Overcoming Personal Crises and the Role of Spirituality: Seclusion and Inclusion

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This paper deals with concepts like personal crises, inclusion, social support, and seclusion. First, we have examined the concept of crisis and the importance of coping with and overcoming personal crises. Then, we have assessed two prominent and unique approaches to overcoming personal crises: seclusion and inclusion. We scrutinized social support as a stress buffer and how it helps individuals when experiencing hardship. Finally, we defined seclusion, narrated the story of one of the most influential and celebrated scholars of Islamic thought, al-Ghazali, and how he overcame his crisis through seclusion. We also transmitted his view on personal crises and seclusion. In conclusion, we attempted to emphasize the potential benefits of seclusion when going through major life events.

Introduction

A crisis can be described as an unexpected and destructive event that disrupts human life's normal flow. (Khosla, 2008). A crisis is a turning point and an internal reaction to external danger. An individual is likely to face crises when obligated to make an essential choice, solve a problem or confront debilitating situations; hence, crises are indispensable fragments of human life (Stone, Cross, Purvis, & Young, 2003). There are various kinds of crises, such as developmental, situational, existential, and psychological crises (Stone, 1993; Gilliland & James, 1993). It is really difficult, if not impossible, to avoid crises; one cannot imagine a life without them (Khosla, 2008).

Coping with and overcoming crises play a primary role in the quality of life as well as physical and mental well-being (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith,1999). In this paper, two main yet unique ways of coping with and overcoming personal crises: seclusion and inclusion, will be examined. We intend to illustrate the inclusion method and the take social support's extensity and emphasize the potential positive outcomes of seclusion and the Islamic mysticist approach.

1. Social Support as a Stress Buffer and Inclusion in the Society

Evidence suggests that well-being is attained and sustained when strong and positive social relations are present to offer protection against the possible negative impacts and consequences of personal crises (Ryff, Singer, & Palmersheim, 2004). Taking help from family members, friends, colleagues, relatives, and psychologists, may mediate the damaging impact of crises on mental and physical well-being (Khosla, 2008).

Social support operates as a stress buffer and it amelorites the negative impact of stress on physical and mental well-being. A web of powerful social support may provide benefits like longer life expectancy, less stress-related illnesses, and stronger coping skills (Antonovsky, 1979). Moreover, exposure to social interactions has been used as a technique during the therapy process of many psychological disorders, such as social phobia, anxiety disorders, and depression (Kashdan & Herbert, 2001).

2. Islamic Mysticist Approach and al-Ghazali's Seclusion

In Islamic mysticism, *seclusion* is defined as staying alone in a quiet room and employing oneself in worship and contemplation night and day for a certain number of days. During seclusion, the individual interrogates himself and focuses on getting to know his innermost self (Kara, 1995). Choosing solitude and striving to cultivate the mind and heart is the essence of seclusion. However, the notion of seclusion is wider and deeper than staying alone and worshipping; it encompasses staying away from evil deeds, unnecessary and meaningless behavior, and people who are engaged with them (Uludağ, 2012).

Human struggles, such as the constant feeling of anxiousness, depressive episodes, narcissism, finding happiness by satisfying worldly desires, may produce an urge to purify the self (Aksöz, 2015). The Islamic mysticist approach views seclusion as a process of purification and maturation; it is a return to the self by the abandonment of others (Taşdelen, 2012). Intentional isolation is vital to achieving rebirth (Knabb & Welsh, 2009). This rebirth in entirety achieved through seclusion produces a trans-cultural state of being characterized with the inner experience of life, certainty, positivity, and a mature mindset (Arasteh, 1995).

One of the most influential and celebrated scholars and philosophers of Islamic thought,

Al-Ghazali (1058-1111), faced an intense spiritual crisis during the golden age of his career. He started doubting everything, including his faith. He judged everything and everyone around him, including himself. He even got to a point where he could not speak and function as a professor. Therefore, he decided to forsake his eminence, high office, fame, wealth, and loved ones; he found peace in seclusion, invocation of God, and worship (Nofal, 1993).

By applying the techniques set forth by Sufi forebears and spending almost two years in seclusion, he overcame the crisis and completed his journey of self-completion and pursuit of the truth. After bringing his seclusion to an end and returning to Baghdad from Damascus, he has written his autobiographical work *al-Munqıdh min al-Dalâl* (Deliverance from Error) and told his story of crisis and seclusion (Çağrıcı, 1996). Proving every crisis is an opportunity for growth, he has written his ground-breaking work *Ihya' Ulum al-Din* (Revival of the Religious Sciences) after his debilitating and paralyzing crisis. He revived the Islamic sciences and has been since accepted as The Mujaddid (The Renovator) of his age, the shining pearl of Islamic spirituality and the heart of Islam (Abd Rahman & Yücel, 2016).

Al-Ghazali stated the benefits of seclusion and asserted that it brings the believer closer to God, prevents committing sins, and protects the individual from the torture and hardship that society causes. In his view, the heart is a castle that has to be protected by its owner. The devil is an enemy who always tries to leak into the castle and invade the heart. We have to strengthen the door and fill the gaps of our castles just so the devil cannot transgress, and if one does not know where the door and the holes of the castle are, he cannot protect the castle, namely, his heart. So, knowledge of the innermost self is critical (Ghazzālī, 2014), and seclusion is the experience of being closely acquainted with and cultivating the innermost self.

Every single part of the human body is created exclusively to serve a specific function. It falls ill when it loses its ability to fulfill its duty. The heart's function is acquiring knowledge, wisdom, love of God, worship, and invoking him whenever it encounters a Godly endowment. As the heart's genuine duty is loving God, whoever holds anything else dearer to him than God suffers an illness in his heart. Just like a man who prefers eating mud over bread harbors sickness in his belly. Thus, employing the heart with the love and invocation of God is the key to avoid illness in the heart and spiritual crises

(Ghazzālī, 2015). These practices constitute the essence of seclusion.

3. Overcoming Personal Crises and the Role of Spirituality

A substantial body of research associates religiosity with lower stress levels and more happiness (Safara & Bhatia, 2008). A significant amount of people gravitates towards religion when going through major life events. The high conversion rate of inmates is a reflection of this phenomenon. After losing their jobs, eminence, becoming estranged from their loved ones, and losing all social ties, inmates tend to convert and claim to overcome their crises through religious activities and doctrines (Maruna, Wilson, & Curran, 2006).

Religion operates as a stress buffer in two ways: the framework that the religious doctrines provide helps the individual to understand and evaluate the stressful event, and the feeling of belonging to a religious community may empower the individual when confronting traumatic events and unexpected upheavals (Pargament, 1990). Moreover, the enhancement of self-esteem and positive appraisal of the meaning of traumatizing events that spiritual support provides influences well-being; these cognitive benefits may lead to an improvement in stress coping strategies (Maton, 1989).

Positive religious coping techniques may help the individual with his journey of overcoming personal crises. With these techniques, the individual evaluates the triggering event through a spiritual perspective and tries to see the potential benefits. He may consider it as a punishment coming from God and believe that his suffering will wash away his sins in the Hereafter. By thinking in the all-mighty power of God, he may console himself that God may remove the suffering anytime He desires. The individual may focus on religion, faith, religious activities, and seek God's compassion, love, and forgiveness. Feeling like he is in contact with transcendent forces may empower him. He also may find solace with the company of other members of his religious community (Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 1998).

It is worth noting that crises offer priceless opportunities for growth. It is often viewed as a transformational journey. Growth and development after major life crises have been a common theme for various religious parables and mythological stories. In modern times, this phenomenon is called posttraumatic growth. It is generally associated with finding

the meaning and purpose of life, strengthening the connections with others, feeling more powerful, and improved self-reliance (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996).

On the other hand, religious coping styles representing a negative relationship with a judgemental and cruel God may trigger the crisis. The potential negative influence of religion is believed to be caused by components that may trigger psychological conditions such as eternal punishment in Hell, fear of God, or spiritual creatures like Jinns. Moreover, many clinicians today encounter patients who adopt religious beliefs and practices in an unhealthy way to cope with psychological problems and ignore other factors that may help their recovery (Behere, Das, Yadav, & Behere, 2013)

Conclusion

We cannot deny that religion is an essential part of the culture. It has an impact on nearly every area of life, and mental well-being is no exception. As every religion is unique and multidimensional, some religious doctrines and religious coping styles positively affect the individual's process of overcoming crises and others negatively. The effect of religion on mental well-being and overcoming personal crises seems vague and needs further research.

Social support and inclusion in society constitute a magnificent resource for coping with and overcoming personal crises. Moreover, exposure to social interactions has been used as a therapy technique for several decades and proved its effectiveness. However, the potential ameliorating impact of spirituality and, in particular, seclusion should not be ignored or neglected. Seclusion is a crucial tradition of Islamic mysticism, and many influential scholars and figures have experienced it and recommended it during the historical process.

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