

Religious beliefs and mental health

Introduction:

From the two aspects of human existence, namely the physical and spiritual aspects or in other words the body and soul, the soul is of particular significance. As the majority of specialists within the psychological and educational fields believe, a healthy soul and a pure spirit are the key factors to leading a life of humanity in this world and also in the Hereafter. But the question is, how is mental health and the healthy existence of the soul secured? What are the best ways to obtain mental health and what are the most significant factors to remove disturbance within the human mind? What is the role of religious beliefs and models in the improvement of mental health and the perfection of the human existence? How are mental health and its perfection related? We presented our challenges to two specialists in the field of psychology and education. What follows are the explanations of both Mr. Reza Salari Far, a faculty member of the Research Center of University and Seminary studies and Mr. Rahim Mirdarikhvandi, a Professor in the Research and Education Center of Imam Khomeini, to our questions in brief.

Rah – e – Tarbiyat: What is the definition of mental health? What dimensions and purviews does it contain?



Reza Salari Far: Mental health has been defined in various forms. The Korisni doctrine presents this definition as follows: «Mental health is a mental state with features of healthful emotions, relative disengagement to stress, lack of disabling disease symptoms, ability to establish creative relations, and getting along with natural circumstances and pressures.» While considering various viewpoints about mental health, we can say that the quality of the relationship a person has with himself and others is an indication of the state of his mental well – being. If a person can comprehend different dimensions of his existence and admit his deficiencies and actualize his potentialities, he can enjoy proper interaction with himself. Another essential criterion for mental well – being is the ability to establish a satisfactory relationship with their family members, friends and co-workers.

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The best indicator for mental health is having a correct comprehension of the universe at large and establishing a relationship with its Creator, God, at the same time having awareness of Him through worship and love. The matter of mental health is broader than simply being free of disease. We are of the opinion that mental well – being in this world is associated with that of the next world.

Rahim Mirdarikhvandi: Human beings are made up of multiple aspects: physical and spiritual. Within the spiritual aspect, a healthy spirit equates to the diagnosis and eventual treatment of its illnesses. Naturally it is easier and cheaper to prevent the disease

rather than curing it. In spite of the superficial meaning of health (prevention only) within human spirituality, health also involves curing, alleviating the pain, recovery, and the rehabilitating of the illness. In psychology, the term mental health is composed of three terms: prevention, cure, and rehabilitation. It is commonly said that mental health includes three systems. 1. The system of prevention. 2. The system of curing and alleviating the pain. 3. The system of rehabilitation and improving the patient's condition. To sum up, we can say mental health is defined as the securing of the mental well – being of a society in every possible way. Mental health includes all principles, points, methods, and tactics which are helpful in securing the mental health for all society members.

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According to the above definition, we can conclude that mental health is a broad and multidimensional issue. Mental health deals with personal, social, and family issues along with such concepts as learning, growth, personality, intelligence, motivation, excitement, stress, disaster, sport, industry, production and so on.

Rah – e – Tarbiyat: What are the best ways to achieve mental health and what are the most significant factors to bring about disturbance within the human mind?

Reza Salari Far: The most effective method in securing mental health is having a proper and broad view of life and its purpose. The reality some psychologists have derived is that the only thing



capable of determining the philosophy and true purpose of life is religion. Religion can help a person discover his inner talents and in turn flourish them. Furthermore, obedience to religious teachings causes a person to have a committed and at the same time friendly relationship with people close to him and a sense of responsibility with respect to the people around him. The most substantial factors related to the disturbing of the human mind are: deprivation, failure, not succeeding in providing life its mental and spiritual necessities, mental opposition and pressures, committing sin, immoral and anomalous behaviors.

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Rahim Mirdarikhvandi: We can briefly say that every factor that blocks or diverts the physical and spiritual growth of the human and hinders his health and perfection is considered to be a disturbing element for the human mind. Hence, according to scientific and psychological views, we can achieve mental health by observing psychological points and heeding psychologists, advice in such various fields as learning, growth, personality and so on. In religious and canonical views which we believe present the best and most comprehensive advice and guidance for securing the mental health, we can achieve mental health through observing personal, social, and health – related moral ordinances. The issue of knowing, identifying, and curing mental disorders is a comprehensive, broad and fairly specialized proposition which is outside the scope of our present discussion.

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Rah – e – Tarbiyat: How are religious beliefs and mental health related? Is there a relation between difficulties that arise from religious concepts such as believing God to be All – Observant and All-Witnessing with that of mental health?

Reza Salari Far: As I mentioned in the definition of mental health, true religious beliefs are considered to be essential principles for mental health. A lack of proper religious beliefs leads to the feeling of inanity, agitation, and depression in life. Religious beliefs, particularly those beliefs that revolve around life after death, can have a deterring and encouraging effect. If the deterrent is overemphasized, it causes a feeling of agitation within the psyche of the person and makes him have unattainable and illogical expectations of himself. The vital point in Islamic teachings is the emphasis of being both hopeful in God's mercy and to be afraid of His reprimand and reckoning. Mental health is secured based on these two dimensions. Without these dimensions, undesired outcomes, with respect to a person's mental state, are inevitable.

Rahim Mirdarikhvandi: In my opinion, religious beliefs and mental health are so closely related that it seems like the best way to secure mental well – being and the most suitable method to cure mental disorders is to take religious beliefs into account and apply them into one's life. God, as the Creator of mankind is all aware and conscious of each and every dimension of His creation, namely aspects relating to his personal and social life plus his

religious beliefs and laws which are set down by God Himself.

It is the awareness of God that can secure one's mental health and facilitate the cure of mental disorders in the best possible way. I am of the opinion that religious beliefs and laws encompass the best psychological and even sociological discretion. God the Exalted is the best and the most supreme psychologist and sociologist. Those who lack an intimate interaction with religion and its laws, specifically those beliefs that are related to the Hereafter and the punishment of unlawful deeds in particular, experience stress and agitation in their lives which can disturb their mental balance.

In addressing those who lack this intimate interaction, it should be explained that there exists two forms of fear: condemned fear and praised fear. Similarly, there exists two forms of human belief as well, beliefs that divert or block the true path of progress, and beliefs that place the human on the correct path and guide him towards prosperity and perfection. What I believe is that all religious beliefs completely belong to the second form. I mean these beliefs never block or divert the natural well – being of a human; on the contrary they produce great hope and motivation within humans to stay steadfast and continue to move forward.

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Yes, we do believe that there are some beliefs which are not canonically acceptable. These kinds of beliefs never help the development of mankind, on the contrary, they harm the mental well – being in some cases. Any logical being can confess to the

fact that religious beliefs and experiences have not slowed his progress in his personal and social life down; but rather have firmed him and helped him to continue on the right path.

Rah – e – Tarbiyat: How is mental health and well – being related to mental perfection? Does mental perfection, which entails not being satisfied with the present mental balance have a correlation with mental health and with the maintaining of mental security and tranquility?

Reza Salari Far: Humans have hidden talents. Their perfection depends on the flourishing of these talents. If these talents are not actualized, they will feel a sense of inanity and petrification. On this basis, we can conclude that mental health and mental perfection are connected. Leading a conscious life causes the person, at every level of mental balance and tranquility, to detect the existence of his deeper talents, and make an effort to actualize them. As a result, mental health and perfection are always together and never contradict each other.

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Rahim Mirdarikhvandi: There is a topic in humanitarian science which revolves around the following two questions: «Is health the same as perfection and perfection the same as health?» or «Are these two topics not similar to each other although they may overlap one another?» Some people believe health equates to perfection and perfection to health. While others believe mental health is one part of human perfection and acts as an introduction to the state of

perfection. They hold the opinion that a perfect human possesses various features and characteristics in which mental well – being is simply one of them. Thus, a conclusion can be made that based on both interpretations that mental well – being and perfection are related. It can also be interpreted in the following way that a person cannot achieve his desired perfection unless he is mentally healthy and exuberant.

In response to the second question, a preparatory phase to mental perfection is one type of evolution and alteration and disturbances of the present circumstance, which can per se jeopardize mental well – being and result in suffering from mental disorders. Does this not lead to dissonance between mental well – being and perfection? In my opinion, it is true that every type of perfection requires alteration and evolution. However, does this disturbance mean that the present situation is completely transformed and evolved or can it be maintained while gaining strength and becoming more stable as a result of evolution? What I believe is that, in the case of mental well – being and perfection it can not be said that the person’s mental and spiritual balance is disturbed and he loses his tranquility and consequently is afflicted with mental disorder. Concerning health, perfection and evolution, the more perfect and evolved the person becomes, the more stable and firm his mentality will be and thus he will enjoy ultimate tranquility.

Similarly, in a moral person you will find that the more he progresses in his morality and spirituality, the more stable and firm his previous state and present condition becomes. His previous moral state or his present moral condition is not subjected to destabilization and his moral foundation does not weaken.

So, we come to this conclusion that there is a relation between

mental health (mental well – being) and perfection and evolution. Mental evolution does not disturb mental balance but on the contrary it will greatly strengthen the base and foundation of mental and spiritual tranquility.

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Rah – e – Tarbiyat: If we advise the people of piety to mirror their ethics with those individuals who possess an esteemed level of spirituality which is sometimes difficult to obtain, while at the same time we advise the middle – class religious sector to strengthen their religious deeds and obligations, will this not cause constant internal opposition amongst them?

Reza Salari Far: Presenting a practical model to follow is undoubtedly one of the best methods of religious and moral training. However, introducing transcendent models who are often difficult to obtain, entangles them in crisis and they will continuously feel sinful and inferior. Imam Ali (peace be upon him) in a letter to one of his governors wrote:»You are not able to follow us perfectly, but do support us by being abstinent, hardworking, and honest.« One common mistake which religious and moral educators usually make is the emphasizing of supreme models whereas they should emphasize the creation of sensible and obtainable goals. That is what motivates the internal opposition within the religious middle – class. Educators should introduce models and practical methods according to people’s mental and social capacities.

For example they say Hazrat Fatimah (peace be upon her) gave her wedding clothes to a needy person on her wedding night. They should present a model that is both moderate in its behavior and attainable in its method. Undoubtedly very few women are ready to give their wedding dress to a poor person, but we can tell them: «Choose a wedding dress that is inexpensive and do not place financial pressures on your husband and at the same time spend the money that you are saving on helping those who are in need.» Introducing obtainable spiritual and behavioral models, according to those of the Imams (peace be upon them), will make people more inclined to perform religious teachings and deeds. Moreover, it will prevent them from suffering from internal oppositions and a constant feeling of sin and inferiority.

Rahim Mirdarikhvandi: Religious laws, beliefs, advice and criteria, in every level – be it a high Gnostic level, average level, or common level – are in accordance with the pure nature of the human spirit.

The person who on the basis of his capacity and talent tries to immerse himself with religious beliefs, models and criteria will not experience mental challenges and oppositions, rather this heavenly immersion will result in constant satisfaction. All divine laws, both conventional and obligatory, have been planned, if observed and paid attention to, to secure the mental and even physical well – being of a person. Even disbelievers and pagans will innately feel this concept and relation as well. The point is, that believers and pious people possess the honest motivation to perform these deeds but disbelievers, pagans, and hypocrites have turned their back on their internal conscience as a result of their dishonesty, material and evil temptations and their personal intentions. They

have shunned God and have ignored the beauty of divine law. In conclusion, the more people immerse themselves with religious beliefs and criteria, the more they will enjoy an ideal perfect state of both mental health and balance. Adaptation to religious beliefs and criteria never culminates in internal resistance and the obvious proof for that is the pure nature and conscience of all people especially the believers and the pious ones.

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According to the Islamic view point, the observing of religious laws and beliefs can secure the mental health of both an individual and his respective society.

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