

# Smiling, Anger and Mindfulness in Islam and their Connection to 21st Century Neuroscience (part 1 of 3): What is in a Smile?

**Description:** A look at the traditions of Prophet Muhammad encouraging smiling and how 21<sup>st</sup> century knowledge reveals some surprising benefits.

By Aisha Stacey (© 2016 IslamReligion.com)

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What is in a smile? A Muslim would answer that question by saying that it is an act of charity and a tradition from the ways of Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him. It is well known that Prophet Muhammad said, "To smile in the face of your brother is charity given on your behalf." He was also remembered as a man who, except in the direst of circumstances, always had a smile on his face. The late scholar Sheikh Ibn Baaz, who died in 1999 said, "A smiling face indicates a good quality and causes blessed results - it indicates that one's heart is free of rancor and it causes affection to grow between people."



Thus we see that throughout Islamic history smiling has been considered a very good habit for a Muslim to acquire. Emulating Prophet Muhammad is one of a Muslim's greatest desires. Prophet Muhammad also knew that following the directives of God always led to something inherently good for humankind. The time progressed and as the 20<sup>th</sup> century turned into the 21<sup>st</sup> century we discovered that smiling did a lot more than add to our bank of good deeds, it improved our health and our happiness. Smiling lowers the heart rate and temporarily reduces blood pressure. It releases endorphins, and they in turn, lessen pain.

Smiling also strengthens community bonds. Smiles have numerous psychological and communal effects; smiling can open up a social connection or greeting someone with a smile can reduce interpersonal conflict. Smiling can soften embarrassing situations, and

it can enhance first impressions. Who does not like to meet someone with a smile on their face? Human beings were designed by God to be ultra-social creatures that need viable relationships with other people in order to survive and thrive. Islam abounds with advice on how to maintain these relationships, be they with family, neighbors or wider community. Smiling is one device that helps us make and maintain these crucial social relationships.

People who smile receive more help. And we all know that helping behavior enhances community relationships and builds stronger relationships. The answer to why people receive more help when smiling could be manifold. Do we naturally respond in a friendlier manner to someone who is smiling? Could it be reciprocal selflessness, you gave me a smile, so I will give you the help you need. Does the happy mood created by smiling enhance our inclination to help others?

Helping behavior is a hallmark of Islamic manners and morals, and accordingly, Islam places great emphasis on helping those in need. Research tells us that helping a neighbor, volunteering, or donating goods and services results in a "helper's high<sup>[1]</sup>," that benefits a person's health more than exercise or quitting smoking. Smiling starts a chain reaction that results in people engaging in behavior akin to following the commandments of God. He does expect us to be good people and has equipped us with the ability to smile; this, in turn, enhances and encourages good behavior.

**"Worship God and join none with Him in worship, and do good to parents, kinsfolk, orphans, the poor, the neighbour who is near of kin, the neighbour who is a stranger, the companion by your side, the wayfarer (you meet) and those (slaves) whom your right hands possess. Verily, God does not like those who are proud and boastful."  
(Quran 4:36)**

As we stride into the new century, our technological and scientific knowledge is advancing beyond anything we thought possible even 50 years ago. We are beginning to understand the brain and its marvellous properties and functionality. In light of this new area of exploration, acts like smiling take on a new dimension. The benefits of following the traditions and ways of Prophet Muhammad become even more compelling and fascinating.

Scientists now face another conundrum, what came first, the emotion or the smile. New research suggests that smiling may not only be a result of happiness, it may also cause it.<sup>[2]</sup> Put simply, when our brain feels happy, signals are transmitted to the facial muscles to trigger a smile. Those muscles fire a signal back to the brain stimulating the reward system and increasing our level of happiness. When our brain feels happy we smile and when we smile our brain feels even happier.

Dr. Robert Zajonc, a psychologist at the University of Michigan, says that research into the cause and effect of this smile - happiness loop has a physiological explanation. When certain facial muscles relax and tighten, they raise or lower the temperature of blood flowing to the brain. These temperature changes affect the part of the brain that

regulates emotion. Research suggests that a cooler brain creates good emotions, while a warmer brain produces negative emotions

Something even more fascinating is that you can still get the same benefits from smiling even if your grin is not genuine. Several studies have shown that just the physical action of smiling can begin the process even if the emotion is not there to begin with. Sarah Pressman of the University of California and her colleagues found that people who smiled while getting a needle reported up to 40 percent less pain than people who did not smile. Interestingly the participants in this study did not smile naturally but were tricked into smiling by positioning chopsticks in their mouths to create the illusion of a smile.

So far we have discovered that smiling is not only a charitable act that earns the smiler rewards in the Hereafter, rather it also has several rewards in this life - for the one who smiles, the one who receives the smile and for the community in general. Smiling is contagious. A Swedish study[3] confirmed that it is difficult to keep a long face when you look at people who are smiling at you. The brain is hardwired for sociability, and when we interact with others, a neural bridge is created between brains. Neurons have a synchronizing function, and they can then activate the same region of your brain that has been activated in the brain of the person you're interacting with. These mirror neurons will activate when you see someone else smiling.

The traditions of Prophet Muhammad, examined in light of 21<sup>st</sup> century thinking reveals that even things such as blood temperature and neural bridges link humankind's inherent behavior with the commandments of God. We have learned that the act of smiling lowers the temperature of blood flowing to the brain and it begs the question of what happens when the temperature is heightened. Does the act of frowning, and the bad moods such as anger associated with it, increase the temperature of the blood flowing to the brain? In part two we will discuss this and other fascinating information about the relationship between anger and brain function.

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Endnotes:

[1] (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/high-octane-women/201409/helpers-high-the-benefits-and-risks-altruism>)

[2] (<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/smile-it-could-make-you-happier/>)

[3] (<http://www.yalescientific.org/2012/03/the-subtle-smile-the-effect-of-smiling-and-other-non-verbal-gestures-on-gender-roles/>)

# Smiling, Anger and Mindfulness in Islam and their Connection to 21st Century Neuroscience (part 2 of 3): Control your Anger

**Description:** Twenty-first century studies and research confirm Prophet Muhammad's advice that it is beneficial to control your anger.

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It has long been understood that the Quran and the authentic traditions of Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, often have scientific explanations. These facts become even more apparent and fascinating when we look at some of the traditions we practice in the light of the latest psychological and physiological findings of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In part 1 we looked at the science behind smiling and found that a tradition we practice with ease actually has numerous benefits ranging from how it makes a person feel, to contributing to a cohesive well-bonded community. In this article, we will examine the traditions related to controlling anger.



In one of his most well-known traditions, Prophet Muhammad said, "Whom among you do you consider a strong man?" They replied, "The one who can defeat so-and-so in a wrestling contest." He said, "That is not so; a strong man is the one who can control himself when he is angry."[\[1\]](#)

We learned in part 1 that the muscles we use to smile lower the temperature of the blood flowing to the brain. Research tends to suggest that the opposite is also true. The muscles used for frowning, an expression associated with anger and other such negative emotions, causes the temperature of the blood flowing to the brain to rise. A warmer brain produces more negative emotions.[Worship and Practice > Islamic Morals and Practices](#)

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Contrary to what many people believe mindfulness is not meditation. It is a mental state achieved by focusing one's awareness on the present moment. In the previous two articles, we discussed the latest findings on two of the traditions that Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, recommended to his followers; smiling and controlling anger. In this article, in light of the research on mindfulness, we are going to discuss Islam's version of mindfulness - *khushoo*, particularly khushoo in respect to the daily prayers.



Khushoo means concentration and humility in worship (particularly prayers) while wholeheartedly fighting away any distractions. To attain khushoo a person must be able to forget the world and be in the moment. One must be totally mindful that they are standing before God and engaged in worship of Him. If one is able to do this, they are then able to pray wholeheartedly and reap the rewards for doing so. They are also able to acquire traits that will hold them in good stead in their worldly lives.

Google says that mindfulness is a mental state achieved by focusing one's awareness on the present moment. Other dictionaries define it as the practice of maintaining a nonjudgmental state of heightened or complete awareness of one's thoughts, emotions, or experiences.[1] Mindfulness is both the current buzz word and a hot topic in western psychology. It is recognized as an effective way to reduce stress, enhance emotional intelligence and undermine destructive cognitive and behavioral processes.

Imagine if we could pray every prayer with a heightened awareness of what we are doing. In this day and age, it is easy to rush and be distracted by worldly affairs, the traffic, the milk you need to buy, the shirts you need to iron. We also know that each and every one of us is distracted by the tricks of Satan, the whisperings known as *waswas*. Having khushoo or being mindful has been scientifically proven to be a crucial step for disentangling our minds from those ruminative thoughts.[2]

The word *waswas* comes from the Arabic word for delusion and means thoughts of doubt, apprehension or hesitation. It also covers the distractions that come to mind while a person is trying to concentrate on prayer, or trying to be mindful of the importance of the moment. Islamic scholars stress the importance of not giving into *waswas* and not letting it determine the quality of your prayer.

Prophet Muhammad said that whoever made ablution well and then prayed two units of prayer focusing on them completely without thinking of anything else will be forgiven all his previous sins[3], as long as they were not major sins[4]. Being mindful, being able

to focus on the moment is a skill worth developing. There are numerous advantages attached to mindfulness both in this world and in preparation for the next.

Various studies in the past several years have concluded that mindfulness has numerous health benefits including increased immune function, positive cognitive effects, and the reduction of psychological stress.<sup>[5]</sup> In Islam, rewards are given according to the proportion of khushoo. Prophet Muhammad said that a person might pray but have nothing recorded of it except a tenth, or ninth or eighth and so forth<sup>[6]</sup>. His companion Ibn Abbas explained that meant a person will only have from his prayer that part on which he kept his focus.

In a 2007 study at the University of Toronto<sup>[7]</sup> new ground was broken in our understanding of mindfulness from a neuroscience perspective. Scientists discovered that people have two distinct ways of interacting with the world using two different sets of networks. One is called the default network and it is involved with planning, daydreaming, and ruminating. This network doesn't take much effort to operate. It is active most of the time. You take in information, interpret through a filter of everyday experiences and add your own interpretation.

Through this network a cool breeze isn't just a joyful experience; it is a sign that the weekend is nearly over, it reminds you of work tomorrow and taking the kids to school and packing lunches. It is the network that Satan takes advantage of, whispering this and that, and distracting you from worship.

There is however a whole different network, one of direct experience. When this direct experience network is activated, you are experiencing information coming into your senses in real time. Experiencing the world through the direct experience network allows you to get closer to the reality of any event.

People who practice mindfulness are able to notice the difference between the two networks and switch from one to the other. Thus practicing mindfulness means to bring awareness to the activities that you usually do on auto pilot. Many of us have been guilty of praying without a single thought about God or the prayer itself entering our heads. We recite the words and perform the actions and then congratulate ourselves for praying in the correct time frame. Mindfulness helps us to refocus our attention to the present moment; to feel the action of raising our hands to begin the prayer and think about the moment we leave the world behind.

Muslims are able to begin each day on a high note by practicing mindfulness with the first prayer of the day. They are able to think about getting out of bed to thank God for another day, to follow that with an ablution in which they think about the washing away of sins and finally to pray with khushoo. This is the type of khushoo the companions of Prophet Muhammad struggled to have in their every prayer and every act of worship. Mindfulness or khushoo helps us to experience the prayer with all of our senses.

There is evidence to suggest that mindfulness can eventually become an effortless trait. If we try to be in the moment rather than trying to empty our minds of useless thoughts, we might find a way to experience the blissful nature of prayer. It may become

our comfort as it was the comfort of Prophet Muhammad. He said to his companion; make the call to prayer so that we might be comforted by praying.[8] If we acquire the ability to have khushoo in all our prayers, we will have the ability to be mindful throughout our daily lives and thus be able to worship God in all that we do. When we examine khushoo, the state of mind all Muslims are required to strive for when worshipping God, we find that Muslims have been practicing mindfulness for a very long time. It is part of the structure of a daily life spent in the service of God. The wonderful scientific discoveries in the last two decades demonstrate to us that the Quran and the traditions of Prophet Muhammad are guides detailing how to live a worthwhile and content life even in the face of 21<sup>st</sup> century chaos.

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Endnotes:

[1] (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mindfulness>)

[2] (<http://www.mindful.org/the-science-of-mindfulness/>)

[3] Saheeh Bukhari

[4] Saheeh Muslim

[5] (<http://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/features/pst-48-2-198.pdf>)

[6] Imam Ahmad

[7] (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/your-brain-work/200910/the-neuroscience-mindfulness>)

[8] Abu Dawood

The web address of this article:

<http://www.islamreligion.com/articles/11094/viewall/>

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