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Active Sunnah

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The Modern world and inactivity

Within the modern globalised world, sedentary lifestyles are ever-increasing; this has had a catastrophic effect upon our collective health, spiritual states and mental well-being adversely affecting daily lives. Since the advent of Covid-19, the ramifications of illness and premature death are more apparent than ever.

The Quran and the Sunnah provide certain universal maxims that are at the basis of every ruling of the sacred law. At the pinnacle of these divine maxims is the concept of *ḥifẓ al-nafs*, "preservation of life". The conservation of human life is sacred, and our bodies are an *amanah or* "trust" gifted to us by the Almighty. In essence, they do not belong to us; we are merely entrusted with their maintenance and preservation and, like all blessings, will be held accountable for any forms of negligence to such divine gifts. Another universal maxim is the concept of *ḥifẓ al-ʿaql*, "preservation of intellect" this is designed to protect our God-given intellects via maintenance of our psychological states and general mental health. Physical activity can improve and maintain cognitive function whilst simultaneously managing well-being via the release of hormones such as endorphins. This leads to increased positivity, boosting mood, temperament, and overall happiness.

Regrettably and contrary to the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, the Muslim community within England are statistically the least active religious denomination within broader society. The consequence of a lack of physical activity leads to disproportionate representations such as poor physical and mental health, character suppression, low self-esteem, anti-social behaviour, incarceration ratios, and contributes to limited

social and economic manoeuvrability, further exacerbating the problem. However, as always, Islam provides us with the necessary cure for such physical, psychological, and spiritual ailments, all praise belongs to Allah.

The Emissary Elect

The noble Prophet Muhammad ﷺ is the perfect guide, role model and exemplifier of how Muslims must lead their daily lives. During the years of his propagation, his precious time was spent receiving divine revelation from Allah, the Exalted, *"He does not speak of his desires, it is only revelation sent down to him"*.[1] This verse clarifies that not only is the Quran revealed upon his sacred heart, but all his actions and interactions are also divinely inspired. This revelation came with the command to convey the message preoccupying his precious time dealing with propagation to various tribes, leaders, and Nations. The Muslims equally needed His time to learn, implement and practise the divine teachings. Importantly He also dedicated His time to his clan folk, relatives', friends, and the blessed household.

Despite such essential commitments and busy schedules, the Prophet ﷺ found time to participate in and endorsed physical activities such as archery, swimming, horse-riding, wrestling, hiking, and running. The noble companions followed suit and initiated such traditions and ethos into their daily lives. These activities were recommended for many reasons, from practical daily usages, essential life skills, means of protection in turbulent times and even playful social interactions of affection and love between spouses.

"The Sunnah" Learn, Implement and Share the Love!

Archery

- Abū Dardā' narrates that the Prophet ﷺ said: "Everyone who walks between the two points of the archery field will have merited the reward of a good deed for every step he takes."[2]

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1 Quran (53:3-4).
2 Al-Ṭabarānī

- Abū Saʿīd al-Khudrī reports that the Prophet ﷺ said, "Learn the casting of arrows and the Qur'an."[3]
- Abū Hurayrah relates that the Prophet ﷺ said, "Learn the throwing of arrows and do not be averse to it, for the area between the two targets holds a garden of the gardens of Paradise."[4]
- ʿAbd-Allāh b. Jarād reported that the Prophet ﷺ "liked shooting arrows between the two targets, and he used to run along with his Companions."[5]

Walking, Hiking and Running

- The Mother of the Believers, ʿĀisha, reported: that whilst she was with the Prophet ﷺ on a journey, "I raced Him on foot, and I outran him, but when I gained some weight, I raced Him again, and He outran me. The Prophet ﷺ said: This is for that race."[6]
- Abū Hurayrah relates: "...I have not seen anyone walk faster than the Messenger of Allah ﷺ it was as if the earth would fold up for him. Indeed, we would struggle to keep up with him, yet he would walk at his normal pace."[7]
- ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib reports: "When the Prophet ﷺ would walk, he would lean forward slightly and sternly lift his feet off the ground as if he was descending from an elevated plain."[8]
- The Prophet ﷺ would often make the six-kilometre hike towards the mountain of light and climb the summit, which is situated five hundred and sixty metres above sea level just so that he could enter the cave of *Ḥirā'* for isolation, reflection, and submit himself in the worship of Allah.

Horse Riding

3 *Musnad al-Daylamī*
4 Abū al-Shaykh and Ibn Abī Dunyā
5 Ibn Abī Dunya, *al-Mawsūah*
6 *Sunan Abū Dāwūd*
7 *Shamā'il al-Muḥammadiyyah*
8 Ibid.

- **Abū Hurayrah** relates that the Prophet ﷺ said, "There is goodness tied to the forelocks of the horse until the Day of Judgement."[9]
- Anas b. Mālik relates that "there was nothing dearer to the Messenger of Allah ﷺ after womenfolk than horses."[10]

Wrestling

- Isḥāq ibn Yassār reported that the Messenger of Allah ﷺ said to Rukānah, known as the strongest [wrestler] of all the people, "If I were to you take you down, would you consider Islam to be true?" He replied, "Yes." The Messenger of Allah ﷺ then stood up [to wrestle him' and took him down. So, he said to him, "Again, O Muhammad." The Messenger of Allah ﷺ thus stood once more and for a second time, wrestled him down to the ground…[11]
- ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn Abī Nuʿmān relates that Abū Saʿīd al-Khudrī was asked about performing prayer in one cloth. So, he said, "Wrap it just as you [would] wrap it for wrestling."[12]

Swimming

- The Messenger of Allah ﷺ is believed to have mastered the art of diving in the well of the clan of *ʿAdī b. al-Najjār*.[13]

The following hadith perfectly summarises the Prophetic approach to being physically active, participating in sports and learning and developing crucial skill to navigate human life.

- ʿAṭā b. Abī Rabāḥ narrated, "I saw Khālid b. ʿAbd-Allāh and Jābir b. ʿAmru 'l-Anṣārī, casting arrows. Then, as one of them wearied, the other said to his companion, 'You have grown weary of casting arrows, but I have heard these words from the Prophet ﷺ who said, "Everything that is done without the remembrance of Allah, the Exalted, is a vain distraction and idle play, but for these four accomplishments: a man

9 Sunan al-Nasā'ī
10 Ibid.
11 al-Bayhaqī, *Dalā'il al-nubuwwah*
12 Ibn Abī Shaybah, *Muṣannaf*
13 Refer to sīrah sources.

walking between the two points of the archery ground, training his horse, learning how to swim, and jesting with his family.'"[14]

We are what we eat!

Another area where we can seek to fulfil the commands of Allah is within our dietary consumption; we live in a day and age where poor quality foods and gluttony is on the rise. This can lead to an assortment of health complications. A prime example is that Muslims within England are statistically more likely to suffer from cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and other such illnesses. The sad reality is that the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ never ate more than one main meal each day and, in addition, would be in a state of fasting more often than He was not. This was over fourteen centuries ago before the multitude of benefits of fasting had been discovered by modern science, such as:

- Change in the function of hormones, cells, and genes expression
- Loss of weight and visceral fat
- Reduction in insulin resistance lowering the risk for type-2 diabetes
- Reduction in oxidative stress (anti-ageing) and inflammation in the body
- Beneficial for heart health
- Induced cellular repair processes
- Improved cognitive function and brain activity
- An increased lifespan and quality of life
- Possible reduced risk of cancer
- Possible reduction in the onset of Alzheimer's disease
- Minimising the risk of cancerous cells

The Prophet ﷺ said: "The son of Ādam does not fill any vessel worse than his stomach. It is sufficient for the son of Ādam to eat a few mouthfuls to keep him going. If he must do that [i.e. fill his stomach], then let him fill one third with food, one third with drink and one third with air."[15] This behaviour is further nullified by the Quran, "*Eat and drink and do not*

14 *Sunan al-Nasā'ī*
15 Al-Tirmidhī

commit excesses; Indeed, he does not love those who are excessive."[16] Our religion is one of perfect harmony, balance and steadfastness' often referenced to as the middle path, "*We have made you a Middle (ground) Nation…"*[17]

To illustrate the importance of good health, the Prophet ﷺ encouraged Muslims to supplicate the following 'Ask Allah for forgiveness and health.'[18] In addition, he ﷺ said, 'No supplication is more pleasing to Allah than a request for good health.'[19] Finally, in another tradition, Abū Bakr reported that the Prophet ﷺ said, "You will not be given anything after sincerity in speech similar to wellness, therefore ask Allah for wellness."[20]

Modern science and medicine conclude that a primary factor in sustainable health and wellness is physical activity carried out daily and a nutrient-rich balanced diet. The second Rightly-Guided caliph of Islam, ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb informed the believers to 'avoid having a protruding stomach, for it spoils the body, causes diseases and creates lethargy in the prayer.'[21] This re-iterates the actual purpose of nourishing the body being to utilise it for the servitude and worship of the Almighty creator and to avoid things which inhibit the essential purpose for human existence, "*And I did not create the Jinn and Mankind except to worship me."*[22]

The sacred law highlights that once we become aware that something is detrimental to our physical health and well-being than as Muslims, we are duty-bound to refrain from indulging in such activity, this could be prolonged inactivity, harmful dietary consumption, and other toxic substances '*And do not throw yourselves into destruction*.'[23] Failure to comply with such a lifestyle and to inflict unnecessary harm to oneself will result in a complete disregard for the commands of Allah, the Exalted, and all the endless favours he has bestowed upon us. Moreover, the Quran informs us that we will be held accountable for such blessings on the day

16 Quran (7:31)
17 Quran (2:143)
18 *Sunan al-Nasā'ī*
19 Al-Tirmidhī
20 *Musnad Aḥmad*
21 Abū Nuʿaym
22 Quran (51:56)
23 Quran (2:195)

of reckoning, *'Then on that day (the Day of Judgement) you shall be asked about the favours (of Allah).'*[24]

Prophetic Physical Practice

In *Ṣaḥīḥ* ***Muslim***, there is a famous tradition of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ who said, "The strong believer is better and more beloved to Allah than the weak believer, while there is good in both." The strength referenced is generally believed to be the strength of *īmān*; however, this narration can also be taken in the literal sense, meaning that a fit, robust, and healthy believer is more likely to help himself and, by extension, those who are in need around him. Although ultimately, in Islam, we are encouraged to stop an act of injustice, if possible, with our hands, this can only be achieved if we have the physical capacity to do so.

The solution for our poor levels of activity and declining mental health is not a motivational video on YouTube, obscure training regime, extreme weight loss diet, or magic slimming pills, but rather it is to adopt the Sunnah of our beloved Messenger ﷺ. This does not mean that we must all get involved in organised sports; we acknowledge and endorse the need for low-stress activities suitable for a wide range of ages and physical abilities such as walking, hiking, or riding a bike. The Muslim Sports Foundation recommend the three P's programme, **Prophetic Physical Practice**. This is based on making sure that adults, male and female and all children participate in various forms of activity throughout the week, especially together as families. This way, we can encourage, support, and install a blossoming culture into our communities and broader society.

Ibn ʿAbbās relates that the Prophet ﷺ said: "There are two blessings which many people squander: health and free time for doing good."[25] Therefore, let's not waste any more time and unite as individuals, families, and communities to adopt the prophetic physical practice.

"Active Sunnah" Practical Suggestions

- 10,000 steps a day challenge
- One meal challenge

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24 Quran (102:8)
25 *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*

- Monday and Thursday fasting
- Intermittent fasting alternative days
- Commit our families to learn and implement the Sunnah sports
- Walking and hiking with families to experience the great outdoors
- Cycle rides with qualified leaders
- Mother and daughter sessions at our local centres and mosques
- Father and son sessions at our regional centres and mosques
- Learning to wrestle and other self-defence martial arts
- Fencing the forgotten art
- Walking clubs
- Integrated madrassah physical activity for children
- Mosque & madrassah sports club

May **Allah** send peace and blessings upon the Prophet ﷺ, his Household and noble Companions.