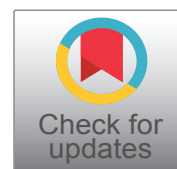**International Journal of**
Depression and Anxiety

The Rise of Anxiety Disorders: Islamic Understanding of Anxiety and Muslim Scholar's Suggestions to Cope with Distress and Achieve Happiness

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Abstract

This paper has examined the concept of anxiety, its rise in recent decades, and the relationship between anxiety and religion. To illustrate a unique approach to this emerging problem, we have investigated the Islamic understanding of anxiety and various Muslim scholar's approach to the term. Since over-thinking and anxiety are universal problems that concern nearly all human beings, this particular subject has been examined by Muslim scholars ranging from Al-Ghazali to Belhî. They tried to suggest plausible techniques to cope with anxiety and achieve happiness. Through these Muslim scholar's influential works, we have attempted to examine the Islamic understanding of anxiety and represent Muslim's views on anxiety disorders.

Keywords

Anxiety, Islam, Havâtır, Al-Ghazali, Ibn Hazm, Ebû Zeyd el-Belhî

The Rising Problem of Humanity: Anxiety Disorders

Anxiety can be described as follows: A natural feeling we experience in certain situations, especially when we are in danger, afraid of something or someone or we feel stressed. As humans, we tend to feel anxious daily because we all have people and things we love and care about, including ourselves. Being in constant fear of losing the things we value the most makes us vulnerable to psychological disorders in some cases. However, it is crucial to understand the difference between feeling anxious during appropriate situations and having an anxiety disorder. Our anxiousness may be caused by an illness, job loss, accident, or losing a loved one, and we may face struggles, but our anxiousness lasts only for a limited time. Anxiety is a psychological disorder that is much more serious and intense than daily worries because it negatively affects the individual's life. Anxiety disorders are not just one illness but a set of diseases distinguished by certain symptoms such as a constant feeling of extreme anxiety, discomfort, distress, and tension [1].

According to the report published by the Mental Health Foundation [2], Anxiety disorders are the most common type of mental illness, and it mostly begins in adulthood, but it can start at earlier ages. As researchers put out before, women are more likely to be diagnosed with anxiety disorders. There are also physical consequences of having anxiety disorders such as sweating, trembling, losing control, distress, nausea, and breathlessness.

As stated in the report of Berkeley Institute for the Future of Young Americans [3] recent researches show that almost 34% of U.S adults develop an anxiety disorder in their lifetimes at least once. It is also revealed that anxiety disorders are the most common mental diseases that concern teenagers, and it is obvious that anxiety is a growing and threatening problem among younger people. Current estimates show that as they get older and new generations come, the percentage of people with anxiety disorders is more likely to increase because the adolescents of the millenniums have reached the anxiety level of the adults of today's

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world. This brings us to the conclusion that anxiety is a problem that has to be taken care of at the earliest because otherwise future generations may face even higher levels of anxiety.

The Relationship between Anxiety and Religion

The effect of religion on mental health has been debated over the past couple of decades, but the link between religion and anxiety disorders, in particular, seems to be ignored. Freud has called anxiety as mental pain, and the effect of religious practices on relieving this pain is not investigated at a satisfying level. On the contrary, in the historical process, some associated anxiety disorders with spiritual and existential issues and claimed that spiritual beliefs cause anxiety. During the 19th century, the sociological factors that may trigger anxiety disorders caught attention. Unlike the former understanding of anxiety, recent researches show that religiosity is associated with lower anxiety and happiness [4].

The effect of religion on anxiety seems to be quite vague and needs further researching but what we cannot deny is that religion is a huge part of the culture, and it has an impact on nearly every area of life and mental disorders are no exception. Even though we are not able to claim that there is an absolute effect of religion on curing anxiety or any other mental disease, some studies showed the effectiveness of religious beliefs and practices on preventing mental disorders and recover your mental health.

For instance, Sargolzaie, et al. [5] did a scientific research to determine if religious activities have a positive influence on university students in terms of preventing mental diseases such as anxiety and depression or not. The results of the study showed that increased time spent in religious activities resulted in a decrease in depression, anxiety, and possibly in substance abuse.

On the other hand, most clinicians today encounter patients who adopt religious beliefs and practices in an unhealthy way to cope with psychological problems and ignore other factors that may help their recovery. In some cases, this situation is illustrated by people with obsessive-compulsive disorders becoming obsessed with worshiping or even God himself. So, mental disorders are sometimes associated with religious beliefs and practices. Besides, most religions have components that may trigger anxiety disorders such as eternal punishment in Hell, fear of God or spiritual creatures like Jinns [6].

After all, it is certain that some scholars claimed that religion could be utilized to prevent mental illnesses or recover mental health and others, on the contrary, claimed that religious beliefs may trigger mental disorders or adopting religious beliefs and practices to

cope with mental disorders may make the situation even more severe. This remarkable conflict will be considered in the following parts of this study.

Islamic Understanding of Anxiety and Al-Ghazali's Approach

Even though it is quite tough to determine the Islamic approach to anxiety disorders, Al-Ghazali who is one of the most famous and revered Islamic scholars examined this particular issue in his own kind of way. It is transmitted in the work of Çağrıcı [7], that he was born in Iran and lived in the golden age of Islam, which according to common acceptance, lasts from 750 to 1258, and he still has a huge impact on Islamic scholars in various kinds of sciences through his monumental works.

In the 3rd volume of his ground-breaking work called Ihya' Ulum al-Din, Al-Ghazali [8] introduced a unique way to understand anxiety, and his way of explaining it reflects most Muslim's understanding of this issue even in today's world. According to him, the heart is a castle that has to be protected by its owner, and this duty of protection is obligatory for all human beings. The devil is an enemy who always tries to leak into the castle and invade our hearts.

We are obliged to protect our castles from the devil because if he ever gets into it, he starts to whisper, which creates "waswasa" in our hearts. This term can be described as the satanic whispers, which take over the person's whole mentality and demolishes him. The concept of waswasa is commonly used by Muslims when someone is struggling with Over-thinking and anxiety disorders. It is not possible to claim that the concepts of waswasa and anxiety disorders are the same things. However, they have many similarities, and in some cases, waswasa is associated with Muslims' anxiety.

In the same work, Al-Ghazali explained a term called "havâtır", and it means occurring in one's mind, remembering something or being inspired, and it constitutes all the good and bad thoughts that come to the mind externally without the thinker's will [9]. The first philosopher of Islamic philosophy, namely, Al-Kindi described this term as the temporary emotions and thoughts derived from the things which are inspired in one's heart [10].

Al-Ghazali divides the concept of havâtır into two broad categories: The first one is the inspiration, and the other is waswasa. In this context, motivation refers to a different type of knowledge delivered to one's heart through reflection. The concept of waswasa is pretty wide-spread among Muslims. It means the anxiety, suspicions, or seductive suggestions whispered by the devil to one's heart. It is a Muslim's responsibility to keep the heart and the mind away from these satanic whispers if he ever desires to submit himself to God's will because these satanic whispers may prevent him from doing good deeds, and they poison him over time.

To help Muslims with their struggles with these satanic whispers, Al-Ghazali explained the issue even further and gave them instructions. According to him, we have to strengthen the door and fill the gaps of our castles just so the devil cannot transgress, and if you do not know where the door and the holes of your castle are, you cannot protect your castle, namely, your heart. We have to be aware of the devil's transgressing ways, and Al-Ghazali revealed them with various parables in his major work Ihya' Ulum al-Din. Lust and rage are the biggest entranceways of the devil into our castles, the rage eliminates the mind, and when the troops of the mind are gone, the devil can finally find his way into our hearts.

Al-Ghazali stated that human beings have weaknesses that make them vulnerable to the devil, in other words, mental disorders because he is the one who poisons our hearts and minds. Compared to our contemporary understanding of anxiety and anxiety disorders, Al-Ghazali's account for waswasa is quite spiritual and even supernatural, but it has to be understood adequately because even in today's world some Muslims link anxiety to waswasa and claim that it is caused by the devil's whispers, and to get rid of it, we have to protect our hearts, and that is only possible through following God's will and spending more time in religious practices.

Ibn Hazm's Religion-Centered Suggestion to Cope with Anxiety Disorders

As transmitted by Apaydın [11], Ibn Hazm is a well-known and influential scholar of the Muslim world [12]; he was born in Andalus in 994 and lived until 1064. He has written works about various fields of science, and he is described as a theologian, hadith narrator, historian, poet, and above all, a controversial thinker. He examined the issues of morality and ways of recovering the human soul in his work called "Müdâvâtü'n-Nüfusvelslâhu'l-Ahlâk" and claimed that he figured out the real reason behind the human anxiousness and found the absolute cure for this devastating human behavior.

According to Ibn Hazm [12], the most excruciating feeling is the anxiety of losing a loved one or facing an undesirable situation, and he also claimed that the one and the only target that all human beings find beautiful and desire is getting rid of fear and anxiety. He stated that, through his observations, he realized that not only all human beings want to get rid of stress and think it is good, but also they always try to keep anxiety away from themselves with every single thing they do.

The aim of everything they do, say, or even think is freeing themselves from fear. He claimed that starting from the day that God created the universe until the Day of Judgment; the only objective of all nation's deeds will be escaping from anxiety. He proposed that there is not a thing that all humans desire commonly except for

getting rid of or preventing anxiety. However, he found them faulty in their way of avoiding it.

He thought achieving this precious piece of information was a grand treasure bestowed by God and started to investigate this situation and try to find the real way of getting rid of anxiety. He claimed that achieving the absolute target of all human beings are only possible through submitting oneself to God and fulfilling the orders of God to achieve salvation in the Day of Judgment.

He explained it a bit further to support his opinion and stated that everyone in this world has different reasons to be anxious, with no exception. Through the journey of pursuing their ultimate goal and trying to get rid of anxiety, they may face hardship or external factors that may prevent them from succession and a new reason to be anxious may appear. However, working for salvation in the Day of Judgment is away from imperfections, purified from all sorrows, and ultimately delivers one to the aim of staying away from anxiety.

He also asserted that people who work for salvation do not fear or feel anxious even if they are tested because the hope they have helps them walk through the path, which gives them extra power. Also, someone who works for salvation in the Day of Judgment does not get affected by the obstacles he faces, and he is fully aware that he will not be held responsible for it because God is just in all of his judgments. So, there is only one target of all human beings and that is getting rid of anxiety, and the only way to achieve this is by working for the sake of God.

After explaining his understanding of anxiety, Ibn Hazm gave some suggestions to his readers; dedicate yourself to something more precious than you, and this is only possible through working for the sake of God, inviting people to the righteousness, helping people in need, and staying away from the worthless things that are not commanded to you by God. Someone who spends his life gaining wealth in this world gives emerald in exchange for pebble stones. A wise man does not accept anything besides heaven for his deeds.

Since he utterly links anxiety to spirituality, Ibn Hazm's understanding of anxiety seems similar to Al-Ghazali's account of the issue. Both of their explanations regarding anxiety disorders are away from the contemporary interpretation of the case, but they represent a unique approach to the problem, so this should be considered by the readers of this study.

Ebû Zeyd al-Belhî's Suggestions for an Anxiety-Free and Happy Life

As Kutluer [13], mentioned in his study, Ebû Zeyd al-Belhî is a doctor, philosopher, and geographer of the Muslim world, and he was born in Khorassan in 850. In one of his most influential works called Meşâliḥu'l-

ebdânve'l-enfüs, he examined the issues of medicine and morality in one piece and this book proves that he absorbed all the medical accumulation of his era and he also is the pioneer of an Islamic method distinguished by examining morality and medicine together. He stated that many works about physical health had been composed, but mental health has been ignored.

According to him, all human beings are composed of a body and a soul; thus, physical health is inevitably linked to mental health. That is why he examined these two sciences together.

In his work Meşâliḥu'l-ebdânve'l-enfüs, he has written a chapter dedicated to anxiety and sadness. Ebû Zeyd el-Belhî [14] stated that sadness and fear take a crucial place in psychological disorders, and if they gain ground in one's heart, their destruction becomes major. Anxiety is the highest spot of sadness and the most robust version of it. Anxiety is the most compelling reason behind the fatigue, change in the lust powers, loss of the youth, and shine. Anxiety is described as the total opposite of happiness.

Ebû Zeyd al-Belhî [14] divided sadness and anxiety into two categories: The sadness or anxiety is apparent such as losing a loved one or a precious thing. In the second category, the reason for the sadness or anxiety is not known. He gave suggestions for the second category and claimed that physical disorders cause them and suggested that talking with someone, listening to music, doing the things you love and makes you happy may help.

For the sadness or anxiety you know, Belhî stated that there are two different ways to cure it. The first one is external helpers such as listening to a preacher, letting someone remind you of the things that matter the most, or physical remedies if a physical disorder causes it. For the internal ways of curing anxiety and sadness, he gave nine different suggestions and said that an individual should keep these five thoughts ready in his mind as a weapon and pull them out when necessary and we shall briefly list them below:

1. You should think of a physical disorder that would give you deep sorrow afterward. This way, you can remember the things that you value the most.

2. You should think about the essential tenet that the world is built upon; the life where everything goes as you desire and you do not lose anyone or anything is not possible for any human being. You should be aware of the circumstances and enjoy what you have, and if you succeed in adopting this idea, everything you earn in this life will be your treasure and everything you lose will not bother you at all.

3. You should think that if you lose your patience when you have problems, you will have even more significant problems in the future. For, the world is full of sorrow and disasters, and if you lose your patience, you will keep inviting them into your life, but if you refuse to feel anxious, you will set a bar between you and problems.

4. You should remember that surrendering yourself to sadness and anxiousness when you struggle is what a weak person would do, and a determined person would remain patient. Also, if you remain patient during hardship, you will be remembered and mentioned with your merits and represent a good role model.

5. You should remember that you are critical and you love what you love for yourself and as long as you are in a good situation there is nothing to worry about.

6. All human beings experience sorrow and hardship in their lives, so you have something in common with people who came before you and your contemporaries. People do not feel severe grief or anxiety when they share it with other people. Because when they have other examples like them, their pain may decrease.

7. If you have a problem to worry about, you should remember that as long as you are alive you can have a bigger problem in the future so you should learn lessons from the smaller issues and if they protect you from making bigger mistakes, then they will become gifts to be thankful for.

8. If you have a terrible time, problems, feel anxious or sad, you should think of all those good things you have, including your own life and soul. You cannot regain what you lost, but you can access what is left. If you are tested with deep sorrow in your life, you should think of it frequently and think of something that makes you happy and thankful afterward, and this way, you can get over it.

9. You should remember that there will surely be good days and gifts to comfort you after all the bad days. The most challenging moment is the moment you are experiencing hardship, and every moment comes after that will be more comfortable.

Ebû Zeyd el-Belhî listed these nine suggestions and stated that we should refer to them when we feel distressed, anxious, or face struggles, and they may help us to get rid of them.

Conclusion

Everyone feels anxious at some point in their life, whether it is because of the fear of facing an undesirable situation, getting ready for a job interview or an important exam and it is an essential component of our

human nature. As human beings, we cannot altogether avoid the feelings of anxiety; however, some people get affected by these feelings more than others, and this situation may damage the person's mental health and as recent estimates show that 4.7% of the population in the United Kingdom have anxiety problems and the percentage of people with anxiety disorders are more likely to increase all over the world.

In this study, we have tried to emphasize the importance of anxiety problems and examine the issue through a different perspective. We have briefly reviewed three highly influential Muslim scholars' views on anxiety disorders and suggestions to cope with anxiety and achieve happiness. Al-Ghazali links anxiety to the concept of waswasa, which means satanic whispers, and he introduces a supernatural approach to the issue. Similarly, Ibn Hazm claimed that the lack of devotion causes anxiety and the absolute technique to get rid of it is working for God's sake and salvation in the Day of Judgment.

Ebû Zeyd el-Belhî's approach to the issue was quite different since he did not even mention the influence of religion on psychological diseases and gave practical techniques to deal with extreme feelings of anxiety, and he distinctively associated anxiety with fear. Through these Muslim scholar's works, we have tried to represent a unique approach to this issue and Muslim's views on anxiety disorders. Considering the time that these examined works have been written, it is predictable that they are not compatible with the contemporary understanding of anxiety or anxiety disorders, but to properly understand Muslim's unique understanding of this issue, these three works are essential.

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