


BUILDING RESILIENCE THROUGH SPIRITUAL PRACTICES DURING CANCER SURVIVORSHIP

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
<p>Article history: Received: 9 Mar 2025 Revised: 20 April 2025 Accepted: 12 May 2025 Published: 1 June 2025</p>	<p>This study examines the role of Islamic spiritual practices in fostering resilience among cancer survivors, integrating contemporary psycho-oncology research with traditional Islamic teachings. Cancer survivorship presents multifaceted challenges that extend beyond physical recovery to encompass psychological adjustment, meaning-making, and spiritual growth. Within this context, Islamic spiritual frameworks offer distinctive resources for building resilience, including structured daily prayers (salat), Quranic recitation, remembrance practices (dhikr), cultivation of patience (sabr) and gratitude (shukr), community support (ummah), and charitable giving (sadaqah). The Islamic understanding of illness as potentially meaningful within a divine plan creates cognitive frameworks that facilitate post-traumatic growth. Research indicates that engagement with these practices correlates with improved quality of life, reduced psychological distress, and enhanced resilience throughout the cancer journey. This essay analyzes how specific Islamic spiritual practices contribute to resilience mechanisms, provides recommendations for healthcare providers and religious communities supporting Muslim cancer survivors, and identifies directions for future research. By integrating spiritual support with conventional medical care, healthcare systems can offer more holistic and culturally responsive approaches to enhancing resilience throughout the cancer survivorship trajectory.</p>
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INTRODUCTION

Cancer survivorship represents a profound journey that extends far beyond medical treatments, encompassing psychological, emotional, and spiritual dimensions. The period following cancer diagnosis and treatment often leaves individuals searching for meaning, purpose, and inner strength. Spiritual practices have emerged as powerful tools for building resilience during this challenging time. This essay examines how spiritual practices contribute to resilience during cancer survivorship, with particular emphasis on Islamic perspectives, drawing from both contemporary research and traditional Islamic teachings.

Cancer survivorship begins at diagnosis and continues throughout life, encompassing physical, emotional, and spiritual challenges that persist long after medical treatment concludes (Stein et al., 2008). As survivors transition from active treatment to recovery and beyond, they often experience existential questions about mortality, purpose, and meaning. Research consistently demonstrates that spirituality plays a crucial role in how individuals cope with these challenges, with numerous studies highlighting its contribution to improved quality of life, reduced psychological distress, and enhanced resilience (Puchalski, 2012).

Spirituality provides cancer survivors with frameworks for making meaning of their experiences, offering resources for coping, and facilitating post-traumatic growth. This relationship between spirituality and resilience is particularly evident within religious traditions that emphasize surrender to divine will, community support, and engagement with sacred texts and practices. Islamic spirituality, with its comprehensive approach to life's challenges, offers cancer survivors valuable resources for developing resilience (Ahmad et al., 2011).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Islamic Conceptions of Illness and Healing

The Islamic tradition offers a multifaceted understanding of illness that acknowledges both medical and spiritual dimensions. Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, is reported to have said: *"There is no disease that Allah has created, except that He also has created its treatment"* (Sahih Al-Bukhari). This hadith establishes the foundational Islamic approach that recognizes illness as part of the divine plan while encouraging active pursuit of healing (Al-Jauziyah, 2003). Islamic tradition views illness through several complementary lenses: as a test (ibtila') from Allah that offers opportunity for spiritual growth, as an expiation (kaffara) for sins, and as a reminder of human mortality and dependence on divine mercy. The Quran states, *"And We will surely test you with something of fear and hunger and a loss of wealth and lives and fruits, but give good tidings to the patient"* (Quran 2:155). This verse frames adversity, including illness, as a trial that can lead to spiritual development when met with patience (sabr) (Al-Ghazali, 2010). Cancer, within this framework, becomes not merely a biological condition but an opportunity for spiritual reflection and growth. Many Muslim cancer survivors report finding comfort in the concept of qadar (divine decree), which helps them contextualize their illness within a larger divine plan (Rassool, 2019). The acceptance of qadar does not imply fatalism but rather creates a spiritual foundation from which active coping can emerge.

Prayer (Salat) as a Source of Resilience

The five daily prayers (salat) in Islam constitute a central spiritual practice that many Muslim cancer survivors report as vital to their resilience. Research by Ahmadi et al. (2016) found that regular prayer helped Muslim cancer survivors maintain a sense of routine and normalcy amidst the disruption of illness. The physical movements of prayer, combined with recitation of Quranic verses, create a multisensory experience that can reduce anxiety and promote mindfulness. Prayer in Islam also fosters a direct connection with Allah, providing cancer survivors a channel for expressing fears, hopes, and gratitude. The Prophet Muhammad taught special prayers for times of illness, such as: "O Allah, remove the harm, O Lord of mankind, and heal, for You are the Healer, and there is no healing except Your healing, a healing that leaves no disease behind" (Sahih Al-Bukhari). Many survivors report reciting such prayers during treatment as a source of comfort and hope (Tayeb et al., 2010). Beyond the prescribed daily prayers, the practice of dua (supplication) offers cancer survivors personalized communication with God. Hebert et al. (2009) found that prayer and supplication among religious cancer survivors correlated with improved psychological adjustment and meaning-making. The Islamic emphasis on prayer during hardship provides survivors a spiritual outlet for processing complex emotions associated with cancer.

Quranic Recitation and Reflection as Spiritual Medicine

The Quran holds a special place in Islamic spirituality as both guidance and healing. Allah states in the Quran: "*And We send down of the Quran that which is healing and mercy for the believers*" (Quran 17:82). Many Muslim cancer survivors incorporate Quranic recitation into their daily routine, finding solace in both the melodic sounds and profound meanings of the text (Al-Faris et al., 2017). Certain chapters (surahs) and verses are traditionally associated with healing in Islamic practice. Surah Al-Fatiha (the opening chapter) is known as "*The Cure*," while the last three chapters of the Quran (*Al-Ikhlās, Al-Falaq, and An-Nas*) are collectively called "*Al-Mu'awwidhat*" (The Protectors) and are recited for protection and healing (Rassool, 2019). Many Muslim cancer survivors report regular recitation of these portions of the Quran as part of their spiritual coping strategy. Beyond recitation, tadabbur (deep reflection) on Quranic verses provides cancer survivors with guidance for navigating the existential challenges of illness. The Quran addresses themes of patience during adversity, the impermanence of worldly life, and trust in divine wisdom—all particularly relevant for cancer survivors. Research by Ahmad et al. (2015) found that Quranic reflection helped Muslim cancer survivors develop more positive appraisals of their illness experience and cultivate meaning-making strategies.

Patience (Sabr) and Gratitude (Shukr) as Spiritual Virtues

Islamic spirituality emphasizes two complementary virtues particularly relevant for cancer survivors: sabr (patience) and shukr (gratitude). Sabr involves steadfastness during adversity without complaint, while recognizing that difficulties are temporary and meaningful within the divine plan. The Quran repeatedly praises those who practice sabr: "*And We will surely test you with something of fear and hunger and a loss of wealth and lives and fruits, but give good tidings to the patient [saabireen]*" (Quran 2:155). For Muslim cancer survivors, cultivating sabr means accepting the challenges of diagnosis and treatment while maintaining spiritual equilibrium. This does not mean passive resignation but rather active endurance with awareness of divine wisdom. Research by Zamaniyan et al. (2015) demonstrated that training in Islamic patience-based coping significantly reduced anxiety and depression among Muslim cancer patients. Complementing patience is the practice of shukr (gratitude), which involves recognizing and appreciating blessings even amid difficulty. The Prophet

Muhammad encouraged this attitude, saying, "*How wonderful is the case of a believer; there is good for him in everything, and this applies only to a believer. If prosperity attends him, he expresses gratitude to Allah and that is good for him; and if adversity befalls him, he endures it patiently and that is better for him*" (Sahih Muslim). Cancer survivors practicing shukr often report focusing on continued blessings despite illness, family support, medical care, moments of joy, and spiritual growth through the experience. This practice of gratitude has been associated with post-traumatic growth among cancer survivors across religious traditions (Ruini & Vescovelli, 2013).

Community Support (Ummah) and Spiritual Resilience

The concept of ummah (community) in Islam provides cancer survivors with vital social support that enhances resilience. Prophet Muhammad compared believers to a single body: "*The believers in their mutual kindness, compassion and sympathy are just like one body. When one limb suffers, the whole body responds to it with wakefulness and fever*" (Sahih Muslim). This communal ethic translates into practical support for those experiencing illness. Research consistently demonstrates that social support significantly predicts better psychological outcomes among cancer survivors (Salsman et al., 2015). For Muslim cancer survivors, community support often comes through specific religious practices. Congregational prayers, especially Friday prayers (Jumu'ah), provide regular community connection. During Ramadan, communal iftars (breaking of the fast) create opportunities for social integration even when individuals may be limited in their ability to fast due to illness. Many mosques and Islamic centers have developed formal support systems for members facing health challenges, including hospital visitation programs, meal preparation for families, and spiritual counseling (Abu-Ras & Laird, 2011). These structured supports complement the informal networks of care that develop naturally within religious communities. Studies of Muslim cancer survivors highlight the importance of these community connections in maintaining hope and reducing isolation during the cancer journey (Akhu-Zaheya & Alkhasawneh, 2012).

Charity (Sadaqah) as Spiritual Healing

The practice of charity (sadaqah) represents another dimension of Islamic spirituality that contributes to resilience among cancer survivors. Prophet Muhammad taught that "*sadaqah extinguishes sin as water extinguishes fire*" (Sunan Ibn Majah) and that "charity does not decrease wealth" (Sahih Muslim). These teachings encourage generosity even during personal hardship. Many Muslim cancer survivors report finding meaning and purpose through charitable acts during their cancer journey. This might involve financial donations to cancer research or patient support organizations, volunteering with other patients, or simply offering emotional support and prayers for others facing similar challenges (Cindoglu & Baloglu, 2014). Research in psycho-oncology confirms that finding ways to help others contributes significantly to resilience and post-traumatic growth among cancer survivors generally (Morris et al., 2011). For Muslim survivors specifically, charitable acts provide a way to transform personal suffering into benefit for others, creating meaning from the cancer experience. This aligns with the Islamic concept of turning adversity into opportunity for spiritual advancement.

Dhikr (Remembrance of Allah) as Contemplative Practice

The practice of dhikr (remembrance of Allah) represents a cornerstone of Islamic spirituality with particular relevance for cancer survivors. Dhikr involves the repetitive recitation of divine names or phrases such as "*Subhan Allah*" (Glory be to Allah), "*Alhamdulillah*" (All praise belongs to Allah), or "*Allah Akbar*" (Allah is Greater). The Quran emphasizes the psychological benefits of this practice: "*Verily, in the remembrance of Allah do hearts find rest*" (Quran 13:28).

For cancer survivors, dhikr provides a contemplative practice that can be performed anywhere—during medical procedures, sleepless nights, or moments of anxiety. The rhythmic nature of dhikr creates a meditative state similar to mindfulness practices that have demonstrated efficacy in reducing cancer-related distress (Al-Jaam & Sulaiman, 2019). Research by Jafari et al. (2014) found that spiritual therapy based on Islamic teachings, including dhikr practice, significantly improved quality of life and reduced anxiety among Muslim women with breast cancer. The accessibility of dhikr makes it particularly valuable during cancer treatment, as it requires no special posture or setting and can be adapted to individual energy levels and circumstances.

Islamic Perspectives on Suffering and Growth

Islamic theology offers frameworks for understanding suffering that many survivors find helpful in their meaning-making process. The concept of hikmah (divine wisdom) suggests that events occur for reasons beyond human understanding but ultimately serve beneficial purposes within Allah's plan. The Quran states, "*But perhaps you hate a thing and it is good for you; and perhaps you love a thing and it is bad for you. And Allah knows, while you know not*" (Quran 2:216). This perspective helps many Muslim cancer survivors reframe their experience not as random misfortune but as potentially meaningful within a larger divine narrative. Empirical research supports the value of such meaning-making; Park's (2010) comprehensive review found that finding meaning in the cancer experience predicts better psychological adjustment across diverse populations. Islamic spirituality also emphasizes that worldly suffering is temporary and may lead to spiritual elevation. The Prophet Muhammad said, "*No fatigue, nor disease, nor sorrow, nor sadness, nor hurt, nor distress befalls a Muslim, even if it were the prick he receives from a thorn, but that Allah expiates some of his sins for that*" (Sahih Al-Bukhari). This teaching frames suffering as potentially purifying rather than merely punitive. For many Muslim cancer survivors, the concept of spiritual growth through adversity motivates them to engage more deeply with religious practices during illness. Garlick et al. (2011) found that religious believers who viewed cancer as an opportunity for spiritual growth demonstrated greater post-traumatic growth than those who saw it only as punishment or a random occurrence.

Integration of Medical and Spiritual Approaches

Islamic approaches to illness encourage integration of spiritual practices with conventional medical treatment. The Prophet Muhammad's guidance includes both seeking medical treatment and engaging in spiritual practices for healing. He is reported to have said, "*Make use of medical treatment, for Allah has not made a disease without appointing a remedy for it*" (Abu Dawud). This holistic approach aligns with contemporary integrative oncology, which recognizes the potential complementary roles of conventional treatment and spiritual practices. Research by Salsman et al. (2015) demonstrates that cancer patients who integrate spiritual practices with medical treatment often show better quality of life and psychological adjustment than those relying exclusively on either approach.

Muslim scholars have developed frameworks for this integration that respect both religious values and medical science. Al-Jawziyya's classic text "Prophetic Medicine" (Tibb al-Nabawi) outlines principles for combining spiritual and physical remedies, an approach that continues to influence Islamic perspectives on health (Al-Jawziyya, 2003). Contemporary Muslim healthcare professionals often emphasize this integrated approach when working with cancer patients (Rassool, 2014).

Practical Applications for Healthcare Providers

Healthcare providers working with Muslim cancer survivors can enhance resilience by supporting spiritually integrated care. This begins with spiritual assessment tools sensitive to Islamic values and practices (Hodge, 2015). Simple accommodations like providing prayer space, access to Islamic chaplaincy services, and respect for modesty requirements significantly improve the cancer care experience for Muslim patients (Padela et al., 2012).

Research by Lazenby (2012) found that oncology nurses who received training in culturally sensitive spiritual care reported greater confidence in supporting Muslim patients and observed better outcomes. Key competencies include understanding basic Islamic beliefs about illness, recognizing the importance of prayer times, and appreciating dietary requirements, particularly during Ramadan.

Collaborative approaches between medical providers and religious leaders show particular promise. Padela et al. (2018) documented successful partnerships between mosques and healthcare systems that improved cancer screening and treatment adherence in Muslim communities. These collaborations recognize that imams and other religious leaders significantly influence health behaviors and can reinforce medically sound recommendations when included in the care team.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Spiritual practices within the Islamic tradition offer multifaceted resources for building resilience during cancer survivorship. From the structured rhythm of daily prayers to the contemplative practice of Quranic recitation, from community support to charitable engagement, these practices provide Muslim cancer survivors with frameworks for meaning-making, emotional regulation, and hope cultivation. Research increasingly confirms what Muslim survivors have long reported—that spiritual engagement correlates with improved quality of life, reduced psychological distress, and enhanced resilience throughout the cancer journey. The Islamic understanding of illness as potentially meaningful within a divine plan creates cognitive frameworks that facilitate post-traumatic growth and positive adaptation. Healthcare providers supporting Muslim cancer survivors can enhance resilience by recognizing and accommodating spiritual needs alongside medical interventions. This integrative approach honors the holistic nature of healing emphasized in both contemporary psycho-oncology and traditional Islamic medicine. As survivorship care continues to evolve toward more personalized and culturally responsive approaches, the rich spiritual resources of Islam offer valuable insights for all professionals supporting cancer survivors on their journey toward wholeness and resilience.

While existing research provides valuable insights into the relationship between Islamic spiritual practices and cancer resilience, several important areas warrant further investigation. Future research should address these gaps to enhance understanding and support for Muslim cancer survivors.

Longitudinal Studies of Spiritual Coping

Most current studies examining spiritual practices among Muslim cancer survivors employ cross-sectional designs, capturing experiences at a single point in time. Longitudinal research is needed to track how spiritual coping strategies evolve throughout the cancer trajectory, from diagnosis through treatment and into long-term survivorship (Asadzandi, 2017). Such studies could identify critical periods when spiritual interventions might be most beneficial and how spiritual needs shift over time.

Gender-Specific Dimensions

Islamic spiritual practices may be experienced differently by men and women due to gender-specific religious roles and expectations. Research by Hammoudeh et al. (2017) with Palestinian breast cancer survivors suggests that women may face unique challenges in maintaining religious practices during illness while also drawing on distinctive spiritual resources. More research is needed to understand these gendered dimensions of spirituality and how interventions might be tailored accordingly.

Culturally Adapted Spiritual Assessment Tools

Existing spiritual assessment tools used in oncology settings often reflect Western religious concepts that may not fully capture Islamic spiritual experiences. Researchers should develop and validate spirituality measures specifically designed for Muslim populations, incorporating concepts like *sabr*, *tawakkul* (trust in Allah), and *rida* (contentment with divine decree) that are central to Islamic spiritual coping (Akbari & Hossaini, 2018).

Integration with Psychosocial Interventions

Further research is needed on how Islamic spiritual practices might be effectively integrated with evidence-based psychosocial interventions for cancer survivors. Preliminary work by Rosli et al. (2016) demonstrates promising results from spiritually modified cognitive-behavioral therapy for Muslim cancer patients, but larger controlled trials are needed to establish efficacy and implementation guidelines.

Digital Spiritual Support Resources

As healthcare increasingly incorporates digital platforms, research should explore how technology might deliver culturally appropriate spiritual support to Muslim cancer survivors. Studies could evaluate the effectiveness of Islamic spiritual applications, online support communities, and telehealth chaplaincy services in enhancing resilience among geographically dispersed or underserved Muslim populations (Alimohammadi et al., 2016).

Recommendations

Based on current evidence and identified gaps, the following recommendations are proposed for healthcare practitioners, religious leaders, and Muslim communities to enhance spiritual support for cancer survivors.

For Healthcare Providers

1. **Implement Routine Spiritual Assessment:** Healthcare systems should incorporate culturally sensitive spiritual assessment into standard oncology care for Muslim patients. This assessment should acknowledge diverse interpretations of Islam and avoid assumptions about individual practices (Rassool, 2019).
2. **Develop Specialized Training:** Oncology professionals should receive training in Islamic perspectives on illness and healing to enhance cultural competence. This training should include basic knowledge of prayer requirements, dietary practices, and gender-related modesty concerns (Laird et al., 2013).
3. **Create Accommodation Policies:** Healthcare facilities should establish clear policies ensuring Muslim patients can fulfill religious obligations during treatment. This includes

providing prayer spaces, accommodation for Friday congregational prayer, and sensitivity to fasting during Ramadan for those able to participate (Padela et al., 2019).

4. **Engage Islamic Chaplains:** Hospitals should employ or partner with trained Islamic chaplains who can provide specialized spiritual care. These chaplains should be integrated into oncology teams to facilitate cooperation between medical and spiritual care (Abu-Ras & Laird, 2011).

For Religious Leaders and Communities

1. **Develop Cancer-Specific Spiritual Resources:** Imams and religious scholars should create resources addressing theological questions commonly faced by cancer survivors, such as modified worship practices during illness and Islamic perspectives on pain management and end-of-life care (Akhtar et al., 2018).
2. **Establish Support Groups:** Mosques and Islamic centers should implement cancer support groups that combine religious guidance with peer support. These groups can provide safe spaces for discussing spiritual struggles while reinforcing community connections (Cindoglu & Baloglu, 2014).
3. **Provide Education on Preventive Care:** Religious leaders should incorporate health education into community programs, emphasizing the Islamic duty of maintaining health and seeking preventive care. This education should address common misconceptions about cancer screening and treatment (Padela et al., 2018).
4. **Train Volunteer Spiritual Caregivers:** Muslim communities should develop volunteer programs that train community members to provide spiritual support to cancer patients. These volunteers could assist with transportation to medical appointments, home visits for prayer, and practical support for patients and families (Al-Shahri, 2016).

For Muslim Cancer Survivors

1. **Develop Personalized Spiritual Practices:** Survivors should be encouraged to identify and engage with spiritual practices most meaningful to them personally, recognizing diversity within Islamic tradition. This individualized approach respects the unique spiritual journey of each survivor (Ahmad et al., 2011).
2. **Utilize Modified Worship Options:** Survivors should be educated about religious accommodations available during illness, such as prayer modifications when standing is difficult or tayammum (dry ablution) when water use is contraindicated. Knowledge of these options can reduce spiritual distress when standard practices are challenging (Rassool, 2014).
3. **Engage with Spiritual Journaling:** Regular reflection through journaling about spiritual insights gained through the cancer experience can enhance meaning-making and document spiritual growth. This practice aligns with Islamic traditions of self-reflection (muhasaba) (Taufik & Ibrahim, 2020).
4. **Participate in Knowledge Sharing:** Survivors who feel comfortable should be encouraged to share their spiritual coping strategies with newly diagnosed patients, creating networks of experiential knowledge within Muslim communities. This service orientation can provide meaning and purpose during survivorship (Morris et al., 2011).

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