

Cognitive Restructuring: An Islamic Perspective

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With the significant growth of the Muslim population in the United States, there has been a corresponding increase in the need for mental health services. Research demonstrates the effectiveness of the integration of spirituality into psychotherapy. This article discusses various beliefs in the Islamic faith that may be incorporated into the counseling process, focusing on a cognitive restructuring model. The fundamental goal is to ensure ethical and effective treatment for Muslim clients. A case study is provided to illustrate the concepts provided.

Keywords *Cognitive restructuring, Islam, mental health, Muslims, religious psychotherapy, spirituality*

There are an estimated 6 to 7 million Muslims in the United States, and that number is expected to increase in coming years due to the fact that Islam is the fastest-growing religion in the country (Bagby, Perl, & Froehle, 2001). With the growth in the Muslim population, there has also been a corresponding rise in the need for mental health services. A recent large-scale research project involving Arab Americans (69% Muslim) provides evidence for the mental health needs of this population (Amer & Hovey, n.d.). This research found that 21.9% of the subjects scored in the mild-to-moderate range for anxiety, 13.6% scored in the moderate-to-severe range, and 11.0% scored in the severe range of anxiety. Nearly half of the participants (49.3%) scored in the clinically significant range of depression (Amer & Hovey, n.d.).

It is not only important for professionals who work with Muslim clients to gain an understanding of the Islamic faith and practices, but also to integrate culturally appropriate and effective techniques in the process. The integration of spirituality and religion into psychotherapy has become a

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significant area of interest in the mental health field (Fukuyama & Sevig, 1999; Genia, 1995; Kelly, 1995; G. Miller, 2002; W. R. Miller, 1999; Richards & Bergin, 1997, 2000; Shafranske, 1996; West, 2000). One specific example has been the incorporation of spirituality into a cognitive-behavioral therapy paradigm (Hawkins, Tan, & Turk, 1999; Johnson, 2001; Johnson, DeVries, Ridley, Pettorini, & Peterson, 1994; Nielsen, Johnson, & Ellis, 2001; Pecheur & Edwards, 1984; Propst, 1988; Propst, Olstrom, Watkins, Dean, & Mashburn, 1992). Although this work has mainly been conducted with Christian or Jewish populations, some work has focused on Muslim clients (Azhar & Varma, 1995a; Azhar & Varma, 1995b; Azhar, Varma, & Dharap, 1994; Razali, Hasanah, Aminah, & Subramaniam, 1998). This article is an attempt to elucidate beneficial cognitions from the Islamic tradition that may be integrated into a cognitive-behavioral therapy approach.

COGNITIVE-BEHAVIORAL THERAPY

Cognitive-behavioral therapy is an effective form of psychotherapy for a variety of psychological conditions, including anxiety and stress, depression, eating disorders, panic disorder, and phobias (Chambless & Ollendick, 2001); it is also one of the most evidence-based and empirically supported (Chambless & Ollendick, 2001; Leahy & Holland, 2000). In general, cognitive theories of psychological disorders assert that maladaptive or irrational thinking styles lead to emotional or psychological disturbance (Beck, 1976; Ellis, 1962). In simple terms, the way that we think influences the way that we feel and behave. The process of psychotherapy involves challenging maladaptive cognitions, and modifying and replacing them with more constructive thoughts in order to positively affect emotion and behavior. The strategies and techniques within this approach vary, but the underlying philosophy is the same. Behavior is considered to be a variable as well, either as an outcome or as a target in itself.

Cognitive Restructuring

Cognitive restructuring is a particular form of cognitive therapy in which the goals are to first teach clients to identify and evaluate automatic thoughts (the actual words or images that go through a person's mind at the most superficial level of cognition) that lead to distress and/or dysfunctional behaviors. Dysfunctional core beliefs and assumptions are also identified. Core beliefs are deeply held beliefs that we have about ourselves and the world around us. Through the treatment process, clients are guided to discuss problems that are the most distressing and recurrent and to first evaluate and modify their automatic thoughts. Following accomplishment of this aspect, clients are assisted in modifying their core beliefs and

assumptions. Modification occurs through examining the evidence and looking for alternative explanations (Beck, 1998). This particular model will be considered for purposes of this article.

SPIRITUALITY, RELIGION, AND MENTAL HEALTH

In recent years, there has been an increasing acknowledgement of the importance of religious and spiritual issues and concerns in clinical practice (Richards & Bergin, 1997; Dein & Loewenthal, 1998). Research has shown that religious commitment and spirituality are associated with many positive outcomes including, but not limited to, improved ability to cope with stress, reduced incidence of depression and anxiety, reduced risk for suicide and criminal behavior, and decreased usage of tobacco, drugs, and alcohol (Gartner, 1996; Larson et al., 1992; McCullough & Larson, 1999). There has been a commensurate recognition of the role of religion and spirituality in the psychotherapeutic process, and that it can be an important part of the solution to psychological problems (Pargament, Murray-Swank, & Tarakeshwar, 2005).

It is important to note that while the terms spirituality and religion are used interchangeably, in many ways they are distinct constructs. It is beyond the scope of this article to address the complexities of these definitions, but in general religion typically involves social institutions with rules, rituals, and formal procedures. Spirituality is often viewed in terms of an individual's personal experience of seeking the sacred in life and striving to connect with God (Thoreson & Harris, 2004); this experience may or may not be associated with any organized religion (Thoreson & Harris, 2004).

In recent years, efforts have been made to integrate religiously based concepts and beliefs in the context of a cognitive-behavioral therapy approach. This involves replacing damaging beliefs and attributions about the self, others, and the world with more positive religiously based beliefs and attributions, as well as utilizing various other cognitive approaches. Research has demonstrated the effectiveness of these approaches for several different populations (Hawkins, Tan, & Turk, 1999; Johnson, 2001; Johnson & Ridley, 1992; Johnson, DeVries, Ridley, Pettorini, & Peterson, 1994; Nielsen, Johnson, & Ellis, 2001; Pecheur & Edwards, 1984; Propst, 1988; Propst, Olstrom, Watkins, Dean, & Mashburn, 1992).

For example, Propst et al. (1992) compared religious and non-religious cognitive-behavioral therapy. In the religious cognitive therapy group, the therapist provided Christian religious rationales for the procedures, used religious arguments to counter irrational thoughts, and used religious imagery procedures. Using a rational-emotive therapy model, Johnson and Ridley (1992) directed participants to dispute irrational beliefs using the Bible. Biblical counter-challenges were taught for each irrational belief. An example of a biblical counter-challenge to the irrational belief, "I must be thoroughly

competent, adequate, and achieving in all possible respects if I am to consider myself worthwhile,” would be: “All of us have become like one who is unclean and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags.” (Isaiah 64:6). Emphasis was also placed on prayer and Christian content in homework assignments (Johnson & Ridley, 1992).

It should be added that research suggests that most clients express an interest in incorporating spiritual issues and resources into the counseling or psychotherapeutic setting (Arnold, Avants, Margolin, & Marcotte, 2002; Hodge, 2006; Rose, Westefeld, & Ansley, 2001). Clients view their spiritual and religious strengths as vital assets in coping with problems and for enhancing healing and growth (Hodge, 2006). This further supports the rationale for integration of spiritual and religious components.

Ethical Issues of Integrating Spirituality in Therapy

It is also important to mention the ethical concerns that may arise in the process of integrating spirituality in mental health treatment. Some of the common ethical concerns that pertain to the integration of spirituality in the counseling process include dual relationships (professional and religious), imposing religious values on clients, informed consent issues, and professional competency issues (Garzon, 2005; Richards & Bergin, 1997). Other potential concerns may include the following: (a) violating the therapeutic contract by focusing on religious rather than therapeutic goals, (b) obscuring the boundaries that are important for the therapeutic relationship to be maintained, (c) assuming religious authority and performing these functions, when referral to religious leaders may be warranted, and (d) applying only religious interventions to problems that may require medication or other treatments (Tan, 1994).

In order to address these problems, a thorough assessment of religious and cultural issues should first be made in order to determine the appropriateness of spiritual integration. A strong therapeutic alliance should be established and proper informed consent procedures followed. The clinician should avoid the imposition of religious values on the client and maintain flexibility throughout the process (Garzon, 2005).

It has also been suggested that the therapist share the client's basic religious or spiritual belief system and that there should be an appropriate rationale for using a particular spiritual intervention (relevant to clinical problem and likely to have an impact) (Tan, 1994). In general, three guiding values have been described for clinicians who are considering religious interventions: (a) respect for client's autonomy and freedom, (b) sensitivity to and empathy for the client's religious and spiritual beliefs, and (c) flexibility and responsiveness to the client's religious and spiritual beliefs (Garzon, 2005; Richards & Bergin, 1997).

RELIGIOUS PSYCHOTHERAPY WITH MUSLIMS

Islam is considered to be a way of life rather than simply an organized religion due to its comprehensive nature. Guidance is provided for many aspects of life including the spiritual, family, social, political, and economic. Because spirituality and religion are often pervasive and central in the lives of Muslims, it would be valuable to integrate this aspect into the process of psychotherapy. This is particularly true for Muslim clients who are more religiously committed. At a minimum, religiosity should be included in the initial assessment phase.

Several studies have found that a form of religious psychotherapy may be effective with Muslim clients who suffer from anxiety, depression, and bereavement (Azhar et al., 1994; Azhar & Varma, 1995a, 1995b; Razali et al., 1998). In each of these studies, clients in the religious psychotherapy groups responded significantly faster than those receiving standard treatment. In this approach, unproductive beliefs are identified and modified or replaced with beliefs derived from Islam. It is, in actuality, a variation of cognitive therapy making use of religious themes (Azhar et al., 1994; Azhar & Varma, 1995b).

In treating patients with anxiety and depression through religious psychotherapy, Razali et al. (1998) identified negative or “faulty” thoughts in patients and modified them using cognitive techniques guided by the Qur’an and hadith (sayings and customs of the Prophet Muhammad). They also discussed religious issues and cultural beliefs related to the illness, and gave advice on changing life style to follow the customs of Prophet Muhammad.

Azhar et al. (1994) used a similar approach. Patients were encouraged to recognize ideal religious values and adopt and cultivate these in their thoughts, actions, and emotions. The goal of searching for ideal values was seen to be a key factor essential to success in therapy. An additional aspect of the work by Azhar and Varma (1995a) in the treatment of depressed patients was the concept of repentance and forgiveness. Patients were encouraged to repent if they felt a sense of guilt from having strayed from the value system. Once they were convinced that their repentance had been accepted by Allah¹ and that they had chosen the right values, symptoms began to disappear.

Another goal of these forms of religious psychotherapy is to revive spiritual strength as a way of coping with the illness or situation. During the counseling process, the client may be reminded to rely on Allah in times of difficulties, to supplicate to Allah in times of need, to turn to Allah in repentance when in error, and to focus on the five daily prayers and reading of Qur’an. Prayer, in particular, is viewed as a form of meditation that promotes relaxation and a general sense of well-being (Azhar et al., 1994; Azhar & Varma, 1995a, b).

Although these research efforts point to the efficacy of cognitive interventions based on Islamic principles for Muslim clients, there are concerns regarding various methodological issues in these studies, particularly small sample sizes and lack of controls (Worthington & Sandage, 2002). More research is necessary in this area to make definitive statements about the empirical soundness of such approaches (Shafranske, 2002; Worthington & Sandage, 2002).

Another weakness of these studies is that they do not provide details regarding the beneficial Islamic cognitions that may be utilized in therapy. The following discussion is meant to fill this gap. It is important to note that these types of interventions are most appropriate for clients who express some level of religious commitment. This information can be acquired through a formal assessment of the importance of spirituality and religious beliefs and practices in the life of the client. Clients who are Muslim, but nonreligious, may be uncomfortable discussing such issues, and thus the approach may not be suitable for all clients. Various Qur'anic verses and sayings of the Prophet are included in each section as they may be integrated into the counseling process. A case study is presented to demonstrate the implementation of these components in the therapeutic process.

BENEFICIAL COGNITIONS FROM THE ISLAMIC FAITH

There are several significant cognitions from the Islamic faith that can be incorporated into the counseling process with Muslim clients. Following the cognitive restructuring model, the client's dysfunctional automatic thoughts and core beliefs would be identified. The process would then involve an evaluation and modification of automatic thoughts, followed by modification of core beliefs and assumptions. Modification occurs mainly through examining the evidence and looking for alternative explanations, although other methods may be used as well. The client would be assisted to question, evaluate, and restructure dysfunctional thoughts and beliefs. The cognitions from the Islamic faith discussed later can be offered as alternative explanations to dysfunctional thoughts associated with a variety of conditions or disorders. The specific ones chosen would depend upon the presenting problem and the needs of each particular client.

Understanding the Temporal Reality of This World

One potentially beneficial cognition from the Islamic perspective is to understand the reality of this world and its temporality. The life on this earth is only a passing phase through which humans journey on to everlasting life in the Hereafter. The nature of this present life is that it contains afflictions, pain, fatigue, and distress. These are inevitable and serve a purpose (as discussed later). Life in the Hereafter will be very different from what is

experienced now. To anticipate and look forward to the next life and to understand the nature of this world can make it easier to cope with the challenges that one must face. As mentioned in the Qur'an (Saheeh International, 1997):

“And whatever thing you [people] have been given—it is [only for] the enjoyment of worldly life and its adornment. And what is with Allah is better and more lasting; so will you not use reason?” (Qur'an, 28:60)

“And this worldly life is not but diversion and amusement. And indeed, the home of the Hereafter—that is the [eternal] life, if only they knew.” (Qur'an, 29:64)

This particular aspect can be used to counter maladaptive thoughts related to hopelessness and feeling overwhelmed with life. The patient can be reminded of the temporality of this life and the abode that awaits him/her after life. The life on earth can be put into perspective in relation to eternity.

Focusing on the Hereafter

Another beneficial way of thinking, related to the previous one, is to focus on the Hereafter. The concerns and worries of this world can be overwhelming, but if the Hereafter becomes the main concern, a person is likely to become content and determined. This entails the understanding that the Hereafter is for eternity and thus, something that must be given due attention. In focusing on the Hereafter, one prepares to meet Allah in the best state. Because death may occur at any moment, the preparation is an ongoing process in which one is continually engaged. A Muslim will continuously strive to obtain success in the Hereafter and have that as his/her ultimate goal and priority.

“Say, ‘Shall I inform you of [something] better than that?’ For those who fear Allah will be gardens in the presence of their Lord beneath which rivers flow, wherein they abide eternally, and purified spouses and approval from Allah. And Allah is Seeing [i.e., aware] of [His] servants.” (Qur'an, 3:15)

Prophet Muhammad said,

“Whoever has the Hereafter as his main concern, Allah will fill his heart with a feeling of richness and independence; he will be focused and content, and this world will come to him in spite of it. Whoever has this world as his main concern, Allah will cause him to feel constant fear of poverty; he will be distracted and unfocused, and he will have nothing of this world except what was already predestined for him” (Al-Munajjid, 1999, p. 26).

Understanding the nature of this life and the Hereafter will encourage the person to focus on this important goal and strive harder to achieve it. This approach can be effective with those who have significant worries and stress, find it difficult to focus, or tend to procrastinate.

Recalling the Purpose and Effects of Distress and Afflictions

Prophet Muhammad said, “No fatigue, nor disease, nor sorrow, nor sadness, nor hurt, nor distress befalls a Muslim, even if it were the prick he receives from a thorn, but that Allah expiates some of his sins for that.” (University of Southern California-Muslim Student Association [USC-MSA], n.d.a, vol. 7, book 70, #545). From this saying, it is understood that any type of pain or suffering, including psychological, serves to expiate for sins or to increase good deeds. This is beneficial for humans because they will be judged in the Hereafter according to their deeds. Those whose scale of good deeds is heavy will enter Paradise. Allah has a purpose or plan in the tribulation, which is mainly to benefit the person in the Hereafter. Because this is the believer’s main goal, understanding these concepts will lead one to be patient and even grateful to Allah. The remembrance of the temporal nature of this world and the rewards that will be obtained helps to ease the burden. In the end, the trials and tribulations that are experienced benefit the individual if he or she is patient and demonstrates reliance on Allah. The person will have the hope of earning reward from Allah for submitting to Him and the events that He has planned.

“And certainly, We shall test you with something of fear, hunger, loss of wealth, lives and fruit, but give glad tidings to the patient (as-Sabirin). Who, when afflicted with calamity, say, ‘Truly, to Allah we belong and truly, to Him we shall return’” (Qur’an, 2:155–56).

Prophet Muhammad said,

“No Muslim is struck with an affliction and then says *Istirja* (‘Truly, to Allah we belong and truly, to Him we shall return’) when the affliction strikes, and then says, ‘O Allah! Reward me for my loss and give me what is better than it,’ but Allah will do just that” (USC-MSA, n.d.b, book 004, #1999).

A client may have negative thoughts such as “Why is this happening to me?” “Why not someone else?” “Why did Allah choose me for this unbearable trial?” or “Allah is punishing me for my disobedience.” Understanding the purpose of trials and tribulations can be an effective counter to these types of unproductive thoughts.

Trusting and Relying on Allah (*Tawakkul*)

One of the foundations of Islamic belief is the understanding that Allah is able to do all things and He runs all affairs. This is an aspect of *tawbeed* (belief in the oneness of Allah) that specifies oneness in Allah's Lordship. Allah knows better about a person's best interests than the individual does. A human can not progress beyond the limits that Allah has decreed for him or her because all has been willed and decreed by Him. This understanding helps the person to submit to Allah and hand over affairs to Him. In turn, this provides relief from distress, worries, and regrets because concern about the needs and interests in this world is lifted. The human recognizes that Allah will take care of the one who puts trust in Him, and thus has confidence in His promise. The result is that worries and anxiety are reduced or eliminated, hardship is replaced with ease, and fear turns to a feeling of security.

“And when you have decided, then rely upon Allah. Indeed, Allah loves those who rely [upon Him]” (Qur'an, 3:159).

It is reported in a hadith on the authority of Abdullah bin Abbas, who said: One day I was behind the prophet and he said to me: “Young man, I shall teach you some words [of advice]: Be mindful of Allah, and Allah will protect you. Be mindful of Allah, and you will find Him in front of you. If you ask, ask of Allah; if you seek help, seek help of Allah. Know that if the Nation were to gather together to benefit you with anything, it would benefit you only with something that Allah had already prescribed for you, and that if they gather together to harm you with anything, they would harm you only with something Allah had already prescribed for you. The pens have been lifted and the pages have dried” (Zarabozo, 1999, hadith 19, pp. 729–730).

At times of distress, it can be beneficial for those who are suffering to recall that Allah is always there and can assist those who place their trust in Him. This understanding can be particularly helpful for those who have thoughts such as “I feel that I am no longer able to cope,” “Life is too difficult for me,” or “No one is there for me.”

Understanding that After Hardship There will be Ease

“So verily, with the hardship, there is ease (relief); verily with the hardship, there is ease” (Qur'an, 94:5–6).

In this verse, hardship is mentioned once, but ease and relief is mentioned twice. This signifies that the ease that follows every difficulty will be greater than the hardship itself. After difficulty, ease will come as Allah has promised; He will make a way out for the person. The more intense the stress and depression, the closer one is to assistance and relief. Prophet Muhammad

said, “Know that victory (or achievement) comes through patience, and that ease comes through hardship . . .” (Zarabozo, 1999, hadith 19, p. 730). When Allah tests a person by means of disasters and miseries, and person is patient and accepting, the difficulties become easy for him to bear.

This thought can be particularly encouraging for those who feel that their situation will not improve or that there is no solution to their problems. This is often connected to feelings of hopelessness and helplessness.

Focusing on the Blessings of Allah

In times of distress, it can be helpful to compare the numerous blessings of Allah with what has befallen the individual. One will see that the distress or tribulation is small in comparison to the bounties. This leads one to be thankful, even in a state of poverty, sickness, or other kinds of despair. If this is combined with the understanding that the tribulation has a purpose, it can have a powerful effect on the individual.

Prophet Muhammad said,

“Look at those who are less fortunate than yourselves, not at those who are better off than yourselves, so that you will not belittle the blessings that Allah has bestowed upon you” (Al-Mundhiri, 2000, n.d., book 68, chapter 13, p. 1115).

Looking at those who are less fortunate will help the person to realize that his or her condition is better than others’ in relation to good health, physical strength and ability, and provision (food, clothing, shelter, etc.). When the individual considers all of the blessings, both spiritual and worldly, this may help relieve the worries and distress that he or she may be experiencing.

Remembering Allah and Reading Qur’an

Remembrance of Allah and reading of the Holy Book can have a calming effect on the individual’s body, mind, and soul. This calming effect, in turn, may relieve stress, worry, and anxiety. There can be potential healing effects for various types of psychological or emotional distress. The illnesses of the heart result from either desires or doubt, and the remembrance of Allah and recitation of Qur’an can be a cure for both.

Remembrance of Allah is one of the easiest forms of worship, but the mercy and grace that it brings can be immense and extremely beneficial. It can take several forms such as remembrance of the names of Allah and His attributes, praising Him, and thanking Him. A person can also remember Allah by talking about His blessings. The greatest type of remembrance is the recitation of Qur’an.

“Those who have believed and whose hearts are assured by the remembrance of Allah. Unquestionably, by the remembrance of Allah hearts are assured” (Qur’an, 13:28).

Prophet Muhammad said, “Allah says, ‘I am just as My slave thinks of Me, and I am with him if he remembers Me. If he remembers Me in himself, I too, remember him in Myself; and if he remembers Me in a group of people, I remember him in a group that is better than that. And if he comes one span nearer to Me, I go one cubit nearer to him; and if he comes one cubit nearer to Me, I go a distance of two outstretched arms nearer to him. And if he comes to me walking, I go to him running’” (Al-Mundhiri, 2000, n.d., book 60, chapter 1, p. 997).

Supplication (*Du’aa*)

“And when My slaves ask you (O Muhammad) concerning Me, then (answer them): I am indeed near. I respond to the invocations of the supplicant when he calls on Me” (Qur’an, 2:186).

Supplication is another powerful method for overcoming anxiety and distress. If the supplication comes from the heart with sincere intention, it can dispel worry and bring comfort; it can turn distress into calm and sadness into joy. Allah may fulfill the person’s hopes and respond to that which is requested.

Prophet Muhammad said,

“There is no-one who is afflicted by distress and grief, and says, ‘O Allah, I am Your slave, son of Your slave, son of Your maidservant; my forelock is in Your hand, Your command over me is forever executed and Your decree over me is just. I ask You by every name belonging to You which You have named Yourself with, or revealed in Your Book, or taught to any of Your creation, or You have preserved in the knowledge of the Unseen with You, that You make the Qur’an the life of my heart and the light of my breast, and a departure for my sorrow and a release for my anxiety,’ but Allah will take away his distress and grief, and replace it with joy” (Al-Munajjid, 1999, pp. 28–29).

Supplication can also be used as a form of protection. The supplicant can turn to Allah and pray for refuge from distress. This will prevent the distress before it happens. Some of the supplications that are prescribed for Muslims throughout the day include this particular aspect. For example, The Prophet Muhammad would say

“O Allah, I seek refuge with You from grief and worry, from incapacity and laziness, from cowardice and miserliness, from being heavily in debt and from being overpowered by men” (USC-MSA, n.d.b., Vol. 8, book 75, #380).

CASE STUDY: AMAL

Amal² is 32 years old, married, and the mother of two children: Aisha (female), age 5, and Rashid (male), age 3. Amal is of Arabic descent and is a practicing Muslim. She works as a teacher in a local school and is actively engaged with activities in the Muslim community. Her daughter was diagnosed at two years of age with a serious and potentially terminal illness. This has required several surgeries and repeated visits to specialists. There are no other significant psychosocial problems within the family, and Amal relates that her husband is very supportive. Her extended family lives in her home country, so her support system is somewhat limited.

The client attended counseling and reported symptoms of moderate depression, including sadness and weeping, loss of appetite, insomnia, and difficulty with concentration. The symptoms had been present for at least two weeks and had begun to interfere with her ability to perform her work. In particular, the mother reported feelings of guilt and grief related to her daughter's illness. She felt that she may have somehow been responsible for her daughter's condition. The doctors had suggested another surgery that may be life-threatening, and Amal was not sure if she could cope with the stress of this event.

Assessment of Cognitions and Beliefs

In the cognitive restructuring model, the first step in the process is to identify the client's dysfunctional automatic thoughts and core beliefs. During the assessment phase, the following automatic thoughts were identified: "Why is this happening to me? Why not someone else? Why did Allah choose me?," "Allah is punishing me for my disobedience to Him," "If my child dies, I will have nothing else to live for and the grief will be overwhelming," "I cannot cope any longer, it is too difficult for me," "The situation will never get better." Related to the feelings of guilt noted earlier, the following thoughts were identified: "Maybe there was something that I could have done to prevent this," "I did something wrong during pregnancy to cause this illness."

In terms of core beliefs, some of the most fundamental ones in the case were related to the concept that Allah is a "Punishing God" whose wrath surpasses His mercy. The client could not comprehend the Mercy of Allah due to the experience that she had been passing through. A related core belief was that justice was not present in the world. If that were the case, why would she be suffering while others were enjoying their lives and their children? These core beliefs were obviously linked in some way to the automatic thoughts, but extended to a deeper level of the client's belief system.

The Therapeutic Process

In the initial phase of the therapeutic process, attention was given to the automatic thoughts of the client. The focus with this particular client was on the integration of spiritual/religious cognitions that would assist her in accepting the situation and coping effectively. Through the process of cognitive restructuring, other possible alternatives were suggested to explain and understand her situation. To build a foundation, it was discussed with the client that Allah has a plan and a purpose for all things, and that nothing occurs without a reason. This is a component of the belief in the *qadr* of Allah; His knowledge, power, and will. What Allah wills occurs, and what He does not will does not occur. There is good in all that He wills, even if we as human beings are not able to perceive that.

Building upon this foundation and dealing with the automatic thoughts of “Why is this happening to me? Why not someone else? Why did Allah choose me?” and “Allah is punishing me for my disobedience to Him,” it was suggested that the distress and grief that she was experiencing had a purpose and that there may be some benefit. Amal was queried as to whether she thought she was the only person who experienced trials in life or if these happened to other people as well. She came to understand that other humans go through trials as well, although these vary from person to person; we are not always aware of what others are going through. Their trials, in fact, may be even more difficult than our own.

Qur’anic verses and hadith of the Prophet Muhammad such as those discussed earlier were offered as evidence that there is a purpose in the trials that we experience. A question was posed to Amal as to whether the test could be other than a punishment. Could it be that it was not punishment from Allah, but rather a mercy? And, in fact, if it were mercy how could that be? Amal came to realize that the expiation in this life for sins cleanses the person before the Day of Judgment, which will ease the process of judgment and accountability before Allah. This may also expedite the person’s entrance into Heaven. A discussion of the Hereafter and its importance in comparison to this life in the Islamic conceptualization was also included.

To challenge the automatic beliefs of “If my child dies, I will have nothing else to live for and the grief will be overwhelming,” and “I cannot cope any longer, it is too difficult for me,” emphasis was placed on patience and reliance on Allah. The therapist asked Amal, “Is there anyone that you can trust or rely upon at this time to assist you in coping?” After some thought, she understood that Allah is there for her and that He would always be there. She was assisted to realize that to rely on Allah means to hand one’s affair to Him and to recognize that Allah takes care of the one who puts trust in Him. This does not mean that we stop striving; rather it means that we do our best with the situation and trust that Allah has the best in mind for us. It also requires that we supplicate to Allah and ask him for the best in this

life and in the Hereafter and that we remember Allah and His mercy at all times.

Regarding the automatic thought, “The situation will never get better,” a plausible alternative was suggested. Allah promises in the Qur’an that He will bring ease as this is part of His mercy for His creation. Amal was asked if she knew for certain that the situation would not improve. She was asked to think of times in the past when she had experienced some difficulty or test and then to recall whether or not the situation had improved. She was able to recall several incidents in which improvement had in fact occurred, although at times it required patience. This process of challenging thought processes and coming up with divergent evidence is part of the cognitive restructuring process.

Amal was questioned as to whether being patient was difficult or impossible and how the experience impacted her in the end. She shared that being patient was challenging, but not impossible and that she felt stronger following the experience. She was reminded of the hadiths in which the Prophet Muhammad said,

“How wonderful is the believer’s affair. All of his affairs are good, unlike anybody else. When he experiences a joyful occasion, he is grateful, and it will be good for him. And if he suffers misfortune and endures it patiently, then it will also be good for him” (Al-Mundhiri, 2000, n.d., book 68, chapter 18, p. 1117).

In the subsequent phase in treatment, following modification of automatic thoughts, the focus was directed toward core beliefs. Some of these were addressed through the discussion of automatic thoughts, but a more in-depth examination was beneficial. Due to her experience, the client had come to believe that Allah prefers to punish people for their sins and mistakes and that His mercy is limited. This had resulted in a distancing between the client and Allah, primarily due to the anger that was generated from this particular belief.

Through cognitive restructuring, Amal was guided to understand that Allah is merciful and cares for His creation. The Prophet said,

“When Allah created the Creation, He wrote in His book (and it is placed with Him on the Throne): ‘Verily, My Mercy overcomes over my Anger’” (Al-Mundhiri, 2000, n.d., book 62, chapter 8, p. 1026).

Amal was asked if she loved her children and whether she could imagine a love greater than that. She replied that she loved her children dearly and felt that there could be no love greater than that of a mother. With the use of the following hadith, it was suggested that Allah did indeed love her more than she loved her own children and that He is more merciful to her than any mother toward her child.

Umar ibn Al-Khattab narrated: “Some captives were brought before the Messenger of Allah. There was a woman among them who whenever she found a child amongst the captives, took it over her chest and nursed it (she had lost her infant but later found him). The Messenger of Allah said to us, ‘Do you think that this woman can throw her son in the fire?’ We replied, ‘No, if she has the power not to throw him (in the fire).’ The Messenger of Allah then said, ‘Allah is more Merciful to His slaves than this woman to her son’” (Al-Mundhiri, Sahih Muslim 2000, book 62, chapter 9, p. 1027).

An incorporation of some of Allah’s names and attributes was useful at this point. For example, He is named *Ar-Rahman* (The All Merciful), *Ar-Rabeem* (The Most Compassionate), *Al-Wudood* (The Loving), *Al-Ghafaar* (The Forgiving), and so forth. Belief in the names and attributes and understanding their meanings are important aspects of being Muslim. Allah may punish at times when appropriate, but as noted in the hadith and indicated by His names, His mercy is above His anger.

As mentioned earlier, the trials that Amal was experiencing may not have been punishment from Allah, but rather a test that should increase her faith and her status in Paradise. She came to accept that it is part of Allah’s mercy that we go through these trials in this life rather than in the Hereafter. Allah is particularly merciful toward the believers who attempt to become close to Him through prayer, good deeds, and supplication.

The second core belief that was in need of modification was related to the concept that Allah is not just in this world. This was a continuation of the previous discussion as the concepts are somewhat related. The client was reminded that another one of the names of Allah is *Al-Adl* (The Just). This means that He has complete justice. We may not always be able to perceive that justice due to our limited abilities, but that does not mean that it is not present. The other aspect of justice is that the complete justice may not occur in this life. There will be ultimate and complete justice on the Day of Judgment when all humans will be brought to account for their beliefs and actions in this life. We are not always able to comprehend the experience of others, and the injustices that we do see will be rectified on that Day. Amal was able to understand these concepts to a certain extent, but struggled with the idea that complete justice would be postponed until the Day of Judgment.

The purpose of this phase of treatment was to help the client to love, trust, and hope in Allah and His mercy and justice. This would increase the likelihood that she would feel inclined to pray and supplicate to Allah and to rely on Him for her worldly and spiritual needs. Other issues were also addressed through cognitive behavioral therapy, including the client’s tendency toward perfectionism and all-or-none thinking. Following nine sessions, the treatment was considered successful and the client was able to overcome the symptoms of depression without medication (as indicated by scores on the Beck Depression Inventory-II at baseline, 3 weeks, 7 weeks, and at the end of treatment). The positive results were maintained at 6-month follow-up.

DISCUSSION

With the increasing emphasis on the role of religion and spirituality within clinical practice and the psychotherapeutic process, it is essential that further efforts be made to develop models from various perspectives and world views. This article presented components of an Islamic approach to integrating spirituality within a cognitive-behavioral paradigm. The model requires greater development and refinement, but this article offers an initial discussion. Specific clinical strategies and techniques would need to be developed based on this model, and research must be conducted to demonstrate its clinical efficacy (Shafranske, 2002).

The integration of religious and spiritual components in psychotherapy has great potential for a variety of populations, including Muslim clients. More research is needed to determine the processes by which these components can best be integrated, as well as to empirically validate such processes. The overall goal of these efforts is to enhance the effectiveness of therapy and to ensure its relevance to the lives of clients.

NOTES

1. Allah is the Arabic word for God used by Muslims.
2. Names and details of the case have been changed in order to protect the confidentiality of the client.

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