Traditional Health Systems and Public Policy

Proceedings of an International Workshop, Ottawa, Canada, 2–4 March 1994

Edited by
Anwar Islam and Rosina Wiltshire
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CONTENTS

FOREWORD ................................................................. v

WORKSHOP REPORT
Preamble ................................................................. 1
Goals and Objectives ................................................. 2
Session 1: Workshop Opening ...................................... 3
Session 2: Traditional Health Systems — Issues and Concerns . 6
Session 3: Health Systems — Traditional/Western Dichotomy . 10
Session 4: Gender and Indigenous Knowledge Issues .......... 15
Session 5: Traditional Health Systems in Different Cultures . 19
Session 6: Research and Policy .................................... 23
Session 7: Future Directions ......................................... 29
Summary and Conclusions ........................................... 31

TRADITIONAL HEALTH SYSTEMS — ISSUES AND CONCERNS
Law and Traditional Medicine in Kenya ......................... 33
Arthur Okoth-Owiro
Traditional Knowledge and Gender: the Caribbean Experience . 58
Jeanette Bell
Models of Health Care Pluralism ................................ 62
David E. Young
Understanding Traditional Health Care Systems:
A Sociological Perspective ........................................ 71
Anwar Islam

HEALTH SYSTEMS — TRADITIONAL/WESTERN DICHOTOMY
Traditional Health Systems and the Conventional System in Uganda . 86
S. Amooti-Kyomya
Developmental Therapeutics Program at the Division of
Cancer Treatment: A Short Description ........................ 91
Gordon M. Craig
Traditional Health Care and Public Policy: Recent Trend .... 96
Gerard C. Bodekar

GENDER AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE ISSUES
Traditional Health Systems: Challenges in the Philippines .... 110
Ma. Chona L. Segismundo
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TRADITIONAL HEALTH SYSTEMS IN DIFFERENT CULTURES</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ayurveda — Fundamentally Based on the Study of Substances</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P.K. Warner</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Unani System and Traditional Health Systems in Bangladesh</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hakim Azizul Islam</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Indigenous Health System of the Peruvian Amazon</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juan Reategui S.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RESEARCH AND POLICY</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Health Systems and Primary Health Care</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanaja Ramprasad</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHO's Policy and Activities on Traditional Medicine</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xiaorui Zhang</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Health Systems: National Policy Issues and Directions</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hakim Mohammed Said</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quranic Concepts for Eliminating Negative Emotions: Another Aspect</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of the Healing Effect of the Quran</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ahmed Elkadi</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Health Services in the Middle East: Spiritual Aspects</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of Healing and their Scientific Bases</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ahmed Elkadi</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF PARTICIPANTS</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Quranic Concepts for Eliminating Negative Emotions:

Another Aspect of the Healing Effect of the Quran

by

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held in Moscow, Russia, September, 1993
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Introduction and historical background:

The Quran declares that it (the Quran) is a healing.

"We reveal from the Quran that which is healing". (1) This declaration guided us at the Institute of Islamic Medicine for Education and Research to explore the various aspects of the healing effect of the Quran. The purpose of this exploration is not to prove that the Quran is right, because we are already convinced that it is. Our Quranic studies are intended to find out the details that are needed so that the healing effect of the Quran may be better utilized. Details such as mechanism of action, and indications for use; and specifics related to application such as how, when, and for how long.

We have already learned from modern scientific discoveries that numerous legislations in the Quran have a direct impact on the health of the individual. (2) These are either legislations prohibiting matters which are hazardous to health, or those enjoining matters which promote health. The most important health-promoting legislation--although it may not appear to be--is the prohibition of disbelief in God. More obviously health-related legislations are the prohibition of alcohol, excessive eating, sexual promiscuity, homosexual relations, sexual intercourse during the menstrual period, and any matter which proves to be impure or harmful. Other health-promoting legislations include enjoining prayers, fasting, ablution and bathing, breast feeding, and many other injunctions. Added to that are statements in the Quran ascribing the term "healing" to honey, or to the Quran itself. All these are the areas traditionally considered the link
Elkadi - Quranic Concepts

between Quranic teachings and physical health. These are, of course, supplemented by similar or related teachings and practices of our prophet Muhammad peace be upon him.

In 1984 and 1985 evidence was found that the words of the Quran had physiologic effects on the person listening to the recitation of the Quran, even without understanding the meaning of the words--although the effect was usually more pronounced when the meaning was added to the sound. (3,4) The physiologic changes that were monitored and measured in the persons listening to the Quran reflected various physical manifestations of stress reduction, and were of the type normally associated with the healing process. Since it is a known fact that prolonged stress leads to impaired immunity, and that relief or reduction of stress improves immunity, it was assumed that the stress-reducing effect of the Quran would have a favorable effect on the immune system of the body.

At that time we were also aware of the fact that the guidance contained in the Quran has an indirect positive effect on the physical health and well-being of the individual. The Quran contains teachings related to personal behavior, attitudes and dealings that guide the individual in the conduct of his or her daily affairs. It also contains teachings which deal with general matters of the society, and which--if applied correctly--will lead to the achievement of general goals such as freedom, justice, and improved economic conditions. All of these lead to the making of a balanced, emotionally stable, and successful individual who is able to make better decisions, and realize better achievements in life. Such an individual will enjoy a much higher degree of well-being and--as a result--a better emotional set-up, a better immune system, a healthier
physical condition. (2) This was the extent of our understanding in 1985 of the relationship between the general guidance of the Quran and the health and well-being of the human being.

Since then, and during the past eight years, our understanding of the healing effect of the Quran has considerably expanded, although it is still extremely limited. We realize now that the Quran contains certain teachings that are very effective therapeutic modalities dealing with some fundamental aspects of the patho-physiology of disease in general. Consequently, these teachings could be—and should be—an integral part of treatment programs for almost all types of illnesses, especially the challenging ones that may be considered "incurable" by modern medicine. This means that the direct healing effect of the Quran is not limited to the effect of the sound of its words, but extends to its therapeutic concepts that can be applied to any person regardless of his or her belief in the Quran as the revealed word of God. These are the Quranic concepts that have proven to be very effective in helping patients get rid of their harbored negative emotions. They are logical concepts that are most suited to human nature, regardless of whether the person is Muslim or non-Muslim.

The purpose of this presentation is to introduce some of these concepts and to show how they work, and how they relate to the treatment of the majority of disease conditions.
What are negative emotions and what is their effect on physical health?

Negative emotions are of various types. They include resentment, frustration, depression, grief, helplessness, hopelessness, anger, hate, desire for revenge, feelings of guilt, fear, anxiety, worry, insecurity—among others—or any combination of two or more of the above. All these negative emotions are very useful and beneficial for the first few moments or minutes after any acute situation because they make the person have a response appropriate to the situation. However, if they are harbored for a longer period of time beyond the first few moments or minutes, they start having negative effects on the physical health of the person harboring them. If the degree of the negative emotions is severe enough, and they are harbored for a long enough time, they can literally kill the person harboring them.

Among the numerous bad effects of negative emotions on physical health, the most serious is their suppressive effect on the immune system which results in a variety of immune deficiencies or dysfunctions. How do they do that? Ideas and emotions are a form of energy that passes through the brain: energy like electricity, light or sound energy. The immune cells have receptors that can register these ideas and emotions, either indirectly through neuro-endocrine chemicals or transmitters; or directly like an electronic monitor registers some electrical impulse, or the exposure meter of a camera registers light energy, or a radio receiver receives sound energy sent from a broadcasting station.

To put this in very simple terms, the immune cells can read the mind of their owner. If we consider the immune cells as obedient soldiers trained to do the defense and repair work, and
consider their owner as the commander in charge of these soldiers, then these cells not only read the mind of their owner, but they take messages as orders to be obeyed and complied with. The emotional and behavioral condition of the person is thus reflected in the condition and behavior of the immune cells. If one can imagine the condition and behavior--or performance--of a person under fear, depression, anger, hopelessness, or helplessness, we can have a good idea as to how his or her immune cells will behave or perform.

Once the immune system fails to function properly, all types of physical illnesses develop. If the immune malfunction is in the form of inadequate response, we see conditions like cancer, AIDS, and all types of chronic and recurrent infections. If the immune response is excessive, we see conditions like allergies, bronchial asthma, and a variety of chronic degenerative diseases. If the immune response is misguided--when immune cells attack their own body's tissue instead of their enemies--then we have all types of auto-immune diseases like rheumatoid, lupus, juvenile diabetes, multiple sclerosis and a growing list of other challenging problems.

Of course negative emotions are not the only immune suppressors. There are other physical and chemical immune suppressors like pollutants of air, water, and food; certain food items like refined sugar and certain processed foods; some prescription drugs and addictive drugs; and many other factors. However, negative emotions usually have an important contributing role. All the patients with chronic illnesses associated with immune deficiency or dysfunction that we have seen in the last 7 years had excessive exposure to harbored negative emotions before the onset of their illness. This applies even in the case of new-born infants with immune dysfunctions where
Quranic Concepts

their parents had excessive exposure to harbored negative emotions. The same mechanism that applies to negative emotions and how they contribute to the development of disease also applies to positive emotions and how they contribute to the healing of disease. There is now a whole new science called "Psycho-Neuro-Immunology" which is the science of how ideas and emotions can affect the immune system, negatively or positively.

All this sounds good and marvelous. But what does the Quran have to do with all this? The Quran has a lot to do with it.

What does the Quran say and do about negative emotions?

First, the Quran makes it clear—in one way or another—that negative emotions are bad, undesirable, or harmful; then it gives us clues as to how to get rid of them. The following phrases are part of some of the Quranic statements indicating the prohibition of negative emotions, the desirability to get rid of them; or their harmful effect:

"... do not fear", (5) لا تَحْرَف

"... do not despair and do not grieve" (6) وَلَا تَهْمِئُوا وَلَا تَحَرَّبُوا

"... do not destroy yourself out of frustration about them", (7) فَلَا تَذْهَبْ نَفْسَكَ عَلَيْهِمْ حَسَرًا

"... do not keep angry hate in our hearts towards the believers", (8) لا تَحْبَلْ فِي قُلُوبِ الْمُؤْمِنَّينَ
Elkadi - Quranic Concepts

"...... only disbelievers give up hope in the spirit of Allah", (9)

"...... die with your anger" (10), and many others.

Similar statements are expressed by our Prophet Muhammad--Peace be upon him (PBUH):

"...... do not get angry" (11), لا تغضب

"...... do not be helpless (or do not give up out of despair)" (12), لا تغبر

"...... we seek refuge in Thee from worry and grief" (13), أعوذ بك من الهم و الحزن

"...... we seek refuge in Thee from helplessness and laziness" (14), أعوذ بك من المجر و السكبال

and many others.

We have to realize, however, that just telling someone to eliminate negative emotions, without telling the person how to do it, is not enough. It is often very difficult to get rid of negative emotions because they are natural human emotions, and are usually justified. But it can be done, if we learn how. This is what the Quran does. It gives us simple concepts which are very effective in dealing with specific negative emotions. However, to achieve the desired effect, we first need to understand first the mechanism of formation of the negative emotion, and also understand how the Quranic concept relates to that mechanism. To simplify the issue, we shall divide the negative emotions into three groups, with each group sharing the same etiologic mechanism then we shall find one or two Quranic concepts for each one of the three groups:
Elkadi - Quranic Concepts

A. **The depression group**: This includes resentment, frustration, depression, grief, helplessness, and hopelessness. What is the mechanism of formation of the emotions of this group? **The bad list** is responsible. What is the bad list? It is a list of all the bad features, situations, and circumstances that I want to change but cannot. These bad things are either in myself, in other people around me, or in the world around me. These bad things may include that I am too fat or too skinny, that my health is not good enough, or that my money is not enough. I cannot see well without glasses, I have much work I did not finish, or many challenges I cannot deal with. People around me are not cooperating with me, or not responding to my effort. There is too much crime and evil in society, or too much injustice in the world. The air is polluted, the water is polluted, the food is not healthy, and the list goes on.

A long list of all the things that I want to change. Every time I look at this list, I resent what I see but I still hope that I shall be able to change everything. A few months later when I look at the list and find it unchanged, I feel frustrated. After a few years have passed I see that the content of the list has not changed much although a few items have disappeared and were replaced by some others. Then I feel depressed. Gradually, as I keep looking at the bad list I get the feeling that nothing is working. I feel helpless and give up hope. The more I look at this bad list, the worse I feel. As I feel bad, my efficiency and productivity decrease, I get further behind, and the list gets longer. From bad to worse. The depression group is the most common cause of suicide.
Those who have faith do not kill themselves, but if they keep the helpless and hopeless feeling in their mind, their immune cells read their mind and do the killing through a variety of disease mechanisms. What is the solution? We have to recognize three facts:

Fact number 1: The bad list is not going to disappear, ever. Since perfection is for God alone, everybody else and everything else is imperfect, or deficient. The deficiencies in myself, in the people around me, and in the world around me, are all items on the bad list. Although the bad list may change in size or appearance, it will always be there because no one and nothing will ever be perfect in this world except for God alone.

"There is nothing like Him." (15)

Fact number 2: There is another list, the list of good things and good features—in myself, in the people around me, and in the world around me. Since all good things are from God the Almighty, we shall call this list the list of blessings. I can see, I can move, I eat and go to the bathroom, I sleep and wake up, I think, I have faith, I sometimes do good deeds, others sometimes do good deeds, I can breathe—even the bad polluted air has 21% oxygen that I cannot live without—and the long list of blessings goes on and does not appear to have any end. And the list of blessings is longer than the bad list, because the blessings are too many to count. "If you would count up the blessings of Allah, never would you be
Elkadi - Quranic Concepts

able to number them" (16).

What happens if I look at the list of blessings? I feel good, I feel cheerful, I feel grateful. When I feel good my efficiency and productivity improve. When I feel grateful I do good deeds to express my gratitude, and the list of blessings grows longer. From good to better.

Fact number 3: A law of physics says that if I focus my eyes—or attention—on a certain object, it is impossible to focus my eyes—or attention—on another object at the same time. This means that if I focus on the list of blessings, not only will I feel cheerful and grateful, with improved performance, and improved immune functions, but I will also not be able to see the bad list clearly.

Once the bad list fades out of my sight, the depression and other related "miserable" emotions disappear too. These miserable and dangerous emotions did not start until I kept looking at the bad list. This law of physics also means that while I was looking at the bad list, not only was I feeling bad and suffering from a suppressed immune system, but—worse than that—I was unable to see the list of blessings. And, because I was not able to see the blessings, I was not showing gratitude for them.

Recognizing these three facts, I immediately realize that I have a choice: Either look at the list of blessings and feel cheerful and be happy, with a healthy immune system and better
performance, and above all be grateful--be on the winning path for this world and the hereafter--or, look at the bad list and feel miserable, with a sick immune system and have poor performance, and worst of all, be ungrateful--be on the losing path for this world and the hereafter.

"We have guided him to the path, either grateful or ungrateful" (17).

Now after understanding the mechanism of formation of the negative emotions of the depression group and the mechanism for their elimination, where is the Quranic concept? It is a simple statement that we frequently read but rarely comply with:

"Speak about the blessings of your Lord" (18).

This is an order, a Quranic order, a Divine order that must be obeyed. It is not limited to time or space. It means that, any time I have a chance to speak about the blessings, I must do so. If I cannot find someone to speak to, I can always speak to myself. If I try to comply with this order, I shall be forced to always look at the list of blessings in order to find out what to speak about. If I ever catch myself complaining, I shall realize that at this moment I was reading from the bad list, and while doing so I was ignoring the Quranic order. This will remind me to immediately return my sight to the list of blessings.

Does this mean that I shall never look at the bad list and never have a bad feeling? Not at all. As a matter of fact I shall be looking at the bad list, probably several times every day, every time something bad happens to me or in front of me. But after a few moments or a few
minutes—which is enough to know how to respond to the "bad" situation—I return my sight
and attention to the list of blessings while I am carrying out the appropriate response. There is
a lot more to be said about the application of this technique, and there are several exercises to
be practiced again and again in order to increase our awareness of the content of the list of
blessings. It takes one or more hours to talk to patients only about this one method, with
additional follow up sessions, all of which is beyond the scope of this presentation. For now,
we only need to remember the name of the method: The list of blessings; and the main
statement is: Speak about the blessings of your Lord.

Every method we shall use will have two components: one is the visualization of a mental
picture, and the other component is a short statement to act as a reminder. For this method,
the mental picture to visualize is the image of the two lists. The statement to say is: Speak
about the blessings of your Lord (18). 

B. The hate group: This includes anger, hate, desire for revenge, and feelings of guilt. What
is the mechanism of formation of the negative emotions of this group? It is the presence of
bad deeds or practices that I do not like. If the bad deeds were done by someone else I
feel angry, I hate the person for what he or she did, or I may not hate the person but hate
what he or she did, and I may have the desire to take revenge. If I was the one responsible
for the bad deed, I feel guilty for what I did. What is the solution? We have to recognize one
fact, and possess one qualification.
Elkadi - Quranic Concepts

The fact to recognize is that the effect of harbored hate--especially if mixed with anger--on the person harboring it is the same as the effect of concentrated acid on a metal container that contains it. The harbored hate or anger will damage the person who is harboring the hate or anger and not the one who is the object of hatred or anger. The Quranic statement "die with your anger" (10) is literally accurate. If anger is not completely eliminated it can ultimately lead to death. That is why we are advised not only to control our anger but to follow it with forgiveness and good deeds to be sure it is completely eliminated: "Those .......... who restrain anger, and pardon all people, for Allah loves those who do good" (19).

The one qualification we must have is "self love" or "to insist on what is of benefit for you" (20). The issue of self love is a complex one because many "good" people have difficulty accepting the concept, or at least they feel uneasy about it because they confuse it with "bad" selfishness. It takes sometimes one hour to give the patients adequate explanation, justification, and regulation of self love from the Islamic point of view--which happens to be the logical point of view, even for non-Muslims. There is no direct statement in the Quran about self love, although the same conclusion can be reached indirectly from several other injunctions. The teachings of our Prophet Muhammad PBUH about this subject are more specific. The most direct statement is "insist on what is of benefit for you" (20),
Elkadi - Quranic Concepts

in addition to his statements about loving for people what you love for yourself, "to love for your brother what you love for your self" (21) (حَبِّي بِحَبِّ لَأْخِي مَا بِحَبِّ لِنفْسِي).

The regulations of self love in relation to love of others are at three levels: the quality, the quantity, and the timing. The quality of the love I give myself is the same quality as the love I give others, always the best I have. The quantity of love and care I give myself is always less than what I give others, simply because my needs are much less than what I can give. The timing, however, is to give myself its little share first, then everybody else.

Where did we get these regulations from? These are the results of what we learn from a teaching by our Prophet Muhammad PBUH when he points to the human body as a model to learn from, indicating that the rules governing the relationship between the members of the community should be like the rules governing the relationship between the organs of the body. "The example of the believers in their kindness to each other, their cooperation, and their mercy among each other is like the body, if one of its organs complains the rest of the body comes to its rescue with attention and fever" (22).

Once self love is clear, and its regulations are understood, we can use the concept. What is the name of the method? Self love or insist on what is of benefit for you.

What is the mental image to be visualized? The metal container with the steaming concentrated acid contained in it, knowing that I am the container and the acid is the negative emotion. What is the statement I shall use as reminder? Insist on what is of
benefit for you (20) Once I realize that

this negative emotion is going to damage me, I shall be very quick to get rid of it, because

this is in my best interest and because I love myself. Once I get rid of the negative emotion, I shall be in a better position to deal with the persons who caused it. Either I get rid of them, or I go away from them, or I decide to continue dealing with them if this proves to be of benefit for me. In this situation, once I can see the benefits coming to me from the association with these persons, their bad deeds will not bother me any more, simply because the benefits exceed the harm. As a matter of fact, once I adopt such a positive cheerful attitude, it is quite possible that the bad persons will gradually improve.

C. The group of fear: This includes fear, anxiety, worry, and insecurity. Helplessness is also part of this group as it was part of the depression group. What is the mechanism of formation of the emotions in this group? It is always due to the presence of an element of weakness, and weakness is always relative to something else. If I feel that my resources are less than the resources of whatever is facing me, be it a person, a cancer, a virus, a beast, or a challenge that requires more resources than I have, I will feel afraid, worried, or insecure.

What is the method? The pooling of resources. If I can find enough outside resources to add to mine to the extent that my combined resources are equal to or more than those of whatever is facing me, I shall lose the fear. The secret for the success of this method is to have
my combined resources facing the resources of whatever is causing my fear in order to see
the difference. This principle could utilize any material or human resources. However, any
material or human source of support is limited and could fail me at any time. Therefore,
the only source of support that is guaranteed to exceed all other resources, and that can help
me in any situation or confrontation is God the Almighty. But first, I have to qualify for the
love and support of God by thinking and acting according to His rules and guidance. What
is the mental image to visualize? I must feel the presence of God with me as if I see Him, and
visualize whatever is causing my fear in front of me. What is the statement to use as a
reminder? Who is stronger or better? or "Isn't God enough for this servant? and they
frighten you using those who are less than Him" (23).

Once I realize that whatever is facing me is much less than God the Almighty, then
nothing in the world can cause my fear. Once the fear is gone, I shall be in a much
better position to deal with whatever was causing it. If it was a cancer or virus, my immune
cells that used to be afraid and unable to attack will become confident and aggressive, and take
care of the disease. If it was a human opponent, I shall have the logic and the words to reason
with the person or somehow deal with the situation. If it was an animal, then just losing the
fear will keep the animal from attacking me. If the will of God is that I die while fighting the
disease, or fighting a human enemy or even an animal, I shall die in a winning mood, and my
benefits on my list of blessings will be beyond any benefits I could dream of.
Elkadi - Quranic Concepts

The Quranic concepts that we have reviewed address most of the basic problems in the three groups of negative emotions. However, several other Quranic concepts have to be used to treat specific issues, specific individual situations, or a certain emotion within one of the three groups. The time does not allow us to address any of these now. I have to say, however, that the Quran is a source of endless treasures, for the practitioner of the healing arts and for everybody else. It is at the top of the list on the list of blessings.
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