



“Why Bother Living if the Future is Filled with Pain?” Reclaiming Our Thoughts

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*In the depth of winter, I finally learned that within
me there lay an invincible summer.*

-Albert Camus¹

Case Study

*Aliya was in her last year of college and lived at home with her parents. Silence in her home always meant that something must be horribly wrong because the norm was constant yelling, threatening, and screaming. Her parents fought with each other all the time and she also fought with them—about her grades, how she dressed, and what she should be studying. Some days it felt like they fought about everything and nothing at the same time. It was just a neverending feeling of walking on eggshells and feeling doomed rolled into one. Aliya used to try and please her parents but now she was just fed up and tired. She changed her degree from something she loved to pre-med, she sacrificed her social life by rarely going out with friends, and tried to do whatever her parents asked of her but nothing was ever good enough for them. Aliya felt manipulated, taken advantage of, and guilt-tripped about everything. It felt like no matter what she did they were going to be perpetually unhappy with her and everyone else in the home. She just wanted a “normal” life in which she could be free of feeling anxious and sad all the time but there seemed to be no end in sight to her misery. She felt alone and hopeless about what to do. **“Why bother living if the future is filled with pain?”** was a thought she frequently experienced.*

What’s Happening to Me?

There are crossroads in life where trauma and the desire to keep going in life intersect. It’s a busy intersection where on the outside everything seems to be whizzing past you, almost crashing into you, yet on the inside there is a deafening and throbbing lull. This lull is not peace, but a numbness that develops after feeling stuck between a rock and a hard place for so long. In this overwhelming pain it

¹ Camus, A. (1954). *Summer*. “Return to Tipasa.”

may feel like it takes too much effort to continue. You might ask yourself questions like:

How much longer can I hang on?

How am I supposed to keep carrying such a heavy load?

When will this pain stop?

On your bad days, the questions may be less exploratory and more emphatic, like:

I hate my life.

Nothing ever works out for me.

Everything about me and my existence is terrible.

Thoughts about not wanting to continue life during times of adversity can alternate between feeling strangely right and feeling very scary. Many people get worried not just about experiencing thoughts of death, but also what those thoughts mean:

If I think about ending my life, does this mean I'm crazy?

What would others think about me if they found out I had these thoughts?

Will these thoughts ever go away? What if I'm going to feel this way forever?

If you've had these thoughts, know that you are not alone. There are people all over the world, including other Muslims who are reading this chapter just like you, who feel stuck with no way out. Studies shows that the lifetime prevalence rate for thinking about ending one's life in the average population is about 18.5%² and that those who have experienced trauma have an even higher likelihood of experiencing these feelings.³

You may to think to yourself, "Well I bet they weren't **good** Muslims because even just the thought of ending your life before its time is *haram*!" How would you feel to know that that one of the best Muslims of all time had thoughts about dying

² Lee, J.-I., Lee, M.-B., Liao, S.-C., Chang, C.-M., Sung, S.-C., Chiang, H.-C., & Tai, C.-W. (2010). Prevalence of suicidal ideation and associated risk factors in the general population. *Journal of the Formosan Medical Association*, 109(2), 138-147.

³ Panagioti, M., Gooding, P., & Tarrier, N. (2009). Post-traumatic stress disorder and suicidal behavior: A narrative review. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 29(6), 471-482.

when suffering from intense pain—someone who was promised Heaven and was dear to Allah. How would you feel to know that this person was Maryam عليها السلام? In Surat Maryam, in which we are told about the conception and birth of Isa عليه السلام Allah tells us about the difficulties of birth Maryam عليها السلام experienced:

And the pains of childbirth drove her to the trunk of a palm tree. She said, “Oh, I wish I had died before this and was in oblivion, forgotten.” (Quran, 19:23)

The example of Maryam عليها السلام shows that being overwhelmed with anguish and having thoughts about dying does not make you a bad Muslim. Ideas of death don't make you “crazy” and oftentimes these thoughts are just slivers of time in your life—not something that you will continue to experience indefinitely.

Unbeknownst to many, these types of thoughts are a type of cognitive distortion called **black-and-white thinking**.⁴ In order to know how to cope with thoughts about not wanting to continue living, it's important to understand more about where these types of thoughts come from. When medicine helps heal the body, the sufferer doesn't need to know how or why the medicine works—the cure just needs to help the person feel better. The mind is different, however, in that gaining insight and understanding plays a crucial role in healing psychological pain long-term.

Understanding Your Thoughts and Emotions

Black-and-white thinking is one of the most common types of unhealthy ways of thinking and occurs when a person develops extreme views about people, objects, or ideas—including religion. It is the inability to see gray in between the two extremes. This type of polarized thinking can happen at any time and for some people it happens often when they are under continuous distress.

Common everyday examples include:

⁴ Burns, D. D. (1981). *Feeling good: The new mood therapy*. New York, N.Y: Penguin Books.

1. All-good or all-bad thinking:

Examples: “I yelled at my kids again—I’m the worst mother in the world.”
or “My wife never cleans up—she’s the worst wife ever.”



2. All-or-nothing thinking:

Example: “I cheated on my diet by eating two cookies, so I might as well eat the whole bag.” or “I missed *fajr* prayer today so what’s the point in praying the rest of the day.”



Black-and-white thinking starts all the way back in infancy. In the early stages of development, infants can only hold one good or one negative thought at a time. When an infant's caregiver is unavailable or does not meet the baby's needs (e.g., not comforting when they are upset, not feeding them when they are hungry, not changing them when they are wet, etc.) the infant will associate negative feelings with the caregiver. When the caregiver is present and meeting the infant's needs, the baby will associate positive feelings with the caregiver. As time progresses and cognitive abilities improve, the growing child will be able to hold the two views simultaneously if the caregiver is caring and consistent.⁵ For example, the child might think (within their limited abilities): *My mother is away, but she still cares for me and will come back soon. I know this because she always comes back and shows how much she cares about me.*

In situations in which a caregiver is neglectful, unpredictable, and/or abusive then it will be difficult for the child to reconcile the two opposing views at the same time and black-and-white thinking will persist over time. This is because when the caregiver is inconsistent, the child will never know what to expect next so it's easy to go from one extreme to another at any given time. For example, the child might think (within their limited abilities): *My mother has abandoned me. There is a time when she left and didn't come back for a very long time, so she is probably not coming back this time.*

Black-and-white thinking in healthy, typical development gradually disappears from infancy through adolescence, but it's not unusual for even healthy adults to fall into black-and-white thinking on occasion. Common examples include:

"I got all Cs for my midterm grades so there is no point in continuing on with the semester."

"My boss gave me an unsatisfactory review so I want to quit the job immediately."

"My friend didn't respond to my text for two days, I'm totally done with the friendship."

⁵ Boag, S. (1994). Psychodynamic Approaches to Borderline Personality Disorder. *The ACPARLAN*, 9, 25-28.

In high-pressure situations, the fight, flight, or freeze instinct can make black-and-white thoughts even darker and harder to ignore. The flight response is not always about physically leaving; it can also involve impulsively removing yourself from the picture. You might have had thoughts like:

“What’s the point in continuing with life?”

“If I knew my illness would be over soon I could wait it out, but I don’t know if it will ever go away—and so my life is already over.”

“I’m a burden, perhaps others would be better off without me.”

It should be noted here that there is a big difference between passive thoughts of death and active thoughts of death. Passive thoughts are temporary feelings with no intent of following through, whereas active thoughts, or feeling suicidal, warrant immediate help. If you ever feel suicidal, it’s important to get help right away by calling 911 or having someone take you to the nearest hospital emergency room for immediate attention. The next sections of this article address how to cope with *passive* thoughts of death that result from black-and-white thinking.

Changing Your Mind, Body, and Heart

Overcoming black-and-white thinking is no easy feat, but it can be done with self-compassion, commitment, and a lot of practice. You matter. Your feelings matter and your future matters. Allah put you on this earth for good reason and does not want you to end your life. He wants you to stay and find your way back to Him when it’s the right time.

If you have had this type of thinking all your life, then understand it cannot be undone with the flick of a switch. Looking at the world in black-and-white can not only deeply embed itself in your way of thinking, but in how your body responds to the environment around you as well. Some days your physical and mental urges to get caught up in the fight, flight, or freeze response will be stronger than others, and that is ok. The more you practice riding out those emotional waves, the easier it will be to tame them. Over time, you will notice that the black-and-white

thinking still exists but the feelings will be less intense, less frequent, and less impactful.

Building Distress Tolerance

Distress tolerance is the ability to experience stress without being completely overcome by it and is a great way to start practicing coping with black-and-white thinking. It involves being able to take a step back, *pausing*, and then acting. The pause can be a few moments or a few days, but it's enough time to allow you to recenter yourself. Maintaining calm doesn't mean suppressing your feelings or pretending that a problem doesn't exist; it means that you are stressed, but that you feel in control of yourself—instead of your emotions controlling you.

The Messenger of Allah ﷺ said: “(Real) Patience is at the first stroke of the calamity.”⁶

The first step in building distress tolerance is to know what stress feels like in your body. Humans experience emotional overwhelm in different ways, but individuals tend to experience similar symptoms within themselves in distressing situations. The next time you feel distressed, pay attention to your body and reflect on where you feel tension or pain. Notice if you have:

- A racing heart
- Labored breathing
- Feelings of wanting to yell
- Feelings of wanting to throw something
- Sweating
- Clenched fists
- Tension in other parts of the body, like one's neck or back
- A sense of hastiness and wanting to take immediate action
- Heat on your face, chest, or other parts of your body
- Feeling like your body is shutting down

Symptoms are signs our bodies manifest *before* we take action. The unrest, although uncomfortable, is actually a blessing in that it gives our bodies a signal

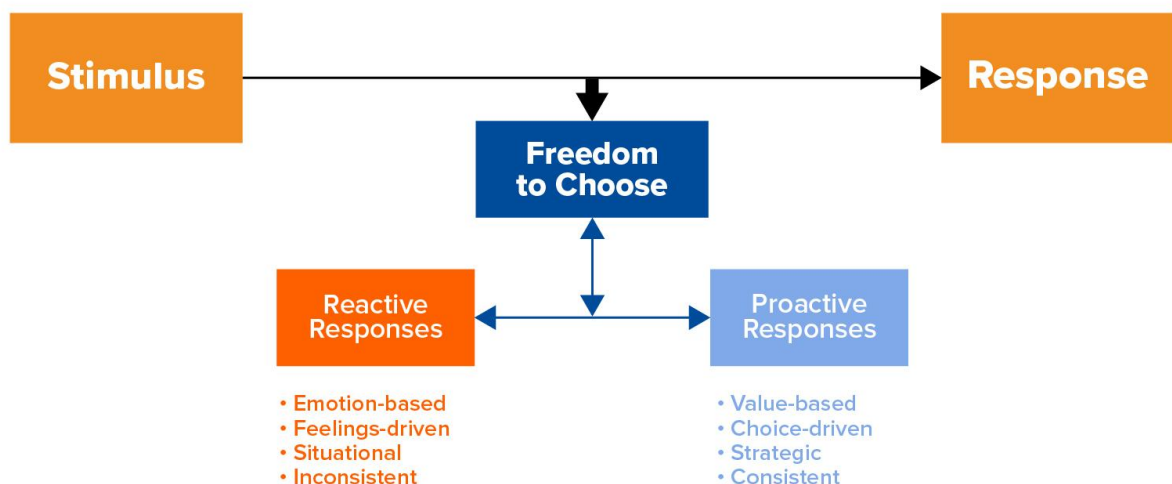
⁶ *Jami` at-Tirmidhi*, Vol. 2, Book 5, Hadith 988.

and the ability to recognize that we have an opportunity to decide what happens next. Taking a pause in between the feeling and the action is the space where you can regain control of your body and thoughts and decide how to proceed.⁷ This is also the space where black-and-white thinking can be modified. Those who succumb to black-and-white thinking usually do it here, sometimes making snap decisions that end relationships and have catastrophic effects on opportunities and achievements. Some keywords to listen for in your mind during this time are: Always, never, and hate.

“I **hate** my life:

“You are **never** there for me”

“I **always** fail.”



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Practicing the pause in between stimulus (what is happening) and response (how you act) is where all your power lies to modify your black-and-white thinking and change the course of your future.⁹ You can decide if you want to act based on temporary emotions and feelings or if you want to act in accordance with healthy

⁷ Covey, S. R. (2004). *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Restoring the Character Ethic*. New York: Free Press.

⁸ Mujtaba, B. G. (2008). Interpersonal change through the "Inside-Out-Approach": Exercising the freedom to choose our responses during conflict and stressful situations. *RU International Journal*, 2(1), 1-12.

⁹ Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*.

logic, your values, and what is in your long-term best interests. During this pause, try some of these effective exercises from the Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) model to make better choices:

According to Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), we have 4 options when facing a calamity or hardship:¹⁰

1. Stay Miserable
2. Solve the problem
3. Change your perception of the problem
4. Radically accept the problem

Staying Miserable

The first option is to stay miserable, a common path that many people take without even realizing it. The reason so many people take this path is because they think that not taking action is a way to avoid having to make a decision; but, in fact, ***not*** making a decision ***is*** a decision.

Let's take staying in an extremely unhappy marriage, for example. Staying silent about one's feelings, participating in futile fighting, and not getting marriage counseling are all choices. Avoiding meaningful action to change is, in effect, a decision to stay unhappy. Being miserable is probably the easiest of the four options but it still takes a lot of time and effort to maintain this unhealthy state.

When people realize that being miserable is a choice, the first instinct is to think, "Well, I don't want to be miserable on purpose!" But they often continue to feel stuck because they don't know what to do next or how to change. This is ok as awareness is the first step to change.

Solving the Problem

¹⁰ Lineham, M. (2015). *DBT Skills Training Manual*, Second Edition Second Edition, Available separately: DBT Skills Training Handouts and Worksheets, 2nd ed., New York, NY: The Guilford Press.

Behind every black-and-white thought there is usually a larger, big-picture issue at hand. Solving the problem is not always an option in cases involving trauma and calamity, but when possible it's best to try solve the problem directly. Let's look at a few examples:

If you are so upset at your parents for never letting you leave the house that you want to self-harm, the immediate issue is that you want to hurt yourself, but the big-picture issue is that there are significant communication, trust, and relational issues with your parents.

If you are so stressed out at work or school that you just want your life to end, the immediate issue is wanting to die but the big-picture issue is how you are relating to and coping with the demands in your life.

Although you may be faced with uncomfortable circumstances, addressing the problem at the root is the best way to reduce difficult emotions in the long term. An excellent way to solve a problem is to turn it into an action item and then create a basic pros and cons list associated with that idea. Writing out the pros and cons will help organize your thoughts, get more clarity on the situation, and ideally build insight into the best way to move forward. In the first example, the teen's action item may be to ask her parents to go to family therapy or to speak with her guidance counselor about getting help. In the second example, one action item may be to consider changing from a full-time work/school schedule to part-time.

If you would like to take your pros and cons list one step further, you can use the Motivational Interviewing technique below.¹¹ This technique is a more advanced pros and cons list that will help you think in a multidimensional way, whereas the traditional chart is simpler. The decision matrix looks like this:

¹¹ Lundahl, B., Burke, B. (2009). The effectiveness and applicability of motivational interviewing: A practice-friendly review of four meta-analyses. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 65(11), 1232-1245.

	Benefit	Cost
Decision to change		
Decision to not change		

Example: Should I leave my Spouse?

	Pros	Cons
Leaving Spouse	-Less Fighting -Might find someone better -Cure situational depression	-Will have to start over again -Children will be negatively affected
Staying with Spouse	-More financial security -Keep same circle of friends	-Emotional cost of long-term bickering -Feel unfulfilled

The quicker you are able to complete the pros and cons list and act on it with due diligence, the better. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ encouraged us to perform a prayer called *istikhaara* when making a decision. This prayer will help affirm your decision or deter you from it as Allah knows variables affecting your issue that you may not be aware of. It can also provide a sense of calmness in knowing that you have consulted with Your Creator, who knows you and your life better than anyone. Please see the end of this chapter for details about the *istikhaara* prayer.

Changing Perception of the Problem

If you can't change your problem, then the next best thing is to change how you view it. Perhaps the problem is not as bad as you originally thought? Or maybe it's not a problem, but could represent an opportunity? Perhaps you have more control over the problem than you think, or you play a bigger role in the problem than you think? After all most positive changes in life start out as something difficult.

Looking at the silver lining, making excuses for people, and deriving positive meaning from adversity are key ways of looking at the situation differently. Let's take the example of someone who is suffering from a serious long-term illness. If you have ever met someone with a chronic disease, you know that there can be many setbacks at various points in their medical journey. A person who is overcome with emotion and gives into black-and-white thinking might say:

"Everyone in this hospital is incompetent."

"There is no hope for me!"

"If I have this much pain, I might as well just be dead."

The same person who pauses and tries to reframe their pain might say:

"I'm blessed to be able to get treatment for this illness even though it's not perfect."

"I'm scared and I don't know how this disease will play out but I trust that Allah is the Best of Planners and everything good in my past, present, and future comes from Him."

"To Allah we belong, to Allah we must all return—when it's my time, Allah will take me. My pain now will alleviate my pain when my time here ends."

The circumstances are identical, but reframing the problem completely changes the outlook of the person experiencing the difficulty. When you reframe a problem you are taking ownership of how the problem is presented to you which, in turn, gives you power. You are exemplifying that, while you may not have control over your circumstances, you do have control over how you view them, which is more important.

A good example of changing one's views about a problem can be seen in the words of Ibn Taymiyyah, a well-known 13th-century Muslim scholar:

What can my enemies do to me! My garden and my paradise are in my breast wherever I go and they are with me. If my enemies kill me, I become a martyr and if they banish me from my country, I go abroad as a tourist, and

by imprisoning me, they allow me to have solitude (so that I can worship Allah).¹²

For the average person, these circumstances may be very traumatic and terrible, but Sheikh Ibn Taymiyyah, may Allah have mercy on him, found a way to genuinely look at these circumstances in the best light so they had no power over him whatsoever.

Another way one can change one's perspective on a problem is to imagine how the situation could be worse. Sheryl Sandberg, in her famous University of California at Berkeley 2016 commencement speech, talked about how this technique helped her with the immense grief she experienced when her husband suddenly died of complications due to a heart condition:

One day my friend Adam Grant, a psychologist, suggested that I think about how much worse things could be. This was completely counterintuitive; it seemed like the way to recover was to try to find positive thoughts. "Worse?" I said. "Are you kidding me? How could things be worse?" His answer cut straight through me: "Dave could have had that same cardiac arrhythmia while he was driving your children." Wow. The moment he said it, I was overwhelmingly grateful that the rest of my family was alive and healthy. That gratitude overtook some of the grief.¹³

When you feel like you have hit rock bottom, it seems that there is nowhere else to go; however, rock bottom is relative. When you imagine that your difficult situation could be worse, you can gain perspective and gratitude that it may not be bad as it could be. Originally, Sandberg thought that the worst thing that could happen to her was her husband dying; however, when she realized that her children could have died as well if they had been riding in the car with him, then she had a big shift in how she viewed the situation. This does not take away from the

¹² Al-Qarni, 'Aaidh Ibn Abdullah. *Don't be Sad* (2005). Riyadh: International Islamic Publishing House, p. 120.

¹³ O'Dea, Meghan (2016, May 14). Transcript: Sheryl Sandberg at the University of California at Berkeley 2016 Commencement. Retrieved from <http://fortune.com/2016/05/14/sandberg-uc-berkeley-transcript/>

legitimacy of the pain you are experiencing; however, it helps to shift some of the focus away from everything that has gone wrong back to the things that haven't gone wrong.

Radical Acceptance

A final option is radical acceptance. Radical acceptance involves completely accepting in one's mind and body the situation at hand so there is no longer any bitterness in the heart.¹⁴ Radical acceptance is not giving in or giving up. It's also not complacency with matters that can be changed or should be changed. Domestic violence, for example, is not something radical acceptance would be appropriate for, whereas the death of a child would be. In the case of domestic violence, a person has options even if one doesn't feel like pursuing them, whereas nothing can really change the death of a loved one.

Radical acceptance also doesn't mean accepting the stressor itself; rather, it means that you have accepted that this is the decree of Allah. Let's take terminal cancer, for example. Radical acceptance doesn't mean that you are ok with cancer or that you will not take steps to fight cancer, but it means that you accept this is a trial that you have to face. Radical acceptance is coming to peaceful terms that you might have cancer for a long time or may even die from cancer. In accepting the trial, you are not living in denial, but acknowledging the truth of your circumstances with no ill feelings in your heart or soul. Radical acceptance is riding the wave instead of fighting it.

Radical acceptance in Islam is eloquently expressed in this *hadith*:

The Messenger of Allah ﷺ said, "How wonderful is the case of a believer; there is good for him in everything and this applies only to a believer. If prosperity attends him, he expresses gratitude to Allah and that is good for

¹⁴ Lineham, *DBT Skills Training Manual*.

him; and if adversity befalls him, he endures it patiently and that is better for him."¹⁵

There is no easy way to achieve radical acceptance. This psychological concept is probably one of the most difficult achievements in one's journey with trauma. Many people can accept bad things that happen to them, but not without bitterness or despair. Radical acceptance takes a lot of reflection, talking through, and faith. For some individuals it may also take working with a professional, sometimes for many years, to get to this place of acceptance; but it is possible.

Radical acceptance is the antithesis of black-and-white thinking. It's being able to tolerate and accept something undesirable but still have hope, peace, and optimism. Instead of thinking, "I'm ill and there is no point in living," it's thinking, "I'm ill and in pain, but I have more to offer the world." Instead of saying, "I'm in so much misery right now I should end my life," it's saying "I'm in so much despair, but I will hang on and make the most of my situation."

Black-and-white thinking does not allow us to see the good and bad at the same time, while *integration* involves accepting the whole picture and being able to tolerate the good and bad simultaneously. Integration is being upset with others without ending relationships, being upset with oneself without resorting to self-harm, and even having extremely difficult life circumstances while still believing in Allah.

Self-Soothing Coping Skills

Pausing before falling into black-and-white thinking, changing your perspective on the problem, and radical acceptance are not easy tasks but can be made easier by practicing self-soothing activities at the same time. These types of activities also help take the sharp edge off of difficult feelings of anxiety, agitation, anger, and depression. The next time you are experiencing intense emotions, consider the following self-soothing activities to help you practice the pause longer.

¹⁵ *Riyad as-Salihin*, The Book of Miscellany, Book 1, *Hadith* 27. Retrieved from <https://sunnah.com/riyadussaliheen/1/27>

Affirmations: Affirmations are brief and often powerful sayings you tell yourself to help shift your thoughts towards something positive. The nice thing about affirmations is that you don't have to believe the thoughts (at least initially) to practice them. The more you use them, however, the more you begin to alter your thoughts and begin to believe them.

This is not what I would have chosen, but I'm at peace with it.

Hasbi Allahu wa naima Al Wakeel (Allah is sufficient for me and is the Best Trustee of affairs).

I don't have control in this situation, but I have control over myself and that is enough.

I accept what has been ordained for me and I know Allah will bring something good from this.

I trust Allah and His Plan and His Wisdom.

Deep breathing: When you get upset, your breathing automatically becomes more rapid and shallow. This sends ongoing messages to your brain that you are upset and, in turn, your brain will continue to send back messages to the rest of your body that result in constricted breathing. Taking deep breaths will help counter this and make you feel more stable. Breathe in through your nose for 4 seconds, hold your breath for 4 seconds, and then exhale through your mouth like it is holding a straw for at least 6 seconds. Practice this 10 times or as long as you need to.



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¹⁶ Image courtesy of www.therapistaid.com (2017)

Tawakkul & Practicing Hope: Have you ever driven around in really thick fog and were taken aback that you could not see the road, the usual buildings, and everything else you typically observe on your commute? Everything looks like it is covered and you can not see past what is right in front of your car. Although it might be anxiety-provoking, you know with certainty that despite not being able to see anything, all those objects are still there. The same is for *tawakkul* (reliance on Allah). You may not readily see Allah in the fog of your distress but you can constantly remind and affirm to yourself that He is still there, loves you and wants what is best for you. Intentionally practicing and looking at situations with optimism can also remind you that although you are in very difficult circumstances now, relief will eventually come and that good things lie ahead.

For indeed, with hardship [will be] ease. Indeed, with hardship [will be] ease. (Quran, 94: 5-6)

Additionally, practicing hope and *tawakkul* during times of ease will help them come to mind more quickly when in distress. Abu Zayd al-Balkhi, a pioneer of Islamic cognitive psychotherapy in the 9th century, indicates that similar to the healthy person who keeps medicine readily at hand in case an unexpected ailment occurs, the same should be done with thoughts. Healthy thoughts should be stored during a tranquil state so they can be easily accessible when emotional distress occurs.¹⁷

Replace thoughts with cognitive activities: If you are feeling consumed with your thoughts, put them to the side and distract yourself with other thought-based activities like doing a puzzle, learning a new task, or building something new. Distracting yourself in a healthy way can help you keep your mind off the problem until you calm down.

Replace thoughts with grounding physical activities: In psychosomatic literature, which focuses on how psychological ailments manifest themselves through the

¹⁷ Badri, Malik (2013). *Abu Zayd al Balkhi's Sustenance of the Soul: The Cognitive Behavior Theory of a Ninth Century Physician*. Washington: The International Institute of Islamic Thought.

body, triggering thoughts that jump-start the fight or flight response can be minimized through positive physical touch and pressure.¹⁸ Simple physical activities may include wrapping yourself in a blanket (what Prophet Muhammad ﷺ did when distressed at first receiving revelation), lying flat on the floor (a recommended *sunnah* for when angry), or placing your hand on your heart. These small gestures are very simple but can profoundly help you feel more safe, in control, and secure.

Inspirational Hadith & Ayat for Reflection

Narrated Abu Huraira: Allah's Messenger ﷺ said, "The example of a believer is that of a fresh tender plant; from whatever direction the wind comes, it bends it, but when the wind becomes quiet, it becomes straight again. Similarly, a believer is afflicted with calamities (but he remains patient till Allah removes his difficulties.) And an impious wicked person is like a pine tree which keeps hard and straight till Allah cuts (breaks) it down when He wishes." (Sahih al- Bukhari 5644)

Narrated Abu Uthman: Usama bin Zaid said that while he, Sa'd and Ubai bin Ka'b were with the Prophet (peace be upon him) a daughter of the Prophet (peace be upon him) sent a message to him, saying. "My daughter is dying; please come to us." The Prophet (peace be upon him) sent her his greetings and added "It is for Allah what He takes, and what He gives, and everything before His Sight has a limited period. So she should hope for Allah's reward and remain patient." She again sent a message, beseeching him by Allah, to come. So the Prophet (peace be upon him) got up and so did we (and went there). The child was placed on his lap while his breath was irregular. Tears flowed from the eyes of the Prophet. Sa'd said to him, "What is this, O Allah's Apostle?" He said, "This is Mercy which Allah has embedded in the hearts of whomever He wished of His slaves. And Allah does not bestow His Mercy, except on the merciful among His slaves." (Sahih Al-Bukhari Book 70, Hadith 559)

¹⁸ Wong, A. (2019). Somatic Approaches to Healing Trauma. Online Course. Retrieved from <https://www.somatopia.com>

Narrated `Aisha: I asked Allah's Messenger ﷺ about the plague. He said, "That was a means of torture which Allah used to send upon whomsoever He wished, but He made it a source of mercy for the believers, for anyone who is residing in a town in which this disease is present, and remains there and does not leave that town, but has patience and hopes for Allah's reward, and knows that nothing will befall him except what Allah has written for him, then he will get such reward as that of a martyr." (Sahih al-Bukhari 6619)

Abdullah ibn Mas'ud reported: I entered the home of the Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, while he was suffering from fever. I said, "O Messenger of Allah, you are suffering from a strong fever." The Prophet said, "Yes, for I am afflicted with fever like two men among you." I said, "Is it that you have a double reward?" The Prophet said, "Yes, it is so. Likewise, there is no Muslim who is afflicted with pain as much as the prick of a thorn or more but that Allah will expiate his sins just as leaves fall from a tree. (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 5324)

Practical Exercises

A. Distress Tolerance

To address black-and-white thinking, it's important to increase tolerance for difficult feelings. Instead of making snap decisions and statements, working on the space between a trigger and response helps with coping and the ability to make healthy decisions.

Identify your personal triggers when you are feeling like you are about to lose your cool:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

What are coping skills or activities you can use before you jump to black-and-white thinking? Think of ways to stay in the pause or gray-zone as long as you can:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

If you can't shake off your black-and-white thinking, try this exercise in your journal:

A. I know this is black-and-white thinking and I feel (write black-and-white statement here):

Example: Everyone hates me and I'm worthless.

B. I know this is black-and-white thinking, but my rational self knows that the truth is (affirmation):

Example: Allah cares about me and people in my life do love me.

C. Repeat these affirmations to yourself 3 times in the morning and evening, or as often as you need to.

B. Changing Your Perception of the Problem: Reframing

Problems are sometimes masked opportunities for growth and opportunity. Reframing is a powerful tool for viewing obstacles in a different or more positive light. Below, write down your top 3 biggest obstacles and next to them reframe them, keeping the following questions in mind:

How can I use this issue to end up in a better place than where I started?

How can I take this issue to propel me closer to my life goals?

Masked Problem	Reframed Opportunity
Example: My marriage is in a terrible place right now.	We have generally not been good with communication or affection. This can be an opportunity to seek marriage counseling and learn tools to make our relationship better than it ever has been.
I am dying of cancer.	I've been aimlessly getting by in life, just doing the bare minimum in everything. Now that I have a more defined time limit, I should live life to the fullest by consistently telling my family how important they are to me, living with more intention and purpose, and taking a more active role in my spiritual development.

C. Problem Solving and Radical Acceptance

You have four options anytime you are facing a problem. Fill out the graph below with how life would be if you tried each option:

Example: My wife says she has met someone else she wants to marry and wants to get a divorce.

Stay Miserable Perhaps my wife is going through a phase. We all make mistakes. I'll try being patient and maybe her relationship with the other man will run its course on its own.	Solve the Problem Example: I will try convince my wife that the marriage can be salvaged by going to marriage counseling.
Change your Perception of the Problem Example: My wife committed adultery and wants to dissolve the marriage amicably. Perhaps this is a gift and an opportunity for me to find someone else who will actually respect and love me.	Radical Acceptance Example: I accept that my wife is leaving me for another man. Although our marriage didn't end well, there were many good things that came from it, like our children. I'm not going to judge her; that will be up to Allah. After our divorce, I will stay on the best terms with her as humanly possible for the sake of co-parenting our children. I will be ok <i>inshaAllah</i> .

Are there truths are you fighting and refusing to accept? What are they?

Example: I don't want to accept that my marriage might be over after 10 years.

What are the pros and cons of continuing to fight?

Pros	Cons
Ex: Maybe we can reconcile.	Ex: What kind of dignity and self-respect can I have by staying in a relationship like this?

What are the pros and cons of radical acceptance (not giving in, but accepting reality)?

Pros	Cons
Ex: This chapter of my life will finally be over and I can now rebuild it on my terms.	Ex: I have to cope with the idea of restructuring my life and family.

What affirmations will help you in your radical acceptance?

1. Example: Allah is the Best of Planners.
2. Example: I don't have control over others, but I have control of myself and that's what's important.
3. Example: Everything is going to be ok *inshaAllah*.
- 4.
- 5.

Radical acceptance is not something you can turn on like a light switch. Think about it, journal about it, and debate it in your head. When you are ready to make a commitment to accepting your reality, write it down here:

Example: I accept that my marriage is over. It was a good chapter in my life while it lasted and now I'm ready for the next one. It's not exactly how I envisioned it would be, but I will have *tawakkul* in Allah and look forward to what's ahead.

Case Study Revisited

Aliya learned about the four options to approaching a problem (solving it, changing perception of it, radical acceptance, and staying miserable) and decided that staying miserable was not an option for her. It's not that she truly wanted to die—she just wanted the conflict and pain to stop. She thought about changing her perception of the problem, but she knew that this was not going to work unless she at least tried to change the problem first.

Aliya decided that she wanted to go to therapy. Her parents were reluctant to accept her going to treatment so she decided to utilize the free therapy sessions at her college. Aliya learned that she had developed depression as a result of her family dynamics and that the extreme yelling, name-calling, and fighting were actually forms of verbal abuse. Aliya consulted with her local Imam and he agreed with Aliya's therapist that her current living situation was very unhealthy.

Aliya decided to move in with her aunt nearby and work on developing healthier boundaries with her parents from a distance. She understood that vilifying her parents was not going to get her the results she wanted long-term and so she made efforts to build a better relationship with them; when her parents acted inappropriately, however, she would try to change the subject or leave without making a scene.

With the help of her therapist, Aliya began to work on addressing her black-and-white thinking and depression. If she began to think too negatively of her parents, she would try to focus on their good qualities and the fact that they had raised her. If she became overwhelmed and started to have thoughts of wanting to shut down, or that she didn't want to continue living, she would use self-soothing activities to calm down. Over time, she realized that the quicker she started her coping skills the less she experienced the black-and-white thinking. As her black-and-white thinking decreased, so did her depression.

Istikhaara Prayer

Use this prayer when you want to make a decision about a difficult matter (or any matter). Pray two *rakat* voluntary prayer and, after completing the prayer and saying *salaam (tasleem)*, say this *du'aa*.

“It was narrated that Jabir bin ‘Abdullah said:

The Messenger of Allah ﷺ used to teach us Istikharah, just as he used to teach us a Surah of the Qur'an. He said: 'If anyone of you is deliberating about a decision he has to make, then let him pray two Rak'ah of non-obligatory prayer, then say: Allahumma inni astakhiruka bi 'ilmika wa astaqdiruka bi qudratika wa as'aluka min fadlikal-'azim, fa innaka taqdiru wa la aqdir, wa ta'lamu wa la a'lam, wa Anta 'allamul-ghuyub. Allahumma in kunta ta'lamu hadhal-amra (then the matter should be mentioned by name) ma kan min shay'in khairan li fi dini wa ma'ashi wa 'aqibati amri, aw khairanli fi 'ajili amri wa ajilihi, faqdurhu li wa yassirhu li wa barik li fih. Wa in kunta ta'lamu [O Allah, I seek Your guidance (in making a choice) by virtue of Your knowledge, and I seek ability by virtue of Your power, and I ask You of Your great bounty. You have power, I have none. And You know, I know not. You are the Knower of hidden things. O Allah, if in Your knowledge, this matter (then it should be mentioned by name) is good for me in my religion, my livelihood and my affairs, or both in this world and in the Hereafter then ordain it for me, make it easy for me, and bless it for me. And if in Your knowledge]. Then saying similar to what he said the first

time, except: Wa in kana sharran li fasrifhu ‘anni wasrifni ‘anhu waqdur li al-khair haithuma kana thumma raddini bihi (If it is bad for me then turn it away from me and turn me away from it, and ordain for me the good wherever it may be and make me pleased with it).” (Sunan Ibn Majah, Vol. 1, Book 5, Hadith 1383)

حَدَّثَنَا أَحْمَدُ بْنُ يُونُسَ السُّلَمِيُّ، حَدَّثَنَا خَالِدُ بْنُ مَخْلَدٍ، حَدَّثَنَا عَبْدُ الرَّحْمَنِ بْنُ أَبِي الْمَوَالِ، قَالَ سَمِعْتُ مُحَمَّدَ بْنَ الْمُنْكَدِرِ، يُحَدِّثُ عَنْ جَابِرِ بْنِ عَبْدِ اللَّهِ، قَالَ كَانَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ - صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ - يُعَلِّمُنَا الْإِسْتِخَارَةَ كَمَا يُعَلِّمُنَا السُّورَةَ مِنَ الْقُرْآنِ يَقُولُ "إِذَا هُمْ أَحَدُكُمْ بِالْأَمْرِ فَلْيَرْكَعْ رَكَعَتَيْنِ مِنْ غَيْرِ الْفَرِيضَةِ ثُمَّ لْيَقُلِ اللَّهُمَّ إِنِّي أَسْتَخِيرُكَ بِعِلْمِكَ وَأَسْتَقْدِرُكَ بِقُدْرَتِكَ وَأَسْأَلُكَ مِنْ فَضْلِكَ الْعَظِيمِ فَإِنَّكَ تَقْدِرُ وَلَا أَقْدِرُ وَتَعْلَمُ وَلَا أَعْلَمُ وَأَنْتَ عَلَّامُ الْغُيُوبِ اللَّهُمَّ إِنْ كُنْتَ تَعْلَمُ هَذَا الْأَمْرَ - فَيَسِّمِيهِ مَا كَانَ مِنْ شَيْءٍ - خَيْرًا لِي فِي دِينِي وَمَعَاشِي وَعَاقِبَةِ أَمْرِي - أَوْ خَيْرًا لِي فِي عَاجِلِ أَمْرِي وَآجِلِهِ - فَاقْدُرْهُ لِي وَيَسِّرْهُ لِي وَبَارِكْ لِي فِيهِ وَإِنْ كُنْتَ تَعْلَمُ - يَقُولُ مِثْلَ مَا قَالَ فِي الْمَرَّةِ الْأُولَى - وَإِنْ كَانَ شَرًّا لِي فَاصْرِفْهُ عَنِّي وَاصْرِفْنِي عَنْهُ وَاقْدُرْ لِي الْخَيْرَ حَيْثُ مَا كَانَ ثُمَّ رَضِّنِي بِهِ"