

## **How do People Approach God during Stressful life Situations: an Empirical Exploration**

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The current trend in dealing with stress has been shifted towards the inclination of individuals to turn before God for experiencing relational comfort and benefits. Empirical evidences have demonstrated the vital impact of religious coping in reducing distress and remorse. The aim of this study is to examine how a person uses to approach God for managing stress. The sample of the study comprised of 53 Muslim Adults with the age range of 20 to 30 years ( $M= 22.8$ ,  $SD=1.77$ ). It was a qualitative exploratory study incorporating semi structured interviews in which participants were asked that what particular styles they take on for approaching God for dealing with stress. Major stressors were identified as health issues, death traumas, professional or work related problems, relational clashes and financial losses. In content analysis four major styles of approaching God were found to be (i) visualizing God's names 35%, (ii) memorizing Quranic Verses 28%, (iii) reciting Quranic Chapters 23%, (iv) performing rituals and practices 71%. Such religious efforts bring the feelings of being connected to God, supporting individuals for dealing effectively with life stressors. Subjective self-reporting nature of data and lack of standardized measures are the limitations of the study. The findings have practical implications in a way that it can be adopted for assisting individuals with mental health problems as well as for enhancing the worth of spiritual experiences.

**Keyword.** Styles of approaching God, life stressors, Quranic Verses, Religious practices, support, effective dealing.

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The legend of life encompasses series of ups and downs requiring an individual to adapt accordingly as per the requirement of the situation for capturing the optimum essence of livelihood. The inability to meet these requirements lead individuals to experience stress, effecting their mental as well as physical functioning. People usually use multiple approaches to handle the hardships but it is found as a typical practice for all human beings to manage the situation by following the path of spiritualism for moving towards God in stressful situations irrespective of the religion to which they belong (Khan, 2015).

It is traditional practice for human beings to believe and experience Divine spirit through faith. True knowledge for being closer to God can bring the essence to feel the power of soul, heals the fear of death and provides the faithful meaning to the life of an individual (Chopra, 2000). William James stated about hundred years ago that it is natural for man to have a strong will for believing in the highest power of the world. The purpose of evolution of man is to find God. The never ending activity of brain is all about this search. It is not a matter of choice but something necessary to live by knowing the creator (Saleem, 2004; (Ahmed, Ammar Ahmed, Akhtar, & Salim, 2017; Cisheng et al., 2017; Jami & Kamal, 2017; Kalsoom, Masood, & Jami, 2017; Wasif et al., 2017).

Dependence on God is considered as a chief intrinsic worth of Muslims. It works as one of the milestone of the spiritual development for the true believers. Surely it is the ultimate stage in the journey of being close to God. This trait of relying on God is mentioned as a step toward spiritual development in Islam (Khurasani, 2008). It also acts as a way to deal with stressful situations in the lives of Muslims. Islamic spirituality is a broad term explaining the relationship of man with Allah and the way in which this relationship affects the life of an individual (Nasr,

1997). There are different ways people normally use to approach God for experiencing the true essence of this relationship. Muslims can approach their God (i) through the attributes of God directly (ii) through Quranic stories and (iii) through Quranic verses as well as teachings (Ghobary Bonab, Miner & Proctor, 2012).

### **Approaching God through His Attributes**

There are ninety-nine attributes or divine names available to know God (Al-Bukhari, 1979). Each attribute has a specific impact on the relationship of God with His creatures. Attachment specific attributes of God includes *Al-Mu'min* (The Preserver and Bestower of security). Security serves as the core requirement of the care seeker shaping the relationship with the caregiver and in adverse situation the sufferer always turns to the stronger partner of the attachment relationship. This attribute of God addresses that God is the only One who can provide safety and security in both external and internal threats [Al-Quran 113:1-5; 114:1-6] and *Al-Mujib* (Responsive), this attribute reflects His willingness to respond and availability at every time whenever an individual calls Him for protection.

### **Approaching God through Quranic Narratives**

Quranic stories are considered as another way of approaching God. These stories serve as a source of strength and confidence for the believers showing God in the role of attachment figure. Different stories of Quran reveal that God is the ultimate source of protection and acts as a secure base for an individual to turn again and again considering Him the reliable connection available in every threatening situation (Ghobary Bonab, Miner, & Proctor, 2013). Different stories provide evidences how God provide protection and security to His believers including the

stories of Noah (Al-Quran, 26: 105-122), Hud (Al-Quran, 26: 123-140), Salih (Al-Quran, 26: 141-159), Lot (Al-Quran, 26: 160-175), Shuayb (Al-Quran, 26: 176-191), and Prophet Muhammad (Al-Quran, 3: 173-174). The story of Moses and Pharaoh the king of Egypt was another example supporting the availability and responsiveness of God (Ibn Arabi, 2004).

### **Approaching God through Quranic Verses**

Quranic verses presented another way of approaching God. These verses also provides evidences that God is an attachment figure for His believers suggesting clearly that all attributes of God are the obvious qualities of an attachment figure. As some verses describe God as Omnipresent, compassionate etc (Mottaghi, Esmaili, & Rohani, 2011).

Few verses with the divine attributes of God supporting His role as an attachment figure assure that God is available every time, everywhere for everyone. For instance,

“And Allah is with you, wherever you are” (Al-Quran, 57:4)

“And We are closer to him than his jugular vein” (Al- Quran, 50:16)

“And We are closer (than you) to that person but you cannot see it” (Al-Quran, 56:85)

“In whatever direction you turn, there is a face of Allah” (Al-Quran, 2:115).

These few verses suggest that believers will always be responded whenever they turn to God in any stressful life event. Further it is revealed from these verses that protection and security can only be attained with secure attachment to God.

Next important consideration is that this kind of attachment, connection and spiritual understanding seems to be the essence of lively activities making it important element to be explored. Another noteworthy point is that there are quite few studies available on subjective experience or perceptual orientation of connection and assistance seeking approach to God among Pakistani individuals (Khan, 2015). There are the sort of studies which in actual explored the relationships among variable like bonding to God, religious orientation, etc with respective outcomes and all such studies are clearly presenting that much of the literature is directing a positive relationship between religious variables and healthy outcomes (Saleem, 2004). Also, there are few negative considerations are available in case of poor or unhealthy attachment patterns.

Existing literature and general observation of individuals revealed such forms of religious coping but this would be an attempt to have an empirical understanding of this phenomenon. Moreover, such work would also provides an opportunity for further studies to address the reasons and features of being religious and ways of practicing religion for the promotion of health (Levin, 1996). Also, this is a domain being widely explored even in current practices for the betterment and favor of humanity.

The attempt to consider stress under the concept of religiosity presented multiple avenues to be travelled and is greatly encouraged in psychological realm (Clements & Ermakova, 2012). Thus, this could be an effort to reflect the importance of this

connection in indigenous context with subjective explanation of individuals having rich essence and lesson for learners and assistance seekers along with the ways to approach God. Additionally, this will enrich and extend the theoretical stance of religious and spiritual psychology with content analysis sort of reality driven and theory formulating endeavors.

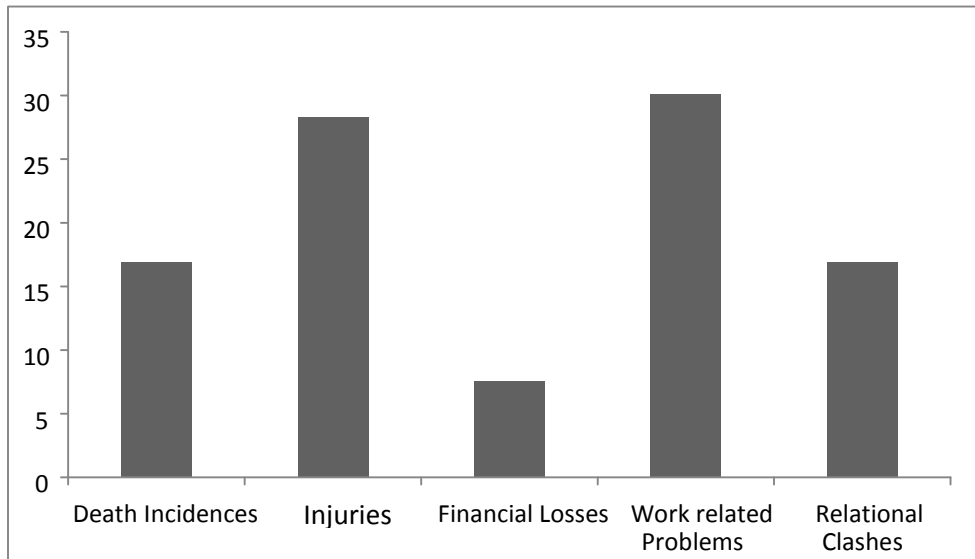
## **Method**

### **Research Design**

It was a qualitative study incorporating semi-structured interviews of participants for exploring the particular style they uses to approach God in stressful situation for coping with it effectively. The description of base line characteristics was presented through descriptive analysis, inter-rater reliability was established and frequencies as well as percentages were computed for representing the findings of the study.

### **Sample**

The sample of the study was comprised of 53 individuals with the age range of 20 to 30 years ( $M= 22.8$ ,  $SD=1.77$ ) selected from Islamabad Pakistan. There was nearly equal participation of males (51%) and females (49%) with (92%) had 16 years of education and just (8%) had an inclination with 14 years of education. Finally, with respect to professional status there were about (94%) participants as students and 6% participants with working status. The most frequently identified stressors included health issues (28%) like physical injuries, road accidents and chronic illnesses etc, death traumas of loved ones (17%) like parents, siblings and friends etc, professional or work related problems (30%) like fatigue and overwhelmingly demanding tasks, relational clashes (17%) and (8%) financial losses.



*Figure 1. Categories of Stressful Life Events*

### **Instrument**

**Interview Guide.** An interview guide-line was developed on the basis of the work of Hamilton, Moore, Johnson, and Koenig, (2013) asking participants regarding the recall of any stressful event from life and what was the religious act that helped them during that time to come out of that situation

### **Procedure**

Data collection was started with the informed consent being taken from the participants and then further processing was pursued on voluntary basis. Confidentiality was ensured, participants were briefed about the requirements and flexibility of the study as they were allowed to quit at any stage. Interviews were recorded as per the permission of participants and in few cases extensive notes were taken as not permitted by the participants to record. Finally, the interview sessions were terminated with thanking the

participants for sharing their valuable experiences and precious time.

### **Data Analysis**

After data collection the process of transcription of interviews began. Then the content of the transcripts were analyzed on the basis of the research technique called content analysis. It is a flexible method of data analysis being widely used in health studies (Cavanagh, 1997). Specifically conventional content analysis was used here in this study as this is the type of content analysis in which the researchers try to generate categories directly from raw data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).



## Results

The results of the interview data are presented in the form of tables and frequencies and percentages were computed. During content analysis codes categories and themes have been generated directly from the data collected from semi-structured interviews (Weber, 1990). After data collection the interviews were transcribed and it was thoroughly analyzed to extract codes. Coding is used to categorize the merging and overlapping codes into single representative entity (Krippendrof, 1990).

**Table 1**

*Frequencies and Percentages of Styles of Approaching God  
(N=53)*

Styles of Approaching God	f%	
Visualizing God's names	19	35.8
Memorizing Quranic Verses	15	28.3
Reciting Quranic	12	22.6
Performing Rituals and Practices	38	71.6

Note. Participants could have used more than one style to approach God in response to a stressful event.

Table 1 shows the frequencies and percentages of different styles of approaching God in effectively dealing with life stressor. Four major styles were generated directly from data with respective description. The first way mentioned in the table is "Visualizing God's names" (37.7%) which incorporate visualization or imagination of God's names directly for experiencing His power over the situation. For instance a male participant (age 22years) reported [I just have imagined that God is Merciful, be patient and ask Allah for help].

According to the verbatim, participant visualized the names of God directly (Merciful) and indirectly (Helper) which reflects closeness of God conceived by an individual in stressful situation making such responses related to the theme of visualizing the names of God.

The Second way is “Memorizing Quranic Verses” (28.3%) which included the memorization of particular Quranic Verses for dealing the stressful event through the optimistic subjective explanation associated with it.

For instance a male participant (24 years) reported verse no 156 of Al-Baqara “Who when they struck in adversity, say, surely we belong to Allah, and surely we will return to Him” and explained it as [I suddenly remembered that when we lost something, there is a prayer, memorizing it many times will result in the attainment of that lost belonging, I memorized it and found lost papers back].

This verbatim reflects that the memorization of particular verse resolved the problem of the participant so inclining such statements under the theme of memorizing Quranic Verses. The third way “Reciting Quranic Chapters (Surahas)” (22.6%) comprised of different chapters of Holy Quran being recited in stressful situation by the participants associated with the hopeful subjective rationalization. For instance a female participant reported [I have a strong believe that if I prayed after reciting Surah-e-Ya Sin, my problem will resolved].

According to verbatim of the participant recitation of Quranic chapters or Surahas helped the participants and it is common with subjective emphasis and beliefs gathering relevant reporting under this theme.

Finally “Performing Rituals and Practices” (71.6%) is a way which comprises various kinds of typical practices performed by participants in stressful situations helping them to cope up with them actively or bear them passively.

For instance a male participant reported “I have heard that if you go for *tahajud* (mid-night Prayer)and prayed it will be fulfilled so, for constant seven nights I went for *tahajud* (mid-night Prayer) along with five times prayers it resolved my problem”

This verbatim reveals that this domain covers the common practice performed by participant for the resolution of their problems predominantly prayers.

**Table 2**

*Frequencies and Percentages of Styles of Approaching God along with respective Description (N =53)*

Styles of Approaching God	Description	f (%)
Visualizing Names of God (N=19)	The All Merciful	5(26.3)
	The All Beneficent	1(5.26)
	The Witness	1(5.26)
	The Rich One	1(5.26)
	The Guardian	2(10.5)
	The All Powerful	2(10.5)
	The Generous	1(5.26)
	The Responder to Prayers	1(5.26)
	The Hearer of All	2(10.5)
	The Knower of All	2(10.5)
	The Loving One	2(10.5)
	The Helper	6(31.5)
	The Healer	1(5.26)
	Memorizing Quranic Verses (N=15)	Al-Baqara 2:153
Al-Baqara 2:156		2(13.3)
Al-Baqara 2:255		2(13.3)
Al-Imran, 3:175		3(20.0)
Al-Isra, 17:80		1(6.66)
Ta Ha, 20:25		1(6.66)
Ta Ha, 20:114		1(6.66)
Al-Anbiya, 21:83		1(6.66)
Al-Anbiya, 21:87		3(20.0)
Al-Qamar, 54:10	1(6.66)	
Reciting Quranic Chapters (Surahs) (N=12)	Ya Sin	5(41.6)
	Victory (Al-Fath)	1(8.33)
	The Beneficent (Al-Rahman)	1(8.33)
	Mutual Loss and Gain (Al-Taghabun)	1(8.33)
	The Pen (Al-Qalam)	1(8.33)
	The Mantled One (Al-Muzzammil)	1(8.33)
	The Unbelievers (Al-Kafirun)	2(16.6)
	Unity (Al-Ikhlās)	2(16.6)
	Daybreak (Al-Falaq)	2(16.6)
	Men (Al-Nas)	2(16.6)
Performing Rituals and Practices (N=39)	Prayers	27(69.2)
	Fasting	2(5.12)
	<i>Drood Shrif, Nad-e-Ali &amp; Aashora</i>	8(20.5)
	Paternoster ( <i>Tasbeeh</i> )	2(5.12)

Note. Participants could have used more than one style of approaching God in stress.

Table 2 shows the different styles of approaching God along with respective description. The First way “Visualizing Names of God” included fourteen names of God as, The All Beneficent (5.0%), The Witness (5.0%), The Rich One (5.0%),

The Governor (10%), The All Powerful (10%), The Creator of good (5.0%), The Generous (5.0%), The Responder to Prayers (5.0%), The Hearer of All (10%), The Knower of All (10%), The Preserver (5.0%), The Loving One (10%), The Helper (30%), The Healer (5.0%) representing a way individuals opted for experiencing closeness to God.

The second “Memorizing Quranic Verses” comprised different verses from Holy Quran which were memorized by the participants in adverse situations includes Verse no 153 reported by two individuals and verse no 255 also reported by two other individuals from the chapter Al-Baqara, Verse no 175 from Al-Imran reported by two individuals, Verse no 80 from Al-Isra reported by three individuals, Verse no 25 reported by an individual and verse no 114 reported by another individual from the chapter called Ta Ha, Verse no 83 and 87 from Al-Anbiya reported by one and three individuals respectively and finally the Verse no 10 from Al-Qamar reported by an individual.

The third “Reciting Quranic Chapters or Surahas” integrated following ten chapters as Ya Sin reported by five individuals, Victory (Al-Fath) reported by one individual, The Beneficent (Al-Rahman) reported by one individual, Mutual Loss and Gain (Al-Taghabun) reported by one individual, The Pen (Al-Qalam) reported by one individual, The Mantled One (Al-Muzzammil) reported by one, and the rest four chapters were reported by two individuals including The Unbelievers (Al-Kafirun), Unity (Al-Ikhlās), Daybreak (Al-Falaq), Men (Al-Nas).

The Fourth mode “Performing Rituals and Practices” included predominantly Prayers (69.2%), Fasting (5.12%), *Drood Shrif*, *Nad-e-Ali* and *Aashora* (20.5%) along with (5.12%) Paternoster (*Tasbeeh*).

## **Discussion**

The current research was conducted to explore the traditional styles people prefer to approach God in dealing with stressful situations. These styles represent a self-management strategy as suggested in literature, which promotes effectiveness of individual's dealing with stressful situations. Moreover, participants get assistance, guidance, comfort, peace, strength and hope from such religious attempts. The objectives of the study included the exploration of the styles of approaching God for effectively coping in case of life stressors.

It was a qualitative study encompassing semi-structured interview for data collection. Data was collected from the 53 individuals of Islamabad having age range between 20-30 years. After transcription of interviews, the data was thoroughly analyzed to extract codes and line by line coding was utilized to identify multiple codes from the data (Weber, 1990). Thus frequencies and percentages were computed for this purpose.

Stressful life events include different events that require adjustment after an immense kind of environmental changes. It can also assume as the significantly high intensity stressor, threatening the health of an individual. For instance, loss of loved ones, academic failure, injury, job loss, divorce and disasters that are affecting the whole community are considered as stressful life events (Schwarzer& Schulz, 2001). Here in the current study five kind of stressful situations including health issues like physical injuries, road accidents and chronic illnesses etc, death traumas of loved ones like parents, siblings and friends etc, professional or work related problems like fatigue and overwhelmingly demanding tasks, relational clashes and financial losses were identified.

Table 1 shows that four different styles of approaching God were found namely visualizing the names of God, Memorizing Quranic Verses, Reciting Quranic Chapters and performing the rituals presented by Holy Quran. Visualization of names of God refers towards the use of words by the participants focusing solely on visualizing the certain names of God and getting the assistance from God. No requests to God are being made. Just on visualizing His name God responded the participants and they experienced the availability of God anywhere anytime. Al-Bukhari, (1979) suggested that it is an Islamic belief that an individual can understand God by His names or attributes and each name is associated with a specific kind of power to regulate the relationship of God with His followers.

Memorizing Quranic Verse includes the passage emphasizing on the helping nature of God. The participants mainly ask Him here to help them through strength to tolerate or stand in the adverse condition. Evidence for the concept to consider God as someone to be connected with (an attachment figure) is provided through Quranic Verse having the attributes or characteristics of a perfect attachment figure. Reciting Quranic Chapters is found as another way to experience the power of God to assist the requesters. This mode was mostly opted by the individual who are confronting with the illnesses either themselves or bearing the illness of significant others. In different Quranic stories the characteristics of Allah are presented as the functions of safe haven, secure base and close one making Him worthy attachment figure (Ghobary Bonab, Miner & Proctor, 2013; Ahmed, Ammar Ahmed, Akhtar, & Salim, 2017; Cisheng et al., 2017; Jami & Kamal, 2017).

The last mode is performing rituals and regular practices like five times prayers of a day, the main concern here was about

the provision of a reward either in the form of satisfaction or a material thing. It is considered that these rituals are the way to demonstrate and maintain an association or relationship with the divine power (Khodayari-Fard et al., 2008; Kalsoom, Masood, & Jami, 2017; Khan, Amanat, Aqeel, Sulehri, Amanat, Sana, & Amin, 2017; Bibi, Sobia, Mustanir & Sana 2017; Peter, Abbas, Aqeel, Akhtar, & Farooq, 2017; Hussain, Rohail, & Ghazal, 2017; Rehna & Hanif, 2017; Aftab & Malik, 2017).

Stressful events were considered as the important component of the narrative explanations for giving sense to the seriousness of the situation, intensity of turning towards God and depth of effectiveness of conceiving His name in the form of respective experiences. Thompson and Collins (1995) consider that the perception of individuals to get favorable outcomes and avoid unwanted conditions with their own efforts or plans, reflects the important part of human experience. It was expressed by Skinner (1996) that the individuals who are having confidence upon their abilities normally tend to put more efforts and try hard to handle the situation and reflect optimism despite failure and fatalities.

Also, God is considered as a safe haven and secure base for believers who are proximity seekers, certainly few others have altogether opposite experiences like avoiding the feelings of proximity to God reflecting insecure attachment patterns with Him (Ghobary Bonab, Miner & Proctor, 2013). Remembering, visualizing and reciting the Holy names of God verbally depicts the experience of connectedness or closeness to Him. It is explained that feelings of being close to God provides strength and courage to the believers to engage in and tolerate the challenging situations, and can feel as being awarded with positive emotions like love, protection and sense of being cared enabling an



individual to cope up with the stressors of life (Miller & Thoresen,1999).

### **Limitations and suggestions**

Study limitations included the small sample size, use of convenient sampling method, and the self report narratives. Comparatively larger sample, with the by using probability sampling may give more generalizable findings. Also, as there was lack of standardized instruments to quantitatively explore these influential kind of elements thus the present study was designed, presenting a need to develop some relevant measures for having objective investigations. Other issues of this exploratory study included subjective biases and lack of objectivity representing some considerable limitations of the study. There is a need to address such problems. Counselors, practitioners, and therapists should take into account the spiritual or religious coping for assisting individuals. Furthermore, these styles can be recognized for addressing the spiritual care and relieves generating sentiments of individuals. Additional work is required to examine the empirical evidence for the relationship of an individual with God and the optimal quality of life in our population.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

Approaching to God during stressful life situation might be a protective factor that helps in alleviating stress. Traditional styles of approaching God during stressful situation reflected to be associated with effective dealing and better adjustment in case of having an encounter with life stressor. Stressors, anxiousness, cognitive disruptions etc are the critical indicators of mental problems recognized to be reduced with coping strategies like religious and intrinsic affiliation with God. Thus, mental health professionals and counselors should consider the individual's

associations with God while helping sufferer to deal with adversity in a meaningful manner.

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