



Studying Effect of Fasting during Ramadan on Mental Health of University Students in Iran: A Review

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ABSTRACT

Fasting is one of the oldest worships that have been common among the people and nations of the world. The most comprehensive and the best fasting is the fasting in Ramadan by Muslims, which is obligatory in Islam for every eligible man and woman. Several factors can affect people's mental health, one of the most important of which can be spiritual and religious beliefs, especially fasting. Therefore, this research aims to review the effect of fasting in Ramadan on mental health of university students in Iran. This study was a simple review in 2017 to investigate the effect of fasting in Ramadan on mental health of Iranian university students. Research data has been collected through the search of published articles in Internet resources and scientific databases including (SID, MAGIRAN, PubMed, Scopus and Web of Science) and with searching 3 terms "fasting, students and mental health" without linguistic and time limitations. In total, 11 published articles have been used in this research. Based on the results of 11 studied researches, it can be claimed that students' fasting during Ramadan increases their mental health. Strong religious beliefs, especially fasting, affect all aspects of mental health of students and cause students to feel less depress and anxiety and to better come to terms with psychological crises and problems.

Keywords: Fasting, Ramadan, Students, Mental Health, Iran

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INTRODUCTION

The term Health is divided into two types of "mental health" and "physical health" in general; they are not too alien to each other, but they overlap greatly, affect one another [1]. Mental health is more important because it has a direct relationship with individual-social performance and psychosocial harms, because a significant percentage of physical diseases has a psychological root, and the enjoyment of mental health can have a positive effect on the health of the body [2]. Although many definitions of mental health have been provided by relevant organizations and many psychologists, but briefly the mental health can be defined as follows: mental health is to have a sense of tranquility,

internal security, and being away from stress, anxiety, tension, depression and other chronic psychological conflicts [3]. The followers of many of the world's great religions pay homage to the fasting some days of the year, but Islamic fasting has special features to which is dedicated one month of Ramadan and performed by hundreds of million Muslims annually around the world. Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar, and all healthy Muslim people should fast every day of this month. Since more than a billion people in the world follow the religion of Islam, several hundred million Muslims appear to follow Ramadan fasting. Fasting teaches Muslims self-discipline and familiarizes them with what the poor feels. Immature children, women at the time of menstruating, pregnancy and lactation, as well as sick people and travelers who stay in the local area for less than 10 days, are exempt from fasting; but except for children, other individuals should pay the indebted fasting in other months of

the year when the excuse is removed [4-5]. Fasting is one of the oldest worship that has been common among the nations of the world. Romanians and Hindus were famous for the proliferation of fasting. In all divine religions, fasting is an obligatory decree. In the Torah, the 40-day fasting of Moses and Elias and the three-week fasting of the Holy Diana and the fasting of David and Younis have been mentioned. The Jews are fasting for two days a week. The most comprehensive and highest fasting is the fast of Ramadan which in Islam is obligatory for every eligible man and woman. Prophet Muhammad says, fast to be healthy. In ancient medicine, fasting was very important; Pythagoras and Hippocrates treated some of the diseases with fasting. Ibn Sina has dedicated a chapter of his *law* to treatment with fasting [5].

Many factors affect mental health, one of the most important of which is spirituality and religious beliefs. One of the worships that Islam has always emphasized is the religious duty of fasting. Fasting is one of the religious obligations of Islam, which has been considered in different forms in other religions. From the point of view of Islam, fasting improves the physical and mental health of the individual. God says in the Holy Quran, "If you had knowledge, you knew that fasting was good for you" [6]. A lot of research has been done on the effects of fasting on physical health, such as its effects on weight control, burning of fats, lowering blood pressure and reducing cardiovascular diseases [7-9]. Mental health plays an important role in student performance [10] and in promoting academic status and prevention of their lowering of educational standards [2-3]. The fasting of Muslims in the month of Ramadan for a month, will change their lifestyle and prevent them from consuming any drinks and food, and some of the daily pleasures and committing sin [8]. In scientific psychology, the question whether religion is really related to mental health, has been a subject of many theories and studies and has led to different and even conflicting outcomes and consequences; while some theories have considered religious belief as a mental disease, they have considered religious practices to be abnormal, and they are referred to as "obsessive neuroses" (for example, Freud, 1967; 1927, 1964; Ellis ,1980, quoted by Ventis, 1995); many theories have paid a great attention to the role of religion in achieving psychological health in a completely other way (Argyll 2000; Scooby 1975;

Wolfe 1997; Reeves 1989, and Bursuma 1995, quoted by Spilka, Hood, Hunsberger and Gorsach, 2003). [11]. Therefore, considering the role of religion and religious rituals in mental health, on the one hand, and considering the importance of Ramadan as a religious month for Muslims, including Iranians, on the other hand, the present research seeks to see whether the fasting in Ramadan can be effective in increasing the mental health of students who perform religious practices. The characteristic of this research is to investigate the researches done on comparing the effect of a natural intervention concerning individuals who do perform or not a religious behavior in a given period of time.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study was a simple review in 2017 to investigate the effect of fasting in Ramadan on mental health of Iranian university students. Research data has been collected through the search of published articles in Internet resources and scientific databases including (SID, MAGIRAN, PubMed, Scopus and Web of Science) and with searching 3 terms "fasting, students and mental health" without linguistic and time limitations. In an initial search, 29 related researches were found, of which 11 researches that were completely related were used in this research.

RESULTS

In Iran, several studies have been conducted on the effects of fasting during Ramadan on students' mental health. Here are 11 examples: Sadeghi and Mazaheri conducted a research entitled "effect of fasting on students' mental health". Data was collected by GHQ mental health questionnaire and 162 students (102 males and 60 females) were selected as the statistical sample. Questionnaires were completed by students before and after Ramadan. The result of this research showed that mental health of students who were fasting was significantly higher than those who were not fasting for religious excuses [11].

Kazemi *et al.*, conducted a research aimed at studying the effects of fasting on mental health and depression levels in students of Islamic Azad University of Sirjan in 2014. In this research 361 participants were selected randomly. Data were gathered by questionnaires containing

demographic information, 12-item mental health criterion of Farrell and Beck Depression standard test. The questionnaires were completed by the samples under study, 10 days before the holy month of Ramadan and again ten days after the Ramadan; the mean scores were compared before and after the holy month of Ramadan. Findings of this research confirm that Ramadan fasting can be an important factor in reducing depression and improving the mental health of students [12].

Askari *et al.*, conducted a semi-experimental research entitled "effect of fasting on mental health of students at Razi University of Kermanshah". Data were collected by GHQ mental health questionnaire and 30 students were selected as a statistical sample. They were divided into two equal groups of experimental and control groups. Control group were those who were fasting. Before the month of Ramadan, the pre-test questionnaires were completed and after that the participants were exposed to post-test. The results showed that fasting has increased mental health of students [13].

In a research entitled "Fasting, Mental Health and Sleep and Wakefulness pattern" Khoshniat Nikoo *et al.*, showed that fasting is associated with improved mental health of individuals [14].

Javanbakht *et al.*, conducted a research under the title "effect of fasting during Ramadan on self-esteem and mental health of students". In this descriptive-comparative study, 60 students (38 girls and 22 boys) of Mashhad Islamic Azad University in Ramadan during 2007 were evaluated at the beginning of Ramadan by the SCL-90-R questionnaire. Those people who had been fasting for at least 21 days were again examined at the end of Ramadan by the two Coppersmith and SCL-90-R questionnaires. Results showed that the mental health of the subjects was increased compared to the beginning of Ramadan [15].

Moghadam Nia & Maghsoudi conducted a research entitled "investigating the effect of fasting in Ramadan on anxiety" on male students of Guilan University of Medical Sciences. 110 fasting boy students participated in this descriptive-comparative research. Hamilton's Anxiety Questionnaire was used to measure students' anxiety in late Ramadan and one month after the end of Ramadan. Students' anxiety was reported

as to be weak in the late Ramadan and one month after Ramadan to be moderate, indicating that fasting had a positive effect on students' anxiety [16].

Nikfarjam *et al.*, carried out a research, entitled "effect of fasting on students' emotional intelligence"; 32 male religious students participated in this research. The data gathering tool was Bar-On questionnaire. The questionnaire was completed by students in three stages, one week before Ramadan, at the end of Ramadan and one month after Ramadan. The results showed that fasting can affect the emotional intelligence of fasting people [4].

Shafie *et al.*, conducted a research in order to "determine the effect of Ramadan fasting on mental health of students in Jiroft faculty of nursing". Their statistical sample is 115 students from Jiroft faculty of nursing. Data were collected by the questionnaire of "Mental Health Measurement list". The list, which had 12 questions, was completed by students one week before, and one week after Ramadan. The results of this research showed that the average mental health score of students participating in the research, compared to before Ramadan, was promoted. Also, the average mental health score of male students before and after Ramadan was more than female students [17].

Roshaninejad *et al.*, carried out a research with the aim of "determining the relationship between religious beliefs and mental health among Iranian medical students". The data of this research were measured using the questionnaire of mental health and religious beliefs of students. Then the relationship between these two variables was determined. The statistical population included 225 undergraduate students who were selected by stratified sampling from different disciplines of different colleges of the University of Medical Sciences of Iran. The findings of this research showed that the majority of students had mental health and had moderate religious beliefs. There was a significant relationship between the two variables of religious beliefs and mental health. The results of this research confirmed that the highest percentage of mental health belongs to students with religious beliefs [6].

Darvishi *et al.*, conducted a research entitled "Relationship between Religious Beliefs and

Mental Health in Students of Alborz and Islamic Azad University of Medical Sciences in Karaj" in 2014-15. From the mentioned population, according to the purpose of the research, a sample of 377 subjects was selected randomly and in order to prevent the loss of samples, 10% were added to the number of samples (415), of which 404 people were responded to questionnaires. Three questionnaires including personal characteristics, general health and religious beliefs were used to collect information. The results of this research showed that there is not a significant relationship between religious orientation and variables of gender, age and academic year. In the study of the relationship between religious orientation, the different aspects of mental health and other variables, there was a significant relationship between religious orientation and gender under the subscales of anxiety and depression in mental health. But this relationship does not exist in the subscale of physical symptoms and is weak in social function subscale [18].

Azad Yekta carried out a research for "studying the relation of religious beliefs, religious orientation and perseverance with students' mental health"; the statistic sample of this research included 365 people of students of Islamic Azad University, branch Eslamshahr, who were selected through random cluster sampling. The data were collected using questionnaires of personal viewpoint, temple test, mental health and Allport religious orientation. The results of this research showed that the relationship between religious beliefs, perseverance and internal religious orientation on the one hand and mental health on the other is significant. But the relationship between external religious orientation and mental health was not significant. Based on the findings of this research, it can be concluded that stronger religious beliefs, internal religious orientation and perseverance can predict higher mental health of students [19].

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the 11 researches reviewed in this study, we can claim that students' fasting during Ramadan increases their mental health. Out of Iran, some researches have been carried out on students in this regard, including the results of a quasi-experimental (pre-test and post-test) research by Ahmed et al conducted on

200 fasting Muslim Indians; it also showed that fasting in the Ramadan has been effective in reducing their stress, anxiety and depression, which is consistent with our research [20]. Fasting has been raised in some way in all divine religions, and God has considered it to be a guarantor of the health of the physical and mental. There is no doubt that success in life depends on the full development of each physiological, intellectual, psychological, and spiritual activities. The result is that strong religious tendencies cause people to be less exposed to psychological stress and disorders and reduce their risk of psychological disorders. Strong religious beliefs affect all aspects of students' mental health and cause students to be less depressed and anxious and to come to terms with psychological crises and problems. Therefore, it is important to understand the religious approaches, deep mystical views and valuable Islamic principles for maintaining mental health. In this regard, it is suggested that some researches be done on different aspects of mental health and religious beliefs separately to determine the relationship between different aspects of religious beliefs and mental health.

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