine taking a picture of your face and then zooming in deeper and deeper. At first, you begin to see more details—every imperfection is emphasized until you can no longer see the big picture, only the flaws. As you zoom closer and closer, the picture becomes distorted and eventually, you can’t recognize what the original photograph was. This is what happens when we magnify negatives and minimize positives in our lives. Try out this activity:

<u>PIXEL</u>	<u>BIG PICTURE</u>
What part of your life is your primary focus right now?	What other parts of your life can you take into consideration? What is going <i>right</i> ?
<i>I lost my job and now I have no idea how I will support my family.</i>	<i>I have a skill set that will allow me to find a new job. I know Allah will provide us with rizq. This is a way of allowing me to turn to Allah. While I search for a job, I have the opportunity to attend prayers at the masjid and attend classes to learn a little more about Islam. Alhamdulillah my family and I are healthy, we have a roof over our heads, food in our fridge, and a means of transportation. My brother has offered to help me financially if it takes me a little longer than anticipated to find a job. One thing in my life isn’t working as well as I’d like since I don’t have a job, but there are so many other blessings I have and they outnumber the difficulties.</i>

Inspirational sayings for reflection

Ash-Sha’bi reported: Shuraih (*radi Allahu ‘anhu*) said:

*Verily, if I am afflicted with a calamity, then I praise Allah four times. I praise him that it was not worse than it was. I praise Him when He provides me patience to bear it. I praise Him when He guides me to supplicate appropriately and hoping for reward, and I praise Him for not making it a calamity in my religion.*¹⁸

Ibn Mas’ud (*radi Allahu ‘anhu*) said:

*A person may hope for some matter of trade or position of authority, until he is close to attaining it. Thereupon Allah looks at him from above the seven heavens and says to His angels: ‘Divert it from him, for if he attains it, he will enter into the Hellfire.’ Thus, Allah diverts it from him and the slave of Allah remains pessimistic, saying ‘So-and-so preceded me to it, So-and-so outwitted me,’ when in fact it is a favor from Allah.*¹⁹

Practical exercises

Conquering self-defeating thoughts with self-endorsing thoughts

Step 1: Break down the self-defeating thoughts in order to address them one-by-one.

Step 2: Identify where you are minimizing the good and where you are maximizing the bad.

Step 3: Replace self-defeating thoughts with ones that are self-endorsing by objectively identifying accomplishments and positive qualities to counteract each of the negative thoughts.

Step 4: Turn this into gratitude to Allah (swt) for giving you the ability to accomplish these things, no matter how trivial they may seem.

¹⁸ *Siyar A’lam An-Nubula* 4/105.

¹⁹ Ibn Rajab in *Jami al-Ulum wal Hikam*.

Self-Defeating Thought	Identify Minimization/ Magnification	Self-Endorsing Thought: Identify Accomplishments	Gratitude to Allah (swt)

Conquering relationship-ruining thoughts with relationship-enriching thoughts

Step 1: Break down the negative thoughts in order to address them one-by-one.

Step 2: Identify where you are minimizing the good and where you are maximizing the bad.

Step 3: Replace negative thoughts with ones that are healthier by objectively identifying the positive things this person brings into your life to counteract each of the negative thoughts.

Step 4: Turn this into gratitude to Allah (swt), no matter how trivial the positives may seem.

Relationship Ruining Thought	Identify Minimization/ Magnification	Relationship-Enriching Thought: Identify Positives	Gratitude to Allah (swt)
		• • • • •	
		• • • • •	
		•	

		• • • •	
--	--	--	--

Cultivating posttraumatic growth

Acceptance: Accept the situation

What do you need to accept about your life at this moment in order to move forward?

Trust: Trust in Allah that He is truly the Best of Planners

Has anything happened in the past that you imagined was detrimental to your life but ended up turning out for the best? When has Allah shown you that His plan for you is better than the plan you imagined for yourself?

Courage: Having the courage to put forth effort to change things within your control

What is within your control at this moment? What can you do to address the factors in your control in the best way possible?

Confidence: Use strength-based words to describe yourself and your capabilities and understand that you are capable of handling whatever comes your way

What qualities do you possess that will help you through this struggle?

Identity: Understanding that you are defined by much more than your struggles

Who are you as a person? What is at the core of your identity? What are the different facets that make you who you are?

Process: Accepting emotions and allowing yourself to feel them rather than avoid them

How are you feeling right at this moment? Write it all out and allow them to come to the surface rather than keeping them at bay.

Identifying signs of posttraumatic growth

Appreciation of life: Is there anything in your life that you appreciate more now than before the trauma you experienced?

Relationships with others: Have any of your relationships improved or have you made new relationships since your trauma?

New possibilities in life: Do you see opportunities and possibilities in your life differently than you did before?

Personal strength: Do you feel more capable of handling situations that come your way? Do you find that life’s small annoyances do not seem as big after your trauma? Do you feel mentally and emotionally stronger?

Spiritual change: Do you feel a deeper connection with Allah (swt) since your trauma?

Cultivating gratitude: Pixel vs. big-picture activity

Think about the thing you are struggling with most right now. Now click the “zoom-out” button in your mind and gradually start to see the other facets of the big picture of your life.

<u>PIXEL</u> What part of your life is your primary focus right now?	<u>BIG PICTURE</u> What other parts of your life can you take into consideration? What is going <i>right</i> ?

Case revisited

Salwa was dealing with a lot after her cancer diagnosis. It was hard to accept the fact that this was her new reality and this became even more difficult once treatment began. As she continued reliving the day she received the news, she realized that she viewed her cancer as the end of her life and responded accordingly. Her self-defeating thoughts took over and she found herself saying:

“Nothing will ever be the same.”

“I can’t do anything with my life anymore.”

“Everything is falling apart.”

“There’s nothing good in my life.”

When Salwa realized that she could no longer get out of bed in the morning even on days when she didn’t feel nauseous or weak from the chemotherapy, she talked to a friend who encouraged her to work with a therapist.

During her time in therapy, Salwa realized that she had been magnifying all of the intense hardships in her life and minimizing her capabilities and the good she still had that cancer had no power to take away. By working to conquer her self-defeating thoughts and replacing them with self-endorsing ones, Salwa’s emotions and behaviors also began to change. When she woke up without nausea, she was able to get out of bed and start her day with a smile. Instead of thinking, “Nothing will ever be the same,” Salwa began to tell herself, “There are some things in my life that have changed and that’s hard but in this moment, it feels really good to wake up without feeling nauseous. There are many things in my life that are still here—my kids, my husband, my home. I’m grateful for that.”

As she worked on her self-defeating thoughts, Salwa learned about posttraumatic growth and strove to:

- *Accept that cancer was now a part of her reality*

- *Trust that her cancer was part of Allah’s plan to elevate her status with Him and emphasize her inner strength*
- *Have the courage to strengthen her bond with her children since she now realized the finality and unpredictability of life*
- *Have the confidence in her ability to push through any challenges that came her way*
- *Identify herself through all of the facets of her identity as a Muslim, mother, wife, employee, and survivor*
- *Allowing herself to process her experience by feeling the waves of emotions that would come and go throughout her battle with cancer*

Salwa also worked on the “Cultivating Gratitude: Pixel vs. Big Picture” activity and realized how much she had magnified the role cancer played in her life while minimizing all of the other blessings she experienced. When looking at the big picture, she discovered that on most days, she could find more blessings in her life than hardships and that some of these blessings actually developed from her cancer. She made new friends who were cancer survivors and these became lasting relationships despite always imagining she was “too old” to make any new, strong friendships. Salwa and her family developed family traditions to ensure they made more time for one another, which allowed them to feel closer. Salwa rediscovered her love of listening to the Qur’an, particularly when she was at the hospital for chemo treatments. Friends came by with food often and the local masjid created a GoFundMe account to raise money to make up for Salwa’s inability to work during her recovery. As she listed all of these blessings, Salwa realized that magnifying the hardships in her life had prevented her from seeing all of the good in it.