

Muraqabah: Meaningful Adjuvant Therapy for Metabolic Health

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Abstract

Muraqabah is an Islamic form of mindful meditation, prayerful meditation or religious meditation. This is a means of connecting to God, while being mindful of his presence. It also implies seclusion. Muraqabah may be used as means of improving physical and mental health in persons with metabolic diseases such as diabetes and hypertension. In this editorial. We share the need to study and research this potential therapy, we share pragmatic ideas as to how muraqabah can be introduced in clinical practice,

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The Metabolic Challenge

Metabolic dysfunction has become an epidemic across the world, including South Asia. The major underlying mechanisms are undisciplined lifestyle; increased intake of energy dense food and decreased physical activity. Whether diabetes, obesity, hypertension or liver disease, these metabolic conditions show no sign of abating. Muslims are not immune to such metabolic disease. Islamic countries have the highest prevalence of obesity and diabetes across the world.¹ Though modern science works hard to keep these diseases under control, results are far from optimal.

Muraqabah

Mindful meditation has been suggested as an evidence-based method of improving health. Mindful meditation works by balancing and optimizing neurotransmitter levels, thus reducing stress, and the resultant vasoconstriction, inflammation and downstream effects. It has been used in diabetes, especially in diabetes distress.²

Traditionally muraqabah has been a popular practice among a religious group in Muslims known as Sufis. This can loosely be translated as meditation, more accurately as

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mindful meditation, and perhaps most precisely as religious or prayerful meditation. Muraqabah is a religio-spiritual practice characterized by undisturbed focus on Allah's creations and his greatness.³ The warm feeling of blissful joy and satisfaction that the individual achieves marks the culmination of the exercise. This contributes to a feeling of connectedness with the Almighty, improves mental health and brings discipline in life.

Under Utilization

Muraqabah enjoys widespread social acceptance across the Islamic world. There is little focus in published literature, however, on the utility and safety of muraqabah as a therapy for metabolic disease. A search on PubMed, using the key 'muraqabah' fetches just 1 hit, authored by a Canadian researcher.³ On the contrary, 'yoga' and 'tai chi' have 8489 and 4364 entries, respectively.^{4,5} Meditation and 'mindfulness meditation' in turn, bring up 10307 and 3714 articles.^{6,7}

The Work So Far

Publications on muraqabah focuses on its role in psychological diseases. Most of the work is from Indonesia and Malaysia.⁸ Researchers from other countries with large number of adherents to Islam are conspicuous by their absence. There is no mention of the link between metabolic health and muraqabah, either.

Need for Communication

It is possible, but highly unlikely, that this is due to lack of interest or due to philosophical bias. Most probably, the lack of research on muraqabah is because of absence of discussion, and deliberation, between the public, religious leaders, and health care professionals.

The health care fraternity struggles to control metabolic disease and mitigate its impact. At the same time, religious and spiritual leadership strive to achieve happiness and harmony amongst their followers. Both aim to achieve the same goal, which is holistic health. Communication and team work between all stakeholders will help accomplish this aim.

Potential Challenges and Concerns

Emotional and social determinants of health are best taken care of by emotional and social interventions. Muraqabah, as well as other Islamic injunctions like dhikr, therefore, must be studied for their therapeutic role.³

It is possible that muraqabah may not benefit all persons living with metabolic disease. The duration of their illness, their autonomic and psychological health, as well as other comorbid conditions, may influence their response to meditative practices. At the same time, their religiosity and spirituality (both of which can be measured by validated indices) will impact their acceptance of, and adherence to, such therapeutic suggestions.⁹

Preparation and Precautions

If muraqabah is to be used as a therapeutic tool, it must be prescribed by therapists who are trained and experienced in its usage. Taaleem, tajurba, tarbiyat and tehzeeb (education, experience, expertise and etiquette) are the hall marks of a successful health care team. Such health care professionals should be well-versed with both metabolic medicine and religious aspects of Islam. While the treating team may be led by an endocrinologist or physician who treats metabolic diseases, a mental health professional and religious scholar (ulema) must be associated with it.

Muraqabah may be introduced initially for short periods (a few minutes) of time, under guided supervision. Individuals can then begin practicing at home, on their own.³ The duration of muraqabah sittings and/or, their frequency can be increased, as per preference and tolerability.

Pragmatic Practicality

Monitoring is an essential pillar of scientific evidence-based therapy. While the primary outcomes, such as glycaemia and blood pressure will obviously be measured, other parameters related to autonomic hygiene can be checked as well.¹⁰ Resting heart rate, heart rate variability and pre- vs post-meditation changes in blood pressure may be useful. Person-reported outcomes, like satisfaction and pain, can complement the afore-mentioned parameters. A sense of self-discipline and determination, which is so important in adhering to a healthy lifestyle, can be checked as well. Both quantitative and qualitative methods are required to evaluate and appreciate the benefits of muraqabah. Hence, mixed methods research may be the most optimal way of studying this form of therapy.

The Way Forward

Through this editorial, we sensitize our readers to the realistic possibility of using muraqabah as an adjuvant therapy for treatment of metabolic diseases, including diabetes and hypertension. This form of meditation may also be tried in psychological and psychiatric care. Its wide spread socio-cultural and religious acceptance, and the lack of financial cost, make muraqabah a person-friendly and community friendly form of adjuvant treatment. Its potential impact on physical and mental health allow us to describe it as a physio-friendly and psycho-friendly intervention.

We hope that our readers take up the challenge, and utilize the opportunity, of studying muraqabah in clinical as well as research settings. The expertise and experience gained will help improve metabolic, and overall, health of humankind.

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