

Spiritual Medicine in the History of Islamic Medicine

Ibrahim B. SYED, Ph.D*

* Clinical Professor of Medicine University of Louisville School of Medicine Louisville, KY 40292
President, Islamic Research Foundation International, Inc 7102 W. Shefford Lane Louisville, KY 40242-6462
e-Mail: irfi@iname.com
Website: <http://www.irfi.org>

Summary

Spiritual Medicine has two components: Distant Healing and Self-care. It is known that the spiritual elements also play an important role in the recovery process from acute or chronic sickness. Spiritual healing techniques frequently can support or complement conventional health care modality. It has been known for centuries, that the “placebo effect” is substantial and has positive influence over the body.

In this paper, the relation between religion and health is emphasized and the importance of spiritual medicine is defined.

Key Words; Spiritual Medicine, History of Islamic Medicine.

The articles of faith in Islam are: 1. Tawhid or belief in the Oneness of Allah (SWT) 2. Salat or contactual prayer 3. Siyam or Fasting during the month of Ramadan 4. Zakah or charity 5. Hajj or pilgrimage to Mecca.

History has recorded that Babur, Mughal Emperor of India, prayed for his son, Humayun’s health who was seriously ill or almost near death. Hence Babur asked Allah (SWT) to spare his son’s life and take his (Babur’s) life in lieu thereof.

Recent scientific research indicates that affirming belief in God or Allah (SWT) makes a critical contribution to our physical health. When people call upon faith, they activate neurological pathways for self-healing.

The Muslim prayer consists of contact prayer (salat), Zikr (Dhikr) or remembrance of Allah and recitation of the Qur’an. These elicit the physiologic relaxation response. The Prophetic saying is “Worship in the congregation is more excellent than Worship alone, by twenty seven degrees.” Hajj and congregational Prayers serve to buffer the adverse effects of stress and anger, perhaps via psycho-neuro-immunological pathways. It is speculated that congregational prayers may trigger a multi-factorial sequence of biological processes leading to better health. Studies have shown higher degrees of social

connection (through family and friends or congregational prayers in the Masjid) consistently relate to decreased mortality.

Zakah is altruism and in sharing the wealth, apart from the socio-economic benefits, the Muslims also garner better health. Doing good to others is also Zakah and those who volunteer their work find marked improvement in their health.

Several studies have already documented the health benefits of fasting during the month of Ramadan.

The National Institute of Health, in Bethesda, Maryland, a few years ago opened an Office of Alternative Therapies, which encourages Homeopathy, Ayurveda, Aromatherapy, and other “alternative” therapies.

Recently there is a tremendous surge in interest and publications in the field of spiritual medicine in the United States. An abundance of articles (1-8), books, and conferences in recent years have addressed the impact of spirituality on patient, physician, and health care. For example Dr. James S. Gordon, MD who is the founder and Director of the Center for Mind-Body Medicine at Georgetown University, Washington, D.C. published “MANIFESTO FOR A NEW MEDICINE: Your guide to

healing partnerships and the wise use of alternative therapies (Addison-Wesley, 1996). Dr. Gordon wrote that medical education is long on technical mastery but short on issues of personal and spiritual growth. Dr. Gregory Plotnikoff, MD who is the medical director of the University of Minnesota's Center for Spiritual Care and Healing advocates care for the body and the soul (9). "Timeless Healing: The Power and Biology of Belief," by Herbert Benson, M.D. (Scribner, 1996) draws on Benson's work at Harvard's Mind/Body Medical Institute. Benson's prescription for doctors and patients contains three ingredients: 1. identifies each other's important beliefs and motivations, 2. discuss and act on those beliefs, and 3. let go and believe. Religious belief and faith are the vehicles for his prescription.

Dr. David Larson, MD who is the president of the National Institute for Healthcare Research (NIHR), Rockville, Maryland awarded five \$10,000 grants in 1996 to Medical Schools to incorporate classes on Religion and medicine into their Curricula. He is the author of the 1995 book, "The Neglected Factor." Dr. Ornish, MD has documented the reversal of coronary artery occlusion by diet and meditation.

This message-that health care has a spiritual component-flies in the face of modern Western health care culture, which holds to a biomedical model for healing and recovery.

Spiritual Medicine has two components: Distant Healing and Self-care (that is healing by patient's own efforts). Distant healing is defined as any purely mental effort undertaken by one person with the intention of improving physical or emotional well being in another. In clinical practice, healing may involve a mental effort in or out of the healer's presence, with or without his or her awareness, and with or without touch. This broad definition would also include petitionary prayer or Du'a in which the practitioner generates a mental request for a particular outcome or that God's "will be done."

What is spirituality

An individual has biological, psychological, and social dimensions and yet there is a spiritual dimension, which connects to all of these and contributes to

an individual's sense of wholeness and wellness. Experiences such as joy, love, forgiveness and acceptance are manifestations of spiritual well being. Imbalance in one of the several dimensions led to disease and exacerbating illness. It is known that the spiritual elements also play an important role in the recovery process from acute or chronic sickness. Spiritual healing techniques frequently can support or complement conventional health care modality (3).

Spirituality is often defined as the experience of meaning and purpose in our lives-a sense of connectedness with the people and things in the world around us. For many, this connectedness encompasses a relationship with God or a higher power. For many American, spirituality is experience and expressed through religiousness. The terms "religiousness" and "spirituality" often are used interchangeably. Religiousness is adherence to the beliefs and practices of an organized place of worship or religious institutions. Spirituality provides a sense of coherence that offers meaning to one's existence as a human being. Sometimes a patient may experience states of consciousness that have profound spiritual and transformative impact, including near-death experiences, mystical states, and delirious states associated with alterations of brain chemistry. These events may have a positive impact on the individual or they may lead to distress. Reassurance and legitimization of the experience by a health care provider can be very therapeutic (10). Physicians are helping patients look beyond the physical dimension to find comfort, answers, and cures. The vast majority of Americans believe that spirituality influences their recovery from illness, injury, or disease, says one recent poll. Two thirds of the respondents indicated they would like physicians to talk with them about spirituality as it relates to their health or even to pray with them.

Religion and health

Religiousness may contribute to the enhancement of well being in a number of ways.

The relaxation response

A bodily claim that all of us can evoke and that has the opposite effect of the well-known fight-or-

flight response. This is called the “relaxation response” by Benson. In this state the blood pressure is lowered, and heart rate, breathing rate, and metabolic rate are decreased. The relaxation response yields many long-term benefits in both health and well being and can be brought on with Salat, Zikr and recitation of the Qur’an which are related lead to very simple mental focusing. These lead to the power of self-care, the healthy things that individuals can do for themselves. Our bodies are wired to benefit from exercising our beliefs, values, thoughts, and feelings. Patients who suffer from anxiety and panic after surgery or from a terminal illness have documented that they experience the wonderful physical solace after making Du’a (supplication) to Allah (SWT). This experience is the opposite effect of the edgy, adrenaline rush we experience in the stress-induced fight-or-flight response. Through Du’a patients have gained both emotional and spiritual balm. This tender comfort and soothing gained everyday makes one to regain confidence both in body and one’s ability to face the twists and turns of life. Salat, Du’a elicit the relaxation response in patients resulting in mental equilibrium and help them to ward off disease by doing something to calm the body and the fears.

It has been known for centuries, that the “placebo effect” is substantial and has positive influence over the body. What is less known is that an individual’s belief empowers the placebo. The fact that the patient, caregiver, or both of them believe in the treatment contributes to better outcomes. Sometimes affirmative beliefs are all we really need to heal us. Other times there is a need for the collective force of our beliefs and appropriate medical interventions. Every individual has the power to care for and cure him- or herself. Physicians are now paying special attention to the self-care that is on the inner development of beliefs that promote healing. The placebo effect was found to have a substantial impact on the commonly reported symptoms—chest pain, fatigue, dizziness, headache, back and abdominal pain, numbness, impotence, weight loss, cough, and constipation. In 1992 an Ohio State University study of patients with congestive heart failure, it was demonstrated that placebo treatment may also help more serious conditions. It has been shown that belief in or

expectation of a good outcome can have formidable restorative power, whether the positive expectations are on the part of the patient, the physician or a caregiver or both. In a study pregnant with belief alone cured themselves of persistent nausea and vomiting during pregnancy. The women were given a drug and were told that it would cure the problem, but in fact were given the opposite-syrup of ipecac—a substance that causes vomiting. When patients *believed* in therapies that were fervently recommended by their physicians, this fervor worked to alleviate a variety of medical conditions including angina, asthma, herpes simplex cold sores, and duodenal ulcers. Good doctor-patient relationship is known to accelerate the healing. Two thirds of the patients got better after hearing the good news from their doctors even if the prescription is vitamins. Hence the bedside manner does matter. Studies show that surgical recovery is more quick if the patient’s surgeon is upbeat, confident and kind.

In “psychosomatic” disease episodes of anger and hostility can translate into stomach ulcers and heart attacks. Our thoughts are intimately related to our bodies. The success the medical profession achieves is attributable to the inherent healing power within individuals. A patient’s positive frame of mind can be exceedingly therapeutic.

Benson describes a renal cancer patient who could elicit relaxation response through her beliefs and prayer, refrained from pain medicine in spite of her great deal of pain, and was relieved of the terrible distress she had suffered before. When she died she was at peace, drawing upon this internal physiologic succor and the power of her beliefs during the final weeks of her life.

When the relaxation response is activated it provides a calm state in the mind—opposite of the fight-or-flight response—whenever the mind is focused for sometime through Salat or Zikr. In other words, when the mind quiets down, the body follows suit.

Recent scientific research indicates that affirming belief in God or Allah (SWT) makes a critical contribution to our physical health. When people call upon faith, they activate neurological pathways for self-healing.

The Muslim prayer consists of contact prayer (salat), Zikr (Dhikr) or remembrance of Allah and recitation of the Qur'an. These elicit the physiologic relaxation response.

Spiritual medicine in Islam

In Islam *Spiritual medicine* can be used to mean two different things, although both are allied and sometimes confused. One refers to the belief in a spiritual or ethical or psychological cure for diseases that may have physical or spiritual (or psychic). Thus, a physical illness may be cured, for example by recitation of the Qur'an or other prayers (Du'a). Most medical men of Islam even in the scientific tradition of medicine recognized this belief to an extent.

Ibn Sina is credited with psychic cures. Muslim physicians practiced various forms of psychotherapy such as shock or shame-therapy in the treatment of mental illnesses and this treatment was original. A famous Persian work titled *The Four Essays (Chahar Maqala)*, written about 1155 AD for the ruler of Samaraqand by his court-poet, Nizami-Ye 'Aruzi discusses administrators, astronomers, poets and physicians. Each chapter gives definitions of an ideal person in each category followed by ten illustrative anecdote (11). Ibn Abi Usaibi'a narrates about the treatment by Jibra'il ibn Bakhtishu' of a beloved slave-girl of the caliph Harun al-Rashid through shock-treatment (12).

Part of spiritual medicine in Islam is devoted to ethical well being, but from a practical point of view. Thus Abu Bakr al-Razi wrote *al-Tibb al-Ruhani* (Spiritual Medicine) which has been translated into English as *The Spiritual Physick of Rhazes*. (13).

In this work, al-Razi describes in detail the moral diseases and discusses with acute perception how these affect human behavior.

The Moghul emperor Jehangir once suffered from some illness, which his doctors were unable to cure. Frustrated, he repaired to the tomb of the Saint Mu'in al-Din Chishti at Ajmer and was cured. Ever since then he wore earrings in the name of the saint as a token of being his follower (14).

Volumes of spiritual prescriptions for cures exist.

Most prayers and amulets contain verses from the Qur'an, to which high curative powers were ascribed. Very frequently, the recommendation is made that the patient shall write down certain Qur'anic verses on a piece of paper or on a glass (ceramic plate) and after soaking these writings in water drink the water. In south-east Asian countries, sick people stand outside the mosques and the believers who are coming out of the mosques after performing the salat, recite certain Qur'anic Surahs and blow air on the sick people.

Khawass al-Quran (Miraculous Properties of the Qur'an): The "miraculous properties" of practically each passage of the Qur'an are discussed including their curative properties for various diseases. It is said that when Surah 38 (Saad) is recited on a sleeping person it cures breathing problems; when written down and read during a patient's waking hours, it cures illness. A person who continuously recites it will be immune from all troubles at night (15).

Sufi Shaikhs or *pir* are said to cure (16):

- * Sickness
- * Infertility
- * Problems with one's job
- * Alleviate fear of failure in an exam
- * Demonic possession (mental illness)

Al-Dhahabi (d.1348 AD)(17) says the benefits of the Islamic ritual prayers (salaat), which involve certain changing physical postures, are fourfold: spiritual, psychological, physical, and moral. He further says:

- * Prayers cause recovery from pain of the heart, stomach, and intestines.
- * Prayers produce happiness and contentment in the mind; they suppress anxiety and extinguish the fire of anger. They increase love for truth and humility before people; they soften the heart, create love and forgiveness and dislike for the vice of vengeance. Besides, often-sound judgment occurs to the mind (due to concentration about difficult matters) and one finds correct answers (to problems). One also remembers forgotten things. One can discover the ways to solve matters worldly and spiritual. And one can effectively examine oneself-particularly when one strenuously exercises oneself in prayers.

- * Salaat is a divinely commanded form of worship
- * Psychological benefit: prayers divert the mind from the pain and reduce its feeling.
- * Besides the concentration of the mind, salaat is; Exercise of the body: postures of standing Upright, genuflexion, prostration, relaxation, And concentration; where bodily movements Occur and most bodily organs relax.

Al-Muwaffaq ‘Abd al-Latif narrates in his book *Kitab al-Arba’in* that a number of people who led lazy lives because of their wealth, who nevertheless had preserved good health. The reason is they were given to frequent prayer and also regular *tahajjud* (midnight prayer) (18).

REFERENCES

1. Targ E: Evaluating Distant Healing: A Research Review. *Alternative Therapies In Health And Medicine* 1997 Nov; 3(6): 62-73.
2. Schlitz M, Braud W: Distant Intentionality And Healing: Assessing The Evidence. *Alternative Therapies In Health And Medicine* 1997 Nov.; 3(6): 62-73
3. Waldfogel S: Spirituality In Medicine. *Primary Care; Clinics In Office Practice*. 1997 Dec; 24(4) 963-76.
4. Colon K: The Healing Power Of Spirituality. *Minnesota Medicine* 1996 Dec; 79(12).
5. Levin JS:. How Prayer Heals: A Theoretical Model. *Alternative Therapies In Health And Medicine*. 1996 Jan; 2(1): 66-73.
6. MacLennan S, Tsai S: A Nursing Perspective On Spiritual Healing. *Perspectives*. 1995 Spring; 19(1): 9- 13.
7. Haggart M: Nursing The Soul. *Complementary Therapies In Nursing & Midwifery*. 1996 Feb; 2(1): 17-20.
8. Long A.: Nursing: A Spiritual Perspective. *Nursing Ethics*. 1997 Nov; 4(6): 496-510.
9. Sugeran, D.: Healing Body And Spirit. *Minnesota Med*. 1996 Dec; 79: 8-9.
10. Bragdon E.: Helping People With Spiritual Problems. *Aptos, Lightening Up Press*, 1993.
11. Ibn Sina: *Psychic Cures*. *Chahar Maqala* .Tehran, 1970:120.
12. Ibn Abi Usaibi’a, Uyun Al-Anba, P. 188. Cited In *Health And Medicine In The Islamic Tradition* By Fazlur Rahman (Crossroad, Ny 1987)
13. Al-Razi: *Al-Tibb Al-Ruhani Or The Spiritual Physick Of Rhazes*, London, 1950.
14. Ali Kauthar Chandpuri, *Atibba-I ‘Ahd-I-Mughliya (Doctors Of Moghul Period)*, Karachi, 1960:129.
15. Al-Hakim Al-Tamimi: *Khawass Al-Qur’an (Miraculous Properties Of Qur’an)*. Cited In *Health And Medicine In The Islamic Tradition* By Fazlur Rahman (Crossroad, Ny 1987)
16. Ewing K, Pirs And Sufis In Pakistan (Ph.D. Diss. Univ. Of Chicago), 1980: 74-5.
17. Al-Dhahabi, *Al-Tibb Al-Nabawi*. Cairo, 1961: 140.
18. Al-Dhahabi, *Al-Tibb Al-Nabawi*. Cairo, 1961:139-140.

This story appears in the November/December 2016 issue of National Geographic History magazine. View Images. An 18th-century copper still from Morocco, essential equipment in a Muslim physician's medical kit. Musée du Quai Branly, Paris Photograph by Quai Branly/RMN-Grand Palais. Sancho I, ruler of the kingdom of León in the north of modern-day Spain, was overthrown by rebel nobles in A.D. 958. Their motive, even by the turbulent politics of the day, was an unusual one: The king was unable to fulfill his regal duties with dignity, the rebels said, because he was too fat. The relatives of San Islamic medicine built upon the legacies of Greek and Roman physicians and scholars, including Galen, Hippocrates, and the Greek scholars of Alexandria and Egypt. Scholars translated medical literature from Greek and Roman into Arabic and then elaborated upon it, adding their findings, developing new conclusions, and contributing new perspectives. Among the many achievements of medieval Islamic medicine were an improved understanding of the body's functions, the establishment of hospitals, and the incorporation of female doctors. Related coverage. Anesthesia and pain relief in the history of Islamic medicine [Abstract]. Iranian Journal of Medical Sciences, 41 (3), S21. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/27516654>. Ali, M. (2014).