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HEALING FROM WITHIN: BEDIUZZAMAN SAID NURSI'S RISALE-I NUR AS A FRAMEWORK FOR ISLAMIC MENTAL AND SPIRITUAL HEALTH (ŞİHĤAH NAFSIYYAH)

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ABSTRACT

Despite material progress, modern society faces rising mental health crises and a lack of inner peace. This qualitative study explores Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's *Risale-i Nur* to examine his conceptual contributions to Islamic mental and spiritual health (*Şihḥah nafsīyyah*). Utilizing an analytical and critical approach to selected treatises, the study evaluates Nursi's practical, Qur'an-based guidance on the heart (*qalb*), the inner self (*nafs*), and cognitive transformation (*nazar*). Findings indicate that Nursi identifies heedlessness (*ghaflah*) as the root of psychological suffering and offers structured remedies for intrusive thoughts (*waswasah*). The study concludes that the *Risale-i Nur* provides a comprehensive therapeutic framework in which spiritual disciplines such as remembrance (*dhikr*), repentance (*tawbah*), patience (*Ṣabr*), and trust (*tawakkul*) serve as vital pathways toward psychological resilience, spiritual stability, and sustainable inner peace in the modern world.

Keywords: *Risale-i Nur, Şihḥah Nafsīyyah, Waswasah, Islamic Psychology, Mental Health, Nursi.*

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INTRODUCTION

Background: Material Progress and the Contemporary Crisis of Inner Peace

The twenty-first century has witnessed extraordinary advances in technology, science, and economic development. Many people today enjoy levels of material comfort that would have been unimaginable to previous generations. However, despite this progress, psychological problems such as depression, anxiety, feelings of emptiness, and suicide remain major global concerns. This suggests that human wellbeing depends on more than material success alone.¹ While people often devote significant time and effort to improving their appearance, social standing, and professional achievements, the inner and spiritual dimensions of life are frequently neglected. Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (1877–1960), in his collection of writings known as the *Risale-i Nur*, argued that many of the deeper problems of modern society are spiritual rather than physical in nature, and that their root lies in the condition of the human heart.

Said Nursi wrote the *Risale-i Nur* during a period marked by imprisonment, exile, and political pressure, following the collapse of the Ottoman Caliphate and the establishment of a secular republic in Turkey. Through these writings, he addressed not only theological issues but also the psychological and spiritual struggles faced by ordinary Muslims living in a rapidly changing world. His works deal with challenges such as materialism, doubt, loss of meaning, and spiritual anxiety. As a result, the *Risale-i Nur* occupies a unique place between Qur'anic interpretation, Islamic spirituality, and practical guidance for everyday life. This combination has become especially relevant in the modern era. According to the World Health Organization, rates of anxiety and depression increased significantly worldwide following the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the growing need for approaches that address both psychological and spiritual well-being.

Problem Statement: The Limitations of Modern Secular Psychology

Modern psychology has developed many methods for treating mental health problems. Approaches such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), mindfulness-based therapies, and psychiatric medications have

¹ World Health Organization, *World Mental Health Report: Transforming Mental Health for All* (Geneva: WHO, 2022), <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240049338>.

helped millions of people manage conditions like anxiety and depression. However, these approaches are generally grounded in secular understandings of human nature and primarily focus on psychological, behavioral, and biological factors. Questions related to spirituality, meaning, one's relationship with Allah, and moral responsibility often receive limited attention or are interpreted in non-religious terms. As a result, some forms of suffering that are deeply connected to spiritual concerns may not be fully addressed. Many people who appear psychologically healthy and function well in daily life still experience feelings of emptiness, lack of purpose, or inner restlessness. From a religious perspective, these experiences may reflect needs that extend beyond what psychological techniques or medical treatments alone can provide, highlighting the importance of considering the spiritual dimension of human wellbeing.

This issue is not only theoretical but also has practical importance. Research in the psychology of religion has shown that spiritual wellbeing is closely linked to mental health, resilience, and overall life satisfaction.²³ For many Muslims, approaches to mental health that do not take religious beliefs and values into account may feel incomplete or less meaningful. As a result, there is a growing need for frameworks that address psychological suffering while remaining rooted in the Islamic worldview. The *Risale-i Nur* offers one such framework. Drawing directly from the Qur'an and focusing on the real struggles faced by human beings, Nursi's writings provide a way to understand and respond to psychological distress that integrates both spiritual and psychological dimensions of well-being.

Objectives of the Study

This study examines Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's *Risalei Nur* and its contributions to understanding Islamic mental and spiritual well-being, referred to in this paper as *sihhah nafsīyyah* (the health of the inner self). The study explores several key aspects of Nursi's thought. First, it investigates how the Quran explains the human person through the concepts of the heart (*qalb*), the inner self (*nafs*), and perception (*nazar*). Second, it examines how *ghaflah* (heedlessness or forgetfulness of Allah) is a major cause of psychological and spiritual distress in modern life. Third, it analyzes the treatment of *waswasah* (intrusive thoughts), focusing on how it reduces the stigma surrounding

² Harold G. Koenig, *Handbook of Religion and Health*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 4–18.

³ Kenneth I. Pargament and Julie J. Exline, *Working with Spiritual Struggles in Psychotherapy: From Research to Practice* (New York: Guilford Press, 2021), 22–40.

these experiences and proposes practical spiritual methods for dealing with them. Finally, the study explores how practices such as dhikr (remembrance of Allah), tawbah (repentance), sabr (patience), and tawakkul (reliance on Allah) work together as a comprehensive framework for promoting psychological resilience, spiritual growth, and inner peace, based on the Quranic verse that says, "The heart finds peace through remembrance of Allah."

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research method based on the analytical and critical reading of selected treatises from the *Risale-i Nur*. The primary texts are examined from the perspectives of both Islamic psychology and contemporary mental health studies, using the thematic analysis approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). In addition, relevant literature from Islamic studies and modern psychology is used to provide context and to compare Nursi's ideas with contemporary theories and practices. The analysis begins with a close reading of the texts and then identifies recurring themes and concepts related to the human psyche. These themes are brought together to present Nursi's ideas as a coherent framework for understanding and promoting mental and spiritual wellbeing.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF SIHHAH NAFSIYYAH IN THE RISALE-I NUR

The Nursian Anatomy of the Human Psyche

The Heart (Qalb) as the Centre of Spiritual Perception

It is widely accepted that for Nursi, as for the broader tradition of Islamic psychology, the heart (qalb) is not merely a physical organ but the spiritual and cognitive centre of the human being.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) affirmed this with striking directness: "Beware, there is a piece of flesh in the body; if it becomes good, the whole body becomes good, but if it gets spoiled, the whole body gets spoiled, and that is the heart" (Sahih al-Bukhari).⁴ Nursi deepens this insight by arguing that the heart is the seat of faith, moral intention, and spiritual perception. It is the faculty through which divine revelation is ultimately received and internalized. It is where one's true behaviour lies. Unlike the physical organ that sustains blood circulation, the spiritual heart governs one's entire orientation toward truth, beauty, and the Divine.

⁴ Al-Bukhari, Muhammad ibn Ismail. *Sahih al-Bukhari*, trans. Muhammad Muhsin Khan, Kitab al-Iman, Book 2, Hadith 52. Riyadh: Darussalam, 1997.

The Arabic word *qalb* comes from the root *qalaba*, which means "to turn" or "to change." This reflects an important characteristic of the heart in Islamic thought: it is not fixed in one condition but can change over time. Depending on a person's beliefs, actions, and spiritual practices, the heart may move toward spiritual health or spiritual decline.⁵ Nursi describes three general states of the heart. The first is the healthy, receptive heart of a sincere believer, open to divine guidance. The second is the hardened heart of a person who consistently rejects guidance and becomes spiritually insensitive. The third is the diseased heart, which struggles between obedience and disobedience and experiences inner conflict (Qur'an 2:74).⁶ According to Nursi, the most common spiritual problem in modern society is not outright disbelief but *ghaflah* (heedlessness). This occurs when people become so absorbed in worldly concerns that they gradually lose awareness of Allah and neglect their spiritual life. Over time, this weakening of spiritual awareness can affect both inner peace and overall wellbeing.

From an Islamic psycho-spiritual perspective, the *qalb* (heart) plays a central role in bringing together different aspects of the human personality. The '*aql* (intellect) is responsible for reasoning, understanding, and moral judgment, while the *fu'ad* refers to the emotional dimension of the person, including feelings such as fear, hope, grief, and joy.⁷ The heart serves as the point where these faculties interact, influencing a person's thoughts, emotions, and decisions (Raudlotul & Asma', 2022). In some ways, this resembles modern psychological models that view well-being as a balance among cognitive, emotional, and personal meaning-making processes. According to Nursi, a spiritually healthy person maintains harmony among these different dimensions. Reason helps strengthen faith, faith guides the proper use of reason, and emotions are directed through a purified heart toward meaningful and positive goals. Ultimately, Nursi argues that the highest form of inner balance is achieved when the heart is oriented toward awareness of and love for Allah (*ma'rifatullah* and *mahabbatullah*), allowing the different aspects.

⁵ Raudlotul Jannah and Asma' Muda, "Qalb dalam Perspektif Psikologi Islam: Kajian Konseptual," *Jurnal Psikologi Islam* 9, no. 1 (2022): 45–58.

⁶ Qur'an 2:74. All Qur'anic quotations are from *The Noble Qur'an*, trans. Sahih International (Riyadh: Abul-Qasim Publishing House, 1997), unless otherwise indicated

⁷ Raudlotul Jannah and Asma' Muda, "Qalb dalam Perspektif Psikologi Islam," 50.

The Inner Self (Nafs) and Its Struggles

If the qalb is the spiritual centre of the human being, the nafs (inner self or ego) is the site of the most consequential inner struggle. The Qur'an speaks of the nafs in multiple registers, reflecting its capacity for both degradation and elevation. At its lowest stage, the nafs al-ammarah (the commanding self)⁸ drives the individual toward worldly desire, arrogance, and disobedience, which is a state that in contemporary terms maps onto what psychologists call ego-driven or impulsive behaviour. At an intermediate stage, the nafs al-lawwamah (the self-reproaching soul)⁹ reflects the capacity for moral self-awareness, guilt, and repentance that marks the beginning of spiritual awakening. At its highest attainment, the nafs al-mutma'innah (the tranquil soul)¹⁰ represents a self purified through faith, patience, and remembrance, at peace with its Creator and invited to return to Him in a state of divine pleasure.

Nursi offers a unique understanding of the nafs (inner self). Rather than viewing it as something entirely negative or evil, he argues that the nafs serves an important purpose in human development. According to Nursi, the nafs helps people recognize their own weakness (ajz) and dependence on Allah (faqr). Through its desires, struggles, mistakes, and limitations, the nafs teaches human beings that they are not self-sufficient and that they need their Creator. Nursi explains that people often come to this realization through reflection, personal difficulties, experiences of suffering, and moments of spiritual growth. In this way, challenges associated with the nafs are not merely obstacles but can become opportunities for learning and self-discovery. Rather than leading to hopelessness, the struggle with the nafs can help a person develop greater self-awareness, humility, and a deeper relationship with Allah.

In the contemporary setting, the nafs al-ammarah finds powerful amplification through the structures of modern consumer culture. Social media platforms are engineered to exploit the ego's hunger for validation, comparison, and recognition. Advertising systematically targets the nafs by appealing to envy, pride, and the manufactured sense that one's worth is determined by what one owns and what one possesses. Sometimes with his bank balance. The result is a culture in which the unchecked nafs becomes, in the Qur'anic phrase, one's own god¹¹: the individual lives in unconscious submission

⁸ Qur'an 12:53

⁹ Qur'an 75:2

¹⁰ Qur'an 89:27

¹¹ Qur'an 45:23.

to desires that are never acknowledged as such, mistaking appetite for autonomy. Nursi's framework insists that this condition is not merely a moral failing but a psychological one, producing precisely the restlessness, emptiness, and anxiety that characterize the modern mental health crisis.

Cognitive Transformation (Nazar): From Materialist Lens to Creationist Vision

One of Nursi's most original contributions to Islamic psychological thought is his concept of *nazar*, the quality of one's spiritual gaze or cognitive perception. Nursi argues that the way in which a person looks at the world, and the interpretive lens through which his experience is processed, determines their psychological and spiritual state. He distinguishes between two modes of perception: *mana-yi ismi* (the name-based view) and *mana-yi harfi* (the indicative or relational view). These two modes represent not merely different intellectual positions but different existential orientations with profound implications for mental health and inner peace.

The *mana-yi ismi* view sees things as having value and meaning on their own. From this perspective, a beautiful landscape is simply a pleasant part of nature, wealth is the result of personal effort, and the human body is just a biological machine. This way of thinking is similar to what psychologist Aaron Beck describes as a mental framework that places the self at the centre, and judges experiences according to personal gain or loss.¹² Nursi argues that this outlook can lead to psychological suffering because it makes people depend on temporary and uncertain things for happiness and security. As a result, they may experience anxiety, fear of losing what they have, envy of others, and a constant search for stability in things that cannot provide lasting comfort.

In contrast, the *mana-yi harfi* view sees things as signs that point to their Creator. From this perspective, a beautiful landscape reflects God's beauty, wealth is a temporary trust from God, and the healthy functioning of the body is a gift from Him. This way of thinking changes how people understand their experiences¹³¹⁴. Difficulties are no longer seen as meaningless suffering but as tests that can help a person grow spiritually. Likewise, blessings are not viewed as personal

¹² Aaron T. Beck, *Cognitive Therapy of Depression* (New York: Guilford Press, 1979), 11–15.

¹³ Beck, *Cognitive Therapy of Depression*, 87–90.

¹⁴ Albert Ellis, *Reason and Emotion in Psychotherapy* (New York: Lyle Stuart, 1962), 36–41.

possessions but as reminders of God's generosity. Nursi's concept of *nazar* therefore resembles a key idea in cognitive-behavioural psychology: people's wellbeing is shaped not only by what happens to them, but also by how they interpret and understand those experiences (Beck, 1979; Ellis, 1962).

Ultimately, Nursi's dual frameworks of *mana-yi ismi* and *mana-yi harfi* provide a profound spiritual upgrade to modern cognitive-behavioural principles, showing that psychological resilience is fundamentally an interpretive act. By shifting from a self-centric, transactional gaze (*mana-yi ismi*) to a relational, meaning-centered perception (*mana-yi harfi*), an individual effectively de-catastrophizes life's hardships and unburdens themselves from the anxiety of temporary attachments. This cognitive reframing does not merely manage symptoms; it fundamentally alters one's existential reality, transforming everyday vulnerabilities into sources of enduring peace and anchoring mental well-being in an unchanging, transcendent source.

Heedlessness (Ghaflah): The Root Cause of Modern Psychological Suffering

If *nazar* refers to the way a person perceives and understands reality, *ghaflah* refers to the loss of that awareness. It is a state of forgetfulness in which a person becomes unaware of Allah, their true nature, and the purpose of life. Nursi considers *ghaflah* one of the major spiritual and psychological problems of the modern world (Nursi, 2012)¹⁵. It is not necessarily a rejection of faith, but a gradual loss of spiritual awareness caused by becoming overly absorbed in worldly concerns and distractions. This can be seen in the constant pursuit of consumption, entertainment, and self-promotion that often characterizes modern life. The Qur'an describes this condition by stating: "For indeed it is not the eyes that are blinded, but blinded are the hearts within the chests"¹⁶.

The psychological effects of *ghaflah* are wide-ranging. A person who lives in a state of heedlessness finds it difficult to feel genuine gratitude, because gratitude comes from recognizing that blessings come from Allah rather than from oneself alone. Such a person may also struggle with patience (*sabr*), since patience is easier when one believes that difficulties have a purpose and are part of Allah's wisdom. Without this sense of purpose, life's challenges can seem random, unfair, and

¹⁵ Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *Risale-i Nur: Al-Kalimat* (Istanbul: Hayrat Nesriyat, 2012), 312–316.

¹⁶ Qur'an 22:46.

overwhelming, which may increase feelings of anxiety and despair. Nursi argues that many people who suffer from these feelings have lost their sense of connection with Allah (Nursi, 2012)¹⁷. This does not necessarily mean that they have abandoned religious practices, but rather that they have become disconnected from the deeper spiritual meaning behind them.

Furthermore, *ghaflah* can lead people to view life as being controlled only by their own actions or by chance, leaving no room for divine wisdom in how they understand events. As a result, they may feel that they alone are responsible for carrying the full weight of life's challenges, which can become emotionally overwhelming. Nursi argues that this way of thinking places a burden on people that they are not meant to bear by themselves (Nursi, 2012)¹⁸. In this respect, his ideas are similar to findings in modern positive psychology, which suggest that a sense of meaning, purpose, and connection to something greater than oneself plays an important role in psychological resilience and wellbeing.^{19,20}

ADDRESSING ACUTE PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS:

NURSI'S REMEDY FOR INTRUSIVE THOUGHTS

Understanding Waswasah: Definition, Nature, and Manifestations

One of Nursi's most important contributions to Islamic understandings of mental health is his discussion of waswasah, a term that refers to intrusive thoughts, doubts, and inner whispers that can disturb a person's mind. The Qur'an mentions waswasah both as the whispering of Satan that encourages wrongdoing and as the inner thoughts that arise within the human self. In Nursi's writings, especially in the *Twenty-First Flash of the Risale-i Nur*²¹ waswasah is not seen as a rare problem affecting only a few people. Instead, he describes it as a common human experience that many believers face and one that requires proper understanding and effective ways of dealing with it. Nursi divides waswasah into two main types. The first is the temptation to commit sins, such as neglecting prayer, speaking badly about others,

¹⁷ Nursi, Al-Kalimat, 319.

¹⁸ Nursi, Al-Kalimat, 323.

¹⁹ Martin E. P. Seligman, *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being* (New York: Free Press, 2011), 11–27.

²⁰ Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1985), 104–115.

²¹ Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *Risale-i Nur: Al-Lama'at* (Istanbul: Hayrat Nesriyat, 2012), 175–196. The *Twenty-First Flash* is dedicated entirely to the phenomenon of waswasah.

or engaging in actions that Islam considers wrong. Although this type is serious, it is usually easier to recognize and resist because a person knows that the suggested action is sinful. The second type is more difficult and emotionally painful. It involves unwanted thoughts, doubts, disturbing images, or even seemingly blasphemous ideas that arise without a person's intention. These thoughts can cause intense anxiety, guilt, and shame. Nursi pays particular attention to this second type because many people mistakenly see these involuntary thoughts as proof that their faith is weak or corrupted. Instead, he argues that such experiences should be understood carefully and dealt with healthily and constructively.

This second type of waswasah can appear in many different forms. Nursi explains that some people experience unwanted thoughts during prayer that distract them from worship. Others develop doubts about whether they performed ablution (wudu) or prayer (salah) correctly, leading them to repeat these acts over and over again in search of certainty. Some believers may also experience involuntary doubts about faith, such as questioning the existence of Allah or the truth of Islam, which can make them fear that they have lost their faith. Others may have disturbing thoughts or imagine inappropriate actions during worship, causing feelings of guilt and shame (Nursi, 2012). Nursi examines each of these experiences carefully and offers practical guidance based on both a deep understanding of human psychology and a strong foundation in Islamic teachings and law.

De-stigmatization: Nursi's Therapeutic Approach to Normalizing Waswasah

One of Nursi's most helpful contributions in this area is his effort to remove the stigma surrounding waswasah. People who experience intrusive thoughts often believe that these thoughts reflect their true character, weak faith, or a loss of Allah's favour. As a result, they judge themselves harshly and experience additional feelings of guilt, shame, and self-blame. Nursi challenges this understanding by making an important distinction: intrusive thoughts do not necessarily come from a person's heart or true beliefs. Rather, they are unwanted thoughts that arise from outside the heart and should not be taken as evidence of a person's moral or spiritual state. By separating the individual from the intrusive thought, Nursi helps reduce the emotional burden that often accompanies waswasah.

To support this view, Nursi refers to a well-known Prophetic tradition. Some of the Companions of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, who were among the most faithful believers, told the Prophet that they

sometimes experienced disturbing thoughts that made them feel ashamed. Instead of criticizing them, the Prophet asked whether they were truly troubled by these thoughts. When they replied that they were, he explained that their distress was actually a sign of genuine faith.²²

This teaching has important therapeutic value because it shows that having intrusive thoughts does not mean a person lacks faith. Rather, the fact that a person feels upset by such thoughts indicates that they do not accept or approve of them. Nursi therefore argues that unwanted thoughts should not be taken as evidence of spiritual failure. On the contrary, a person's discomfort with these thoughts can be a sign that their faith remains strong, since such thoughts are more likely to trouble hearts that care deeply about faith than those that are indifferent to it.

This idea is similar to a key principle in modern psychology, particularly Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), developed by Hayes (2004)²³. ACT emphasizes the difference between simply having an unwanted thought and becoming emotionally attached to it or believing that it defines who you are. According to ACT, psychological suffering is often caused not by intrusive thoughts themselves but by a person's reaction to them and their attempts to fight or control them. Nursi expressed a similar idea within an Islamic framework a decade earlier. He argued that people should not blame themselves for the appearance of unwanted thoughts, since preventing them completely is impossible. Instead, they should avoid identifying with these thoughts, dwelling on them, or treating them as evidence about their true beliefs or character.

Cognitive and Spiritual Strategies: Nursi's Practical Steps to Overcome Waswasah

In addition to reducing the stigma surrounding waswasah, Nursi offers practical methods for dealing with it. One of his most important recommendations is not to engage with intrusive thoughts. When such thoughts arise, he advises believers not to argue with them, analyze them excessively, or spend long periods trying to prove them wrong. To explain this, Nursi compares waswasah to a mosquito: the more attention a person gives it by chasing or fighting it, the more persistent it seems to become. If it is ignored, however, it gradually loses its

²² Abu Dawud, Sulayman ibn al-Ash'ath, Sunan Abi Dawud, Kitab al-Adab, Hadith 5112, as cited in Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *Risale-i Nur: Al-Lama'at* (Istanbul: Hayrat Nesriyat, 2022), 185.

²³ Steven C. Hayes, *Acceptance and Commitment Therapy: An Experiential Approach to Behavior Change* (New York: Guilford Press, 2004), 58–73.

influence. According to Nursi, even trying to refute an intrusive thought can unintentionally strengthen it, because the thought continues to receive the attention needed to remain active in the mind. Nursi also recommends several practical strategies for dealing with waswasah. The second strategy is to seek Allah's protection immediately when a disturbing thought arises by saying, *A'udhu billahi min al-shaytan al-rajim* ("I seek refuge in Allah from the accursed Satan"). Nursi does not present this as a magical phrase, but as a way of redirecting attention away from the intrusive thought and toward Allah. This approach is based on the Qur'anic instruction: "And when an evil whisper comes to you from Satan, seek refuge in Allah. Indeed, He is the Hearing, the Knowing"²⁴.

A third strategy is based on the Islamic legal principle *al-yaqin la yazulu bi al-shakk* ("certainty is not removed by doubt"). According to this principle, if a person is certain that they have performed wudu but later begins to doubt whether it is still valid, they should rely on their original certainty rather than their doubt. This rule helps prevent endless questioning and repeated actions caused by waswasah. By giving priority to certainty over doubt, it protects individuals from the cycle of perfectionism and obsessive repetition that often accompanies intrusive thoughts.

Nursi also discusses the problem of intrusive thoughts during prayer with great care and understanding. He explains that the imagination naturally works through associations, meaning that when a person thinks about something holy, unrelated or even inappropriate thoughts may sometimes appear in the mind. According to Nursi, this is a normal function of the imagination and should not be seen as a sign of weak faith or a reason for guilt. He emphasizes that the imagination and the heart are not the same. Unwanted images or thoughts that appear in the imagination do not harm the sincerity of a person's worship as long as the heart does not accept or approve of them. Therefore, such thoughts do not invalidate the prayer or diminish the purity of one's faith. Nursi advises believers not to focus on these thoughts or become distressed by them. Instead, they should continue their prayer and recitation, allowing the thoughts to pass naturally without giving them further attention.

²⁴ Qur'an 7:200.

THE RISALE-I NUR THERAPEUTIC FRAMEWORK: PATHWAYS TO PSYCHOLOGICAL RESILIENCE

Remembrance (Dhikr) as Cognitive Anchor and Mindful Presence

The Qur'anic verse, "Verily, in the remembrance of Allah do hearts find rest"²⁵ forms the foundation of Nursi's approach to spiritual and psychological wellbeing. In his understanding, dhikr (the remembrance of Allah) is not merely the repetition of words but an active practice that helps a person focus their mind and heart on Allah. Through dhikr, attention is redirected away from the worries and distractions of daily life toward the stability and comfort that come from awareness of Allah's presence. Nursi compares the soul's need for dhikr to the body's need for food. Just as the body becomes weak without nourishment, the soul becomes restless and vulnerable to problems such as *ghaflah* (heedlessness) and *waswasah* (intrusive thoughts) when it is deprived of regular remembrance of Allah.

Nursi understands dhikr as more than simply repeating certain phrases. It includes both verbal remembrance and thoughtful reflection on their meanings. When believers recite expressions such as *SubhanAllah* (Glory be to Allah), *Alhamdulillah* (Praise be to Allah), and *Allahu Akbar* (Allah is the Greatest), they are not merely saying words; they are reminding themselves of Allah's greatness and attributes. Nursi argues that reflecting on these meanings can gradually change the way a person understands and relates to the world. He describes the divine names as windows through which spiritual insight enters the heart. By remembering names such as *Ar-Rahman* (the Most Merciful), *Al-Shafi* (the Healer), *Al-Hafiz* (the Preserver), and *Al-Wakil* (the Trustee), believers develop a stronger awareness of Allah's mercy, healing, protection, and care. This awareness can bring comfort, hope, security, and relief from the feeling that one must face life's challenges entirely on one's own.

There are interesting similarities between Nursi's understanding of dhikr and modern mindfulness-based approaches. For example, Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn²⁶, encourages people to pay attention to the present moment in a calm and non-judgmental way (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). Research has shown that this practice can help reduce anxiety, depression, and stress by improving focus and awareness. Like mindfulness, dhikr helps individuals develop attention, awareness, and

²⁵ Qur'an 13:28.

²⁶ Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life* (New York: Hyperion, 1994), 4–10.

a greater sense of calm. However, there is an important difference between the two. While secular mindfulness focuses on awareness of present experiences themselves, dhikr directs attention toward Allah and His presence. For Nursi, this means that everyday experiences are understood as signs of Allah's wisdom, mercy, and care. As a result, dhikr not only helps improve concentration and emotional well-being but also addresses the deeper spiritual problem of ghaflah (heedlessness). For believing Muslims, this gives dhikr a unique spiritual significance that goes beyond the goals of secular mindfulness practices, provided that it is done wholeheartedly with full consciousness and not merely verbal recitation.

Repentance (Tawbah) as Emotional Release and Moral Realignment

Along with dhikr, Nursi considers tawbah (repentance) to be an important means of psychological and spiritual healing. The word tawbah literally means "to return," and Nursi understands it as returning to Allah after becoming distant from Him through sin. According to Nursi, sin gradually affects the heart by weakening its ability to perceive truth clearly and experience inner peace. He compares this process to rust forming on a mirror: as the rust increases, the mirror reflects less clearly. In the same way, repeated sins can cloud the heart and reduce its spiritual sensitivity. Over time, if a person neglects repentance, this can lead to the condition described in the Qur'an as a diseased heart (qalb marid)²⁷ a heart that becomes less responsive to divine guidance (Qur'an 83:14).

Modern psychology has shown that unresolved feelings of guilt and shame can contribute to problems such as depression, anxiety, and difficulties in relationships²⁸. Nursi agrees that guilt has important psychological effects, but he also emphasizes its spiritual dimension. For a believer, guilt is not only the result of breaking personal or social standards; it also reflects a weakening in one's relationship with Allah. Therefore, true healing requires addressing both the psychological and spiritual aspects of the problem. According to Nursi, tawbah (repentance) does this by encouraging a person to recognize their mistake, feel sincere remorse, resolve not to repeat it, and turn back to Allah with hope and trust in His mercy. Nursi repeatedly highlights the Qur'anic message that no one should lose hope in Allah's forgiveness:

²⁷ Qur'an 83:14.

²⁸ June Price Tangney and Ronda L. Dearing, *Shame and Guilt* (New York: Guilford Press, 2002), 92–110.

"Say, 'O My servants who have transgressed against themselves by sinning, do not despair of the mercy of Allah. Indeed, Allah forgives all sins²⁹."

Nursi identifies three major obstacles that prevent people from repenting. The first is despair, when a person believes that their sins are too great to be forgiven. The second is delay, when a person keeps postponing repentance and assumes that there will always be another opportunity in the future. The third is self-deception, when a person excuses, minimizes, or justifies their mistakes instead of acknowledging them honestly. Nursi's analysis of these obstacles closely resembles ideas found in modern psychology. Despair is similar to negative thinking patterns in which people exaggerate the seriousness of a problem and lose hope. Delay reflects the tendency to choose immediate comfort over long-term benefit. Self-deception resembles the habit of interpreting situations in ways that protect one's ego rather than reveal the truth. By identifying these barriers so clearly, Nursi helps believers recognize the mental and emotional patterns that can prevent sincere repentance and spiritual growth.

Patience (Sabr) and Emotional Regulation in the Face of Existential Anxiety

Patience (sabr) holds a central place in Nursi's approach to psychological and spiritual well-being. However, he understands sabr as much more than simply enduring difficulties. According to Nursi, sabr has three main forms. The first is remaining consistent in acts of worship even when one feels unmotivated or faces inner resistance. The second is resisting sinful actions despite temptation. The third is maintaining trust in Allah during times of hardship, loss, and suffering. In each case, sabr involves actively managing one's thoughts, emotions, and actions rather than simply accepting circumstances passively. For Nursi, patience helps people focus on higher spiritual goals instead of being controlled by their immediate feelings or desires.

Nursi's understanding of sabr is especially relevant to problems such as anxiety about the future and regret over the past. To explain this, he uses the example of a military commander who spreads his forces across many directions, leaving his main position weak and vulnerable. Similarly, a person who constantly worries about the future or dwells on past mistakes may exhaust their emotional strength and struggle to deal with the challenges of the present. Nursi argues that Allah has given every person enough strength and patience to face the

²⁹ Qur'an 39:53.

difficulties of today. In this sense, the Qur'anic verse, "Allah does not burden a soul beyond what it can bear,"³⁰ expresses the idea that life's tests are within a person's capacity to endure. Therefore, sabr involves focusing one's emotional and spiritual energy on the present moment, where a person can act, worship, grow, and strengthen their relationship with Allah, rather than becoming overwhelmed by worries about the past or the future.

There are also interesting similarities between Nursi's understanding of sabr and modern psychological approaches such as Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT)³¹, developed by Marsha Linehan. One part of DBT teaches people how to cope with emotional distress without making the situation worse, encouraging them to accept difficult realities rather than constantly fighting against them (Linehan, 1993). Nursi's concept of sabr shares this emphasis on accepting hardship, but it provides a different reason for doing so. In Nursi's view, suffering is not meaningless or random. Rather, it occurs within Allah's wisdom and can contribute to a person's spiritual growth and development. Because of this, difficulties are not simply obstacles to be endured but can become opportunities for spiritual benefit. Nursi even cites Islamic traditions that emphasize the great rewards and growth that can come through patiently enduring illness and hardship. In this way, sabr transforms suffering from something purely negative into an experience that can carry meaning, purpose, and spiritual value.

Trust in God (Tawakkul) as Psychological Shield Against Uncertainty

The central element of Nursi's therapeutic framework is tawakkul (reliance on Allah). Like sabr, tawakkul is often misunderstood as simply waiting for things to happen without making any effort. Nursi strongly rejects this idea. He explains that tawakkul means doing everything within one's ability, fulfilling one's responsibilities, and taking the necessary practical steps, while recognizing that the outcome ultimately rests with Allah. To illustrate this, Nursi refers to a saying of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ about birds that leave their nests hungry in the morning and return full in the evening. The birds actively search for food, but they do not carry the constant fear that their survival depends entirely on their own efforts. In the same way, believers are encouraged to work hard and act responsibly while placing their trust in Allah rather

³⁰ Qur'an 2:286.

³¹ Marsha M. Linehan, *Cognitive-Behavioral Treatment of Borderline Personality Disorder* (New York: Guilford Press, 1993), 97–112.

than becoming overwhelmed by anxiety about results. Through tawakkul, effort becomes not a desperate attempt to control everything, but an act of worship carried out with sincerity, followed by trust in Allah's wisdom regarding the outcome.

The psychological benefit of tawakkul comes from a fundamental realization: human beings do not have complete ownership or control over themselves, their lives, or the world around them. Nursi argues that when people forget this, they often place enormous pressure on themselves, feeling responsible for controlling every outcome and avoiding every failure. This can lead to anxiety, fear of uncertainty, and a constant need to stay in control. Modern psychological research has similarly shown that anxiety is often linked not simply to uncertainty itself, but to a person's difficulty in accepting uncertainty.³² Nursi believes that tawakkul helps address this problem by changing how a person relates to uncertainty. Instead of seeing the unknown as a threat, the believer learns to view it as something that remains under Allah's knowledge and control. While people continue to make responsible efforts, they do not feel compelled to control every result. In this way, tawakkul replaces excessive worry with trust, helping believers face uncertainty with greater peace and confidence in Allah's wisdom.

Nursi's own life illustrates the psychological benefits of tawakkul in a powerful way. Throughout his life, he faced imprisonment, exile, persecution, and separation from his students. Despite these hardships, he remained calm, hopeful, and productive. Even while in prison, he continued writing works that later reached a large audience. Nursi often emphasized that although others could restrict his physical freedom, they could not control his inner spiritual life. His ability to maintain peace and purpose under such difficult circumstances was not, in his view, simply a matter of personal toughness or resilience. Rather, it resulted from a deep trust in Allah and a conviction that all events occur within divine wisdom. Because of this trust, external difficulties were unable to disturb the inner stability of a heart that had placed its reliance upon its Creator.

³² Michel J. Dugas, Mark H. Freeston, and Robert Ladouceur, "Intolerance of Uncertainty and Problem Orientation in Worry," *Cognitive Therapy and Research* 22, no. 6 (1998): 593–606.

DISCUSSION: SYNTHESIZING NURSIAN THOUGHT WITH MODERN MENTAL HEALTH

Comparative Analysis: Nursi's Framework and Contemporary Therapeutic Models

The discussion above shows a striking similarity between Nursi's Qur'an-based approach to psychological well-being and several major forms of modern psychotherapy. This similarity is particularly noteworthy because Nursi developed his ideas in the 1920s and 1930s, long before therapies such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), and Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) were formally established. These similarities create an opportunity for meaningful comparison between Nursi's ideas and contemporary psychological research. At the same time, such comparisons should avoid reducing Nursi's framework to modern psychological theories alone or treating it as completely separate from scientific discussion. Instead, both perspectives can be studied together to better understand their similarities, differences, and potential contributions to mental health and wellbeing.

The strongest similarity between Nursi's ideas and modern psychology can be seen in the relationship between *nazar* and Aaron Beck's cognitive theory of depression and anxiety. Beck argued that emotional distress is often shaped by the way people interpret events through underlying patterns of thinking, known as schemas or cognitive frameworks.³³ Similarly, Nursi argues that suffering arises when people view the world through the *mana-yi ismi* perspective, which separates life experiences from their connection to Allah and their deeper spiritual meaning. Both approaches suggest that psychological wellbeing depends largely on changing the way people interpret and understand their experiences rather than simply changing external circumstances. However, the two frameworks differ in their foundations. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) seeks to replace unhelpful or distorted thoughts with more accurate and beneficial ones within a secular psychological framework. In contrast, Nursi's approach is rooted in the Qur'anic worldview and aims to transform perception by connecting human experience to Allah, divine wisdom, and a transcendent purpose.

There are also strong similarities between Nursi's understanding of *waswasah* and the principles of Acceptance and

³³ Beck, *Cognitive Therapy of Depression*, 11–20.

Commitment Therapy (ACT). A central idea in ACT is defusion, which means learning to see thoughts as temporary mental events rather than treating them as facts or as reflections of one's identity³⁴. Nursi's approach to waswasah reflects a very similar principle. He teaches that intrusive thoughts do not necessarily come from the person's true self, do not represent the state of their faith, and should not be taken as evidence of their character. Instead of becoming absorbed in these thoughts, believers are encouraged to let them pass without engaging with them. Both ACT and Nursi's framework suggest that constantly fighting, suppressing, or arguing with intrusive thoughts can make them stronger and more persistent. However, the two approaches differ in their underlying foundations. ACT explains these processes through a psychological and naturalistic understanding of the mind, whereas Nursi explains them through an Islamic understanding of the heart, waswasah, and the believer's relationship with Allah and divine protection.

Comparing Nursi's concept of dhikr with Jon Kabat-Zinn's Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) reveals both important similarities and differences. Both approaches emphasize the importance of attention and present-moment awareness for psychological well-being. They also recognize that focusing on the present can help reduce the excessive worry and rumination often associated with anxiety and depression. However, MBSR is intentionally non-religious and does not address questions of God, ultimate meaning, or spiritual purpose. Its primary goal is to improve wellbeing by developing awareness of present experience. Nursi's approach differs in this respect. For him, awareness of the present moment is most meaningful when it is connected to awareness of Allah. He argues that many forms of suffering arise from ghaflah (heedlessness), which involves forgetting Allah and the deeper purpose of life. Therefore, while dhikr provides many of the attentional and emotional benefits associated with mindfulness, it also connects those benefits to a broader spiritual framework of meaning, purpose, and relationship with Allah. From Nursi's perspective, this spiritual dimension is essential for addressing the deeper causes of human distress.

³⁴ Steven C. Hayes, Kelly G. Wilson, and Kirk D. Strosahl, *A Practical Guide to Acceptance and Commitment Therapy* (New York: Springer, 2004), 17–33.

Achieving Sustainable Inner Peace: The Unique Value of a Qur'an-Based Model

The comparison above shows that although Nursi's approach shares several similarities with modern psychotherapies, it cannot be fully reduced to them or replaced by them. Its distinct contribution rests on several key ideas. First, Nursi offers a different understanding of the root cause of psychological suffering. While modern psychology often focuses on factors such as unhelpful thought patterns, past experiences, or biological influences, Nursi argues that a deeper cause is *ghaflah*, a state of spiritual heedlessness in which a person becomes disconnected from Allah. He does not necessarily reject psychological or biological explanations, but he believes that they do not fully address the spiritual dimension of human suffering. Secular psychological approaches generally do not include spiritual realities in their explanations because they operate within scientific and non-religious frameworks. For people whose understanding of life is deeply shaped by faith, however, spiritual concerns are not separate from psychological well-being. From Nursi's perspective, any approach that ignores this spiritual dimension may help relieve symptoms, but it may not address what he considers the deeper source of distress.

The second distinctive feature of Nursi's framework is its therapeutic approach. According to Nursi, practices such as *dhikr* (remembrance of Allah), *tawbah* (repentance), *sabr* (patience), and *tawakkul* (reliance on Allah) do more than simply reduce psychological distress. They aim to address what he sees as the deeper spiritual causes of that distress. For example, anxiety is not viewed merely as a problem to be managed but can be understood as an opportunity to strengthen one's trust in Allah. Feelings of guilt are not only reduced emotionally but can be resolved through sincere repentance and confidence in Allah's forgiveness. Similarly, hardship is not seen solely as a negative experience to endure; it can also be understood as a means of spiritual growth and a way of drawing closer to Allah. In this sense, Nursi's framework encourages believers to view life's challenges within a broader spiritual perspective. Rather than changing reality or denying suffering, it expands the way suffering is understood by including dimensions of meaning, purpose, and relationship with Allah that are generally outside the scope of secular psychological approaches.

The third important feature of Nursi's framework is its integrative nature. Nursi does not oppose medical treatment, psychological therapy, or scientific research into mental health. In fact, he encourages people to seek help from qualified doctors and to make use of available treatments. He argues that Allah has placed remedies

for illnesses within creation and that human beings should actively search for and benefit from them³⁵. However, Nursi also maintains that medical and psychological treatments alone may not fully address the needs of a believer because they primarily focus on the body and the mind, while the spiritual heart also requires attention. For this reason, he sees spiritual practices such as dhikr, tawbah, sabr, and tawakkul as complementary to professional healthcare rather than as substitutes for it. In Nursi's view, the most complete approach to wellbeing combines medical and psychological support with spiritual development. This allows both the psychological and spiritual dimensions of human suffering to be addressed within a broader and more holistic understanding of health.

CONCLUSION

Summary of Key Findings

This study has explored Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's *Risale-i Nur* as a comprehensive approach to Islamic mental and spiritual wellbeing (*sihhah nafiyyah*). The analysis has shown that Nursi's framework is built around the interaction of three key elements: the heart (*qalb*), the inner self (*nafs*), and the way a person perceives and interprets reality (*nazar*). According to Nursi, the root cause of many forms of modern psychological suffering is *ghaflah* (heedlessness), a state in which the heart becomes disconnected from awareness of Allah. This disconnection can lead to feelings of anxiety, emptiness, and emotional instability. To address this condition, Nursi proposes a set of spiritual practices that are grounded in the Qur'an and that also have clear psychological benefits. *Dhikr* (remembrance of Allah) helps focus attention and brings inner calm. *Tawbah* (repentance) offers a way to overcome guilt and find peace through Allah's forgiveness. *Sabr* (patience) strengthens emotional resilience and helps people face hardship with purpose and composure. *Tawakkul* (reliance on Allah) reduces anxiety about uncertain outcomes by encouraging trust in Allah rather than complete dependence on one's own control. Together, these practices form a coherent framework for promoting both spiritual and psychological wellbeing.

Regarding the issue of *waswasah* (intrusive thoughts), this study has shown that Nursi's approach contains ideas that closely resemble principles found in modern psychological therapies such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Compassion-

³⁵ Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *Risale-i Nur: Al-Lama'at* (Istanbul: Hayrat Nesriyat, 2022), 210.

Focused Therapy (CFT). Long before these approaches were formally developed, Nursi emphasized the importance of not becoming overly engaged with intrusive thoughts, avoiding self-blame, and responding to such experiences with understanding rather than harsh self-judgment. He also applied the Islamic legal principle *al-yaqin la yazulu bi-shakk* ("certainty is not removed by doubt"), which helps protect individuals from the cycle of excessive doubt, perfectionism, and repeated checking that often accompanies *waswasah*. In addition, Nursi's distinction between the heart and the imagination allows believers to understand that unwanted thoughts and images do not necessarily reflect their true beliefs or spiritual condition. This helps prevent the mistaken assumption that involuntary thoughts are signs of weak faith or spiritual failure.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study have practical implications in several areas. For Islamic psychologists and counselors, the *Risale-i Nur* provides a well-developed framework based on the Qur'an that can be combined with modern therapeutic approaches to create a more holistic model of mental health care. Concepts such as *ghaflah* (heedlessness), *nazar* (perception), and *waswasah* (intrusive thoughts) can offer useful ways of understanding and addressing the experiences of Muslim clients, particularly those who seek explanations and treatments that align with their religious beliefs. For educators in Islamic institutions, Nursi's ideas highlight the importance of combining intellectual education with spiritual development. This suggests that mental and spiritual wellbeing (*sihhah nafsiyyah*) should be considered a key goal of education rather than something separate from the learning process. For community leaders and imams, Nursi's practical teachings on *dhikr* (remembrance of Allah), *tawbah* (repentance), *sabr* (patience), and *tawakkul* (reliance on Allah) can be applied in counseling, Friday sermons, and community programs aimed at supporting mental and spiritual wellbeing.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study has several limitations. Since it is based on qualitative analysis and textual study of the *Risale-i Nur*, it focuses on explaining and interpreting Nursi's ideas rather than testing them through empirical research. While the study has presented a detailed and coherent account of Nursi's approach to mental and spiritual wellbeing, it does not determine whether applying this framework leads to measurable improvements in mental health outcomes. Future research could address this question by using quantitative methods and established

psychological scales to examine the effects of Nursi-inspired practices on factors such as anxiety, depression, spiritual wellbeing, and sense of meaning in life among Muslim populations. Researchers could also compare integrated Islamic-psychological approaches with purely secular therapeutic models to better understand their effectiveness for Muslim clients. In addition, the *Risale-i Nur* contains many other writings that were not explored in this study. Future studies could examine Nursi's discussions of death and the afterlife, the role of community and social relationships in healing, and his reflections on illness, suffering, and spiritual growth, especially those found in the *Epistle for the Sick*.

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