

Recognising and Addressing Inequalities in Religious Education Spaces

A Call for Holistic Support and Healing

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Abstract

This article explores how religious spaces can embrace holistic education to address mental health challenges. It will examine the importance of breaking the stigma surrounding mental health in religious settings, providing faith-based mental health support in mosques and community spaces, addressing past traumas and fostering emotional healing within faith communities, and building a more inclusive and mentally healthy religious environment. By fostering open conversations, education, and professional collaboration, religious spaces can become places of healing rather than solely places of worship.

Keywords: *Muslim Mental Health, Inequalities, Psychology, Mosques, Spirituality, Holistic, Education*

Introduction: The Role of Religious Spaces in Mental Health

Religious spaces, such as mosques and Islamic community centers, serve as central hubs for spiritual growth, social connection, and guidance. However, while these spaces excel in providing religious education, they often overlook the mental and emotional well-being of their members (Abu-Ras et al., 2024). In many Muslim communities, mental health struggles are frequently misunderstood or dismissed, leading individuals to suffer in silence (Abrar & Hargreaves, 2023).

Studies indicate that mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, PTSD, and substance misuse are on the rise among Muslims, particularly the younger generations (Hekmoun et al., 2019; Ragheb et al., 2023). Despite this, many individuals hesitate to seek professional help due to stigma, cultural misconceptions, and fear of being perceived as lacking faith (Abrar & Hargreaves, 2023; alHarbi et al., 2023). For instance, out of the 45,999 Muslims referred to National Health Service (NHS) Talking Therapies in England between 2021 and 2022, only 2.6% completed their full course of treatment (Woolf Institute, 2023).

A holistic education approach can play a crucial role in addressing these challenges. Instead of viewing mental health and spirituality as separate, holistic education integrates mental, emotional, social, and spiritual well-being (Abrar & Hargreaves, 2023; Pouille et al., 2023).

This article explores how religious spaces can embrace holistic education to address mental health challenges. It will examine the importance of breaking the stigma surrounding mental health in religious settings, providing faith-based mental health support in mosques and community spaces, addressing past traumas and fostering emotional healing within faith communities, and building a more inclusive and mentally healthy religious environment. By fostering open conversations, education, and professional collaboration, religious spaces can become places of healing rather than solely places of worship.

Breaking the Stigma Around Mental Health in Religious Spaces

In many Muslim communities, anxiety, depression, and other psychological challenges are sometimes perceived as a lack of faith, rather than legitimate conditions requiring support and treatment (alHarbi et al., 2023). As a result, individuals struggling with their mental well-being may feel isolated, reluctant to seek help, or even guilty for experiencing such difficulties.

This stigma is deeply rooted in cultural and historical factors. In some cases, mental health discussions are overshadowed by a strong emphasis on perseverance and trust in God (tawakkul), leading some to believe that prayer alone should be sufficient to overcome psychological distress (Abrar & Hargreaves, 2023; Baig, 2017). Others may fear community judgment, worrying that acknowledging their struggles will be seen as weakness or a sign of personal or spiritual failure (Dunthorne, 2023).

A holistic education approach within religious spaces can help break these barriers by fostering awareness, open dialogue, and faith-integrated psychological support. This means creating an environment where mental health is acknowledged as part of overall well-being and not seen as separate from religious or spiritual life (Abu-Ras et al., 2024; Pouille et al., 2023).

One way to achieve this is through mental health education initiatives within mosques and community centers. Religious leaders and educators can integrate mental health topics into sermons, classes, and discussions, using examples from Islamic history and prophetic traditions that emphasize emotional well-being. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) openly addressed sadness, stress, and emotional struggles, teaching his companions to care for their psychological state alongside their faith. By drawing from such examples, religious spaces can help remove the misconception that mental health challenges stem from personal weakness.

Another crucial step is to train Imams and community leaders in mental health awareness (Khan & Gilliat-Ray, 2022). Many religious leaders play a key role in offering guidance and support, but without proper training, they may unintentionally reinforce harmful narratives or dismiss legitimate concerns (Abrar & Hargreaves, 2023). Training programs that equip them with basic mental health knowledge and referral systems can make a significant difference in how mental health is addressed within faith spaces.

Additionally, fostering open conversations about mental health in community settings can empower individuals to share their experiences and seek support without fear of judgment. Creating safe spaces for discussion, peer support groups, and collaborations with Muslim mental health professionals can ensure that individuals receive the help they need while still feeling connected to

their faith and community (Malik, 2023). By challenging misconceptions, encouraging open discussions, and equipping religious spaces with the tools to support mental well-being, faith communities can play a transformative role in reducing stigma and promoting holistic healing.

Providing Faith-Based Mental Health Support in Religious Spaces

While breaking the stigma around mental health is a crucial first step, it must be followed by tangible support systems within religious spaces. Many individuals experiencing anxiety, depression, or trauma turn to mosques and religious leaders as their first point of contact when seeking guidance (Abu-Ras et al., 2024). However, most religious spaces lack structured mental health resources, leaving individuals without the necessary support. A faith-based approach to mental health within these settings can help bridge this gap by integrating spiritual care with psychological well-being.

One of the main challenges is that many imams and community leaders are not equipped to address mental health struggles (Abrar & Hargreaves, 2023; Baig, 2017). While they may offer religious counsel, they often lack formal training in psychology, counseling, or crisis intervention (Abrar & Hargreaves, 2023). As a result, individuals experiencing severe mental health conditions, such as PTSD, suicidal ideation, or substance abuse, may receive spiritual advice when they require professional therapeutic intervention. This gap highlights the need for mental health first-aid training for imams and religious educators. By equipping them with basic psychological knowledge and referral networks, they can better guide individuals to professional resources while still offering spiritual support.

Holistic education can also help integrate faith-based therapy and counseling services within religious spaces. Collaborations between mosques

and Muslim mental health professionals can provide a balanced approach where individuals receive both psychological and spiritual guidance (Malik, 2023). For example, some Islamic centers and mosques have begun offering faith-sensitive counseling services within their premises, ensuring that individuals feel comfortable seeking help without compromising their religious values (<https://www.eastlondonmosque.org.uk>; <https://www.hounslowmasjid.co.uk>). This approach acknowledges that faith and mental health are not separate, but interconnected aspects of well-being.

Another essential component is the creation of support groups within religious spaces. Many individuals feel isolated in their struggles due to shame, guilt, or fear of judgment (Woolf Institute, 2023). Establishing peer support groups, such as mental health discussion circles, addiction recovery programs, or stress management workshops, can provide a safe space for individuals to connect, share experiences, and heal together. These initiatives normalize mental health discussions within faith communities and encourage individuals to seek help without fear.

A successful example of faith-based mental health integration is the Khalil Centre, a psychological and spiritual wellness organization in the United States. It blends Islamic spirituality with modern therapeutic techniques, offering services such as Islamically-integrated psychotherapy, mental health education, and faith-based trauma counseling. Such models can be replicated in other religious spaces, ensuring that faith remains a source of healing rather than a barrier to mental well-being.

To fully embrace a holistic approach, religious spaces must go beyond prayer and recitations but actively provide structured mental health resources. By training religious leaders, partnering with professionals, and establishing

community-driven support networks, mosques and community centers can transform into safe, healing spaces that nurture both spiritual and psychological well-being (Pouille et al., 2023).

Faith & Trauma Healing: Addressing Past Emotional Wounds

For many individuals in religious communities, mental health challenges are not limited to immediate stressors or daily struggles. Past traumas, including historical events, family dynamics, and cultural upheavals, often play a significant role in shaping emotional and psychological health (Abrar & Hargreaves, 2023). Muslim communities may carry the weight of intergenerational trauma, which can have profound effects on both the individual and collective well-being. Addressing these emotional wounds within religious spaces is essential for healing and promoting long-term mental health (Abu-Ras et al., 2024).

One of the key challenges facing many Muslim individuals is the impact of migration trauma. Refugees and immigrants who fled conflict zones or experienced displacement may carry the psychological scars of war, loss, and instability. For example, those who experienced the partition of India and Pakistan or the aftermath of the Bosnian War often live with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression, yet these emotional wounds are often not discussed within their faith communities (Abrar & Hargreaves, 2023). Trauma-informed care, which considers the effects of past trauma on mental health, can play a critical role in healing.

Religious spaces can help address these issues by offering trauma-informed services, which acknowledge and validate the pain of individuals while offering pathways to healing. Imams, counselors, and community leaders can be trained to understand the impact of historical and intergenerational trauma on mental health,

providing compassionate and appropriate support. For example, in communities with significant refugee populations, religious leaders can offer spiritual and psychological guidance that is sensitive to the trauma of displacement and loss.

In addition to migration trauma, many Muslim individuals also experience emotional wounds related to family dynamics, including strict cultural expectations or experiences of abuse (Chowdhury, 2023; Gill & Hamed, 2016). In some cases, shame, guilt, and silence surrounding these issues may prevent individuals from seeking help.

Religious spaces can play a pivotal role in healing by reframing harmful cultural practices and providing spiritual and emotional support for those recovering from trauma. Instead of perpetuating cycles of guilt or shame, faith leaders can emphasize the Quranic principles of mercy, compassion, and forgiveness, which offer a foundation for healing. For instance, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) consistently demonstrated deep empathy for individuals facing personal challenges, providing a model for compassionate leadership. By following this example, religious spaces can help create an environment where individuals feel safe to heal, seek support, and reclaim their sense of dignity.

Moreover, faith-based trauma recovery programs can be introduced within mosques and community centers. These programs could focus on group therapy, one-on-one counseling, and mindfulness practices that integrate both Islamic teachings and modern therapeutic techniques. For example, incorporating Islamic-based mindfulness exercises such as dhikr (remembrance of Allah) or guided meditation can help individuals process emotional pain and reconnect with their faith in a way that fosters healing.

A real-life example of organizations supporting Muslims dealing with trauma and mental health challenges in the UK includes the Muslim

Counsellor and Psychotherapist Network (MCAPN) (<https://www.mcapn.co.uk>) and Inspired Minds (<https://inspiredminds.org.uk>). MCAPN connects individuals with qualified Muslim mental health practitioners, ensuring culturally and religiously sensitive care. Inspired Minds, a grassroots Islamic charity, provides counseling services and educational programs that integrate faith-based approaches to mental health awareness and support.

The need to address past traumas and emotional wounds is clear. By offering trauma-informed care, providing spaces for healing, and integrating faith with mental health support, religious spaces can help individuals move past their pain and experience true emotional and spiritual growth.

Building a Mentally Healthy & Inclusive Religious Space

Creating a mentally healthy and inclusive religious space requires a shift in both structure and mindset. Religious institutions have the unique opportunity to foster a community where every individual feels welcomed, understood, and supported. For mosques and community centers to truly promote mental well-being, they must be inclusive of diverse mental health needs and accessible to individuals of all backgrounds, including those from marginalized or underrepresented groups.

The first step in building a mentally healthy space is to acknowledge diversity within the community. Mental health needs can vary widely depending on factors such as age, gender, socio-economic status, and personal experiences. For instance, younger individuals may experience social anxiety, academic pressure, or peer relationship difficulties (Anthony et al., 2024), while older members may struggle with issues such as loneliness, grief, or chronic illness (Hughes, 2023). Women in particular may face unique challenges related to cultural expectations, such as the pressure to balance family and professional life, or difficulties

around gender roles (Glas, 2022). Understanding and addressing the diverse mental health challenges that members face is essential for creating an inclusive environment that fosters mental well-being for all.

A key element of this is ensuring that religious spaces are accessible and supportive for women, who often face specific mental health struggles due to gender-related societal pressures (Glas, 2022; Hametner et al., 2020). In many Muslim communities, gender-specific spaces or roles may inadvertently reinforce feelings of isolation or exclusion for women. For example, women who feel disconnected from the primary spaces of worship, which are often male dominated (Megahed, 2022), or those who are hesitant to speak openly about mental health, may feel alienated. Offering women-only support groups or faith-based therapy sessions can create spaces where they feel safe to discuss mental health issues without fear of judgment. These initiatives can be integrated into existing programs to encourage participation and provide support tailored to their needs.

Furthermore, religious spaces must be designed to ensure physical and emotional accessibility for all members. This includes ensuring that mosques and community centers are equipped with appropriate facilities, such as private spaces for counseling, wheelchair accessibility, and safe spaces for discussions around mental health. Additionally, making sure that religious leaders are trained in providing inclusive pastoral care will ensure that all individuals feel supported, regardless of their background or life circumstances (Malik, 2023).

Another crucial aspect of building a mentally healthy religious environment is to promote mental health education and literacy within the community. Many Muslims are unaware of the signs of mental health struggles or the resources available to them (alHarbi et al., 2023). By offering

regular workshops, seminars, and support groups on topics such as stress management, coping strategies, and understanding mental health disorders, religious spaces can increase awareness and encourage individuals to seek help when needed. These initiatives can be led by mental health professionals who are also familiar with Islamic teachings, offering culturally sensitive and faith-based approaches to mental health education.

A practical example of this initiative can be found in the Sakinah Wellness Centre in Canada, which integrates Islamic teachings with psychological care to create an inclusive environment for Muslims dealing with mental health challenges. This model provides support groups, counseling services, and educational events, fostering a sense of belonging and promoting emotional well-being within the faith community.

By creating an inclusive, accessible, and supportive environment, religious spaces can actively promote mental health and ensure that all individuals feel empowered to seek help. This approach not only benefits those dealing with mental health struggles but also creates a stronger, more connected community where everyone's well-being is valued and prioritized.

Conclusion – Holistic Education as a Path to Healing and Empowerment

Addressing mental health within religious spaces requires a transformative shift, one that moves beyond traditional models of religious education and embraces a holistic approach that integrates spiritual, psychological, and emotional well-being. By recognizing the interconnection between faith and mental health, religious spaces can become centers of healing rather than places where mental health struggles are ignored or stigmatized (Abu-Ras et al., 2024).

This article has explored the key steps necessary to foster mental well-being within religious spaces. It

begins with breaking the stigma surrounding mental health, ensuring that individuals do not feel guilt or shame for their struggles. From there, faith-based mental health support systems – such as training imams, integrating professional counseling, and establishing peer support groups – help create a structured and effective response to mental health challenges. Addressing past traumas within the community, particularly migration trauma and gender-based struggles, is also essential in promoting emotional healing. Finally, building an inclusive and mentally healthy religious space ensures that all individuals, regardless of their background, feel welcomed, understood, and supported in their faith journey.

A holistic education approach plays a crucial role in this transformation. By incorporating mental health education, trauma-informed care, and faith-sensitive counseling into religious teachings, community leaders take a holistic approach. This allows them to create an environment where individuals feel spiritually uplifted while also receiving the emotional and psychological support they need. Practical steps such as mental health workshops, awareness campaigns, and faith-based therapy programs demonstrate how religious spaces can actively contribute to mental well-being.

The future of religious education must include compassion, inclusivity, and psychological awareness. When religious spaces embrace mental health as an integral part of spiritual development, they become more than just places of worship—they become safe havens for healing, personal growth, and empowerment. By continuing to challenge stigma, invest in education, and foster open discussions, faith communities can lead the way in reshaping how mental health is perceived and addressed in religious settings.

True spiritual well-being comes not only from prayer and devotion, but also from self-awareness, emotional support, and communal care. A holistic education approach ensures that religious spaces can fully serve their purpose, not only as houses of worship but as beacons of hope and healing for all who seek them.

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Author Bio

My name is **Iram Salam**, and I am based in Manchester, United Kingdom. I specialize in the intersection of public health, community support, and harm reduction. I am committed to creating inclusive community and religious education spaces that cater to diverse needs. My work involves conducting research to inform evidence-based policies and interventions aimed at improving the well-being of young Muslims and their families within both their communities and wider society.

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