

SEEKING COUNSEL

Objectives >>>

Students should:

- Understand that we should always ask for advice from elders, especially our parents and teachers
- Understand that we should only ask for advice from elders whom we know

SOCIAL ISLAM

LEVEL 5

Seeking Counsel

The prophets that Allah (SWT) has sent to humankind throughout history came to guide, advise, and help their followers. The Holy Qur'an states that prophet Hūd said:

"...and I am a trustworthy adviser to you" (7:68)

In another verse about prophet Nūḥ, he says to the people

"I but fulfil towards you the duties of my Lord's mission; sincere is my advice to you..." (7:62)

As such, counselling in Islam is of great value and importance. It is how the Prophets and Imams (as) carried out the mission Allah (SWT) had given them.

In fact, "counsellor" means "adviser." A counsellor is an individual who facilitates the solving of problems, the resolving of conflicts and issues, and the capacity to change. Islam is a way of life that prescribes self-transformation. This is the changing of thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and behaviours for the better so as to achieve certain states – pure and sound heart, richness of self, tranquillity and freedom of the soul - all endeavouring to earn the pleasure of Allah SWT.¹ Such transformation is often impossible without heeding advice.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SEEKING ADVICE IN ISLAM

People often experience a mental or emotional problem that they are unable to cope with and resolve by themselves. It is not surprising given the complex and fast-paced world we are living in. The following example is common of problems that warrant help from a counsellor.

- Sarah was a young woman who came for counselling due to obsessive thoughts. She would list in her mind what she had to do each day, over and over again. She felt that this problem was ruining her life as she found it difficult to focus while at her college classes and felt anxious most of the time. She never participated in class and avoided close friendships as she didn't want anyone to find out about her problem. She did not know where this problem came from or how to deal with it. The more she tried to just stop the listing habit, the stronger it seemed to become. She was miserable and desperate to find relief and live her life without the possessiveness and the anxiety.

In such a situation we know our social responsibilities in Islam suffer and if we suffer from a problem that causes us to fail to meet some of our Islamic responsibilities, then we should seriously consider seeking counselling.

When facing problems, either marital trouble, financial difficulties, or otherwise, many Muslims are reluctant to seek professional counselling. Some people consider it degrading or inappropriate to speak of one's troubles to others.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Islam teaches us to give good advice to others, and to offer guidance and support when needed. Of course, the advice needs to come from qualified people who are likely to give beneficial advice.

BARRIERS TO LISTENING

In the Holy Qur'an Allah (SWT) has provided stories of several prophets who came to guide and teach the people of their communities and to prevent them from idol worship and sins. For example in the story of Prophet Abraham (as) we see that he was sent to guide

the people to worship only One God and to turn away from idols. In the story of Prophet Hūd (as), we see that he was sent to the people of his community to guide them to worship only One God and to be thankful for the blessings that they had and to stop committing sins. In the story of Prophet Şāleḥ (as) and Prophet Moses (as) also we see that the prophets were busy guiding the people and the rulers.

However, as in the above stories, we see that the prophets acted in one common way. They all had one message and duty. Just as the prophets and righteous people had one common duty, we see that the people of their communities also acted in a common and similar way. The following are the main causes that act as barriers against listening to advice.

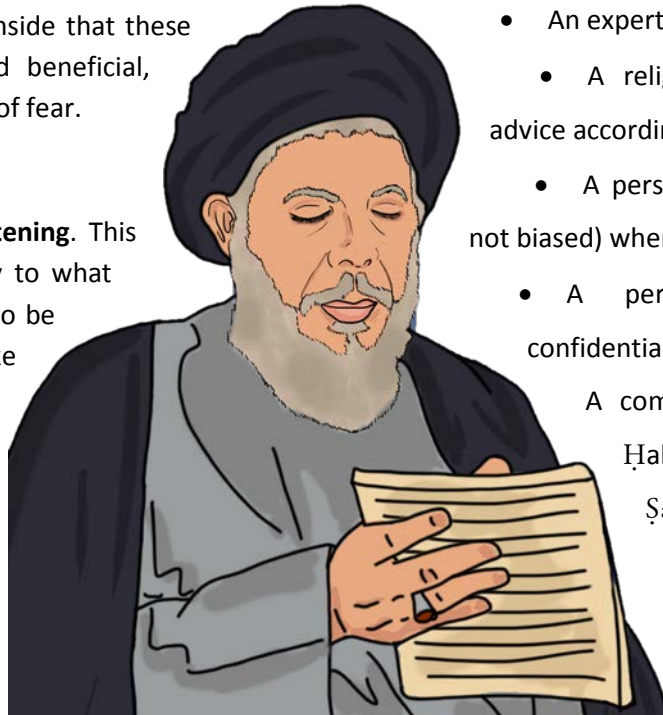
1. **Having a pre-determined attitude and assumption about the subject matter** – this is a common problem that people suffer from even today. Once you have made up your mind on a particular subject then to listen to advice on that becomes very difficult especially if the advice is against what you desire to hear, though it may be in your real interest. During the time of Prophet Muḥammad (saw) the people would put cotton wool in their ears because they had been told by their chiefs that the words of Prophet Muḥammad (saw) were magic and that he would possess them if they listened to him.
2. **Pride and arrogance** – this is the biggest barrier to taking advice



because it blocks the person from seeing the truth and acting on it. This is the cause that led to the ruin of many people and still continues to ruin many. This problem even got Satan to where he is.

3. **Love of this World** – there are many ḥadith that teach us that love of this world is one of the major causes of blindness to the truth. Pharaoh’s love of his position, and the love for wealth of the people of Prophet Shu’ayb stopped them from listening to advice.
4. **Fear** – Sometimes a person is afraid to take advice because they fear that taking advice will mean making significant and difficult changes in their life. We often know deep inside that these changes are necessary and beneficial, but we delay them because of fear.

5. **We engage in selective listening.** This occurs when we listen only to what we want to hear. We like to be right, and our minds like consistency. We don’t feel comfortable when something upsets our belief system. It is easier to ignore that information. The downside is that we can’t learn from others or cooperate with each other effectively. ⁱⁱ



these things, we should not dismiss it simply out of love and attachment to these things.

- Courage to make changes despite the difficulties and challenges that come with change will help us implement good advice.

THE QUALITIES OF THE ADVISOR

Earlier, we gave the example of a person who was suffering from difficulties in their life and needed to seek advice. When seeking advice, we should go to a person who is:

- An expert
 - A religious person, who will give advice according to the principles of Islam.
 - A person who will be impartial (i.e. not biased) when giving advice
- A person who will maintain confidentiality and not reveal our secrets.

A companion by the name of al-Ḥalabi narrates from Imam al-Ṣādiq (as):

“Seeking advice from others is a virtue. If you do not do it, you will face a great loss.

However, there are conditions. The first is that the person you seek advice from should have intellect (i.e. be an expert). Secondly, he should also be religious and impartial. Thirdly, he should also be a friend. Fourthly, you must divulge all the details to him, so that he knows your affairs as much you do. The counsellor should then keep this a secret and not divulge it.”

WHAT DOES ISLAM SAY ABOUT SEEKING ADVICE FROM WOMEN?

It is related from Imam ‘Ali (as) says in Nahjul Balagha:

“Do not seek the advice of women, because their advice is incomplete and their decisions are weak, except those women whom you know are intelligent”

Generally speaking, women are more emotional and their emotions often influence their decisions and cause them to make mistakes. However, as the Imam (as)

REMOVING THE BARRIERS

- The most important step to take is to overcome our pride. We should train ourselves to look at other points of view seriously, and not be afraid to admit we are wrong.
- It is also important to listen actively. Whenever someone gives us advice, we should at least consider it. We should also thank that person. Then we can objectively try to assess whether the advice is beneficial or not.
- Another important step is to reduce attachment to things in this world. While it is permissible to enjoy wealth, friendships and reputation if they are ḥalāl, it is important not to become too attached to these things. When we are given advice that may affect

clarifies at the end of the narration, it is good to take the advice of women who are intelligent and who are not overly affected by their emotions.

This is confirmed by the Holy Qur'an, which says that the husband and wife should seek each other's advice and make decisions together.

- In one specific example about the issue of breast-feeding children, Allah, the Exalted, recommends that the husband and wife take each other's advice and make decision together
- In Surah al-Ṭalāq, there is a more general command for the husband and wife to take advice from each other

In one narration, the Prophet (saw) says that when it comes to issues relating to women, it is better to take advice from a woman than from a man.

“take and accept the advice of women in the matter of their daughters”

There is another narration that says: “take their advice (feminine) then go against it”. This is often interpreted to mean that we should always go against the advice of women. However, the mystics interpret this feminine pronoun to be referring to our evil-commanding soul, rather than to women.

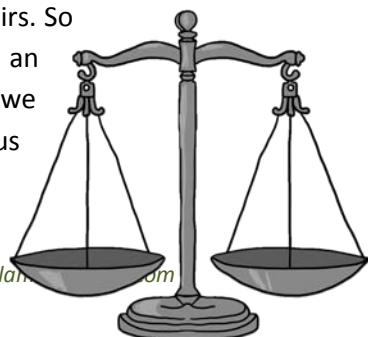
In conclusion, there is no problem with taking the advice of women, as long as the woman or women are using their intellect and not being driven solely by emotion.

SEEKING GUIDANCE AND COUNSEL FROM ALLAH (SWT) – ISTIKHĀRAH

The Prophet of Allah said:

“Among the felicities of the children of Adam is that he asks the best from Allah and His pleasure in that which Allah has decreed for him. And among the misfortunes of the children of Adam is abandoning the asking of what is best from Allah and not being pleased with what Allah has decreed.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The actual meaning of the word Istikhārah is to seek the best from Allah in one's affairs. So before we engage in an important project or task, we pray to Allah (SWT) to give us the best in this task and



help us succeed.

Another meaning of Istikhārah is to use the Holy Qur'an or other methods to decide what to do in situations where we cannot make a decision. This Istikhārah is^{iv} reserved for situations where:

- One has weighed up the pros and cons of the decision or situation. This step also includes supplication and prayers to Allah (SWT) to guide you to the best.
- We have done all our research, asked the appropriate experts and advisors, and still cannot come to a decision based on the facts we have at hand
- We have a sincere intention to follow the outcome of the Istikhārah
- We do not become dependent on, or obsessed with Istikhārah, such that we do not do anything without it and stop using our intelligence

Review Questions

Q1. How do we know WHEN to seek advice:

- a. When we want to justify our actions
- b. When we are making important decisions
- c. When we know the answer but just to make sure

Q2. What are the qualities of the advisor in Islam?

- a. They must be our close friend
- b. Expert in his field
- c. Someone older than us

Q3. When should we not perform Istikhara?

- a. When we are in a reasonable dilemma and can act both ways
- b. When we have made up our mind but we just want to make sure
- c. When we don't feel like thinking.

ⁱ Seeking Advice Through Counselling — Part 1
http://salaamhearts.com/advice/57/Seeking_Advice_Through_Counseling__Part_1

ⁱⁱ 7 BARRIERS TO ACTIVE LISTENING: WHY WE DON'T LISTEN AS WELL AS WE COULD - <http://lawsagna.typepad.com/lawsagna/2010/03/7-barriers-to-active-listening-why-we-dont-listen-as-well-as-we-could.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ Bihar al-Anwar, Volume 77, Page 159, Hadith 153

References

Seeking Advice Through Counselling — Part 1
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Istikhara – Seeking the Best From Allah (swt) – <http://www.al-islam.org/istikhara-seeking-the-best-from-allah-muhammad-baqir-haideri/section-1-necessity-performing#1-istikhara-success-muslim>

Holy Qur'an