

What this year's Ramadan taught me about the balance between spirituality and mental health

by Zeba Khan, April 28, 2022

I was relieved when I realized that the first day of Ramadan this year would fall on a Saturday. Having two days to get in the rhythm of fasting before the start of the workweek would help ease me in, I hoped.

Fasting during Ramadan, the holiest month in the Islamic calendar, is one of the five basic beliefs and practices, often referred to as pillars, of Islam and is required of every Muslim adult who is healthy enough to participate. For 30 days, observant Muslims do not eat or drink from dawn until sunset.

As an editor at The Chronicle, my days go from one time-crunched deadline to the next with ample opportunity for plans to dramatically change at a moment's notice. It's a role I relish but not one without stress.

Thirty minutes into the start of my first fasting workday, my team's plan for the next day's paper fell through – a common occurrence in the world of journalism. But that morning, an unusually strong rush of anxiety, fear and nerves hit me all at once. My mind immediately triaged across my inbox and the drafts I was midway through editing, trying to determine which one I could get ready in time to meet our midday deadline. My team was counting on me, and I began to feel an overwhelming fear that fasting would make my task impossible to execute.

My heart sank and I broke my fast.

Even now, admitting that isn't easy. For many Muslims who don't fast, there is an incredible amount of self-induced and community-dispensed guilt and shame associated with not fasting – even for those who have Islamically sanctioned exemptions.

Growing up, I'd always been told about the specific situations in which fasting was either not required or not allowed: for the sick, traveling, menstruating, pregnant and nursing, and for young children and older

people. In most of these circumstances, Muslims are expected to make up their fasts at a later time or, if they cannot, then give to charity.

These exceptions make sense. After all, the objective of fasting is to facilitate a deeper connection with God and with the community but not at the expense of your health.

The exemptions also proved to me an oft-repeated idea in the Quran that God does not burden us with more than we can bear. It's a sentiment that has brought me solace in my darkest moments – grieving my mother (may God have mercy on her) who passed from a brutal form of cancer three years ago this month, followed by two more cancer diagnoses in my immediate family within the year that followed. And then, of course, the pandemic.

I know I'm not alone in my grief. So many of us have experienced profound loss and feelings of severe isolation these past few years. According to researchers at Boston University's School of Public Health, depression among adults in the U.S. tripled in 2020, climbing from 8.5% to 27.8%. That percentage only increased the following year, reaching 32.8% of American adults. For Muslim Americans, the pandemic compounded pre-existing mental health challenges. According to a [survey](#) conducted in 2019 by the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, Muslim Americans are twice as likely to have attempted suicide than people in other religious groups. Researchers think that higher rate is due to a combination of factors including religious discrimination and community stigma around mental illness.

No people have a monopoly on stigma when it comes to mental illness. But because it wasn't something I grew up hearing about, and certainly not in the context of being a potential health exemption from fasting, to me and probably many other Muslims, mental illness in any form became the opposite – a condition that we *should* be able to bear.

Today research says otherwise. According to a [2019 analysis](#) published in the Lancet, people with mental illness can die up to 20 years earlier than the general population and the vast majority of those early deaths come from poor physical health, not suicide. People with mental health disorders have twice the risk of developing diabetes or experiencing a stroke and those

with depression can face similar health risks up to 40% more than the general population. While researchers are continuing to learn more about the connections between mental illness and physical disease, we already know that depression can physically change the brain.

Mental illness can be just as harmful to the body as many physical afflictions. The tricky thing about it, however, is that mental illness isn't as readily discernible – neither for the person experiencing it or the people around them. Moreover, many people with mental illness do not seek out professional help – which means, in the context of Ramadan, they also don't have the external validation of an expert telling them fasting may not be a healthy practice for them.

Fasting in Ramadan has always been important to me. It's a practice that bonds me to my family, my faith and my community. But it's as much of a mental trial as it is a physical one. Refraining from food and water is not meant to be easy but it's not supposed to be unbearable, either.

In the Islamic tradition, God has many attributes. But perhaps the most widely repeated are those said at the beginning of every prayer, *al-Rahman* and *al-Raheem*, or the Compassionate and the Merciful – two qualities we all might do well to show ourselves and others, whatever your religious beliefs.