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Fasting In Islam

Fasting In Islam

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P R O J E C T

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C O N T E N T S

Fasting In Islam	3
Ramadhan is easy-worship smart not hard	4
Month of Ramadhan	6
Purpose of Fasting	7
Eating in Ramadan	8
Some specific acts during Ramadhan	9
Those who are exempted from Fasting	10
Health benefits	11
How does it work	12
Conclusion	13

Fasting In Islam

You may be wondering why your Muslim neighbour, friend or co-worker has to fast the entire month of Ramadhan? There are many reasons and benefits to the fasting. Some are of spiritual and some of social nature. Fasting has been made obligatory on every adult Muslim by the Quran and fasting is a unique moral and spiritual characteristic of Islam. Literally defined, fasting means to abstain "completely" from food, drinks and intimate intercourse. This abstinence starts from before the break of the dawn till sunset, during the entire month of Ramadan, the ninth month of the lunar year.

But if the meaning of the Islamic Fasting is restricted to this literal sense, we would be grossly mistaken. It must be clearly understood that the act of fasting during the month of Ramadhan is not for atonement or repentance. It is not a sort of punishment; it is an act of training willingly engaged in by a Muslim for a positive purpose. In the verse quoted below the Quran describes unambiguously the purpose of fasting as the attainment of self-restraint and gaining God-consciousness:

“O you who believe! Fasting is prescribed to you as it was prescribed to those before you, that you may (learn) self-restraint (God-consciousness).” (2:183)

However, like most other injunctions of Islam those relating to fasting were revealed gradually. In the beginning the Prophet (peace be on him) had instructed the Muslims to fast three days in every month, though this was not obligatory. When the injunction in the above verse was later revealed in second year after migration to Medina, a degree of relaxation was introduced: it was stipulated that those who did not fast despite their capacity to endure it were obliged to feed one poor person as expiation for each day of obligatory fasting missed (verse 2:184). Another injunction was revealed later

(verse 2:185) and here the relaxation in respect of able-bodied persons was revoked. However, for the sick, the traveller, the pregnant, the breast-feeding women and the aged who could not endure fasting, the relaxation was retained.

“So those of you who live to see that month should fast it, and whoever is sick or on a journey should fast the same number of other days instead. God wants ease and not hardship for you” (2:185)

Whether a person should or should not fast whilst on a journey is left to individual discretion. We find that among the Companions who accompanied the Prophet on journeys some fasted whereas others did not; none objected to the conduct of another. The Prophet himself did not always fast whilst travelling. On one journey a person was so overwhelmed by hunger that he collapsed; the Prophet disapproved when he learned that the man had been fasting. During wars the Prophet used to prevent people from fasting so that they would not lack energy for the fight. It has been reported by 'Umar that two military expeditions took place in the month of Ramadan. The first was the Battle of Badr and the second the conquest of Makkah. On both occasions the Companions abstained from fasting, and, according to Ibn 'Umar, on the occasion of the conquest of Makkah the Prophet proclaimed that people should not fast since it was a day of fighting. In other Traditions the Prophet pbuh is reported to have said that people should not fast when they had drawn close to the enemy, since abstention from fasting would lead to greater strength. (See Ahmad b. Hanbal, *Musnad*, vol. 3, p. 329, and vol. 5, pp. 205 and 209; Darimi, 'Sawm', 41; Muslim, 'Siyam', 92; Nasai, 'Siyam', 47; Bukhari, 'Maghazi', 71; Muslim, 'Siyam', 102; Ahmad b. Hanbal, *Musnad*, vol. 3, pp. 21, 35, 46)

Ramadhan is Easy-Worship Smart not Hard

The last part of the above verse (2:185),

“God wants ease and not hardship for you”

Makes it crystal clear that the intention of fasting is not to impose hardship for people but only to train their self to learn restrain and feel the difficulties of those who are less fortunate. This verse is one of the over-arching, over-riding principles of Islam. The Quran mentions this point in half a dozen verses, and the Prophet (peace be upon him) explicitly stated it. Business people often say: “work smart, not hard.” In other words, instead of spending every waking moment working on something, make strategic moves that will cut your workload without decreasing your success rate.

In Ramadan people are inundated with reminders on how often we should recite the Quran and how many hours we should stand in night time prayers etc. But the reality is that in Ramadhan the duties and responsibilities that we have do not cease. Ramadan is meant to propel us into a better state of faith and practice – it is not meant to burn us out. The Prophet pbuh said:

“The most beloved deed to God is the most regular and constant even if it were little.” (Bukhari)

We should use Ramadan as our motivation and springboard to develop good deeds and habits that are consistent and give up at least a few bad habits and be firm on abstinence for the rest of the year. We can, in the next Ramadhan repeat the same cycle of improving some aspects of our lifestyle and giving up some bad habits. By using this strategy we will be using a smart rather than hard method to make real changes and gain true benefit from Ramadhan. Personal development and improvement is the real goal of Ramadhan, it’s the quality we achieve at the end of it rather than the bulk of actions and rituals which are not producing any real change in our lives.

If you’re ignoring your routine responsibilities at work and at home in order to recite the Quran, or you’re falling asleep during night time prayers because you haven’t had a chance to sit down and rest since fajr (morning), maybe you should re-evaluate your worship goals. We must make personal and meaningful goals to recite Quran, pray

night prayers, give charity and reflect on our relationship with our creator. It may be just learning one page of Quran each day or 2 Rakah of prayer and only pound a day of charity.

You may only be able to do these deeds that may seem “small” to others, but offering two Rakah with full concentration and understanding is enormously better than dizzily standing all night in prayer without any semblance of understanding. That’s when you’ve crossed the line from actual worship to mechanical ritual. Finding ways to take advantage of Ramadhan and multiplying your rewards without necessarily adding to your workload is paramount to worshipping smart.

For example, if you’re cooking or baking something special for your family, wrap some of it up and give it to your neighbours. It doesn’t require any extra effort on your part, but considering the immense rewards of being kind to your neighbour, the rewards of this action can be enormous.

Or, if you’re going to donate some money to a certain cause or needy family, ask your friends if they’d like to donate with you. The Prophet pbuh said:

“Whoever guides (another) to a good deed will get a reward similar to the one who performs it.”

By encouraging others to take part in charity, you reap the benefits of not only your own donation, but the donations of everyone else who follows your lead. The possibilities of multiplying your rewards are endless by Worshipping Smart instead of Hard!

Month of Ramadhan

Muslims follow both Solar as well as the Lunar calendar for determination of months. The solar calendar is followed for performing five daily prayers, whilst the lunar calendar is followed to determine Fasting and Hajj (The annual pilgrimage). The advantage

of following lunar calendar for fasting is that every year the lunar calendar changes; thus Ramadhan comes 11 days earlier each successive year. Therefore people have the opportunity to fast in every month and season of the year, over the years.

Purpose of Fasting

The purpose of fasting has been explicitly described by Muhammed pbuh in his following sayings. He (peace be upon him) said:

“Whoever establishes Ramadhan with faith and introspection/soul-searching will have his previous sins forgiven” (Bukhari)

“If a person does not avoid false talk and false conduct during Siyam (Fasting), then Allah does not care if he abstains from food and drink.” (Bukhari, Muslim)

“Many people who fast get nothing from their fast except hunger and thirst, and many people who pray at night get nothing from it except wakefulness” (Darimi)

Fasting must bring out the best in an individual, help remove habits and qualities that are harmful for individuals and the society and create an atmosphere of care and compassion for all. Muslims are not expected to give up any of their routine activities nor abstain from physical activities during Ramadan. They are however, expected to do their best to avoid evil thoughts and deeds as well. Main reasons for fast, including:

-Obeying God- Learning self-discipline- Becoming spiritually stronger. -Appreciating God's gifts to us- Sharing the sufferings of the poor and developing sympathy for them- Realising the value of charity and generosity. -Giving thanks for the Holy Qur'an, which was first revealed in the month of Ramadan

-Sharing fellowship and brotherhood with Muslims and nonmuslims.

Eating in Ramadan

During Ramadan Muslims will try to eat a large meal called Suhoor just before dawn, in order to refuel their body for the day of fast ahead. Till sunset they will abstain from food and drink as well as try to improve their behaviour and attitude in all aspects of their life. When daylight is over, Muslims will break or open the fast with dates or water, following the example of the Prophet Muhammed, before having a proper meal later. The evening meals during Ramadan are occasions for family and community get-togethers, wherein people share the joy of community spirit and spiritual upliftment. Eating or drinking during the day by mistake or unintentionally does not invalidate the fast of the individual; in fact this is seen as a mercy of God for that particular person. The Prophet pbuh said:

“Take the suhoor meal (pre dawn), for there is blessing in it.”
(Bukhari, Muslim)

“Break your fast with dates, or else with water, for it is pure.” (Abu Dawud, Tirmidhi)

Abu Huraira related that the Prophet (peace be upon him) said:

“If anyone forgets that he is fasting and eats or drinks he should complete his Fast, for it is God who has fed him and given him drink.” (Bukhari, Muslim)

Zaid ibn Khalid Johni related that the Prophet (peace be upon him) said:

“He who provides (food) for breaking of fast of another person earns the same merit as the one who was observing fast without diminishing in any way the reward of the latter.” (Tirmidhi)

God's Messenger pbuh said,

"Fasting is a shield (or a shelter). So, the person observing fasting should avoid sexual relation with his wife and should not behave foolishly and impudently, and if somebody fights with him or abuses him, he should tell him twice, 'I am fasting.'" The Prophet pbuh added, "By Him in Whose Hands my soul is, the smell coming out from the mouth of a fasting person is better in the sight of God than the smell of musk. (God says about the fasting person), 'He has left his food, drink and desires for My sake. The fast is for Me. So I will reward (the fasting person) for it and the reward of good deeds is multiplied ten times.'" (Bukhari)

The Prophet was the most generous amongst the people, and he used to be more so in the month of Ramadan when Gabriel visited him, and Gabriel used to meet him on every night of Ramadan till the end of the month. The Prophet pbuh used to recite the Holy Qur'an to Gabriel, and when Gabriel met him, he used to be more generous than a fast wind (which causes rain and welfare).(Bukhari)

God's Messenger pbuh said,

"God said, 'All the deeds of Adam's sons (people) are for them, except fasting which is for Me, and I will give the reward for it.' (Bukhari)

Some Specific Acts during Ramadhan

There are a number of special practices which are only done during Ramadan. First and foremost action during Ramadhan is the full days fast. Although Muslims fast during other times of the year, Ramadan is the only time when fasting, or Sawm, is obligatory during the entire month for every able Muslim. Ramadan is intended to increase self-control in all areas, including food, sleeping, sex and the use of time.

Apart from fasting some specific acts of worship include the Taraweeh Prayers (Night time prayers). These are long night prayers, which are not obligatory, but highly recommended.

Mosques are filled with worshippers who go to attend these prayers, which usually last for one and a half to two hours. These prayers also give Muslims a chance to meet at the mosque every day, and so they also help to improve relationships in the Muslim community.

Another important act of worship is called I'tikaf. I'tikaf refers to going into seclusion during the last ten nights of Ramadan, in order to seek Lailat ul Qadr (night of Power) by praying and reading the Qur'an. Some people live in the mosque during this time for serious reflection and worship. Others spend a few hours at the mosque or home.

Lailat ul Qadr: It is the night when the Quran was first revealed and is sought in the last five odd nights of Ramadhan by engaging in recitation, reflection and self awareness in order to gain the pleasure of God and improve our understanding and relationship with God.

The Quran describes the night of Power as:

“Verily! We have sent it (this Qur’an) down in the night of Al-Qadr. And what will make you know what the night of Al-Qadr is? The night of Al-Qadr is better than a thousand months. Therein descend the angels and the Ruh (Gabriel) by God’s Permission with all Decrees, Peace! Until the appearance of dawn.” (Qur’an, 97:1-5)

Those who are exempted from Fasting

Children before puberty, however they can be allowed to train themselves by keeping half day fasts increasing to a full day fast gradually in order to prepare them when they reach puberty.

Elderly persons who cannot fast at all, on account of their physical health difficulties are exempt from fasting.

Acute illness: those who cannot fast due to a temporary illness (e.g., fever, severe cold, infection, etc.). Such persons are exempted from fasting; however, they have to do make up for it once they regain health or after Ramadhan.

Long-term illness: those who cannot fast due to a long-term illness (e.g., diabetics, etc.). Such persons are exempted from fasting: there is no need to make up for it; however, they have to pay fidya or charity for each day of fasting.

A pregnant, menstruating or a breastfeeding woman: However, she has to do make up for missed days after pregnancy or weaning the child.

A traveller: Anyone leaving their usual place of abode has a choice to either fast or make up for the missed days after Ramadhan.

Health benefits

Fasting is a spiritually uplifting experience which leads to social as well as community spirit development. From a purely health perspective it carries a lot of benefits too. In recent years, numerous studies have suggested that intermittent fasting - abstaining or reducing food and drink intake periodically - can be good for us, making it one of the most popular diet trends worldwide.

One of the most well-known intermittent fasting diets is the 5:2 Fast Diet - a plan that involves eating the recommended calorie intake for 5 days a week but reducing calorie intake to 25% for the remaining 2 days - to 500 calories a day for women and 600 a day for men.

According to Dr. Michael Mosley - author of The Fast Diet books - this eating plan can not only help people lose weight, but it offers an array of other health benefits.

"Studies of intermittent fasting show that not only do people see improvements in blood pressure and their cholesterol levels, but also in their insulin sensitivity," he adds.

In June 2014, for example, Medical News Today reported on a study suggesting periodic fasting - defined in the study as 1 day of water-only fasting a week - may reduce the risk of diabetes among people at high risk for the condition.

Another study, conducted by Dr. Valter Longo and colleagues from the University of Southern California (USC) in Los Angeles, found longer periods of fasting - 2-4 days - may even "reboot" the immune system, clearing out old immune cells and regenerating new ones - a process they say could protect against cell damage caused by factors such as aging and chemotherapy.

How Does it Work

Since the body is unable to get its energy from food during fasting, it dips into glucose that is stored in the liver and muscles. This begins around 8 hours after the last meal is consumed.

When the stored glucose has been used up, the body then begins to burn fat as a source of energy, which can result in weight loss. As well as aiding weight loss, Dr. Razeen Mahroof, of the University of Oxford in the UK, explains that the use of fat for energy can help preserve muscle and reduce cholesterol levels.

A detoxification process also occurs, because any toxins stored in the body's fat are dissolved and removed from the body," he adds, noting that after a few days of fasting, higher levels of endorphins - "feel-good" hormones - are produced in the blood, which can have a positive impact on mental well-being.

As mentioned previously, the study by Dr. Longo and colleagues suggests prolonged fasting may also be effective for regenerating immune cells.

"When you starve, the system tries to save energy, and one of the things it can do to save energy is to recycle a lot of the immune cells that are not needed, especially those that may be damaged," Dr. Longo explains.

In their study, published in the journal *Cell Stem Cell*, the team found that repeated cycles of 2-4 days without food over a 6-month period destroyed the old and damaged immune cells in mice and generated new ones. People who fast commonly experience dehydration, largely because their body is not getting any fluid from food. As such, it is recommended that during Ramadan, Muslims consume plenty of water prior to fasting periods.

If you are used to having breakfast, lunch, dinner and snacks in between, fasting periods can be a major challenge. As such, fasting can increase stress levels and disrupt sleep. Dehydration, hunger or lack of sleep during a fasting period can also lead to headaches.

Fasting can also cause heartburn; lack of food leads to a reduction in stomach acid, which digests food and destroys bacteria. But smelling food or even thinking about it during fasting periods can trigger the brain into telling the stomach to produce more acid, leading to heartburn.

While many nutritionists claim intermittent fasting is a good way to lose weight, some health professionals believe such a diet is ineffective for long-term weight loss. A Muslim must take care of not indulging in overeating during breakfast times and should continue the healthy eating style after Ramadhan in order to reap the fruits of health benefits from Ramadhan

Conclusion

Ramadhan is a full training manual for each individual to attaining best results for his/her spiritual, social, physical and health related well being by tailoring it according to his or her needs. Ramadan is a

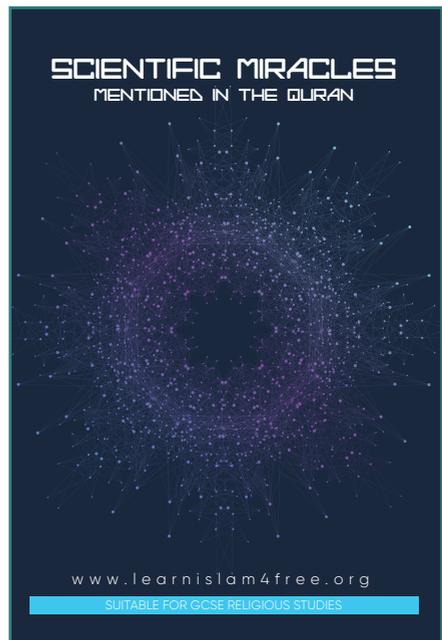
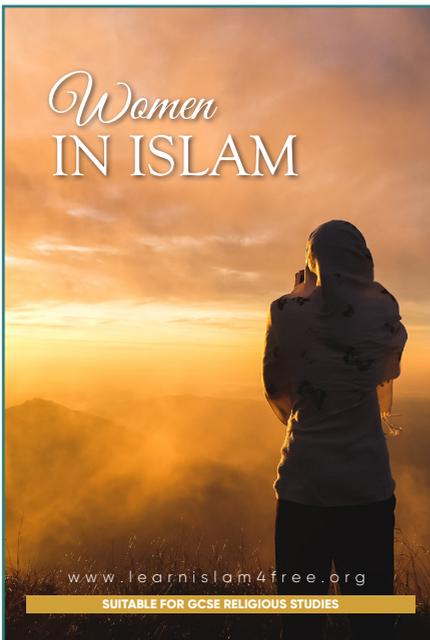
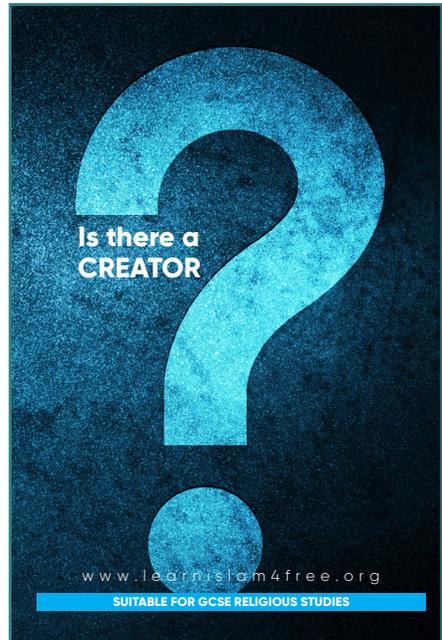
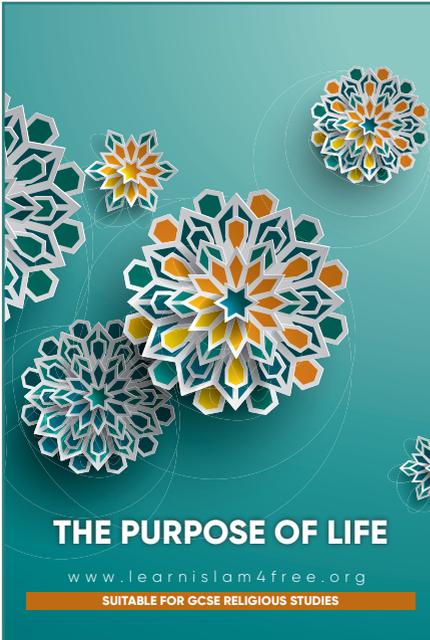
time of spiritual reflection, improvement and increased devotion and worship. Muslims are expected to put more effort into self development and following the teachings of Islam. The fast begins at dawn and ends at sunset. In addition to abstaining from eating and drinking, Muslims are specifically encouraged to learn increased restraint, such as abstaining from any immoral activity or bad behaviour. The act of fasting is said to redirect the heart away from getting bogged down and lost in worldly activities, its purpose being to cleanse the soul by freeing it from harmful impurities. Ramadan also teaches Muslims how to better practice self-discipline, self-control, sacrifice, and empathy for those who are less fortunate; thus encouraging actions of generosity and compulsory charity known as Zakah.

Ramadhan can play a pivotal role in making a fresh start for anyone at any time in his or her life. This opportunity beckons every year for anyone and everyone to take advantage of and make a positive change in their respective lives. Personal development guides mention a three week period of consistency in introducing new routines or abstaining from harmful habits, in order to make such changes a regular and permanent part of our lives. Well, Ramadhan provides us with the opportunity of four such weeks of consistent behavioural and cognitive change in order to inculcate the changes we make into our very personalities!

Ramadhan is followed by Eid celebrations; for it is a great way to acknowledge the achievement of a positive change in our lives. However, if we fail to improve any aspect of our lives during this month, then Ramadhan is no different for us than any other month and the celebration of Eid at the end of it will make no sense!

Let us all use the opportunity of this blessed month with a view to making a fresh start towards developing a positive, productive, fruitful and a caring personality in each one of us.

OTHER ESSENTIAL READINGS



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10. Did Jesus Predict Coming Of Muhammad?
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12. Is There A Creator?
13. Women In Islam
14. The Hijab
15. Scientific Miracles Mentioned In The Quran
16. Message To Mankind
17. Islam's Solution To Terrorism
18. Islam For The 21st Century
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