

Nope for the **Muslim Alcoholic**

Twelve Step Recovery
in the Light of Islam

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Contents

Introduction 7

Who is this book for? 7

A message to the family and friends of the alcoholic 8

Structure 9

Section One

Alcoholism and Islam 11

Sinbad: A cautionary tale 11

An Islamic orientation to recovery 14

Being an alcoholic and *knowing* what that means 16

A way out? From fitnah to fitrah 21

From Jahiliyya to Tawheed 26

A useful metaphor? 28

Embracing reality 30

Section Two

The Road of Recovery 33

Islam as ‘capitulation’ 33

Willpower or willingness? 39

Lā ḥawla wa lā quwwata illā billāh 41

Niya – intention 42

Muhasabat al-nafs – accountability and the examination
of the soul 43

Suggested guide for accountability 46

Casting light on defects and shortcomings before Allah 48

Summary 52

Section Three

Polishing the heart – the maintenance of sobriety 55

Remaining in the Light 55

Wudhu 56

Salah 57

Sawm 59

Dhikr 59

Sabr (Patience) and Shukr (Gratitude) 60

Istighfar 61

Salawat 62

Iqra – read 62

Ibadah 63

Ummah – community 64

Mahabba – love 64

A Final Message 67

Resources 68

Books to read 69

Notes to accompany the twelve steps 70

Introduction

This book seeks to build a bridge between two worlds: that represented by the principles and teachings of Islam, and that of the Twelve Step approach to alcoholism recovery. The Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, is reported to have said:

Seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim.
(Ibn Majah)

This is true of knowledge which helps the individual attain the pleasure of Allah. In the early twentieth century, a way out of the hell of alcoholism was charted by Alcoholics Anonymous. This way is, in my view, entirely compatible with and complementary to the path of Islam. But for the Muslim alcoholic, who may be suspicious of what he or she often perceives as a mysterious institution foreign and alien to his or her tradition, the pragmatic spiritual tools offered by the AA programme may remain largely inaccessible.

The profound feelings of shame common to most alcoholics are compounded in the Muslim alcoholic. The Qur'an and the life and example of the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) unequivocally warn of the dangers of alcohol. This warning is intended as a mercy, to prevent suffering and the forgetfulness of Allah which drinking can precipitate. For the Muslim, forewarned of the perils of intoxicants, alcoholic drinking can become a prison of shame and silence.

Who is this book for?

Addictions, it is said, hunt in packs. While this book has alcoholism as its central focus, it may also be useful for those concerned with the other forms of addiction which beset our community. These words were

written with certain people in mind: in particular, those working with Muslim alcoholics and their families as well as Muslims experiencing the mental and physical torture of alcoholism, either personally or in a loved one. The ideas presented may also be of interest to people who have recovered from addiction via a Twelve Step process and who have either come to Islam (there are many¹), or who may be interested in Islam. For such people, it is my hope, insha'Allah, that in these pages they may find nourishment for their journey as they search for the relationship with Allah, which I believe is foundational to healing and ongoing recovery.

This comes with an important caveat: an assumption that any individual seeking to utilise these ideas as part of their own programme of recovery from alcoholism is in a stable condition medically. Medical intervention or hospitalisation may be necessary or advisable to deal with the toxic effects of alcohol or other drugs if the individual is still using or has stopped using very recently.

I am not an authority on Islam. Neither am I an academic in the Western, secular sense. I do not speak for Alcoholics Anonymous or for the Muslim community. These are my own thoughts on the points of connection between Islam and Twelve Step recovery. I am simply a Muslim with several decades of experience in the world of alcoholism recovery. As such I seek to share what I have learned in the hope, insha'Allah, that others may benefit. In setting down these words, I seek also to clarify my own thoughts and grow in understanding. I have tried not to advise, for the giving of advice is fraught with the pitfalls and traps laid by the ego. I have sought instead to speak from experience.

A message to the family and friends of the alcoholic

Alcoholism, and by extension addiction more generally, is an illness which is not limited to the individual who is drinking or using. Those close to

1 Several of the 'revert' stories contained in Michael Sugich's beautiful book *Hearts Turn* speak of struggles with addiction. See Sugich, M. (2019) *Heart's Turn: Sinners, Seekers, Saints & the Road to Redemption*, Telltale Texts.

the drinker – spouses, parents, family, friends – also become unwell. They are in a sense ‘infected’ by the illness. The selfishness and self-centredness of the alcoholic, driven by their illness, can create a gravitational pull so powerful that it sucks those close to them into an orbit around the drinker, the influence of which can be extremely difficult to escape. Although loved ones are not responsible for the alcoholic’s drinking or behaviour, it can be of great benefit to them to be aware that they too have become sick. If this realisation is reached, those close to the alcoholic are then better placed to work on their own recovery, and develop the strategies and attitudes needed to get their own needs met in healthy, balanced ways.

The family and friends of alcoholics often feel a misplaced, but nonetheless crushing, sense of responsibility for the situation they find themselves in. This is part of the illness which can develop when living with alcoholism, even when it is someone else who is actually drinking. Family and friends may feel they should be able to ‘cure’ the alcoholic if only they tried still harder, or loved more fiercely. They may spend countless sleepless nights and fretful days trying to work out what they did ‘wrong’. The alcoholic themselves, in their sickness, may actively blame and exploit the sense of responsibility felt by those around them. However, this sense of responsibility is, of course, erroneous. Family and friends are not to blame, but this phenomenon further illustrates how the illness of alcoholism can affect lives and well-being beyond the individual who drinks. As such, the approach outlined here may also be of use to those who have been negatively affected by someone else’s drinking.

Structure

The book is divided into three main sections:

- ❖ Section One discusses the nature of alcoholism and the path to recovery viewed through the lens of Islamic teaching and the Twelve Step recovery programme of Alcoholics Anonymous;
- ❖ Section Two offers a practical guide to embarking on that road of recovery;
- ❖ Section Three is concerned with the ongoing maintenance of sobriety.

If the message, borne of experience, laid out in these pages resonates with one individual, helps them to escape the enslavement of alcoholism and return their gaze to Allah, then the endeavour will have been worthwhile. Any error to be found in these pages arises out of my ignorance. Any good in these pages comes from Allah.

Accountability is not merely about saying sorry. The alcoholic who seeks recovery must truly hold themselves accountable for their actions and the impact on others. Injustices should be corrected to the best of his or her abilities. ‘Gaslighting’ must be turned on its head, whereby the alcoholic has undermined others and sought to make them feel responsible for mistakes they themselves have made. This must be put right. The alcoholic must take responsibility for harms done. If they have acquired wealth, status or belongings through haram means, this must be corrected as far as is reasonably possible.³⁹

Casting light on defects and shortcomings before Allah

Al-Muhasaba – accountability – encourages us to hold ourselves answerable, evaluating our performance on the spiritual path. It is necessary to reflect on our actions and to learn. Once this process of earnest reflection uncovers errors of commission, or omission (i.e. character defects and shortcomings), it is necessary to make tawba:

You who believe! Repent sincerely to Allah. It may be that your Lord will erase your bad actions from you...

(Surah Tahrīm 66:8)

This corresponds to Step 5 of the AA programme:

“Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being, the exact nature of our wrongs.”⁴⁰

Step 6 of the AA programme:

“Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.”⁴¹

As well as Step 7:

³⁹ However, any potential negative impact upon others must always be considered and avoided.

⁴⁰ Alcoholics Anonymous p.59

⁴¹ Ibid p.59

“Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.”⁴²

Tawba describes the re-orientation of the soul towards its original human nature (fitrah) after it has been covered over by sin and disobedience. This original nature, whilst it may be obscured beneath layers of darkness, is never lost and longs for tawba. When the pain of separation from the Almighty becomes too much, the sufferer turns their face back towards Allah, broken-hearted. He or she submits in a state of Islam, placing themselves unreservedly under Allah’s care and direction. Tawba is to repent and turn back to Allah, the only true source of power, the only true source of Mercy and Healing. When we thoroughly and honestly hold ourselves accountable before Allah, we place ourselves in a favourable position to be shown the straight path. It is difficult to overstate the need for diligence in this regard. The longer an error is allowed to continue, the further off course we get. Al-muhasaba (accountability) and tawba (repentance) are therefore intimately linked concepts.

Gaining a true picture of one’s defects, shortcomings and assets is ultimately an exercise in developing humility and integrity. Finding guidance in relation to this matter of al-muhasaba in Islam, is ultimately between the individual and Allah. Prayer and supplication are the means through which to knock on the door. There is of course the supplication in Surah al-Fatiha that we recite in each Salah to:

Ihdinaş şirat al-muştaqīm
Guide us on the Straight Path. (Surah al-Fatiha 1:6)

As well as the Prophetic supplication:

Allāhum-ahdinī fī man hadayta
O Allah, guide me with those you have guided.
(Abu Dawud)

42 Ibid p.59