

COMMUNITY CARE

Objectives >>>

Students should:

- Learn some of the etiquettes of looking out for the ill, including
- Understand some of the etiquettes of looking after the elderly

Social Rules

SENIOR LEVEL

Community Care

Falling ill is an inevitable part of life. Everybody falls ill in their lifetime and no one can claim to be immune from it. While illnesses are difficult to bear, all of them are a hidden mercy from Allah (SWT) as our sins are forgiven. For this reason we should not complain when ill, but instead practice patience and pray to Allah (SWT) to make us better.

In addition to shedding light on the positive side and hidden mercies behind every illness, Islam has also laid great emphasis on visiting the sick and promised great rewards reserved for ones who do so.

In this lesson we will discuss the benefits of illness, the importance of visiting the ill, the etiquettes of dealing with them and those of dealing with the elderly.

BENEFITS OF ILLNESS

a) Appreciating good health

It is only when we have lost something that we miss it. Similarly, it is only during illness that we truly appreciate and remember the days when we were healthy. Periods of illness cause us to become more careful about ourselves when we regain health; we naturally tend to avoid those foods or activities or ways of life that caused our illness in the first place. This change of life is a practical way of appreciating the blessing of Allah (SWT). Falling ill also makes us humble as we begin to realise how weak and powerless we are since creatures as tiny as mosquitos can leave us bed-ridden for several days.

b) Purification of sins.

The Holy Prophet (saw) says:

“The wrongdoings of a sick person shed away from him like the shedding of leaves from a tree.”ⁱ

It is for this reason that Imam al-Sajjād (as) says in one of his supplications:

“O Allah, I do not know in which situation I should be more grateful; in health or during illness. When I am healthy, I should be grateful for my health and the opportunity to perform good deeds. However, when I am ill, I am lying in bed and resting, but your angels are asking forgiveness for me and I gain rewards despite not doing anything.”ⁱⁱ

One day the Prophet was walking when he looked up and began smiling. He was asked why he was smiling to which he explained that two angels had come down to write the rewards for a person who usually attended congregational prayers but they did not find him there. They went back and reported this to the Exalted Lord. He said to them:

“Write the same rewards for him as if he were there, because if he was not ill, he would have been present.”

HOW TO DEAL WITH ILLNESS

The discomfort experienced from illness makes one very easily agitated and frustrated. We tend to lose our temper quickly and often complain about our situation to others. Moreover, because we are unable to resume normal duties, we become depressed and consequently also affect the moods of those around us. Take for example the sullen mood of an active young boy who has sprained his ankle and is barred from any sporting activity for 4 weeks, or imagine the frustration of a middle-aged man who is bed-ridden for a month because of a chronic illness.

In these testing times, Islam has given us invaluable advice on how to best deal with our illness:

a) Concealing illness

The first important tip is to conceal our illness as much as possible and not to inform anyone other than our doctors about it. Unfortunately we usually have a tendency of exaggerating and dramatizing our illnesses to people so that we can gain their sympathetic attention. In addition to our personal problems and our

acts of charity, our sicknesses should also remain concealed. The Prophet (saw) said,

“From among the treasures of righteousness are: concealing one’s tragedies, sicknesses and charity.”ⁱⁱⁱ

b) Do not complain to others

When we are ill, we should not complain about our situation to anyone but Allah (SWT). Complaining to others means that we are indirectly complaining about Allah’s decision upon us. Instead, we should try and think of those people who are in a much worse situation and then thank Allah (SWT).

“Allah Almighty has said, ‘Whoever becomes sick three times and does not complain to any of his visitors, I change his flesh to flesh better than what he has and blood better than his blood. If I cure him, then I will cure him and he will have no sin, and if I take him [in death], I will take him to My Mercy.’”^{iv}

When Prophet Ayyūb (as) was very ill for a long time, he did not complain to anyone but very politely asked Allah (SWT) to have mercy on him:

“O my Lord, harm has touched me, and You are the Most merciful”

c) Take quick steps to become well.

We should not wait for our illness to become severe before taking necessary steps; it may after all be too late. When we are ill, we should take quick steps to recovery by visiting a doctor and following his prescriptions carefully, eating well and resting adequately. Having a carefree attitude toward illness is in reality betraying the trust (our body) that Allah (SWT) has gifted us with.

HOW TO DEAL WITH THE ILL

As previously mentioned, Islam has placed great emphasis on visiting the ill. It has instructed us to inquire about our brothers and sisters who have not been seen in the mosque or in social gatherings for an unusually long time. If we learn that they are ill, we must visit them. In this section we will discuss the etiquette of visiting the ill, be it at home or in a hospital.

a) Before visiting, we should call the family to ask for the most convenient time so that we do not trouble the family and the patient. Often, the family of the patient is

already struggling to care for the patient and the last thing they want is to attend to guests at random times.

b) We should not disclose the details of the illness to other people and we must respect the family's wish for confidentiality if this is what they want.

c) We should not visit the ill empty-handed. We should always take something even if it is simple, like a get-well card or flowers. We should keep in mind to take something suitable like a book or healthy foods like fruits rather than sweets that the patient should not be eating anyway. A companion of Imam al-Ṣādiq (AS) narrated.

“One of his companions became sick so we went to visit him as a group. We met Imam Ja’far (as) on the way, and he asked, ‘Where are you going?’ We replied, ‘We are going to so and so to visit him.’ He said, ‘Stop’, so we stopped, and he asked, ‘Does any of you have an apple or a quince, or a citron, or some perfume or a piece of sandalwood?!’ We said, ‘No, we do not have any of these?’ He said, ‘Do you not know that the sick man is comforted by anything that is brought for him.’^v

d) Our visits should be short so that we do not make the patient uncomfortable. Often patients find it difficult to stay awake or to sit up for long. Sometimes they also need to use the toilet often and our long stays would inconvenience them. We should only prolong our stay if they need our company. Imam ‘Ali (as) said:

“The visitor with the greatest reward with Allah is he who when he visits he sits briefly, unless the sick person likes the company and wants and asks for [him to sit longer].

e) We should not visit the ill in a sad or depressed mood, nor argue, nor interrogate them about his illness as this would make him very upset. Instead, we should visit them with a cheerful and happy face and give him good words about a speedy recovery so that he feels better.^{vi}

REWARDS OF VISITING THE ILL

a) Visiting the ill is likened to visiting Allah (SWT) Himself

The Prophet (saw) said:

“Allah Almighty will say on the Day of Resurrection, ‘O son of Adam, I became sick and you did not visit Me!’ and he will ask, ‘O Lord, how can I visit You when You

are the Lord of the worlds?’ He Almighty will say, ‘Did you not know that My servant so and so became sick and you did not visit him?! Did you not know that if you had visited him you would have found Me there with him?!’^{vii}

b) Forgiveness of sins.

Imam al-Ṣādiq (as) said:

“Whoever visits a sick person, seventy thousand angels will escort him repenting for him until he returns to his house.”^{viii}

c) Reminder of the Hereafter:

When we visit the ill, we attain a realisation of our weakness and the transient nature of this world where everything will someday age, deteriorate and eventually die. This realisation is healthy as it reminds of our final abode – the hereafter- and therefore helps to keep our actions on track.

The Prophet (saw) said:

“Visit the sick and follow funeral processions, they will remind you of the Hereafter.”^{ix}

DEALING WITH THE ELDERLY

Like illness, ageing is a natural and inevitable part of life. In affluent countries like Australia, there is a large population of elderly people and this means a greater responsibility on younger people to look after them. Islam has laid as much emphasis on our social responsibilities such as looking after the elderly as it has on our spiritual and individual aspects of life.

According to the Holy Qur’an, the life for the aged has been described as the most miserable stage of life (arthalil ‘umr). This is because that part of life is very difficult and leads to people becoming dependent on others. The Holy Qur’an also says that those who are given long lives suffer a ‘reversal’ in creation, physically and mentally, slowly reverting to a life similar to that of a baby, which is helpless and dependent.

“And he whom We grant long life, We reverse him in creation (weakness after strength). Will they not then understand?”^x

It is also difficult for us to imagine the difficulties of life for the elderly, because we have not experienced it. We think that we will always have our current health and

strength and so we become impatient with the elderly because of their slowness or weakness. Once a champion marathon runner was taken to a running track he used to frequent. Now, in his old age, he could hardly run and was moving like a toddler would. This reminds us that no matter how fit we are, we will one day be old and weak too and so we should be patient with our elders now that we are young.

Elderly people are often depressed because they feel that they are now useless and dependent on others. In addition, they may be suffering from medical conditions which cause them pain and suffering. In addition to all this, they often have many expenses related to health care which makes their life even more difficult. In many cases, elderly people are left alone in a nursing home or in a corner of their house without anyone paying attention to them or visiting them. They can become so depressed that they pray to be taken from this world.

Islam has given us instructions for every aspect of our lives including our responsibilities toward our elders and how to deal with them in the right manner

OUR RESPONSIBILITIES TOWARD ELDERS

- We need to be good and respectful to elderly people, especially our parents. In fact, the Holy Qur'an says:

“...and to your parents, be good to them (directly). If one of them or both them reach old age do not say (even) ‘uff’ to them and do not chastise them and say to them honourable speech”^{xi}

We should take time out from our life and wait on our parents like servants, and always speak to our parents respectfully.

- According to the Qur'an, we should be humble towards our elderly parents and be like a soft carpet they can walk on.

“and lower to them the wing of humbleness and mercy”^{xii}

- If we need to correct our elders or give them advice, we should be subtle in doing this and shouldn't be blunt. Even if the elderly person thinks they are always right because of their experience, we should still not be blunt in

advising them and should take their age into consideration.

- We should spend time around them, converse with them and make them laugh. Give them company and remove some of their boredom and depression.
- We should look after their financial needs without them having to ask us. A man has as much responsibility to look after his parents as he does towards his wife and children. Wives, in turn, should not complain about their husbands sending money to look after his parents. Remember, when we were young, our parents looked after us, and now they may be too proud to ask for anything when they need it. In one narration, a man came to Imam al-Ṣādiq saying that he had a financial dispute with his father and he wanted the Imam to judge between them. The Imam (as) said:

“you and your wealth belong to your father.”

When we are helping our parents financially, we should do in a subtle and respectful way, and should not make them feel bad about it. Part of this is that we should be vigilant of their needs and give them assistance before they ask. Imam al-Ṣādiq (as) says:

“do not trouble them to ask you for their needs.”

- We should pray for them as we have been instructed by the Holy Qur'an:

“Say: O Allah have mercy on them just as they raised me when I was young. Reward them goodness for their goodness, and forgiveness for their mistakes”

Review Questions

1) Which of these is NOT a benefit of illness?

- a. Forgiveness of sins
- b. Practical appreciation of good health
- c. Loss of appetite and hence loss of weight

2) In dealing with the ill, we should:

- a. Ask them in detail about their illness
- b. Meet them with a happy and cheerful mood

- c. Make the details of their illness public

3) In regards to the reality of visiting the ill, it is as though one is visiting...

- a. The Holy Prophet (saw)
- b. Imam Mahdi (atfs)
- c. Allah (SWT)

4) In regards to dealing with the elderly:

- a. Islam has not laid much emphasis on it
- b. Islam has laid as much emphasis on this as it has on individual acts of worship
- c. By providing financial assistance only we have fulfilled our duties.

ⁱ 'al-Tarhib wa al-Tarhib, v. 4, p. 293, no. 56

ⁱⁱ Sahifa Sajjadiyah, His Supplication when Ill

ⁱⁱⁱ Mustadrak al-Wasa'il, v. 2, p. 68, no. 1435

^{iv} al-Kafi, v. 3, p. 115, no. 1

^v al-Kafi, v. 3, p. 118, no. 3'

^{vi} al-Kafi, v. 3, p. 118, no. 6

^{vii} al-Tarhib wa al-Tarhib, v. 4, p. 317, no. 3

^{viii} [al-Kafi, v. 3, p. 120, no. 2]

^{ix} Kanz al-'Ummal, no. 25143

^x Holy Qur'an (36:68)

^{xi} Holy Quran (17:23)

^{xii} Holy Quran (17:24)