



“What Did I Do to Deserve This?” Conquering the Assumptions that Hold You Back

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Sometimes when you're in a dark place you think you've been buried, but you've actually been planted.¹

It all started in college. Ahmed couldn't remember the exact turning point but, little by little, anxiety, anger, and negativity began to overtake his daily life. He struggled to sleep due to his racing heart and mind and also started to feel like getting out of bed each morning was a monumental task. Studying for exams became difficult after his first failing grade and his constant worries about further failures. Nearly every day was filled with dread and anger. He couldn't understand where all of these feelings were coming from.

Ahmed had looked forward to a career as a pharmacist but, as he continued to struggle in his classes, he gave up on this ambition. He had looked forward to getting married but marriage apps increased his anxiety and frustration levels. Slowly, his goals and dreams began to disappear. Friendships began to deteriorate as his struggles amplified and he complained about everything going on in his life each time he hung out with someone. He found himself getting angry over small things and noticed his friends stopped spending time with him, making him feel even more resentful. He began to miss prayers as he began to feel angry toward Allah for everything he was going through. He had done everything “right”—he had worked hard, prayed, been a good person and a good student—but he was still struggling with uncontrollable emotions. He thought to himself, “It doesn't matter what I do; I tried my best and I'm still suffering. What did I do to deserve this?”

What is happening to me?

When life takes a turn in a direction we did not anticipate, we suddenly have to reassess our lives and accept a new reality. The dreams we had so tenderly nurtured are suddenly burned to the ground only to be replaced by the scary realization that our lives are not at all what we had pictured.

¹ Christine Caine, “Sometimes when you're in a dark place,” Facebook, January 9, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/theChristineCaine>.

Coming to terms with a new reality involves the loss of a great deal in our lives. Every trauma involves some sort of loss—the loss of something tangible, such as a loved one, a job, a marriage, or one’s health or the loss of something intangible, such as the dream we had once envisioned our lives would look like. No one expects that their pregnancy will end in miscarriage, that a dream job won’t be nearly as fulfilling as anticipated, or that a marriage will end. Once reality hits, it can be difficult to cope.

When difficult situations befall us, it is natural to experience pain and a sense of disappointment, shock, and anger. After all, you likely spent hours imagining what your life would look like only to realize it didn’t pan out in the way you envisioned. This can bring up a variety of difficult thoughts and questions including, “Why do I keep getting hurt?” and “What did I do to deserve this?” and “Is God angry with me?”

When these thoughts take hold, they can sometimes result in negative feelings toward Allah (swt). We can never say it is “ok” or “permissible” to internalize anger or ill will toward Allah; however, it is important to know that it is a lot more common than you may think.

Abū Hurayrah narrates that a companion came to the Messenger of Allah (pbuh) and asked: “We have thoughts which we cannot dare talk about and we do not like that we have them.” The Messenger of Allah (pbuh) said: “Do you really experience this? Yes, they replied. The Messenger of Allah (pbuh) said: “They are clear signs of faith.”²

We see in this hadith that even some of the best people to walk this earth, our righteous predecessors, struggled with these fearful, confusing thoughts of feeling inadequate in their relationship with Allah (swt). With regards to these difficult thoughts, the Prophet ﷺ told us, “Verily, Allah has pardoned my nation for what occurs within themselves, as long as they do not speak of it or act upon it.”³ These passing thoughts say nothing about your faith in Allah; rather, the discomfort you

² *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, no. 5111.

³ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 6287; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 127.

feel in experiencing these thoughts is indicative of how important your relationship with Allah (swt) is to you.

Understanding your thoughts and emotions

Our minds often behave as though we possess a crystal ball, magic mirror, or telepathy (mind-reading) ability. Of course, none of these are real or possible yet our minds can trick us into believing that our thoughts are accurate despite it being impossible to ascertain the future or what others are really thinking.

Jumping to conclusions

This “magical” ability we act as though our minds have is called *jumping to conclusions*. This type of cognitive distortion (negative thought pattern) is defined as creating a negative interpretation of something even though there are no definite facts that convincingly support that conclusion. Jumping to conclusions can occur in two ways: mind-reading and fortune-telling. “Mind-reading” involves a person thinking that others are negatively evaluating them or have bad intentions for them. When a person is “fortune-telling,” they are predicting a negative future outcome or deciding that situations will turn out badly before the situation has even occurred.

As human beings, our minds and our hearts search for meaning. When someone you care about hurts you or when a tragedy strikes, your brain makes assumptions about why this has happened. We tend to pick interpretations that fit with our existing view of the world. The problem with this is that traumatic experiences change our view of the world from one that is realistic to one that is fear-based and pessimistic. Every conclusion we come to and every perception will be based on something inaccurate—pain, fear, and anger.

What started as one difficulty becomes something insurmountable because our minds perceive it to be so. Your mind begins to jump to conclusions to make sense of the situation but these conclusions are often negative and painful. Consider these examples:

You’ve lost your job and so you begin to think, “I must be a fool, that’s why I was fired. There’s no way I’ll ever be employed again.”

Your engagement has not come to fruition and you think to yourself, “She must have found someone better. I’m not worthy of being a husband. No one will find me worthwhile or worthy of love.”

You have miscarried during your pregnancy and you think, “Allah must think that I’ll be a bad mother so He’ll never bless me with a child.”

The way we think is incredibly powerful and it can either help us to move forward or break us during difficulties.

The impact of anger when we’re going through hard times

Although we know of so many examples from our Islamic tradition that teach us that, spiritually, trials are good for us, they definitely don’t always *feel* good in the moment. Difficult emotions naturally arise during times of struggle including pain, disappointment, sadness, and anxiety. Every emotion serves the function of signaling to us that something is happening.

Another emotion that may arise during times of struggle is that of anger. Anger is a natural part of life as the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ describes, “Verily, anger is a burning ember in the heart of the son of Adam.”⁴ Although this is a human emotion, it can be detrimental to us in many circumstances. Anger can feel overwhelming and sometimes terrifying if it seems uncontrollable; it can be helpful

⁴ *Jāmi‘ al-Tirmidhī*, no. 2191.

to understand how anger moves through your brain and body before we discuss ways to regain a sense of control over this emotion.

The angry brain

Stress Response: When something happens (a trigger), anger activates the amygdala in your brain before you’re even aware that it’s happening. The amygdala is the brain area responsible for emotional processing, particularly fear, anxiety, and aggression. When anger surges, the amygdala turns on the stress response system in your brain and body to prepare your body to respond to a threat. The adrenal glands secrete stress hormones (i.e., cortisol, adrenaline, and noradrenaline), which impact your brain and body quickly.

Judgment Reduction and Pain Amplification: The brain regions that are responsible for good judgment and making new memories (prefrontal cortex and hippocampus) start to experience a loss of neurons⁵ in this situation. That’s why you might struggle to make good decisions or remember what you wanted to say during an argument when you are struggling with anger. Along with neuron loss, too much cortisol also decreases serotonin, which is the hormone that makes you feel happy. With less serotonin, anger is amplified, as are physical and emotional pain.⁶

Jumping to Conclusions and Assuming the Worst: Furthermore, researchers have found that when something negative happens and you’re not 100% sure what caused it to happen, you are more likely to jump to negative conclusions and to quickly associate two things together that may not actually be linked.⁷ When there is a lack of clarity, it’s very easy for our brains to choose the worst possible

⁵ Wayne C. Drevets, Joseph L. Price, Joseph R. Simpson, Richard D. Todd, Theodore Reich, Michael Vannier, and Marcus E. Raichle, “Subgenual Prefrontal Cortex Abnormalities in Mood Disorders,” *Nature* 386 (1997): 824–27.

⁶ “How Anger Affects the Brain and Body,” The National Institute for the Clinical Application of Behavioral Medicine, accessed July 10, 2020, <https://www.nicabm.com/how-anger-affects-the-brain-and-body-infographic/>.

⁷ Sang Wan Lee, John P. O’Doherty, and Shinsuke Shimojo, “Neural Computations Mediating One-Shot Learning in the Human Brain,” *PLoS Biology* 13, no. 4 (2015), art. no. e1002137, ISSN 1544-9173.

explanation despite it being highly unlikely. When your spouse is late and not answering his phone, do you immediately start to wonder if he has been in a car accident? Our minds often jump to negative conclusions despite rationally knowing that the likelihood is much less than a simpler conclusion (i.e., your husband’s phone ran out of charge).

Consider the way jumping to conclusions might progress after something like a miscarriage:

“I’ve been hoping for a child for so long and now the chance has been snatched away from me.”



“What did I do to deserve this? Allah must think I’m unworthy of being a mother.”
(Mind-reading)



“If I’m unworthy of being a mother, I’ll never have a child and my husband will hate me.”
(Fortune-telling and Mind-reading)



“My husband will divorce me and I’ll be alone forever. ”
(Fortune-telling)

Now that we understand the impact that *jumping to conclusions* can have on your life and thought process, let’s explore how to change these thoughts.

Changing your thoughts

Jumping to conclusions depends on false evidence, fear, and distrust. People often have the misconception that “expecting the worst” will save them from disappointment. However, in reality, setting our sights on the worst possible outcome only sets us up for anxiety and depression. When we expect that people will mistreat us, our fear prevents us from nurturing healthy relationships. When we expect to fail at something, we are much less likely to try our best due to our fears. Allah says, “**Indeed, those who have believed** [in Prophet Muhammad] and those [before Him] who were Jews or Sabeans or Christians—those [among them] who believed in Allah and the Last Day and did righteousness—**no fear will there be for them**, nor will they grieve.”⁸

Jumping to conclusions can also impact your faith and can leave you feeling shaken. Consider how an initial thought might lead down this path:

“I’ve always worked hard and been a good Muslim but I still lost my job. Why does Allah allow bad things to happen to good people?”



“Allah didn’t save my job, so He must not care about me.”
(Mind-reading)



“I can’t believe Allah would do this to me. I do everything right and get nothing in return. Nothing is going to change so there’s no point in trying.”
(Fortune-telling)

⁸ Qur’an 5:69.

Our thoughts can drastically impact our emotions and behaviors. When anger floods our minds and hearts, it's easy for our thoughts to follow suit as well. However, as we see in the example above, allowing our angry thoughts to take root can be detrimental to our relationship with Allah (swt) and can negatively impact our desire to connect with Him.

Changing your thoughts: Choose the conclusion you want

It's inevitable to jump to some sort of conclusion when something happens. We naturally try to make sense of life by interpreting events and predicting what seems logical in the moment. However, we can **choose** which conclusion or interpretation we want. We may not be able to control the emotions we immediately feel upon receiving devastating news or witnessing a tragedy. We may not even be able to control the immediate passing thoughts that come to our minds in such a situation. However, we all have a choice: We can choose to dwell on thoughts that bring us closer to Allah or that push us further away from Him. And we can choose actions that either increase the strength of our connection with Allah or decrease it.

Consider the example of Mūsá عليه السلام when he was trapped with the army of Pharaoh on one side and the Red Sea on the other. In these verses see the example of two different thought processes: One that would strengthen your relationship with Allah (swt) and one that would diminish it.

When the two groups came face to face, the companions of Moses cried out, “We are overtaken for sure.” Moses reassured [them], “Absolutely not! My Lord is certainly with me—He will guide me.” So We inspired Moses: “Strike the sea with your staff,” and the sea was split, each part was like a huge mountain.⁹

⁹ Qur'an 26:61–63.

During a difficult situation, the people of Mūsá jumped to the conclusion that they were doomed, which brought about feelings of fear and devastation. We see a very different response in Mūsá (as) when he assumed the opposite. He expected good from Allah (swt) and received a miracle that we still reflect on today.

We find the evidence we search for, so search for the good and watch your thoughts and emotions transform.

Our lives do not always follow the trajectory that we hope for. The standards we often set for ourselves in order to be happy and content may not always be realistic. Likewise, the expectations that we have for Allah (swt)—namely to decree everything we deem best for ourselves or that we have decided should be a part of our life plan—create a very narrow view of our lives and, more importantly, our perception of Allah (swt). When our perception of Allah (swt) is based on this inaccurate perception, we tend to fall prey to a variety of misconceptions about our lives, our struggles and why these things are happening.

Addressing these misconceptions can be a beneficial step for our mental and spiritual health.

Jumping to conclusions: Misconception #1

Why is my life so hard? It wasn't supposed to be this way

Life is filled with uncertainty. Change and unknowns are always imminent but we tend to imagine we are immune to unpredictability. The tests we endure serve as a reminder that we're not. Although in reality even a week ago we didn't know if we'd be alive right now, our daily lives lull us into a false sense of certainty.

Allah (swt) reminds us, “Do the people think that they will be left to say, ‘We believe’ and they will not be tried? We certainly tested those before them. And [in this way] Allah will clearly distinguish between those who are truthful and those

who are liars.”¹⁰

Although our lives are filled with uncertainty, we know one thing for sure: That we will be tested. The sooner we accept this reality, the better we will be able to cope in difficult situations. Every struggle that comes our way gives us the opportunity to teach ourselves to cope with distress, sit with discomfort, and accept circumstances that we can’t control while simultaneously working on what can be changed.

Action Point: Channel your energy in a positive direction rather than fighting against the inevitable. Acceptance of reality gives you the opportunity to take action. Although you may imagine that your life should have looked different, the reality is that you are precisely where you are meant to be at this point in your life. Asking why is not as important as asking “Now what?” Rather than asking why this is happening, ask yourself: “This is happening. So now what?” Our responses, not the circumstances themselves, dictate how we live our lives. Even if it doesn’t feel like it, you are perfectly equipped to deal with everything you’re facing because you were meant to face it. Allah reminds us, “Allah does not burden a soul beyond what it can bear...”¹¹ This doesn’t mean that it won’t be hard but it does mean that you have the tools to overcome it. Remember, if Allah has chosen you to face these tests, then you are guaranteed to have the ability to succeed through them.

Jumping to conclusions: Misconception #2

I must have done something to deserve this pain

As human beings, we pass judgment based on the good and bad that we can directly see. Suddenly thoughts like, “I must be a bad person to be enduring so much pain” come up. When things don’t turn out as we would like them to, it is

¹⁰ Qur’an 29:2–3.

¹¹ Qur’an 2:286.

very tempting to assume that had we done things differently, the story would have had a happier ending. We have a need to believe that the world makes sense, that there is a clear cause for every effect, and a reason that we can grasp for everything that happens. These thoughts are a form of severe self-criticism and can amplify the pain you’re already enduring.

The antidote to self-criticism is self-compassion and is something provided to us by Allah (swt). We tend to operate under the assumption that Allah gives good things and allows good to befall those whom He loves. But in reality, Allah tells us that He tests those who He loves. And in reality, both times of ease and times of hardship are tests as well as blessings.

And as for man, when his Lord tries him and [thus] is generous to him and favors him, he says, “My Lord has honored me.” But when He tries him and restricts his provision, he says, “My Lord has humiliated me.”¹²

The verse that immediately follows this begins with the word *kallā*, meaning “But no!” Here we see that Allah (swt) denies this thought process and that He gives to those He loves as well as those whom He does not love; and that He withholds from those He loves as well as those He does not love. Blessings and difficulties are not an indication of the love of Allah.

We imagine that hardships indicate that Allah is punishing us, that Allah wants ill for us; that we’ve worshipped Him for years and instead of blessings, we have been dealt hardships. However, consider other times in your life where pain literally yielded gain. The pain of exercise led to fitness and better physical and mental health. The pain of studying for a huge exam led to feeling prepared and doing well. The pain of working on better communication with your spouse led to a healthier relationship.

Hardships differentiate us—they allow us to progress and grow. Sometimes this growth is seen in this *dunyā* and sometimes it’s saved for the *ākhirah*.

¹² Qur’an 89:15–16.

Regardless, ask yourself: If Allah truly wanted to harm you, why would there be such a tremendous reward guaranteed for you in the *ākhirah* for what you’re enduring?

The Messenger of Allah ﷺ said: “Allah, the Exalted, says: ‘I have no reward except *Jannah* for a believing slave of Mine who shows patience and anticipates My reward when I take away his favorite one from the inhabitants of the world.’”¹³

The supplications of three persons are never turned away: a fasting person until he breaks his fast, a just ruler, and the supplication of the oppressed which is raised by Allah above the clouds, the gates of heaven are opened for it, and the Lord says: “By my might, I will help you in due time.”¹⁴

The Prophet ﷺ said, “No fatigue, nor disease, nor sorrow, nor sadness, nor hurt, nor distress befalls a Muslim, even if it were the prick he receives from a thorn, but that Allah expiates some of his sins for that.”¹⁵

These don’t sound like punishments, do they?

Action Point: Thoughts that you are deserving of pain and a life filled with negativity are a symptom of self-criticism. The antidote is self-compassion. Acknowledge the tremendous pain you’re enduring for a moment without trying to push it away. Once you have sat with this emotion for a few moments, consider how you would speak to a friend who is struggling with the same situation. What words would you use? Write out some kind, supportive, and gentle words that you would share with a friend and read them out to yourself. How does it feel to receive compassion during this difficult moment?

Jumping to conclusions: Misconception #3

¹³ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 6424.

¹⁴ *Jamī‘ al-Tirmidhī*, no. 3598.

¹⁵ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, nos. 5641, 5642.

Allah is capable of anything so He should have protected me from this

Rather than expecting that Allah (swt) will grant us everything we *want* in the way we want it, shifting our understanding to realize that He (swt) provides us with everything we *need* can improve both our mental and spiritual health.

When we jump to conclusions about why certain tests were sent our way or why they shouldn't have been sent our way, we imagine, unwittingly, that we are capable of knowing what Allah is thinking. However, consider the Name of Allah, *al-Hakīm*: the One who is Most Knowing, Most Wise; the One who acts with perfect knowledge, wisdom and comprehension of everything; the One who does the proper thing in the proper way in the proper place at the proper time.

Abū Bakr (raḍiya Allāhu ‘anhu) used to say: “O Allah! You know me more than I know myself.”¹⁶ When we cannot even master baking a cake to perfection each time (with a recipe in hand), how can we expect to master an understanding of every facet of the universe or even every facet of our own lives?

The difference between Allah's knowledge and human knowledge is that we must acquire our knowledge by what we see and experience around us. On the other hand, Allah's knowledge has no beginning or end and is not based on trial and error. Allah (swt) tells us in the Qur'an:

And with Him are the keys of the unseen; none knows them except Him. And He knows what is on the land and in the sea. Not a leaf falls but that He knows it. And no grain is there within the darknesses of the earth and no moist or dry [thing] but that it is [written] in a clear record.¹⁷

While we focus on the single thread we imagine is perfectly needed in our lives, Allah (swt) sees the entire, beautiful tapestry that every single thread will

¹⁶ Rida M. Ibn Atheer, *Abu Bakr al-Seddeq: The First Caliph* (Beirut: Dar al-Kotob al-Ilmiyah, 2008), 18.

¹⁷ Qur'an 6:59.

eventually become. When Allah, the All-Knowing, The Mighty, The Wise tells us that both times of ease and times of hardship are tests and each has its blessings, we can confidently embrace this despite not always being able to see how this tapestry is being weaved.

Consider this statement by Ibn al-Qayyim,

Evil, as an independent phenomenon whereby no dimension of good is involved, has no existence in this world. There is nothing in our existence that can be called pure evil, because every evil in this world is good from one angle or another. For instance, sickness harms the body from one angle, while from other angles tests patience, evokes resilience, and may even strengthen immunity. Most disliked things are usually this way; never void of some benefit or another for the human being.¹⁸

Feelings of sadness and distress can lead to a pessimistic view of life and the world. Often it takes humility to truly be able to embrace Allah’s Wisdom. When our emotions tell us one thing, but the Word of Allah tells us another, it takes humility to say, “I know I can’t understand the full wisdom of Allah’s decrees but I can accept that they exist even if I don’t see them right now.”

Action Item: Remember that Allah (swt) gives us everything we need but not everything that we want. Have you ever thought you desperately needed something, were disappointed that it didn’t come to fruition and, after some time, you learned something that made you realize that it wasn’t right for you? Write about that experience and notice what thoughts and emotions come up.

Jumping to conclusions: Misconception #4

¹⁸ Ibn al-Qayyim, *Shifā’ al-‘alīl fī masā’il al-qadā’ wa-al-qadar wa-al-ḥikmah wa-al-ta’līl* (Cairo: Dār at-Turāth, 1978), 380–413.

Allah doesn’t care if I suffer

When bad things happen, it doesn’t mean Allah likes it. For example, does Allah like it when people do not worship Him? Of course not since Allah says, “And I did not create the jinn and mankind except to worship Me.”¹⁹ When we assume that everyone, including Allah, is out to get us or don’t care about us, we fall into the cognitive distortion of mind-reading. We assume ill intentions of Allah because our emotions overtake our thoughts. However, consider the statement of the Prophet

ﷺ

Allah says: “I am just as My slave thinks I am, (i.e., I am able to do for him what he thinks I can do for him) and I am with him if He remembers Me. If he remembers Me in himself, I too, remember him in Myself; and if he remembers Me in a group of people, I remember him in a group that is better; and if he comes one span nearer to Me, I go one cubit nearer to him; and if he comes one cubit nearer to Me, I go a distance of two outstretched arms nearer to him; and if he comes to Me walking, I go to him running.”²⁰

Does Allah truly wish you ill if He promises to come nearer to you if you take even the tiniest step toward Him? In reality, our thought processes regarding Allah have much more to do with us than they have to do with Allah. Therefore, it makes sense that Allah is as we expect Him to be—if we expect good of Allah, we will find good in every situation; if we expect bad from Allah, we will perceive that.

When we have been through something traumatic, our mind tricks us into misconceptions about Allah rather than thinking of Him as He deserves to be thought of. This can be particularly true when we have been hurt by someone in our lives.

When a person hurts you, it doesn’t mean that Allah (swt) doesn’t care that you are suffering. Allah (swt) has granted each of us free will. Through this free will, He allows things to happen but holds each of us accountable for whatever is done.

¹⁹ Qur’an 51:56.

²⁰ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 7405.

Allowing something to happen is not the same as allowing it to slide. Ibn al-Qayyim states,

When the slave commits an ugly prohibited act, what he did is certainly evil and sinful, and the Lord is the One who enabled him to be the ‘doer’ of that [deed]. This enablement from God is justice, mercy, and correctness, for Him making someone capable of acting [freely] is good, while its manifestation [in this case] was evil and ugly. By enabling, God has placed things where they belong, for that [granting free will] contains profound wisdom for which He should be praised. Therefore, this is actually good and wise and beneficial, even if what the slave does is a flaw, a defect, and evil.²¹

While free will is a blessing, it also means that sometimes this free will is used for evil. Allah is not the direct cause of this evil, nor does He like it, however He permits free will to remain for a higher purpose and the greater good. Allowing people to commit evil does not indicate that Allah doesn’t love us or care for us since it was a part of his love and care to provide us with the freedom to begin with. If you are unsure of Allah’s love, consider this hadith:

It was narrated that ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (may Allah be pleased with him) said: “Some prisoners were brought to the Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him), and there was a woman among the prisoners who was searching (for her child). When she found her child she embraced him and put him to her breast. The Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said to us, ‘Do you think that this woman would throw her child in the fire?’ We said, ‘No, by Allah, not if she is able not to.’ The Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said, ‘Allah is more merciful to His slaves than this woman is to her child.’”²²

Action Item: Our emotions can be very powerful but so can our thoughts and actions. When you notice yourself feeling unloved and doubting that Allah (swt)

²¹ Ibn al-Qayyim, *Shifā’ al-‘alīl*, 361.

²² *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 5653; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 6921.

cares about you, consider ways that He has shown you love and care throughout your life. To work on your difficult emotions through changing your thoughts, create a list of the different ways Allah has protected you, shown you mercy, and given you what you need. To work on your difficult emotions through changing your actions, create a list of ways you can choose to nurture your relationship with Allah (swt) and pick one to focus on today.

Winning the mental fight against “jumping to conclusions”

Consider the following steps as antidotes to jumping to negative conclusions about Allah (swt) during times of hardship:

1. *Pay Attention to Your Self-Talk*: Remember, just because you think something doesn't make it true. Ask yourself: What is going through my mind right now? When you feel yourself getting angry, what thoughts are going through your mind at that moment?
2. *Focus on the Facts*: Search for observable and tangible facts and events. These anchor us to reality and help us to be more objective. Once we look at the facts, we can determine if reality matches our negative perception, which it often doesn't.
3. *Consider Other Possibilities*: Part of focusing on the facts includes ensuring that you check all the facts. Some of the facts you consider will increase the likelihood of a positive outcome; however, we typically choose to focus on evidence that supports the belief that we already hold. In this step, also remind yourself of past positive outcomes. This serves as a reminder that good is possible since you have already experienced positive outcomes in the past. It can also cause you to question your “negative mind” because the more proofs you find of how your mind was wrong in the past when you

anticipated a negative outcome, the more flexible you can be in concluding that things can turn out just fine even when you assume the worst.

4. *Accept Uncertainty and Focus on the Present Moment*: We may never know for certain what people are thinking or what will happen in the future so worrying about something that is impossible to ascertain can be never-ending. In order to resist unnecessary predictions about others’ thoughts or the future, focus on what is certain—the present moment. Ibn al-Qayyim (*rahimahullah*) said, “Your attention must be directed to your life in the present—the time between two times. If you waste it, then you have wasted the opportunity to be of the fortunate and saved ones. If you look after it... then you will be successful and achieve rest, delight, and ever-lasting bliss.”²³ Focusing on the present moment can ground us and alleviate the anxiety we may be feeling about the future and shift our focus away from what others are thinking.

Inspirational *ayaat* & *hadiths* for reflection

And He has granted you all that you asked Him for. If you tried to count Allah’s blessings, you would never be able to enumerate them...²⁴

Satan threatens you with poverty and orders you to immorality, while Allah promises you forgiveness from Him and bounty. And Allah is all-Encompassing and Knowing.²⁵

And will provide for him from where he does not expect. And whoever relies upon Allah—then He is sufficient for him.²⁶

The Prophet ﷺ advised his daughter, Fatima *radi Allahu `anha*, to say in the morning and in the evening: “O Allah, I have hope in Your Mercy, so do

²³ Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyah, *al-Fawā'id* (n.p.: Dār al-Salām, 2019), 151–2.

²⁴ Qur'an 14:34.

²⁵ Qur'an 2:268.

²⁶ Qur'an 65:3.

not leave me in charge of my affairs even for a blink of an eye, and rectify for me all of my affairs. None has the right to be worshipped except You.”²⁷

‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Umar reported: The Messenger of Allah ﷺ would supplicate saying, “O Allah, I seek refuge in you from a decline in your blessings, the transformation of the wellness You have provided, Your sudden retribution, and all things displeasing to you.”²⁸

²⁷ *Jami‘ al-Tirmidhī*, no. 3524.

²⁸ *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2739.

Practical Exercises

Acceptance of Reality

Channel your energy in a positive direction rather than fighting against the inevitable. Acceptance of reality allows you to take action. Rather than asking why this is happening, ask yourself: “This is happening. So now what?”

What small step can you take to move forward once you have accepted the reality of the struggle you’re enduring?

Even if it doesn’t feel like it, you are perfectly equipped to deal with everything you’re facing because you were meant to face it. What skills/capabilities/strengths/blessings have you been equipped with?

Self-compassion

Notice self-critical thoughts that are going through your mind. Write them below:

The antidote to self-criticism is self-compassion. Consider how you would speak to a friend who is struggling with the same situation. What words would you use? Write out some kind, supportive, and gentle words that you would share with a friend and read them out to yourself.

How does it feel to receive compassion during this difficult moment?

What we need vs. what we want

Remember that Allah (swt) gives us everything we need but not everything that we want. Have you ever thought you desperately needed something, were disappointed that it didn't come to fruition and, after some time, you learned something that made you realize that it wasn't right for you? Write about that experience and notice what thoughts and emotions come up.

Remind yourself of Allah's love and care

Our emotions can be very powerful but so can our thoughts and actions. When you notice yourself feeling unloved and doubting that Allah (swt) cares about you, consider ways that He has shown you love and care throughout your life.

To work on your difficult emotions through changing your thoughts, create a list of the different ways Allah has protected you, shown you mercy, and given you what you need.

To work on your difficult emotions through changing your actions, create a list of ways you can choose to nurture your relationship with Allah (swt) and pick one to focus on today.

Winning the mental fight against “jumping to conclusions”

Be Aware of Your Thoughts:

When you are experiencing a negative emotion, ask yourself: What is going through your mind right now? What conclusion is your mind jumping to?

Focus on the Facts:

What are some observable and tangible facts about this situation? Do these facts match the thought you wrote above?

Consider Other Possibilities:

What are some other possible results in this situation other than the one you fear will happen? Or what are some other possible things that this person may be thinking? What are some times in the past when you have had positive outcomes in a similar situation?

Accept Uncertainty and Focus on the Present Moment:

What is something that is certain right at this moment? What is something you can say to yourself to help you to accept that some of what you are dealing with right now is beyond your control?

Follow-up: Ahmed’s case example

*After realizing that his friends all hung out at their favorite spot without him over the weekend, Ahmed felt his anger bubble over once again. After he cooled down a bit, he started to wonder about the impact he might be having on his relationships with people. He began to think back to his interactions with friends and realized that over the past few months, he hadn’t asked any of them how **they** were doing. Each time he spoke to someone, he complained about his own struggles. He started going through his friends’ Instagram accounts and realized that at least two of them had been dealing with their own difficulties during this time. This was the starting point that led Ahmed to reflect on the cycle that had led him to this point and to begin to gain a greater sense of control over his unhealthy responses to difficult situations.*

Ahmed began to pick up on patterns of behavior in his life as well as the thoughts that would go through his mind that kept him feeling hurt, angry, and hopeless and that impacted his relationships with Allah and others. As Ahmed began to identify his fortune-telling and mind-reading thought patterns, he began to work on them. Instead of thinking, “What’s the point of studying since it’s pretty impossible to get my grades up,” he began to think, “I can’t change the past but I can do my best to put in effort for the future.” Instead of thinking, “My friends must hate me and that’s why they aren’t hanging out with me anymore,” he began to think, “I’ve been really focused on my own struggles lately and haven’t been as kind to my friends so that’s something I’d like to work on.”

As he worked on these negative thought patterns, his behaviors changed as he began to identify the things that triggered his angry outbursts and began to practice healthier ways of responding to them. He began to exercise daily to release the adrenaline that was building up in his body. He felt a greater sense of calmness and began to feel proud of the way he was able to communicate with other people. He made it a point to ask his friends how they were doing and to journal about his own struggles to offer himself the release he needed.

Ahmed applied the same awareness to his thoughts about Allah and the impact this had on his relationship with Him. He realized that he had been thinking that Allah didn't care for him due to all of the struggles he was enduring. When he realized that this was an example of mind-reading, Ahmed began to remind himself, "Allah tests those He loves and I have to do my part to change my life as well." Ahmed reflected on the ways Allah had shown love and care to him in the past and present to alleviate these negative thoughts. As his thoughts toward Allah improved, his connection through acts of worship also improved. As he began to feel deserving of good, he began to take the initiative to increase the good in his life.