

# What's Trauma Got To Do With It?

*By: Br. Khaled Al-Nahar*

In many situations, mental illness has emanated from trauma. Many mental health professionals will not rule out the relationship between a possible traumatic event at some stage of a person's life and the development of mental illness.

When considering whether someone is experiencing a trauma, it is appropriate to initiate the assessment with a broad definition of trauma. Trauma is entirely based on an individual's experience and it is commonly defined as a very distressing event that has exceeded the person's coping abilities. According to this definition, trauma can be understood as an overwhelming event or situation which has transpired once, such as a physical or sexual assault, or repeatedly, such as ongoing physical, sexual, or emotional abuse and violence. Traumatic experiences can lead to the development of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

When talking about traumatic events, we think of major and complex situations. However, this is not always the case. The event can be as "simple" as voluntary or forced migration. Integrating into a society where the norms, lifestyle, culture, and possibly language are completely different from one's own can be traumatic for some. For example, whereas parents may experience difficulties and face challenges integrating into a new society, their own children's journey toward assimilation could be seamless.

Since everyone is unique and every situation is unique, it is up to the person to indicate whether the situation experienced or witnessed was traumatic or not. The best way of explaining this further is by using Allen (1995)'s definition of trauma: "It is the subjective

experience of the objective events that constitutes the trauma. The more you believe you are endangered, the more traumatized you will be. Psychologically, the bottom line of trauma is overwhelming emotion and a feeling of utter helplessness. There may or may not be bodily injury, but psychological trauma is coupled with physiological upheaval that plays a leading role in the long-range effects" (p. 14). According to this definition, it is very possible that two or more people can experience the same traumatic event at the same time or go through very similar events at different times, but only one or a few of them will become traumatized. Thus, each person's experience of an event will define how traumatic that event was for him or her.

Those who experience an overwhelming event or situation can deal with the psychological impact when they receive care from family, support from the community, and counseling by a therapist. Prophet Musa (p.b.u.h) had survived what would be considered today a natural disaster (i.e. earthquake). Allah says in the Qur'an in chapter 7 verse 143 "...And when his Lord manifested Himself on the mountain, He broke it into pieces and Moses fell down unconscious...". Had he not seen himself as a messenger, he may well have experienced this event as traumatic. However, his brother provided care to him, he was supported by a few members of his community, and he was counselled by the Almighty God. Moses' mother experienced extreme grief when the bassinette in which she had placed her son, had gone loose and went floating down the river. Had she not been chosen by Allah, she would have been traumatized. But, she received care from her daughter, support from a midwife, and counselled by ALLAH.

Similarly, Prophet Yaqub (Jacob) had gone through repeated grief (or trauma)—first, when he lost his son Yusuf (Joseph), and then when he lost his other son. Allah says in the Qur'an in chapter 12 verse 85 "...And he turned away from them, crying, 'Alas for Yusuf!' His eyes went white with grief, and he was filled with sorrow."

The Prophet Muhammad survived emotional and verbal abuse. Had he not been a prophet, he too would have been traumatized. It was an overwhelming event when angel Jibreel (Gabriel) spoke to him in the cave of Hira'. Upon returning to his home, quite terrified, he said to his wife, Khadijah, "Zamilooni (hide me)"; "Dathirooni (cover me)." Khadijah immediately provided care to him, her brother showed him support and courage, and he was counseled by angel Gabriel by the Will of Allah.

There are many other stories contained within the Qur'an which portray the tradition of the prophets. These stories provide us

lessons on how to interpret the distress in our lives, direction in how to proceed and cope with trauma, and encouragement to learn from it. In appropriating these past traditions, we understand the benefits of having family and loved ones who care, living in a society that is supportive, and having access to professional counseling, but we also see that spirituality and faith remain the roots of wellbeing.

#### References

Allen, J. (1995). *Coping with Trauma: A Guide to Self-Understanding*. Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association

*Br. Khaled Al-Nahar is a well-known community member. He is a PhD Student in Psychology, as well as Chaplain (Manitoba Justice), Social Services Appeal Board (Province of Manitoba), and Takaful Fund Committee-Chair (MIA).*