

The Psychology of Self-Control in Islam (part 1 of 2): Choices and Challenges

Description: Free will, self-control and the path to success.

By Aisha Stacey (© 2014 IslamReligion.com)

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I often begin articles or essays about Islam reminding readers that Islam is a way of life. Yes it is a religion but not one that can be put away only to be dusted off at the end of the week and paraded around a centre of worship. Islam permeates everything a believer does; it influences his behaviour on both conscious and unconscious levels. For those looking at Islam from the outside it might appear to be a very strict religion, as it is an ongoing exercise in self-control, and a daily fight against temptation, but the reality is that Islam is not strict. In order to understand this further the concept of free will in Islam must be explained.



Dictionary.com defines free will as a free and independent choice. The British dictionary goes a little further and says free will is the apparent human ability to make choices that are not externally determined. Free will is our ability to choose the way we respond to outside stimuli, we can choose to act righteously or wrongfully. In other words we are responsible for our own actions.

God created human beings with free will. We have the ability to choose between believing and not believing, between obeying God and disobeying Him, thus we have the ability to choose between reward and punishment.

Every day we are faced with choices and challenges and every believer knows that this life is full of tests. These tests are designed by God not to 'trip us up', as some might suggest, but to give us more chances to choose the right thing. We can choose to use our voices to praise God or we can use them to swear and lie; we can choose to walk to a mosque or an Islamic centre or we can choose to walk instead to places of vice. There is nothing to stop people making the wrong choice except a little thing called self-control.

Self-control is something that is sadly lacking in the developed world. Many psychologists and researchers are beginning to suggest that it is lacking because we have concentrated on developing the quality of self-esteem rather than self-control. We have convinced ourselves and our children that self-confidence is the key to success.

According to Jean Twenge, one psychologist amongst many with the same idea, self-confidence is not the key to success. She says, "What's really become prevalent over the last two decades is the idea that being highly self-confident - loving yourself, believing

in yourself - is the key to success. Now the interesting thing about that belief is it's widely held, it's very deeply held, and it's also untrue."^[1] Florida State University Professor Roy Baumeister, who has studied the topic of self-esteem versus self-control for many years, believes that self-esteem does not lead to success. "Self-control is much more powerful and well-supported as a cause of personal success," he says.

Self-control is a quality that is embedded in the religion of Islam and surely that is not a coincidence. Is it not obvious that the trait of self-control is something that God wants us to strive for? We are faced with choices and temptations in every direction. We are asked to lower our gaze, to control our anger, and to consider our words before speaking. The fasting month of Ramadan is an exercise in self-control. We refrain from food and liquids from dawn to sunset. We might be hungry and thirsty but we exercise self-control in order to please God and to build our resilience. Following our own desires is not something that Islam encourages.

"...they only follow their own lusts. And who is more astray than one who follows his own lusts, without guidance from God..." (Quran 28:50)

Islam asks us to follow a path to success and it defines success as pleasing God and being rewarded with a blissful life in the Hereafter. If we do not exercise self-control eternal success will be very very difficult to achieve. Islam does not ask us to live a miserable life waiting for an eternally blissful one but it does ask us to delay immediate gratification that sometimes comes from giving in to temptation, in favour of a bigger reward later.

"But as for him who feared standing before his Lord, and restrained himself from impure evil desires and lusts. Verily, Paradise will be his abode." (Quran 79:40-41)

Around 50 years ago a psychologist at Stanford University in the USA conducted a series of experiments into delayed gratification in children. This experiment has come to be known as the Marshmallow experiment and it went something like this. A group of children aged 4-6 years old were each given a marshmallow. Each child was told that he or she could eat the marshmallow as soon as the experimenter left, i.e. straight away, or they could wait until the experimenter returned approximately 15 minutes later at which time they could have two marshmallows.

Later when the children were revisited as adolescents it was found that those who delayed gratification scored higher in exams. They were described by their parents as having the ability to plan, handle stress, and concentrate without becoming distracted, and they exhibited self-control in difficult situations. When they were revisited again in their 40's, those children who were unable to delay gratification in the marshmallow test performed poorly on set self-control tasks.

The marshmallow - delayed gratification experiments have been ongoing, even in 2014 research and experiments are being published and added to the body of work. We, the psychologists and amateur psychologists of the world, have learned a lot about will power

and self-control. Self-control, according to Professor Roy Baumeister, means the ability to delay gratification, but that is not all. It also entails resisting short term temptations to meet long term goals and the ability to employ a "cool" cognitive system of behaviour rather than a "hot" emotional system. Self-control, Professor Baumeister says is synonymous with self-regulation, and self-regulation means changing responses based on some rule, value or ideal.[2] For Muslims that value or ideal is the way of life known as Islam.

In the next article we will continue the discussion by looking at concepts of hot and cold behaviour in self-regulation, and in Islam, and the idea that self-control, like a muscle gets tired.

Endnotes:

[1]

<http://www.joannejacobs.com/2013/01/self-control-not-self-esteem-leads-to-success/#sthash.KC2Kz5t.dpuf>

[2] Roy F. Baumeister, Self-control - the moral muscle. February 2012 in the British Psychological Society Journal Volume 25 - Part 2. Pages: 112-115

The Psychology of Self-Control in Islam (part 2 of 2): The Cool Cognitive Approach

Description: How Islam teaches self-control and thus sets us up for success.

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Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, had a great deal to say on the subject of anger. His thoughts and recommendations resonate perfectly with the discussion of resisting short term temptations to meet long term goals with which we ended part 1. In many of his sayings and traditions Prophet Muhammad tells us to use self-control and respond to the source of our anger

with a cool cognitive approach rather than a hot over emotional response. The hot or emotional response is often the one we resort to most easily and just as often it usually leads to a less desirable outcome. Increasingly modern studies suggest that people who



consistently have a hot response should be offered ways to cool down their response. Let us examine some of the *hadith* from the perspective of self-control.

- "The strong person is not he who has physical strength but he that can control his anger."[\[1\]](#) Prophet Muhammad is telling us that it takes a strong person to have self-restraint when he or she is angry and that self-control is obviously a desirable quality for a believer to aspire to.
- "If one of you gets angry and he is standing, then he should sit down until his anger subsides. If it does not, then he should lie down."[\[2\]](#) When a person is overcome by anger it is hard to keep a cool head and to make a considered response. However the act of sitting down, delaying the response allows the person to cool down, and think clearly. If sitting down is not enough then we are told to lie down. Metaphorically pouring water on the hot response.
- "When anyone of you gets angry, let him perform ablution because anger arises from fire."[\[3\]](#) Performing ablution literally rather than metaphorically pours water over a hot unconsidered response.

Self-control can be described as what people use to restrain their impulses and desires. It is the capacity to override one response with another. The 21st century world of psychology sees this as being a very desirable trait and one that those who wish to be successful should cultivate, and silly as it might sound, exercise. In more than one study self-control has been compared to a muscle.[\[4\]](#) Engaging in acts of self-control draws energy from a limited resource and once it is depleted there is less energy to be used for self-regulation. This is much the same as a muscle that requires strength and energy to exert force and after some time it gets tired. However it seems that the more you exercise self-control the easier it becomes.

People start out refreshed but over the course of the day their willpower starts to diminish. Making many choices and self-regulation makes them weary. Researchers have observed that self-control tends to break down late in the day, especially on demanding or stressful days. Most diets are broken in the evening, sexual misdeeds and addictive behavioural relapses occur at the end of long and stressful days. Studies have shown that people are more willing to cheat and steal when their willpower reserve is depleted.[\[5\]](#)

Islam has long held the view that people need more reminders as the day goes on. If we look at prayer as a reminder, we can see that it serves this purpose as people get tired over the course of the day. We start the day with *Fajr*, the Morning Prayer and then have a big block of time in which to get the productive work done. Any moral or self-regulating choices we have to make are tackled with ease. At the noonday prayer we have time to be thankful, to rest our weary brains and remember that our lives are dedicated to pleasing God. But it is still a long day, we are hungry and tired.

Those reminders from God however just keep coming; there are three more obligatory prayers before bedtime. Prayer, as we should not forget, is a little kick start, we leave it feeling refreshed, a tiny bit closer to God and determined to stay away from anything that

displeases Him. We have the antidote to muscle fatigue both physically and mentally. Who would be inclined to get up from there place of prayer to cheat, lie or steal?

Prophet Muhammad said that the first thing that will be judged among a person's deeds on the Day of Resurrection is the prayer. If that is in good order, he will prosper, and if that is defective, he will fail.^[6] If a person's connection to God is maintained throughout the day it allows him to strive against all kinds of evil and temptation and it gives him the fortitude to make good choices using willpower and self-restraint.

Like any good muscle, the more we use it the stronger it becomes and not only that, we develop what is called muscle memory. These are memories of frequently enacted tasks that are stored in the brain. Through repetition you can become extremely good at something; self-control for example. The evidence suggests successful people spend relatively less time struggling with temptations and choices. Successful people are they who, with God's permission and help, have developed strong self-control. No one is suggesting that it is easy but it is doable and it is desirable.

God explains in the Quran that human beings have a weakness that impedes their success. This weakness is a lack of willpower or the inability to sustain their sense of purpose. As believers we know what to do but often we lack the self-control to keep heading in the right direction. We build no muscle memory. Our way of life, Islam, gives us countless opportunities to build up our strength and countless ways to use our self-control. The newly discovered psychology of self-control has been embedded in the religion of Islam for quite some time; from the time of Adam in fact.

"And, indeed, We made a covenant with Adam before, but he forgot and We found on his part no firm willpower." (Quran 20:115)

"But whoever desires the Hereafter and exerts the effort due to it while he is a believer - it is those whose effort is ever appreciated (by God)." (Quran 17:19)

A good way to leave our discussion of Islam and self-control is with a saying from Prophet Muhammad. It is a reminder that even the smallest effort can be huge in the reckoning of God.

"..the deeds most loved by God (are those) done regularly, even if they are few."^[7]

Endnotes:

^[1] *Saheeh Al-Bukhari, Saheeh Muslim*

^[2] *Abu Dawood.*

^[3] *Ibid*

[4] Muraven, Mark; Baumeister, Roy F. (2000). "Self-regulation and depletion of limited resources: Does self-control resemble a muscle?". *Psychological Bulletin* 126 (2): 247-59.

Hagger, Martin S.; Wood, Chantelle; Stiff, Chris; Chatzisarantis, Nikos L. D. (2010). "Ego depletion and the strength model of self-control: A meta-analysis". *Psychological Bulletin* 136 (4): 495-525.

[5] Mead, N.L., Baumeister, R.F., Gino, F. et al. (2009). Too tired to tell the truth: Self-control resource depletion and dishonesty. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 45, 594-597.

[6] At-Tirmidhi

[7] *Saheeh Al-Bukhari, Saheeh Muslim*

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