Synopsis of the Friday Sermon delivered by Ameer Mustapha Elturk on November 03, 2017:

Spirituality and Mental Health

Allah (SWT) informed us there will be no escape from trials in this world. He categorically cautioned, “And most certainly, We shall try you with some fear and hunger, loss of wealth, lives and crops. And give glad tidings (O prophet) to those who are patient (in adversity).” (al-Baqarah, 2:155)

The ayah explains the various states of mind we experience throughout our short-lived lives. Each person regardless of whether she or he is Muslim or non-Muslim, male or female will at one point in his or her lifetime experience some fear, will go hungry, will lose his/her job, house or other possession, will get sick (at times with incurable diseases), will be tried with death, crops yielding zero harvest due to drought or have businesses that fail. These states of mind may lead to anxiety and/or depression.

Most people treat anxieties and depression not in the way the Qur’an and the Sunnah prescribe, rather through prescription drugs. The populace has become dependent on psychiatrists prescribing Prozac among other drugs that profit none except doctors and pharmaceutical companies which in reality care more about money than our well-being.

Smart believers who know and understand such warnings with full conviction and expectation that he or she will experience these states of mind would prepare for it. For example, when it is announced there will be a shortage of food, we rush to grocery stores and fill our basements and pantries with food. A smart thing to do. In other words, we prepare for the event that hasn’t happened yet. Similarly, as believers, being informed of what to expect during our lifetime, one should prepare whether it happens or not. So how do we prepare to overcome anxieties and depression?

First, let us understand what anxiety is. According to the Medical News Today, anxiety is a general term for several disorders that cause nervousness, fear, apprehension, and worrying. These disorders affect how we feel and behave and they can manifest real physical symptoms.[1]

Anxiety disorders may be caused by environmental factors, medical factors, genetics, brain chemistry, substance abuse or a combination of these. It is mostly triggered, however, by the stress in our lives.[2]

It should be noted that people with severe cases of mental illness including disorders that produce psychotic symptoms including but not limited to severe anxiety, major depression or thoughts of suicide need to consult a therapist, psychologist or a psychiatrist depending on the severity of the illness. However, for most people
spirituality is a way to cope with the day-to-day life’s challenges that may cause anxiety and depression.

More people today are under stress than ever before – particularly our youth. Studies show that work, money and job stability are the main sources of stress which lead to anxiety. Stress has a profound negative impact on one’s mental and physical health.

This is where Islam comes to the fore. Islam provides us with a positive outlook on life so we may overcome these states of mind with strength, not weakness. The Qur’an clearly informs us that we were created by Allah (SWT) and that every human soul on earth is going to be tested and tried by his/her Creator. “Blessed is He in Whose hand is Dominion; and He has power over everything. (He) who created death and life to try you in order to see who among you are best in conduct. And He is the Almighty, the Forgiving.” (al-Mulk, 67:1-2) In other words, Allah (SWT) tries us to see how we handle the affairs of life.

So it does not come as a surprise for the believer, Allah (SWT) also explains the types of tests we are going to experience. Rest assured, as Allah (SWT) promised, at times, we will go through cycles of fear. There will come a time when we have to go hungry. There will come a time when we won’t have enough money to eat, live, and buy what we want. We will definitely be tested with ailments, diseases and death.

People who overcome such life events have one thing in common; they endure the trials with patience and perseverance. “And give good news to those who are patient, who, when inflicted with calamity, say, ‘We belong to God and to Him we shall return.’” (al-Baqarah, 2:155-156) In simple terms, it is not the end of the world. Instead of becoming anxious and depressed they are steadfast in the face of adversity. They face hardship with strength. We are reminded that this world is imperfect and such trials are but a part of life.

Competition for the pursuit of worldly endeavors is a source of anxiety and depression. The pursuit of happiness is a slogan of consumerism, materialism and secularism. We are led to believe that we only live once and that accumulation of wealth and possession is a source of happiness and contentment. As we all know too well, this happiness is fleeting. Among the wealthiest of people are those who are utterly depressed and miserable. Many celebrities and wealthy people take their lives and commit suicide. They filled their lives with riches but could not fill their hearts with peace and contentment. The void can only be filled through a meaningful connection with our Creator. Competition is sanctioned in Islam but only for the hereafter, “And in that (the pursuit of Paradise) let those who are in competition compete.” (al-Mutaaffifeen, 83:26)

The Prophet cursed those whose only goal in life is money, “Woe to the slave of dinar and dirham” Although he may be Abdullah (slave of Allah) or Abdul Rahman (the slave of the most Merciful) but in reality he is enslaved by his greed to worldly possessions and materialism. He/she is the slave of the mighty dollar. And the more one competes for worldly endeavors the more miserable one gets. “Woe to every slanderer, backbiter, who amasses wealth and counts it, thinking that his wealth will make him immortal. Never! He will be cast into the Crusher” (al-Humazah, 104, 1-4) “Your greed for more has distracted you (from the pursuit of real happiness) until you visit your graves.” (al-Takathur, 102:1-2)

And what does one take with him/her when departing this world? Nothing except one’s faith and deeds. Not only is competing for worldly endeavors a source of misery in this world; he/she will be tormented in the “Crusher (al-hutamah,) and do you know what the Crusher (al-Hutamah) is? It is the kindled fire of God.” (al-Humazah, 104, 1-4) Double loss.
Lack of trust in God produces anxiety and depression. Financial insecurity is a cause of anxiety. We often forget that Allah (SWT) is the Provider (al-Razzaq) and Sustainer. Do we, as believers, not have the certainty (yaqin) that He will take care of us? Why do people enter panic mode when they lose their job, wondering how they will pay bills and feed the family? This phenomenon is all too common. We simply lack trust in the Provider and Sustainer. One’s attitude should be as the Prophet (SAW) taught, “Praise be to God in any case.” Keeping the bond and spiritual link with Allah strong gives one hope and confidence that Allah (SWT) who sees and hears all will certainly come to our aid. After all, it is He who is in total control of everything. We must have true faith in God and complete reliance on Him.

Omar (RAA) said, I heard the messenger of Allah (SAW) say, “If you only rely on Allah as you ought to rely on him, He would have provided for you as He provides for the birds. They leave in the morning on an empty stomach and return in the evening with full belly.”

Three observations to be made regarding this hadith. One, before the birds leave in search for their daily bread, they congregate and celebrate the praises of Allah in the early hours of the morning and throughout the day. We call it chirping but in reality they are exalting and glorifying Allah (SWT), their Provider, “Do you not see that all (creatures) that are in the heavens and on earth praise God, even the birds lined up in ranks? Each knows its (own way) of prayer and glorification. God has full knowledge of what they do.” (al-Nur, 24:41)

Birds, among other creatures, serve God and pray to Him, “But you do not understand their glorification.” (al-Isra’, 17:44) He is the only refuge they have.

Second, birds, after glorifying Allah (SWT), as do other creatures, go out and seek their provision. They don’t sit idle waiting for a morsel of food to be dropped from the sky. They go after their rations and find it. Finally, no bird hoards food for the next meal, what to speak of the next day for fear of shortage. There is no need for that because they trust Allah (SWT). They are certain that their food will be provided for them every day.

Lack of trust in God indeed produces anxiety. We must have the highest level of certainty (yaqin) that He will provide for us as He provides for the birds; that He will help us find a job if we are jobless; that He will facilitate our affairs for us; that He will not abandon us in times of adversity as long as we don’t abandon Him in times of prosperity. He is our Lord and Master. We must be faithful servants to Him to earn His compassion and mercy. I shall, sincerely and wholeheartedly, celebrate his praises in the early hours of the morning and throughout the day as birds and other creatures do to earn His help and support.

Lack of spirituality and connection with Allah (SWT) is indeed a cause of anxiety and depression. The first story that appears in the Qur’an is the story of our father Adam (AS). In surah al-Baqarah we are told that Allah (SWT) wanted to place a vicegerent on earth. Adam and Eve receive their training before settling on earth to assume the role as vicegerent. While in the garden, Iblis entices them to disobey God. They fall in the trap and feel remorseful. They repent and ask for forgiveness. Allah, the Forgiving, accepts their repentance and forgives them. Prior to being dispatched from the garden to assume his role, Adam receives clear instructions from his Lord. “We said, ‘Descend all of you from here (the garden,) and whenever guidance comes to you from Me (as it certainly will), whoever follows My Guidance, they will have nothing to fear, nor will they[grieve.’” (al-Baqarah, 2:38)
The same story is repeated in surat Ta Ha with additional information. Adam, while getting ready to assume his appointment, is once again instructed, “He (God) said, ‘Descend you two (Iblis and Adam) from here (the garden) as enemies to each other. Nonetheless, whenever guidance comes to you from Me (as it certainly will), whoever follows My Guidance, shall neither go astray (and be lost) nor be depressed.’” Ta Ha, (20:123) He then informs us of the consequence of turning away from His guidance. He says, “And whoever turns away from My remembrance (guidance) will certainly have a miserable life and We shall raise him up blind on the Day of Resurrection.” Ta Ha, (20:124) The wicked soul that deviated from Allah’s guidance will complain, “He will say, ‘My Lord! why did you raise me up blind while I had sight before.’” Ta Ha, (20:125) Allah (SWT) swiftly replies, “He will say, ‘This is how it is, when Our revelations (guidance) came to you, you ignored them, so today you will be ignored.’” Ta Ha, (20:126) Misery and gloom will extend to the next world, but the difference is that it will be eternal.

One who is oblivious of God’s guidance will not only lose the good life of the hereafter but be in a state of total darkness in this world. Most of our stress, anxiety, and depression is due to lack of adherence to the Guidance of Allah (SWT). Even those who pray and fast and fulfill cultural rituals while not heeding the Book of Allah and the tradition of the Prophet (SAW) will go through such states of mind and find themselves miserable and depressed.

It’s clear that lack of spirituality, connection with God and holding fast to His guidance as well as to the prophetic tradition is a major source of anxiety and depression. Positively, regardless of one’s socio-economic condition, connecting with God and following His commands, living by His wishes and guidance will help the individual overcome such states of mind and guarantees peace and contentment within one’s soul and heart. “Those who have (real) faith, their hearts find peace through the remembrance (zikr) of Allah. Is it not in the remembrance of Allah hearts find peace?” (al-Ra’d, 13:28) One of the names of the Qur’an is al-Zikr, the Reminder, hence, the most effective zikr is to connect with Allah (SWT) through His Book.

The Prophet (SAW) hailed the strong believer. He said, “A strong believer is better and is more beloved to Allah than a weak believer, and there is goodness in both. Safeguard that which benefits you and seek help from Allah and do not lose heart. If something (bad) befalls you, don’t say, ‘If only I had done this instead,’ rather say, ‘Allah has decreed what He wills,’ for surely the phrase, ‘If only’ opens the way for satan.”

A strong mu’min is a true believer who is cognizant of Allah (SWT) and does his/her very best to live by His commands and guidance. On the other hand, a weak believer could be a Muslim who, although he/she may be praying and fasting, is spiritually disconnected from Allah and His guidance. Often times such people blame either themselves, others or sometimes God for their misfortune and the trials they are made to receive.

A true believer, mu’min, is worry free. The Prophet (SAW) eloquently describes the affairs of the true believer, “How amazing is the affair of the believer. There is good for him in everything and that is for no one but the believer, mu’min. When something good happens to him, he expresses gratitude to Allah and that is good for him, and if hardship comes his way, he endures it patiently and that is better for him.” Surely, the true believers heed the advice of Allah (SWT), “O believers! Seek help through patience and prayers, for Allah is with those who patiently persevere.” (al-Baqarah, 2:153)

We should be grateful to Allah (SWT) for giving us what it takes to overcome the challenges of life. We
have the final Guidance, the Qur’an, and the tradition of the Prophet (SAW) who, according to his wife Aishah (RAA) was, ‘The walking Qur’an.’

No person, not even Musa (AS) who complained, “O my people! Why do you hurt me when you know I am the messenger of Allah sent to you,” (al-Saff, 61:5) have gone through trials like Muhammad (SAW). He was abandoned and ridiculed by the people he loved the most as they claimed he was a liar, magician, sorcerer, crazy, and more. As an introvert, he (SAW) kept things inside and did not complain. He may have succeeded in hiding his feelings from people but he could not hide them from the All-Hearing, All-Seeing. By way of consoling His Prophet, Allah (SWT) reveals, “Indeed, We know how your heart is distressed by what they say.” (al-Hashr, 15:97)

Consider the event of al-Ta’if that occurred soon after the loss of two of the most dear persons to him and supporters of his mission, his wife Khadijah (RAA) and his uncle Abu Talib. The Prophet (SAW) who wished nothing but good for the people of al-Ta’if finds himself rejected, detested and ostracized. The people of al-Ta’if pelt him with stones as they chase him out of the town. That year was marked as, “the year of sadness.”

The Prophet (SAW) relieves his distress and anxiety by expressing his feelings to the One who listens.

“To You, my Lord, I complain of my weakness, lack of support and the humiliation I am made to receive. Most Compassionate and Merciful! You are the Lord of the weak, and you are my Lord. To whom do You leave me? To a distant person who receives me with hostility? Or to an enemy You have given power over me? As long as you are not displeased with me, I do not care what I face. I would, however, be much happier with Your mercy. I seek refuge in the light of Your face. By which all darkness is dispelled And both this life and the life to come are put in their right course against incurring your wrath or being the subject of your anger. To You I submit, until I earn Your pleasure. Everything is powerless without your support.

Certainly connecting with Allah (SWT) will greatly help us overcome any type of anxiety and depression. We must have full confidence and complete trust in Allah (SWT). As mentioned in the sacred hadith, “Allah the Most High said, ‘I am as My servant thinks of Me…’” We must have the conviction that His Mercy encompasses all things and that only He can relieve us from hardships and comfort us with solace, peace and tranquility.

We pray, “O Allah, we seek refuge in You from anxiety, sorrow, weakness, laziness, miserliness, cowardice, the burden of debts and from being overpowered by men.” Ameen.