



SUFI MUSIC AND WELLBEING AS A HEALING TOOL FOR STRESS AMONG THE STUDENTS AND TEACHERS DURING PANDEMIC COVID

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ABSTRACT:

The aspect of individual patient experience in health care has taken on greater role in contemporary times. Due to an increasingly diverse patient population, medical professionals are encountering individuals who utilize other forms of healing practices in addition to allopathic models of care. With the changing face of educational systems and processes, it is important to acknowledge the systemic and structural underpinnings of teacher and educator stress that are very unique to this time period. The recent suicide of a student from Kerala drew attention to the socio-economic disparity in accessibility to education and while student mental health is on the decline, it's crucial to see its interconnectedness with teacher mental health. Several studies have highlighted the stress and burnout teachers and educators experience. One such example is the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) report that found teachers experiencing an immense amount of occupational stress in comparison to other professionals. This is particularly relevant in mental health care, where concepts of "healing," "well-being," and "wellness" come to fore. This article examines the Islamic concept of Sufism, tasawwuf, and how concepts such as dhikr (recitation) and knowing one's self can be overlaid to psychological principles of mindfulness and self-efficacy—showcasing the intersection of spirituality and mental health. Sufism is a form of Islamic mysticism that attempts to achieve the annihilation of the self through God. Through aspiring to be close to God, its followers – regarded as Sufis or dervishes – practice a detachment from material affairs and worldly desire. One of the ways in which they set out in doing this, is through various forms of meditation; and it is believed these exercises have a range of positive impacts on mental health. This article will explore the different forms of Sufi meditation, with a view to their effects on our mental health. In an age where many a patient has sought out a medical solicitor to deal with inadequate mental health treatment by the NHS, alternative psychological health is needed more than ever.

KEYWORDS:

WELL BEING, RECITATION, STRESS, EDUCATION, SUFISM.

1 INTRODUCTION

The trajectory of an academic calendar is something we all are extremely familiar with, even if we are not part of the system as employees. With COVID-19 in our lives, the beginning of this academic year looks a whole lot different for those involved in school systems — from teachers, parents, students as well as school administrators. With the changing face of educational systems and processes, it is important to acknowledge the systemic and structural underpinnings of teacher and educator stress that are very unique to this time period. The shift to online modalities of learning has seen an increase in documentation, a restructuring in the way content is curated and delivered, and a rapid change in the job roles and expectations of Teachers.

While the socio-economic disparity in accessibility to technology has forced low-income schools to rethink how they prioritise otherwise unquestioned beliefs of 'completing syllabi', it was interesting to note how net connectivity, absence of home laptops and negotiating one's ease with technology is a source of immense distress

even to teachers of middle-income and high-income schools. Lalita, a 54-year-old teacher of a government-aided school in Mumbai, narrates how stressful her experience has been while working with technology to support her students' learning, "I had a few classes on Zoom and now Google Meet, I was struggling to send invites... even now I am scared, anxious and get disturbed sleep... I struggle to make my PPT."

Sufism is the esoteric path within Islam, where the goal is to purify oneself and achieve mystical union with the Supreme (named Allah in this tradition). The practitioners of Sufism are called Sufis, and they follow a variety of spiritual practices, many of which were influenced by the tradition of Yoga in India. In this post, I'll explore the several types of Sufi meditation.

Unlike many of the other meditation techniques, Sufi meditation is spiritual by nature. There is no "secular version" of these techniques, as the idea of God is part of their DNA. The core of all their practices is to remember God, fill the heart with God, and unite oneself with Him. So if you are atheist or agnostic, you probably won't find these meaningful. The journey of the Sufi is the journey of the lover returning to the arms of the Beloved, a journey of love in which we "die" as egos so we can be one with Him.

It's the way of the heart. All of the practices are aimed at letting go of one's ego, which is considered the biggest obstacle to realization. The roots of Sufism date back to around 1400 years ago, but they became near-extinct in the 20th century. There are different orders of Sufis, each emphasizing different exercises. In this article, I have drawn techniques from different schools. Sufism is not a monastic path. The Sufi wayfarer lives in the inner world of the heart as well as functioning responsibly in society.

2 THE NEED TO KNOW SUFISM

Human cognitions and behaviors are determined largely by a set of facts and values. The facts are mostly derived from the science and the values have their origin in religious or non-religious philosophies such as humanism and existentialism. Spirituality being an integral part of most of the religious philosophies provides the value system for the majority of people and thereby influences their well-being. Recognizing this, the spiritual well-being, in accordance with the social and cultural patterns, was accepted as one of the important determinants of health by the World Health Organization during the 37th World Health Assembly in 1984. Spiritual teaching has already found its place in the curriculum of many medical schools in the Western world. From a mental health perspective, spirituality seems to have a far greater role as these operate on the same ground – the brain or as some would like it call it the mind or the soul. In fact, there are studies that show positive as well as the negative impact of the spiritual and religious beliefs and practices on the physical and mental well-being of people who subscribe to spiritual or religious practices. Sufism, having a large following both in the Muslim world and outside coupled with migration of large numbers of people from eastern Sufi oriented lands to the west, is a rapidly growing form of spirituality that needs to be understood in terms of its impact on the mental well-being of its followers and the potential interactions in the mental health care clinical settings. From a more philosophical point of view, Sufism provides an opportunity to understand the source of religious knowledge in general and Islamic knowledge (revelation) in particular. In Sufi traditions, it is believed that Sufis can have similar knowledge revealing experiences as are the source of religious knowledge in the form of revelation of the Quran (the scripture of Islam) to Muhammad (the Prophet of Islam). The study of these Sufi experiences which share phenomenological ground with the prophetic experiences of revelation provides a possibility for the scientific study of the sources of religious knowledge. From day-to-day clinical practice to research, the study of the normal and abnormal perceptual/experiential phenomena and its implications form an integral part of the mental-health related sciences and puts the students of mental-health sciences in a coveted position to study the Sufi experiences.

METHODS OF SUFI HEALING TECHNIQUES RECOMMENDING TO STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

1. WHIRLING DERVISH

From an outside perspective, the most popular form of Sufi meditation is through a whirling dance. The aim of the dance is the abandonment of one's personal desires by completely focusing on God, through the music and movements. The dervish whirls counter-clockwise with the right arm directed upwards (towards the heavens) and the left turned towards the earth. During the dance, the dervishes enter a hyperconscious state. This is all done while maintaining their perfect physical balance, which includes making small rocking movements with the hands, arms and head as they spin. There are a number of health benefits in Sufi whirling. On her website, fullspectrumhealing.co.uk, Amanda Solk of the National Federation of Spiritual Healers cited the whirling dance to stimulate the activity of the pineal and pituitary glands, releasing endorphins and serotonin. Such effects on the brain reduce the need for mood-elevating substances and cause a sense of ecstasy to occur. Dancing in itself can also have a positive effect on the brain with a BBC report in 2004 citing evidence to suggest dancing as a dynamic way to exercise the mind.

2. SEATED MEDITATION

Another form of Sufi meditation is through sitting down and reciting some of the Islamic names of God. Focus is attributed to specific syllables in a way that also initiates conscious breathing and the utilization of sound. In a book entitled *Sufi Healing*, by Shaykh Hakim Moinuddin Chishti, it is written that a divine encountering can be achieved through elongating the vowel sounds of 'ah' 'ee' and 'uh'. It states that: 'Sufis use various formulas or combinations of these tones to produce electrifying effects that are able in and of themselves to unlock congested areas within the heart, thereby releasing one or more potentialities. This alone accounts for a considerable number of miraculous cures.' Amongst other health benefits, it is believed that this positively affects the pineal gland, through the vibration caused by the vowel sounds. An end result of a variety of Sufi meditations using such or similar techniques is therefore a cleansing of psychological stress, which is of course, paramount to upbeat mental health.

3. HEART MEDITATION

This practice, called *Jikr-e-Sirr* or *Wakoof Kulbi* (awareness of the heart), is a type of *jikr* (remembrance of God). It is one of the two central practices of the *Naqshbandi Sufi*.

For the Yogis, the spiritual heart (*anahata chakra*) is in the center of the chest, under the sternum bone. Some—like *Ramana Maharshi* and some *Tantric texts*—speak of the spiritual heart as being different from the heart *chakra*, and call it *hridaya*, saying it is on the right side of the chest. But according to the Sufis, the spiritual heart is at the same place where the physical heart is (on the left).

Here are the steps for this technique:

Start by collecting your dispersed energies, bringing them from the outside world back into yourself. Still the mind and the senses so that you can directly experience the

inner reality of the heart. Focus your attention intensely at the place where physical heart is located, until you forget all about yourself. This state of self-oblivion is considered the straight path to the Infinite.

The third step varies, according to the source and Sufi school. Here are some variations:

Try to listen to the heartbeat in the form of the name of the Almighty. With time, one starts listening to the sound of the heartbeat even during daily life.

Do the zikr (mantra repetition of Allah).

Keep thinking about God or one's spiritual master.

In all of the three variations above, keep your attention focused on the heart center, and simultaneously cultivate feelings of love for the Beloved.

In some more esoteric traditions, it is said that the master transmits his power to the disciple (tavajjoh or tawajjaha), and that awakens his spiritual heart, which is then filled with love. Only after this happens is the practice is really effective.

This practice can be done seated or lying down, and the recommended length is at least half an hour. Here is a more detailed description of the third variation, as found in the book *The Experience of Meditation*:

The first stage in this meditation is to evoke the feeling of love, which activates the heart chakra. This can be done in a number of ways, the simplest of which is to think of someone whom we love. This can be God, the great Beloved. But often at the beginning God is an idea rather than a living reality within the heart, and it is easier to think of a person whom we love, a lover, a friend. Love has many different qualities. For some the feeling of love is a warmth, or a sweetness, a softness or tenderness, while for others it has a feeling of peace, tranquillity or silence. Love can also come as a pain, a heartache, a sense of loss. However, love comes to us we immerse our self in this feeling; we place all of our self in the love within the heart. When we have evoked this feeling of love, thoughts will come, intrude into our mind—what we did the day before, what we have to do tomorrow. Memories float by, images appear before the mind's eye. We have to imagine that we are getting hold of every thought, every image and feeling, and drowning it, merging it into the feeling of love. Every feeling, especially the feeling of love, is much more dynamic than the thinking process, so if one does this practice well, with the utmost concentration, all thoughts will disappear. Nothing will remain. The mind will be empty.

4. SUFI BREATHING MEDITATION

Rumi, one of the most well-known Sufis, spoke highly of the practice of deep conscious breathing (Hosh dar Dam or Habje-daem). As with everything else in Sufism, the emphasis is about remembering God; so, in the Sufi breathing practices, one attempts to remain in God's presence with every breath.

"This Order is built on breath. One, therefore, must

safeguard his breath in the time of his inhalation and exhalation and in between."— Shah Naqshband

There are two main breathing practices.

Here is the first technique (source):

Close your eyes. Breathe normally a few times.

Concentrate on the spiritual heart, while thinking about God. Feel his light in your heart.

As you inhale, mentally repeat Allah, and feel that God's lights are being sucked into your heart.

As you exhale, mentally repeat Hu, and feel that the light of Hu is powerfully striking your heart.

Gradually increase the breathing rate to three to four times your normal speed, while keeping the same visualization and mantra. Take shallow but rapid breaths. The inhalation should be longer than the exhalation. The exhalation is a bit short and forceful.

Practice for ten minutes.

Sometimes this technique also involves long retention of breath, either after inhalation or exhalation.

Here are the instructions for the second technique (source), which includes five breathing cycles focusing on each of the five classical elements

First series—earth: Begin by breathing naturally in and out through your nostrils for five full breath cycles. This first series of five breaths is focused on purifying yourself with the element of earth. As you inhale, imagine that you draw the energy and magnetism of the earth up into you. It circulates through your subtle energy systems and replenishes and renews the vitality and strength of Your body. As you exhale, imagine that the magnetic field of the earth draws all the heavy, gross elements or energies within you down into the ground to be purified and released. With each breath, you will feel revitalized, lighter, less dense, and clearer to the free flow of breath, life, and energy.

Second series—water: Then with a second series of five breaths, imagine purifying yourself with the energy of water. Inhaling through your nose and exhaling through your mouth, envision a waterfall of pure, clear energy pouring down into you from the heavens above, flowing through you, and dissolving, purifying anything within you that might block the flow of life-energy moving through you. With each breath, feel that you are washed clean and clear, as this stream of energy and light flows through you.

Third series—fire: With the next series of five breaths, purify yourself with the element of fire. Inhaling through your mouth and exhaling through your nostrils, let the breath flow focus at your solar plexus as you inhale, and then rise up and radiate as light from your heart-center, shining out between your shoulder blades, and like a fountain of light up through the crown of your head. Inhaling fire, exhaling light, envision and affirm that this circulation of energy is a purifying fire gathering any remaining impurities or congestion and burning them into radiance and light in the fires of your heart.

Fourth series—air: With the next cycle of breaths, imagine purifying yourself with the air element. Inhaling and exhaling through your mouth, imagine the air element sweeping through you like the wind blowing through the spaces of your whole body, purifying any sense of density or obstruction that may remain.

Fifth series—ether : Finally, breathing very gently through your nostrils, envision yourself being purified by the most subtle element – the “ether” element of the ancients, or the most subtle energies that infuse space, or the quantum field of infinite potentials. Let this most subtle breath dissolve any remaining sense of solidity or density and let your heart and mind open to be clear and vast like the infinite sky.

Closing: Energized and purified, sense the subtle, yet profound shift that has taken place in the course of only 25 breaths. Carry the sense of focus, calm, and deep connectedness from this practice into your next meditation or into your daily life.

The first technique is similar to the Kapalabhati Pranayama, one of the six purificatory practices of Hatha Yoga. The second is similar to the Tattwa Shuddhi practice of Tantra. There are also similar “element purification” practices in the Taoist and the Hermetic traditions.

5. SUFI WALKING MEDITATION

In Sufism there is a practice called Nazar bar Kadam (Watch Your Step), which is about walking mindfully and consciously. One should not do anything which may drag him down or which may obstruct his spiritual progress. It also means that one should avoid looking here and there aimlessly as this pollutes the mind. This is why Sufi saints ask their followers to look at their feet while walking.

This practice is basically the application of the principles discussed in the section on Contemplation of God (remembering God in the heart + watching one’s own mind) to walking.

Refer to my article on walking meditation to learn other types of practice

6. SUFI WHIRLING

Some Sufis consider that music and dancing act as a catalyst to produce in them a state of ecstasy. It is mostly practiced by the Dervishes of the Mevlevi Order , and it is called Samazen.

Like everything else in Sufism, it’s all about abandoning one’s ego, focusing on God, and merging with love. It’s the soul dancing out of love for God. It’s training for awareness and for the heart. This choreographed dance involves spinning one’s body in repetitive circles, which has been seen as a symbolic imitation of planets in the Solar System orbiting the sun. While whirling, his arms are open: his right arm is directed to the sky, ready to receive God’s beneficence; his left hand, upon which his eyes are fastened, is turned toward the earth. The semazen conveys God’s spiritual gift to those who are witnessing the Sema. Revolving from right to left around the heart, the semazen

embraces all humanity with love. The human being has been created with love in order to love. Mevlâna Jalâluddîn Rumi says, “All loves are a bridge to Divine love. Yet, those who have not had a taste of it do not know!”

SUFISM AND MENTAL HEALTH CARE SERVICES

A vast number of the mentally ill people in the community go untreated or seeks the help of spiritual healers in most of the developing countries. The reasons lie in the belief systems of the people which foster a spiritually oriented explanation of the mental illnesses and the practically non-existent mental health care services in most of the rural settings. The large number of mentally ill people thronging the shrines (*dargah*) of Sufi saints to seek cure is a testimony to this. The Erwadi (India) fire at the shrine of the Sufi saint Shaheed Valiyullah leading to the death of 28 mentally ill people should be a grim reminder of the cost of neglecting the incorporation of people’s spiritual beliefs into the mental health care services. The incorporation of spiritual/Sufi elements into the mental health care services needs to be a two-fold process:

Incorporation of the spiritual/Sufi healers into the mental health care delivery system which may include basic training in identification of mental illnesses and appropriate

Incorporation of the spiritual/Sufi beliefs and practices into the therapeutic process which may increase the utilization of mental health services by a largely spiritually oriented population.

The integration of spiritual beliefs and practices into the mental health care delivery system needs efforts both at the organizational and individual level. Sensitization of the trainees in the mental health profession to spiritual issues needs to be given an impetus. The focus of the training should be on understanding of spirituality as an important part of the individual seeking help and a thorough understanding of the belief systems of the people in the practice area.

CONCLUSION

Sufi beliefs and practices form an integral part of the belief system of not only the majority of the Muslim world but also the western world where it is gaining popularity. Sufism provides a vital link to the understanding of revelation – the source of religious knowledge in Islam as well as other Semitic religions, and influences the mental health of its believers and practitioners in a significant way. Unfortunately, there is little in terms of research based evidence to draw any conclusions in both these directions. There is a need for research to evolve scientifically sound means of incorporation of Sufi beliefs and practices into the mental health care system before any dogmas strike their roots. At the same time, mental health professionals should not slide into the role of preachers and start promoting the Sufi beliefs and practices; the role should rather be restricted to utilizing these beliefs and practices where it forms a part of the belief system. Human experience in, health and disease,

always has a spiritual dimension. spirituality is accepted as one of the defining determinants of health and it no more remains a sole preserve of religion and mysticism. In recent years, spirituality has been an area of research in neurosciences and both in the understanding of psychiatric morbidity and extending therapeutic interventions it seems to be full of promises. Various methods of sufi healing techniques will help to reduce stress and anxiety among elite athletes. studies recommending sufism for healing tool in sports psychology.

CONCLUSION

As in most work-from-home cultures, the blurred line between work and life has been a source of distress and anxiety for many professionals during the lockdown. For instance, Just because everything is happening online it is assumed that everyone is checking their phone all the time... things are informed at odd hours of the night and at short notice. As teachers make themselves available to answer calls from students, parents and school management, the assumption that teachers can go about their workday as usual, in the absence of the physical environment of the school, doesn't hold true in reality. While for many teachers, an increase in caregiving load and related chores is an added burden, a lack of physical workspace conducive to attend video calls or record instructional videos is also a pressing issue.

During the last two decades, advancements in technology have allowed music to grow into being an effective intervention to achieve a range of desirable psychological and performance effects among athletes. Lead researcher in the field of music in sport and exercise, Dr Costas Karageorghis has primarily explored the psychological, psychophysical, psychophysiological, and ergogenic effects of music:

The **Psychological** effects refer to how music influences mood, affect, emotion, attitudes, cognition and behaviour.

The **psychophysical** effects of music involve sensory responses to physiological processes. In music related research, this involves the perceptions of physical effort and is most often measured via the ratings of perceived exertion (RPE) scale.

The **psychophysiological** effects of music relate to the influence of music on a range of physiological factors, such as heart rate and respiration rate.

Music exerts an **ergogenic** effect when it improves physical performance by either delaying fatigue or increasing work capacity. This often results in higher than expected levels of endurance, power, productivity, or strength.

In support of theoretical research, many famous athletes have been seen using music to enhance their performance. For instance, the American swimmer Michael Phelps, who won 7 gold medals and set 5 world records at the 2007 FINA World Championships, reportedly listened to hip-hop music before his races in order to get focused and psyched up ('More questions with Michael Phelps', 2007).

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