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Need for '*Spiritual high*' in COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract: This is the most vulnerable time that every one of us is going through. This vulnerability depends on age and the place of social isolation. Just as the infection is increasing, the anxiety is also festering amongst us. Uncertainty times breeds hopelessness. And the question that science is not able to answer is sought through religious beliefs. People under stress turn to religion or their spiritual side to cope with strain and apprehension. This research article is a humble attempt to give prominence to spirituality in our lives and nurturing our spirituality as our top priority. The article also underscores various ways to connect to our spirituality by staying physically fit, using technology to enhance spirituality, love thy neighbour, nature, hope, changing habits, a smile, forgiveness and gratitude. Lastly, it concludes how judgment hijacks the ability to hear our inner guide. The awareness ability and a strong and stable spiritual outlook will help us find meaning in life's most challenging circumstances and ultimately achieve a healthy, happy and '*spiritual high*' life.

Keywords: *Spirituality, social isolation, pandemic, COVID-19*

I Introduction

This is the most vulnerable time that every one of us is going through. This vulnerability depends on age and the place of social isolation. Social isolation with your family members and loved ones is far better than social isolation when you live alone away from your family. Just as the infection is increasing, the anxiety is also festering amongst us. However, it is observed that as immunity decreases with age, so does one's strength to hold on to hope and the ability to cope at the face of adversities. Infact social media has news spreading that with this pandemic and social isolation, it is not only making our elderly vulnerable and susceptible to low immunity, but it is also affecting the mental health of youth and children. And they are taking drastic measures to overcome despair and depression.

The feeling of loneliness and social isolation can have severe health consequences in different socioeconomic groups of our society. The quicker one adjusts to this isolation, the better it is for one's psychological well-being (Ahmed, 2020). Uncertainty times breeds hopelessness. And the question that science is not able to answer is sought through religious beliefs. People under stress turn to religion or their spiritual side to cope with apprehension. Koenig et al. (2020) have stated that religious faith is an essential source of health and well-being. When our life was 'normal', we all were busy, and the spiritual side of ours was not at the top of our priorities. Now that everyday activities have come to a halt, we have time to shuffle our priority list and make our spiritual health our top priority at this time. The need of the hour now is to get ourselves connected to nature and our inner self by embracing the naiveté of what life has to offer.

II Connecting to our spirituality

The following are the ways in which we can find and hang on to our spiritual side. These points have been discussed in the light of different researches conducted over time.

Spending time to find our spiritual side: Social isolation is an excellent time for all of us to explore our connection and relationship with the Supreme Being. One can do that by meditation, prayers, observing fast; reading scriptures, holy books; listening to sermons and inspirational preachers that boost up our spirits and hope. Sometimes we want someone to tell us what we already know. The way they say and the emotional tone they use stirs up our inner conscience. This spiritual connection enhances our mental health and in turn the ability to weather anxiety during uncertain times (Koenig, 2012)

The best time to feel the connection with your spiritual self is the pre-dawn hours. The time when you know the rest of the world is sleeping. Your alone time helps in introspection and looking at our situation with different perspectives. The prevailing enforced social separation because of COVID-19 should acquaint us with the value of peace and serenity. The pandemic may seem like the end of some of us, but it can also serve as a beginning for some. It's just the way how we look at it.

Staying Physically Fit: This comes with the package, you cannot separate the soul and the body. Our unravelling soul should be nurtured in a healthy body. Engaging in moderate physical activity/exercise improves one's immune function. And the fresh air of early morning walk in your courtyard, lawn or terrace potentially reduces the risk and severity of respiratory viral infection (Martin et al., 2007). Eating a healthy diet and taking supplements, especially Vitamin C and D, are essential. The US News and World Report (2020) have stressed on the Mediterranean diet to keep one's weight under control and ultimately healthy. Keeping oneself hydrated is vital during this humid weather. Parents have to keep a stringent check on the sugar intake by children. Don't pamper them with homemade sugar-loaded delicacies. (Ahmed, 2020)

Regulating our sleep cycle is also crucial during the pandemic as we lose track of time and days. Going to bed early and rising before sunrise, maintaining seven hours of sleep is indicative of augmenting and sustaining our immunity (Opp and Kruger, 2015).

Love thy Neighbour: Neighbour is anyone in this global world. Every religion propagates how to take care of a neighbour. This sense of empathy with others, sensing their needs and problems and helping them in their time of need is what will give us the satisfaction by the end of the day. There is no better way to reduce our stress and anxiety than by reaching out to others in need. The widespread message of Allama Iqbal shows individuals the exercises of compassion, social affectability and worry for every single person in the society. (Ahmed and Mudasir, 2019)

There may be a neighbour who might be in need of emotional support, and the underprivileged neighbour may need financial support as well. Engage the elderly and children in extending support in helping the neighbour. All this, of course, should be under the norms applicable for social distancing. Here is an opportunity for all religious faith to spread the message of love and hope to anyone in need.

Using technology to enhance our spiritual self: Social distancing has devoid us of the human touch. Technology, on the other hand, is extending the human connections with the help to various applications like Facetime, Skype, Webex, Zoom, Whatsapp, Face book etc. Youtube has provided a platform with a plethora of videos on religious talks, preachers, meditation music etc. For those who are living alone or with only a few members, a pin drop house could be scary and depressing. Listening to the mediation music, prayers and recitation of holy books have a soothing effect. There are researches which have stated that the positive emotions that are generated by sacred scriptures are beneficial for our immune system (Pressman and Black, 2012; Brown et al., 2020). Videos on Youtube can help in reading out aloud, memorizing scriptures and practising mindful meditation. We have to commit to our conversation. Technology has offered us many apps for us to stay connected and to stay communicated to each other. Asking ice-breaker questions and looking for answers on the internet can make self-learning enjoyable and beneficial. Quenching our curiosity with the help of authentic websites empowers us immensely.

Nature: According to William and Leahy (2018) study, they stated that even though the US continues to hold the top ranking among university students worldwide, the university students are experiencing an unprecedented level of stress, depression and other psychologically debilitating conditions. One method to reduce stress, anger, fear, and anxiety is to spend time with nature. Just a 10-20 minute sitting or walking in the array of green space has a meaningful impact and increased our comfort, positive affect and vigour. Nature walk has helped people to energize and motivated them to recover and get back on their tracks or in

other words, feel normal (Berman, 2012). Some environmental psychologists have argued that there is something called a value component added to the human-nature relationship. And it was found that when one is close to nature, they will develop a sense of gratitude and a sense to appreciate what nature has to offer. Sometimes words and ideas just appear and pop up in our minds when we spend quiet time with nature. And these words and ideas sure do not sound like ones that our mind would have come up with on its own.

Breathing in the open air, inhaling fresh air gives us wholesome sensory awareness. Spending time outdoors makes one mindful of their surroundings; it heightens their sensory abilities. We, humans, are always capable of improving the environment we live in. We can improve our mental health and spiritual state by reshaping and improving our surrounding. Even our interpersonal relationships are improved, and we are happier and satisfied with the relationship as soon as we form the connectivity with nature and spend more time with it (Dutcher. et al. 2007). We have to encourage children and to spend time not ‘on the screen’ but ‘on the green’(Brooks, 2018). This not only improved their physical health, but they also became less prone to obesity, childhood anxiety and depression. Even adolescents showed remarkable coping skills and emotional stability.

Hope: During a crisis, the first thing that is negatively affected is our state of mind or mental health. And the irony is that the very state of mind that is susceptible to crash down will help us to endure and survive the same crisis. In this pandemic situation and the social isolation, we are facing, recognizing our crisis mode is the first step in restoring balance to our thinking process and mental health. We cannot let social distancing lead us to emotional distancing. Dr Anthony Scioli had illuminated the concept of hope how it can be cultivated. He categorized it into four kinds according to its purpose: Attached Hope (to build and keep trusting relationship), Mastery Hope (to become strong and successful), Survival Hope (to stay calm and find a solution in a difficult situation) and Spiritual Hope (to feel close to nature, human being and to connect to the something supreme). It is essential to distinguish between hope and fake hope or blind optimism and denial. We have to understand the fine line between what we can control and the things that are beyond our control. We only resort to hoping when we desire something valuable and challenging to obtain. Dr Scioli has written that real hope remains the best medicine for COVID-19.

Wright and Shontz (1968) listed in their study, strategies which facilitated the hoping process. Four tasks identified by them appear readily transferable to the current pandemic situation: ‘taking responsible action (self-explanatory), reflecting on personal assets (age, health, life-experience, social support, etc.), and placing faith in growth forces (the power of maturation), and appreciating favourable environmental conditions (warmer weather, new testing sites, etc.)’

Changing Habits: Wellness comes as a wholesome package; it encompasses dimensions like physical, intellectual, emotional, social, spiritual, vocational, financial and environmental (Maryland Guide, 2013). We have our views regarding what it means to ‘live life fully’. Even we have an acronym for this ‘YOLO’ (*You only live once*), widely used in social media. We should aim to the ‘personal harmony’ that feels the most authentic to us. Habits are powerful and require very little energy (Rubin, 2015). It is a behaviour that is reduced to a routine. Habits are key to wellness. And for better or worse, they influence our health and our well-being. If we change our habits for better, we change our life for the better (Rubin, 2015). Habits tend to keep us doing what we always do. And inserting new routines can be a bit difficult despite knowing its benefits and with best intentions. Rubin has also stressed that self-sameness and strategies, can maximize our potential, and both are indispensable to successful habit formation. Even for the spiritual connection, we need to establish to enhance our relationship with our spiritual self. Meditation, spending time alone before the crack of dawn, mindfulness activities are some of the ways with conscious frequent repetition can get us habitual to his routine. On an average, it takes two months before a new behaviour becomes a routine and is automatically performed (Lally, 2009). In Gardner (2012) research, he suggested that it takes 18 to 254 days for a person to form a new habit and on an average of 66 days. That is for any new behaviour to become automatic. There is no other suitable situation like the pandemic in which we can cultivate the habit that is required to enhance our spirituality.

Smiling: The art and science for the improvement of relationship is smile. Gerard Jugnot, a French actor, has said: “*Laughter is like a windshield wiper, it doesn’t stop the rain but allows us to keep going*”. During uncertain times, a genuine smile can help us to restore the sense of tranquillity and safety, which we are longing for. In Islam, Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) has said: “*Do not disdain a good deed (no matter how small it may seem) even if it is your meeting with your brother with a cheerful face.*” (Sahih Muslim,

2626; Book 45, Hadith 187). Even scientist have learned that this smile is one of humanity's simplest expression, which is stunningly beautifully intricate. Guillaume Duchenne conducted famous research on a smile as a genuine expression of positive emotion. He suggested that the intensity of a grim can predict marital happiness, personal well-being and even longevity (Duchenne, 1990; Johnson, 2010). Research by Hertenstein et al. (2009) confirmed a correlation between low-intensity smiles in youth and divorce later in life. Smiling through tough times does a body good. The Kelter and Bonamo (1997) research reported that lower level of distress in those who displayed the 'Duchenne smile'. The sex difference in smiling is greater than when people believe they are alone (La France, 2003). Behavioural scientist do believe that women smile more than the men. Smile serves a good social purpose. People with genuine 'Duchene smile' advertise 'altruistic purpose' (Mehua, 2007). Therefore an individual with Duchene smile establishes a connection with their true self. The altruistic tendency we manifest through our smile is one of the ways we can truly feel the spiritual side of ourselves. No matter how hard it is for us but to smile during tough times is contagious, and it not only will help the people around you, but it will increase the positivity in ourselves.

Researcher Kristin Neff has quoted "*if we can compassionately remind ourselves in moments of our failures which is a part of the shared human experience, then that moment becomes one of togetherness rather than isolation.*" (Southwick, 2012)

When we are learning about spirituality, there may be some people who are atheist. The baffling question is whether an atheist can be spiritual by nature too. For some, it may be like philosophical searching, self-realization etc. For others, it may involve an intense and strong emotional reaction to "wonders" of life and seeing nature around us like gazing at the starry night sky, caring for a pet, seeing a newborn child, looking at birds flying, walking barefooted at the shoreline etc. A deep peace emanates from it and settles into us.

Judgment hijacks the ability to hear our inner guide. When we free ourselves from judging, we create a spirituality that is exonerating. We are not to assign labels as positives and negatives. Everything is seen for its own inherent and ingrained beauty. According to Austin (2020) all these and similar experiences of "spirituality" are entirely compatible with atheism. There is nothing about atheism which prevents a person from having such experiences or quests. Indeed, for many atheists, their atheism is a direct result of such philosophical searching and religious questioning. Thus, one might argue that their atheism is an integral component of their "spirituality" and their ongoing search for meaning in life. With this point of view, there will be more atheist who are spiritual by nature.

III Conclusion

Letting go of self-blame, relinquishing the ego and negative feelings when we encounter a hurtful incident in our lives is reflected in the scripture and spiritual traditions in different religions like Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism. Holding on limited perception makes us tense, and overshadows our genuine nature. Nobody feels peaceful all the time, but one has to learn to let go of those things by turning inward which are responsible for disruption of peace within us. (Ahmed and Shawl, 2019). We have to learn to accept that forgiveness is good medicine and helps in the self-healing process.

Along with forgiveness is the ability to show gratitude for all the things we are blessed with. Even writing a gratitude journal can have therapeutic effects. Looking for deeper meanings in our lives and analysing occurring patterns will help us see that we have control over our destiny. The awareness ability and a strong and stable spiritual outlook will allow us to find meaning in life's most challenging circumstances and ultimately achieve a healthy and '*spiritual high*' life. Don't fret about getting everything in perfection. Just get it going and become the best kind of person you can be in these uncertain times. To end with the quote of Malcolm Muggeridge "*Every happening great and small is a parable whereby God speaks to us, and the art of life is to get the message.*"

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