



“I Should’ve Gotten Over It by Now”: Surviving the Impact of Grief on Faith

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Should you shield the valleys from the windstorms, you would never see the beauty of their canyons.¹

- Elisabeth Kübler-Ross

Case Study

Khadeejah’s best friend, Amina, passed away in a sudden car accident one month ago. They attended college together and had been friends for over 20 years. After Amina’s sudden death, Khadeejah felt unable to cope with the grief she was enduring. Every time she picked up her phone, she remembered she couldn’t call her best friend. She couldn’t imagine a future without the friend who had enriched so much of her past.

Khadeejah found herself changing as the days went on. Her temper flared up and she found herself feeling angry about seemingly minor issues. She also cried often and struggled to get out of bed for days at a time. She tried to drag herself to the restroom to make wudoo’ for each salah but sometimes the despair was so overwhelming, she couldn’t imagine lifting her head off the pillow. Khadeejah continually felt guilty about her feelings of sadness so she decided to talk to a friend about her struggles. When she approached her and explained what was happening, her friend replied, “It’s been a month so it’s time to get back to regular life. Have you tried praying and reading Qur’an more? When your iman increases, you won’t feel like this anymore. Be grateful that you’ll be reunited with Amina in Jennah.”

*Khadeejah returned home feeling even more depressed and was convinced that her relationship with Allah wasn’t strong enough. She already felt devastated and now she felt like a terrible Muslim. At this point she began to question her ability to connect with Allah, telling herself: “My friend was right. I must be a bad Muslim. **My iman should be stronger. Why else would I still be feeling this way?**”*

¹ Lincoln, L. J. (2017). *Reclaiming banished voices: Stories on the road to compassion*. Bloomington, IN: Balboa Press, p. 95.

What is Happening to Me?

Experiencing grief can feel like you’re caught in a storm in the middle of an endless, dark ocean. As the storm strengthens, you are pulled under by huge waves and barely able to catch your breath. The rain pounds while the waves seem relentless. Suddenly, the waters calm and you catch a breath, not realizing this is the eye of the storm—an illusion of calmness before the waves begin to crash over you again. Sometimes you don’t know what will trigger the revival of the storm—a memory, a scent, or an old text message.

Traumatic experiences, sudden life changes, and the loss of someone we love can be incredibly overwhelming. The pain can feel so intense that you may wonder how a person can experience such torture and still be capable of living and breathing. There will be days when you cry and can’t seem to stop and then there will be days when you feel guilty because you haven’t cried. Whether you have lost someone, your home, your job, or the life you imagined you would have, grief can be so painful that you feel it in your bones.

Grief and loss can transform our daily lives, the way we face the world, and our views of ourselves. Loss is often a form of trauma and can, therefore, cause a significant shift in things we previously considered unquestionable. You may start to question your capabilities, strengths, and relationships. The parts of your life that previously seemed the most certain may suddenly seem unclear.

While you used to consider yourself a person with good judgment, your view of this quality might change drastically after a financial investment has been completely lost. While you used to consider yourself a strong person, you may now feel broken after enduring years of abuse. While you may have considered yourself a successful person, you may start to doubt this after being fired from your dream job. Along with changes in your perception of yourself, the perception of your faith may change following an intense loss.

What you’re feeling right now, as you struggle through tremendous pain, is a feeling that has touched the lives of people from the beginning of time. Furthermore, these feelings have even impacted the best of humanity—the Prophets of Allah ﷺ. Consider the example of Prophet Yaqub عليه السلام. He had twelve sons, one of whom was the Prophet Yusuf عليه السلام. When Yaqub was separated from his son Yusuf, he grieved so deeply that his eyes turned white due to the extent to which he cried. His intense grief is expressed in the Qur’an, ***“And he (Yaqub عليه السلام) said, ‘Oh, my sorrow over Yusuf,’ and his eyes became white from grief because of the sorrow that he suppressed”*** (Surat Yusuf 12:84).

People often misinterpret the grieving process as a sign of discontentment with the decree of Allah (swt). When things in your life are not going in the direction you anticipated or a sudden event causes you to feel hurt or devastated, feeling this way does not indicate a weakness in your relationship with Allah or in your ability to accept what He has written for you. Consider what happened when Ibrahim, the young son of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, passed away: ***Allah’s Messenger took Ibrahim and kissed him and smelled him and later we entered Abu Saif’s house and at that time Ibrahim was breathing his last breaths, and the eyes of Allah’s Messenger ﷺ started shedding tears. `Abdur Rahman bin `Auf said, “O Allah’s Apostle, even you are weeping!” He said, “O Ibn `Auf, this is mercy.” Then he wept more and said, “The eyes are shedding tears and the heart is grieved, and we will not say except what pleases our Lord. O Ibrahim! Indeed we are grieved by your separation.”***² If the greatest human beings to walk the earth—those who were the most beloved to Allah (swt)—experienced such sadness, then how can we attribute our feelings of grief to lack of *iman*? Allah (swt) did not reprimand the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ when he grieved for the loss of his son because grief, sadness, and difficult emotions do not indicate doubt in Allah nor a weakness in our relationship with Him. Emotions were created by Allah and serve a purpose. Therefore, telling yourself that you ***“shouldn’t”*** feel a certain way denies an essential part that Allah has placed within you.

² Saheeh al-Bukhari 1303.

Understanding Your Thoughts and Emotions

When we create unrealistic rules and expectations for ourselves and others, we are engaging in an unhealthy thinking pattern called “**Should Statements.**” This is a type of cognitive distortion in which we use words such as “should,” “ought,” and “must” to create ideas that lead us to feel pressured and resentful. These statements can set up unattainable standards for ourselves and others. Should statements involve operating by rigid rules and do not allow for flexibility.³

Should/must statements are similar to the concept of “**if only**”—the idea that you or your life is missing an essential component, with which everything would be better. This is a thought pattern that leads to constant dissatisfaction, discontent, and regret. This thought pattern also leads to other cognitive distortions that can yield a negative self-image.

Consider these examples:

“I *shouldn’t* have eaten that. I just can’t control myself. I *should* be thinner. *If only* I could lose those extra 20 lbs, I’d find someone to marry. No one would find someone like me attractive.”

“He *shouldn’t* be so inconsiderate and self-centered. He *should* be on time instead of being late constantly. *If only* he wasn’t late, I wouldn’t feel resentful toward him.”

“I *shouldn’t* yell at my children so much. I *must* be a horrible mother and a failure. *If only* I were a better mother, everything would fall into place.”

The Prophet ﷺ said, “... Seek help from Allah and do not lose heart, and if anything (in the form of trouble) comes to you, don't say: If only I had not done

³ Burns, D. D. (1981). *Feeling good: The new mood therapy*. New York, N.Y: Penguin Books.

that, it would not have happened so and so, but say: Allah did that what He had ordained to do and your ‘if’ opens the (gate) for Satan.”⁴

When things aren’t going the way we anticipate, something traumatic or tragic occurs, or we’re experiencing uncomfortable emotions, our minds try to make sense of what is happening. We believe that our lives, our minds, and our emotions **should** function a certain way. When any of these get off track, we draw certain conclusions. We may start thinking about the things we **should** have done differently or the negative qualities we, or others, **must** possess to have caused this to happen.

*“My best friend passed away one month ago. I **should** be able to get back to my day-to-day life by now. I **must** be doing something wrong to still be crying every day.”*

*“Everyone says a Muslim **shouldn’t** feel sad. Maybe my faith is the problem here.”*

*“I **should** have stronger iman. I **must** be a bad Muslim for feeling this way.”*

Or

*“Why is she still looking so sad everyday? She wasn’t even engaged for long. She’ll find someone else. She **should** be over it by now.”*

*“She **should** understand that Allah decreed this. If she’s still sad about it, she **must** be doubting Allah. She **must** have low iman.”*

Unhealthy Ways of Coping with Difficult Emotions

As human beings, we attempt to cope with negative emotions in different ways. We often attempt to push away our difficult emotions or the difficult emotions of

⁴ Sahih Muslim 2664.

others. They make us feel uncomfortable and it’s a painful process to sit with these feelings. You may find that you try to ***distract yourself***, put on a fake smile, or even ***self-medicate*** through the use of drugs or alcohol to alleviate the pain you are feeling. You may find that others invalidate your emotions because they don’t understand or don’t know how to deal with them.

Another way we may try to reject these difficult emotions is through ***rationalization***. Our minds always seek to make sense of the world, particularly when things seem chaotic. Our brains naturally try to make connections even when a realistic connection doesn’t exist. We may connect two events or thoughts that occur around the same time whether or not there is an actual relationship between them. Therefore, when we’re feeling down, we may feel further away from Allah and Islam. This may result in connecting feelings of sadness, hurt, or pain with a lack of faith even though the two are not necessarily connected.

When people around us are uncomfortable seeing us in pain, they may engage in something called ***spiritual bypassing***,⁵ a process through which spiritual ideas and practices are used to sidestep or avoid facing emotional issues and psychological wounds. During times of stress or sadness people may tell us, “You should pray more. You must not be praying hard enough.” There is absolute merit and truth to the idea that prayer can bring a sense of comfort, as Allah tells the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ in Surah al-Hijr, ***“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.”***⁶ Along with this, we have to also understand that trauma and fleeting feelings of sadness are not the same thing. And while prayer is healing, Allah (swt) provides us with many means through which we can journey toward healing alongside our connection with Him. While a cancer patient can be encouraged to pray for health, chemotherapy is also a means that is necessary to heal the underlying issue. In the same way, someone who is struggling due to an emotional or psychological wound needs to heal the wound through appropriate

⁵ Cashwell, C. S., Bentley, P. B., & Yarborough, J. P. (2007). The only way out is through: The peril of spiritual bypass. *Counseling and Values*, 51, 139-148. doi:[10.1002/j.2161-007X.2007.tb00071.x](https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-007X.2007.tb00071.x)

⁶ Qur’an 15:97-98.

treatment as the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said, *“Allah has sent down both the disease and the cure, and He has appointed a cure for every disease, so treat yourselves medically, but use nothing unlawful.”*⁷

What’s Happening In Your Brain

Every trauma tends to involve loss, whether it is the loss of safety and security after a natural disaster, the loss of a future one had anticipated after an accident that causes long-term health issues, or the loss of hope after a sudden catastrophe. While it is safe to say that trauma nearly always involves loss, the reverse is not true: loss is not always traumatic. Grief is a healthy response to a loss—it is the natural experience of a wound that is in need of healing. Therefore there is nothing inherently problematic about grieving the loss of someone or something.⁸ However, when we do not have the opportunity to fully grieve and adapt to the loss we have experienced, it will continue to affect us, often in subtle ways, even years later. Without proper grieving and adaptation, the impact of the loss can be a traumatic experience.

George Engel, M.D. related mourning the loss of someone or something to the healing of physical wounds, implying that the loss of a loved one is psychologically traumatic in the same way that being severely wounded would be physiologically traumatic.⁹ Both of these types of wounds need to heal; otherwise, further complications ensue, such as the manifestation of trauma.

When we are unable to grieve fully and an experience becomes a source of trauma, our central nervous system becomes dysregulated and hyper-activated. When this happens, we are thrust into survival mode, which shuts down the executive functioning part of our brain and prevents us from thinking clearly. This is why we

⁷ Sunan Abi Dawud 3874.

⁸ Worden, J. W. (2009). *Grief counseling and grief therapy: A handbook for the mental health practitioner* (4th ed.). New York, NY, US: Springer Publishing Company.

⁹ Engel, G. (1961). Is grief a disease? A challenge for medical research. *Psychosomatic Medicine*, 2, 18–22.

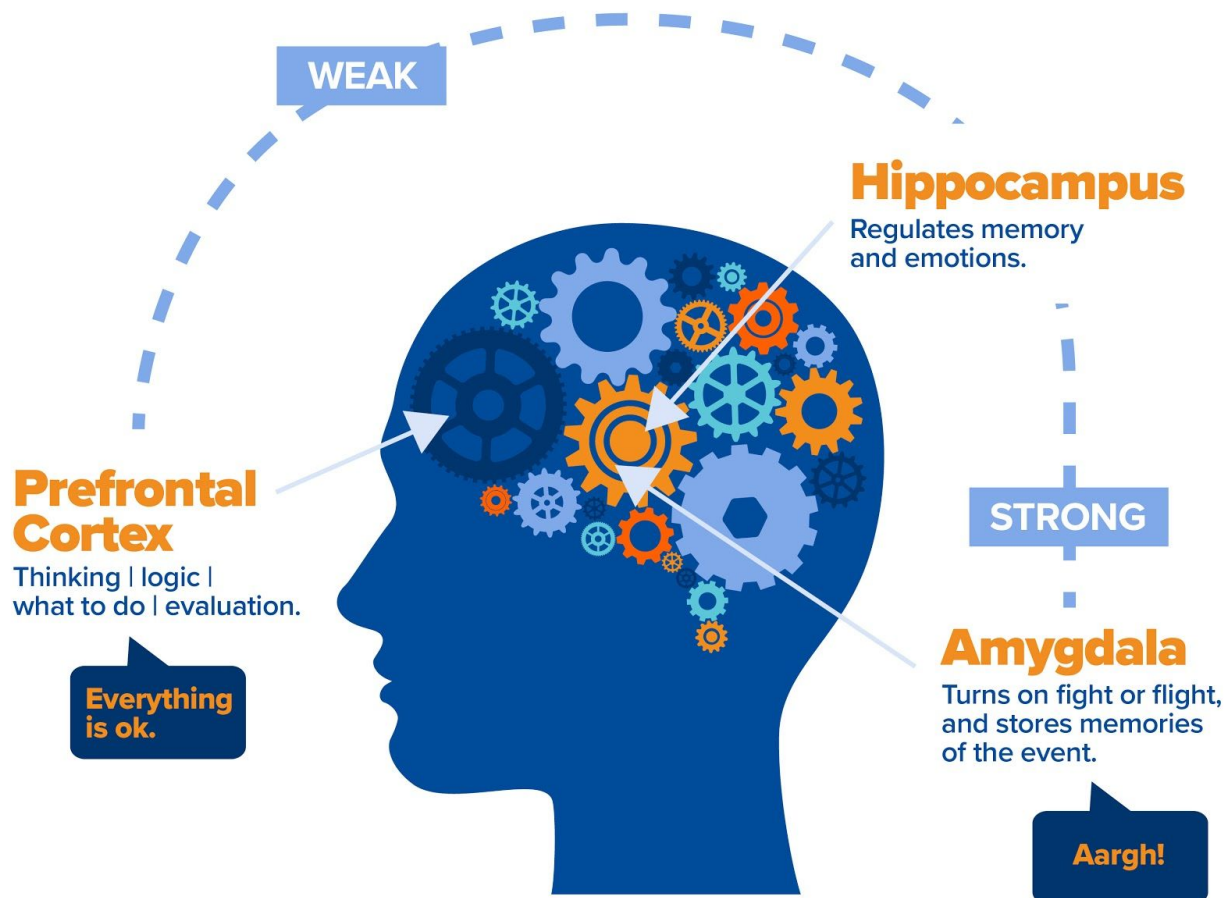
may react to situations in unhealthy ways or do things during times of stress that we would not have done during times of ease.

If you’ve ever yelled at a loved one when you’re particularly overwhelmed or if you’ve ever done something that you know takes you further away from Allah (swt) when you’re feeling like a wreck, consider what’s happening in your brain during these moments. In the same way that we may do things we know are unhelpful during these moments, we may also avoid doing things that can potentially provide us with a little bit of respite.

This is one reason why some people struggle to worship Allah during times of extreme stress. Our prefrontal cortex, the decision-making part of our brain, rationally knows that prayer, making *du’aa* or reflecting on verses from the Qur’an, will likely be helpful during difficult times but this part of our brain tends to shut down in response to trauma.¹⁰ When the “danger activation center” (including the amygdala in the picture below) part of our brain is dominant, there is a decrease in self-awareness, our capacity to self-evaluate, and our ability to establish goals. All of these require advanced thought processes, which are very difficult to sustain during times of extreme stress.¹¹

¹⁰ Shin, L. M., Orr, S. P., Carson M. A., et al. (2004). Regional cerebral blood flow in the amygdala and medial prefrontal cortex during traumatic imagery in male and female Vietnam veterans with PTSD. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 61, 168–176.

¹¹ Buades-Rotger, M., Beyer, F., & Krämer, U. M. (2017). Avoidant responses to interpersonal provocation are associated with increased amygdala and decreased mentalizing network activity. *eNeuro*, 4(3), ENEURO.0337-16.2017. doi:10.1523/ENEURO.0337-16.2017.



You may also think: “Even during really hard times, I continued praying but prayer felt different. I couldn’t focus and I couldn’t get relief through it. Shouldn’t prayer bring me comfort during my struggles?”

Prayer can bring us immediate relief when we are able to completely focus on our words, our movements, and the feelings within our body while praying. This is called mindfulness and is also very similar to the concept of *khushoo*, or focus in

prayer. This type of concentration activates our prefrontal cortex and can help us to shift away from stressed survival mode to a calmer, more mindful state.¹²

However, in order for any activity to help, our brain needs to register it. Research has shown an association between prayer and the ability to re-engage the “thinking” part of our brains.¹³ However, traumatic reminders cause increased amygdala function and decreased prefrontal function. This means that a difficult memory shuts down the “thinking” part of our brains and turns on the “survival” part of our brains. This makes it difficult for us to focus our attention on the task at hand,¹⁴ whether it’s our daily prayers, work tasks, or even remembering to put on your child’s shoes before leaving the house.

When you are grieving or surviving a trauma, your struggle to pray or to feel uplifted during prayer is not an indication of the state of your heart. It’s an indication of the state of your brain—a brain that has endured trauma is a brain that will have trouble focusing on anything other than the pain that it is currently experiencing.

Changing Your Thoughts

If you are feeling as though your emotions indicate that you aren’t a good Muslim, that thought can be changed. Let’s consider the trajectory this thought pattern might lead to:

“I shouldn’t be feeling sad. My iman must not be strong enough.”

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¹² Lazar, S. W., Kerr, C., Wasserman, R. H., Gray, J. R., Greve D. N., et al. (2005). Meditation experience is associated with increased cortical thickness. *NeuroReport*, 16, 1893–1897.

¹³ Newberg, A., Pourdehnad, M., Alavi, A., & d’Aquili, E. G. (2003). Cerebral blood flow during meditative prayer: Preliminary findings and methodological issues. *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 97(2), 625–630. doi:10.2466/pms.2003.97.2.625

¹⁴ Semple, W. E., Goyer, P. F., McCormick, R., et al. (2000). Higher brain blood flow at amygdala and lower frontal cortex blood flow in PTSD patients with comorbid cocaine and alcohol abuse compared to controls. *Psychiatry*, 63, 65–74. doi:10.1080/00332747.2000.11024895

“If I have weak iman, then my relationship with Allah is weak.”

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“If my relationship with Allah is weak, then Allah must be upset with me.”

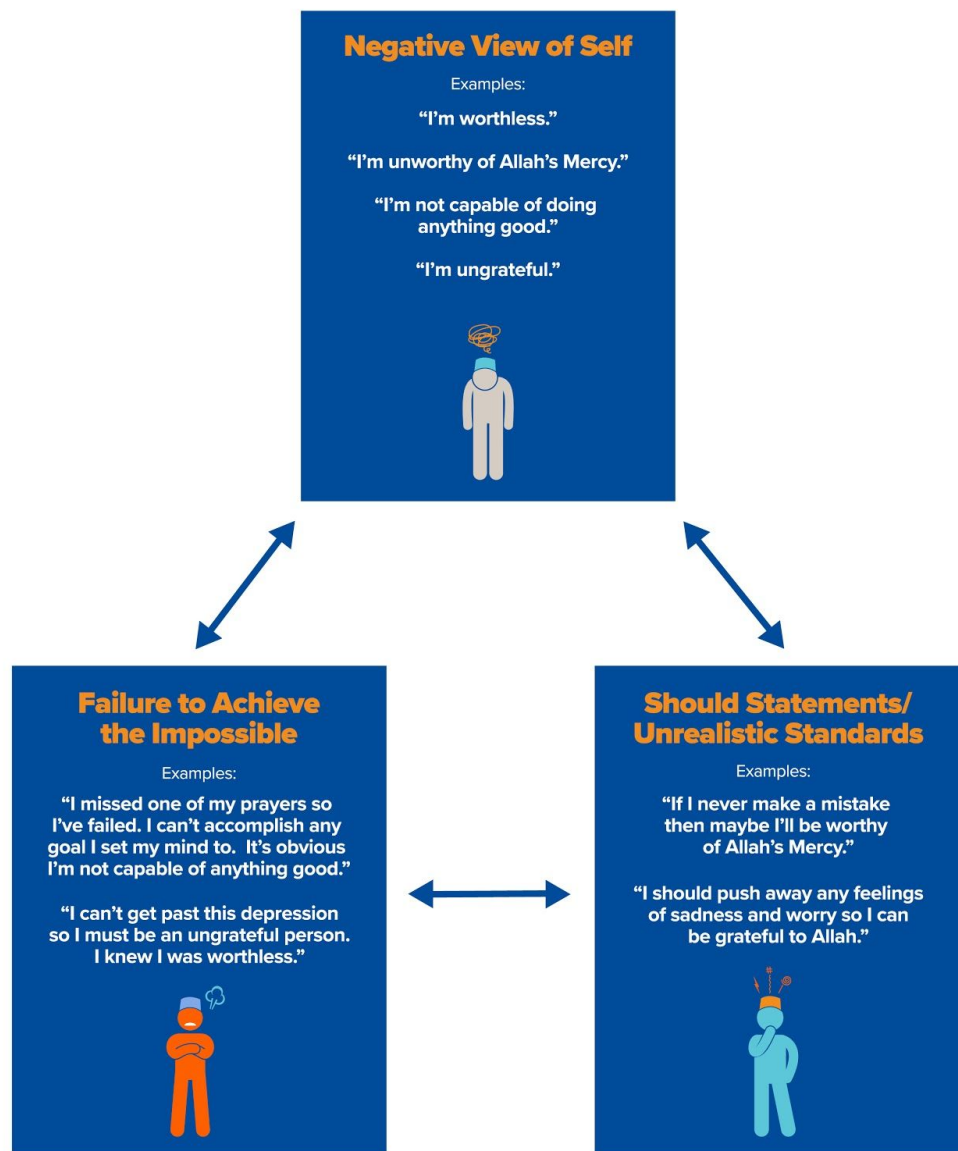
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“If Allah is upset with me and hates me, then I must be doomed.”

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“If I’m doomed, what’s the point in trying to change things?”

Here, we see the connection between emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. When we are in pain and we set unrealistic standards about overcoming these emotions, these unhealthy thoughts propel us into a hurtful cycle. These negative thoughts lead to negative emotions, which eventually yield negative behaviors.



If you or others around you are enforcing a set image of what it means to be a good Muslim and this image involves not grieving or allowing yourself to feel uncomfortable emotions, you may start to expect that Allah wants the impossible from you. And if you can't fulfill the impossible, what's the point of trying? This can have a profound impact on our relationship with Allah.

You can find some helpful definitions below.¹⁵ Please note: A lot of Islamic literature utilizes the words “guilt” and “shame” interchangeably. It is difficult to translate Arabic terminologies directly into English so although some Islamic publications may describe shame as a positive attribute, the way the author is typically defining this concept is in line with the definition of healthy guilt below. Whatever terminology is used, our main goal is to propel ourselves forward in strengthening our connection with Allah (swt) versus holding on to an emotional experience that pushes us further away from Him.

Healthy guilt is a feeling of psychological discomfort about something we’ve done that is not in line with our personal values. We can use this to hold ourselves accountable and work toward positive changes. The key here is identifying the *behavior* as inappropriate, rather than identifying *yourself, as a person*, as the problem. Healthy guilt is similar to what the Prophet ﷺ described when he said, ***“Consult your heart. Righteousness is that about which the soul feels at ease and the heart feels tranquil. And wrongdoing is that which wavers in the soul and causes uneasiness in the chest, even though people have repeatedly given their legal opinion [in its favor].”***¹⁶

Unhealthy guilt is a feeling of disproportionate psychological discomfort about something we’ve done against our irrationally high standards. This could be about something sinful or something completely benign like asking someone for help.

Shame is an intensely painful feeling of being fundamentally flawed. We feel this because we see ourselves as unworthy and deeply flawed.

Consider the different implications of these statements:

Healthy guilt: *I’ve been feeling so down lately that I’ve been struggling to pray. I feel like it’s taking a toll on my relationship with Allah so I’m going to pray at*

¹⁵ The National Institute for the Clinical Application of Behavioral Medicine (2018, April) *Guilt vs. Shame*. Retrieved from URL: <https://www.nicabm.com/guilt-vs-shame/>

¹⁶ 40 *Hadith an-Nawawi* 27.

least one prayer today since I know this is an obligation and I can feel good about fulfilling an obligation to Allah.

Unhealthy guilt: *I’ve been feeling so down lately that I’ve been struggling to pray. I **should** be able to do it all perfectly and if I can’t do it all perfectly, there’s no point in doing anything at all. If I can’t keep up with all my prayers, there **mustn’t** be any hope so I won’t bother doing any of them.*

Shame: *I’ve been feeling so down lately that I’ve been struggling to pray. Allah **must** hate me since I can’t do anything right since I can’t even keep up with simple things. I **must** be a worthless person and a waste of space in the world.*

A balanced, healthy feeling of guilt is an asset for us to be able to hold ourselves accountable. ‘Umar ibn al-Khattab said, “Call your souls to account before you are called to account and weigh your souls (actions) before you are weighed, for it will make the accountability easier for you tomorrow if you call yourselves to account today.”¹⁷ Healthy guilt functions as a compass for our hearts and minds.

Furthermore, healthy guilt reminds us of the benefits of repentance following a questionable choice we’ve made. Allah says in Surah az-Zumar, “**Say: ‘O My slaves who have transgressed against themselves! Despair not of the Mercy of Allah, verily Allah forgives all sins. Truly, He is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.’**”¹⁸

Here, we see a promise that Allah (swt) forgives every sin and that we are commanded to never despair of His Mercy. He does not expect perfection from us. He reminds us that things are not hopeless and that He believes us to be worthy of His Forgiveness even if we struggle to forgive ourselves.

While being human necessitates imperfection, it is incredibly liberating to realize that it is not so much about our sins or our good deeds, but rather it is fundamentally about Who Allah is. We are hopeful, not because our shortcomings are small, but because Allah’s Mercy is so great. And we are hopeful, not because

¹⁷ Ahmad (Az-Zuhd 2/30).

¹⁸ Qur’an 39:53.

our repentance is so sincere that we deserve forgiveness, but because Allah’s Compassion is so vast and His Promise of forgiveness is true. Sometimes overemphasis on our mistakes causes us to forget the Magnificence and Mercy of the One who has promised to forgive these same mistakes when we sincerely turn to Him.

Ask yourself these questions as you try to dismantle your “should” statements:

What rule or assumption are you struggling with right now?

Example: I believe that my feelings of sadness mean that I must have weak iman.

How does it affect your daily life?

Example: I feel ashamed to ask Allah for help because I’m not good enough to deserve it. I can’t pray anymore because I feel worthless in the eyes of Allah and no matter what I do, I don’t think it will ever be enough.

When did you first realize that this unspoken rule became a part of your life?

How did you learn about it? What was happening when you first adopted it?

Example: When I was younger, I was always told that Muslims never feel sad because they are always grateful to Allah, no matter what happens. My Sunday school teachers told me, “Iman and sadness cannot coexist in one heart.” So, when I felt sad, I assumed my iman disappeared.

What are some of the advantages of this assumption? What are some of the disadvantages? (How does believing this “should” statement help you and how does it hurt you?)

Example: Sometimes thinking this way pushes me to pray more, fast more, and read more Qur’an but I always end up going backward after a little while. Believing that my negative feelings mean that I have weak iman usually leads me to stop praying and stop making du’aa because I don’t feel like I’m worthy of being heard by Allah.

What is a potential alternative rule/assumption/statement that would better suit you?

Example: Allah created us with emotions for a purpose. Feelings of sadness are normal and acceptable. My emotional state does not define my spiritual relationship with Allah (swt) nor my ability to worship Him.

How can you put this new and improved rule into practice in your daily life?

Example: I can remind myself that the Prophets عليهم السلام all experienced difficult emotions and Allah loved them; therefore I can be loved by Allah too. I can still be close to Allah even when experiencing feelings of sadness.

It can be a struggle to move past the negativity you’re experiencing—so much so that you may begin defining yourself based on your struggles. Consider how you want to be defined. Do you want to define your relationship with Allah based on your current struggle or based on the potential closeness you can strive toward? Your relationship with Allah does not need to be defined by how you are feeling right at this moment.

We often identify with our imperfections and the negative occurrences that surround us rather than focusing on our positive qualities and the things that are going right in our lives. Trials afflict good people too. And doubts, dips in *iman*, and negative thoughts affect good people as well. Don’t let the things that are going wrong define you. Never believe that you are beyond forgiveness; never underestimate the Mercy of Allah. Allah sees you and knows your heart, mind, and circumstances better than you know them yourself. He knows your struggles. Allow your positive choices moving forward to define you and to define your relationship with Allah.

Inspirational Hadiths for Reflection:

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said, “Verily, Allah has recorded good and bad deeds and He made them clear. Whoever intends to perform a good deed but does not do it, then Allah will record it as a complete good deed. If he intends to do it

*and does so, then Allah the Exalted will record it as ten good deeds up to seven hundred times as much or even more. If he intends to do a bad deed and does not do it, then Allah will record for him one complete good deed. If he does it, then Allah will record for him a single bad deed.”*¹⁹

*The Messenger of Allah ﷺ said, “Allah Almighty says: Whoever comes with a good deed will have the reward of ten like it and even more. Whoever comes with an evil deed will be recompensed for one evil deed like it or he will be forgiven. Whoever draws close to Me by the length of a hand, I will draw close to him by the length of an arm. Whoever draws close to Me by the length of an arm, I will draw close to him by the length of a fathom. Whoever comes to Me walking, I will come to him running. And whoever meets Me with enough sins to fill the earth, not associating any idols with Me, I will meet him with as much forgiveness.”*²⁰

While Allah (swt) counts our sins once and multiplies our good deeds at least 10 times, we tend to do the opposite. The “shoulds” that dictate our lives tend to erase the efforts that we put forth and focus solely on the end-results. Yet, as we see in these hadiths, Allah (swt) rewards us tremendously for our efforts and, rather than emphasizing our shortcomings, emphasizes our perpetual ability to get closer to Him and receive His Forgiveness.

Practical Exercise:

A. Damaging Thought Trajectory

The first step in addressing our negative thought processes is identifying them. Use this template to consider the “should” statement you are saying to yourself and how it impacts your thought patterns.

“Should” Statement: I should... or I shouldn’t...

Example: I should never snap at my children.

¹⁹ *Sahih al-Bukhari* 6491.

²⁰ *Sahih Muslim* 2687.

Example: My wife shouldn’t complain all the time.



If I don’t fulfill this, then that would mean....

Example: If I snap at my children, it would mean I’m not a good mother.

Example: If my wife complains, it means she’s an unhappy person.



If that is true, then it would mean this about me...

Example: If it is true that I’m not a good mother, then I am a complete failure.

Example: If it is true that my wife is unhappy, then I’m incapable of making her happy which means we should get divorced.

B. Healthy Guilt, Unhealthy Guilt, and Shame

Consider the “should” statement you wrote above. Does your thought trajectory lead you to healthy guilt that propels you toward positive change, unhealthy guilt that is due to unattainably high standards or shame that makes you feel hopeless and worthless? Write down your “should” statement and write down how it can be interpreted through the different lenses of healthy guilt, unhealthy guilt, and shame.

“Should” Statement:

Healthy Guilt: A feeling of psychological discomfort about something we’ve done that is objectively wrong. We feel this when we act in a way that breaks objective standards of moral behavior. We can use this to hold ourselves accountable and work toward positive changes. The key here is identifying the *behavior* as inappropriate, rather than identifying *you, as a person*, as the problem.

Unhealthy Guilt: A feeling of psychological discomfort about something we’ve done against our irrationally high standards. We may feel this when we act in a way that fails to meet irrational standards of behavior developed early in childhood to please an adult.

Shame: An intensely painful feeling of being fundamentally flawed. We feel this because we see ourselves as unworthy and deeply flawed.

C. Dismantling “Should” Statements:

Ask yourself these questions as you try to dismantle your “should” statements:

What rule or assumption are you struggling with right now?

How does it affect your daily life?

**When did you first realize that this unspoken rule became a part of your life?
How did you learn about it? What was happening when you first adopted it?**

What are some of the advantages of this assumption? What are some of the disadvantages? (How does believing this “should” statement help you and how does it hurt you?)

What is a potential alternative rule/assumption/statement that would better suit you?

How can you put this new and improved rule into practice in your daily life?

Case Revisited

As Khadeejah’s grief continued to impact her ability to function on a daily basis, she reached out to a therapist and finally had the opportunity to process her emotions in a safe, non-judgmental space. As she began to feel validated, she realized that the sudden loss of her friend had been a traumatic experience for her and she had never allowed herself to fully explore it.

Khadeejah also discovered that her thought processes surrounding her expectations of how she “should” feel in response to Amina’s death were causing

her to suffer even more. She realized that her “should” statements were preventing her from grieving fully and that she couldn’t move forward without addressing them. Khadeejah also realized that her “should” statements were causing her to pull away from her relationship with Allah, which was something she used to rely on for support. Through exploration with her therapist, she realized that her “should” statements resulted in a sense of unhealthy guilt and shame. Khadeejah thought, “My iman should be stronger. I’m still feeling sad so I must be weak and a bad Muslim. I should suck it up and move on.” Khadeejah had been holding herself to an impossible standard—the idea that it was not ok to feel sad anymore is unrealistic for anyone who has lost someone important to them. Furthermore, she viewed her grief as an indication that something was wrong with her, as a person and as a Muslim. This caused her to move further away from Allah due to shame and exacerbated her depression.

Through understanding the impact her negative thoughts were having on her emotions, spirituality, and functioning, Khadeejah chose to dismantle her “should” statements. She realized she had been taught that sadness indicated a lack of contentment and a questioning of Allah’s decree. After changing her expectations to more realistic ones, Khadeejah realized that accepting Allah’s decree and feeling sad are not mutually exclusive and she worked to create new rules and expectations for her life moving forward. Khadeejah determined that Allah (swt) provided her with emotions and experiencing strong emotions during important moments in her life was ok. She also decided that she would no longer allow unrealistic expectations of herself to dictate her relationship with Allah and began to view her struggle as an opportunity to gain closeness to Him.