

The Impact of Fasting

2021/2022

MWC Think + Do Tank Report

Background

The way we do research to inform policy isn't working. Today, most community based/'led' research is done through collaborations between large science or specialist research institutes partnering with local organisations beyond their institutions. Whilst this is an attempt to enrich the quality of research and of bringing wider social benefits, it still lacks the true representation of the communities they are trying to help. Where such partnerships are formed the experiences are not always productive or conducive to drawing on the knowledge and expertise of all participants, as they remain the subject not the co-authors of the research.

There is a need for a process that places these individuals and communities as the authors of research that considers the issues they face; and develops practical responses and recommendations from the ground up. There is a need for a radical shift and movement in how authentic data and insights are collected from women of Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds.

In response MWC have developed an approach that focuses on the delivery of authentic and appropriate research to create better policy and practice that drive practical solutions that address women's health and wellbeing.

Think + Do Tank

With the support of Wellcome Trust, Smallwood Trust & Friends Provident Foundation, we hope to reverse the current trend of Muslim males and non-Muslims researching and advocating on behalf of Muslim women, especially regarding issues of health, wellbeing and bioscience.

Our approach will straddle the 'Think + Do Tank' between both policy and beneficiaries (Muslim Women) and will offer authentic insight and appropriate solutions, as it will be led by the beneficiaries. We focus on the relevance, credibility, legitimacy and utility of the research we do, ensuring that we position our research for use.

We focus on Muslim Women from Bradford and surrounding areas. Within this group there is a climate of misogyny and patriarchy fuelled by public stereotyping and male-dominated interpretations of women's roles and positions. In short, society is denying these women their ability to think and act independently or contribute to the creation of health, wellbeing and bio-science policies and practices that affect them and their community.

For example, Muslim women have not been engaged as contributors to research and policy reflective of them. It seems that most research is a male bastion, which undermines their effectiveness and puts them at a disadvantage and impacts on how they research and present the needs of women. This project will be women led and women governed, therefore putting these women at the heart of the research.



Different Forms of Fasting

Many communities fast for traditional, religious or health purposes. Fasting, abstinence from food or drink or both. The abstention may be complete or partial, lengthy, of short duration, or intermittent.

Fasting has been promoted and practiced from antiquity worldwide by physicians, by the founders and followers of many religions, by culturally designated individuals (e.g., hunters or candidates for initiation rites), and by individuals or groups as an expression of protesting against what they believe are violations of social, ethical, or political principles.

In this report we will explore fasting during Ramadan and its impact. We have met with and discussed fasting experiences with local Muslim women in Bradford.

Ramadan

Whilst many Muslims fast throughout the year, to emulate the Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) actions of fasting every Monday, Tuesday and 13th, 14th and 15th of every Lunar month, the main link to fasting for most Muslims is the holy month of Ramadan.

Ramadan is the holiest month of the year in Islamic culture. It is a time for Muslims to reflect and try and change their character for the better.

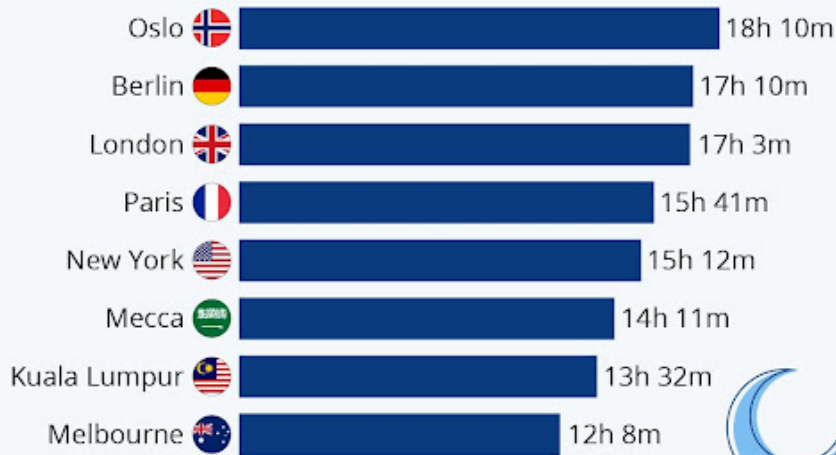
“O ye who believe! Fasting is prescribed to you as it was prescribed to those before you, so that you can learn Taqwa.”¹

(“Taqwa” from the Arabic language, translates to God-consciousness, God-Fearing and Self-Restraining.)

During the month of Ramadan, which is the 9th month of the lunar based Islamic calendar, all Muslim's from puberty onwards, are required to fast. This means that a Muslim must abstain from food and drink, from dawn until dusk for 30 days. Because Ramadan moves approximately 11 days earlier each year on the solar based Gregorian calendar, Muslims will experience Ramadan in different seasons throughout the course of their lives. The average fasting period during Ramadan is 12 hours but it can be as long as 22 hours in Polar regions. Fortunately, Muslims in such regions can adopt the fast period of Mecca or the nearest temperate location.

How Long Do Muslims Fast For Ramadan Around the World?

Length of Ramadan in selected cities in 2021
(in hours and minutes)*



* on April 27, 2021, approximately mid-Ramadan

Source: Islamic Finder

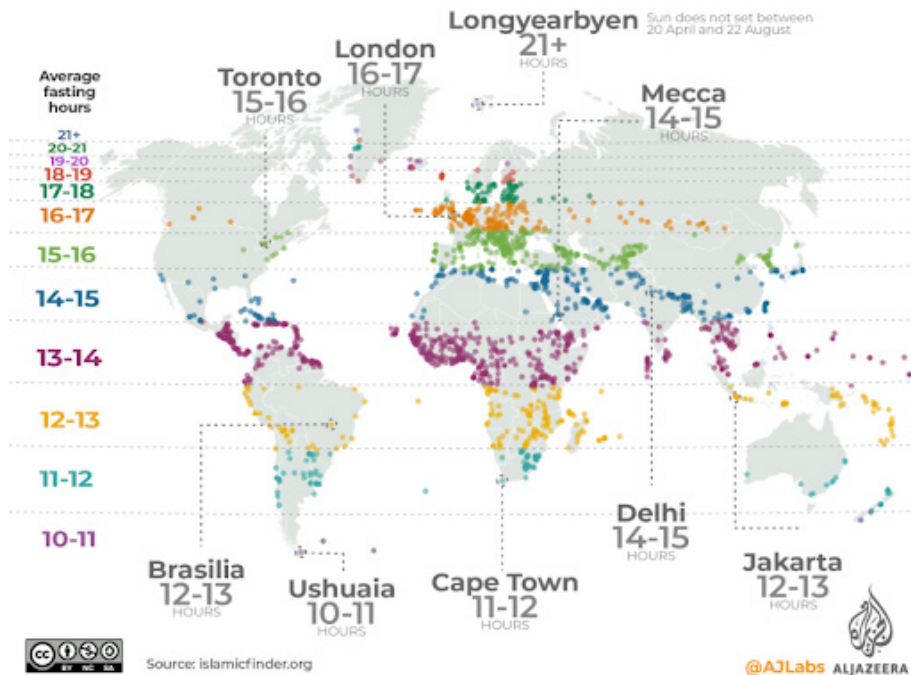


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RAMADAN 2021

Fasting hours around the world

The **pre-sunrise to sunset fast** lasts anywhere from **10 to 21 hours** depending on where in the world you are.



Fasting is a special act of worship which is between the believer and the creator himself. The religious significance of fasting in Ramadan is so that it allows a Muslim to devote themselves to their faith. It teaches a person patience and compassion, allows you to get closer to Allah (God) and there is a focus on nourishing the soul, rather than focusing on the physical body. Abstaining from food and drink helps you to realise and reflect on the luxuries you have and teaches you to be grateful for what you have.

The act of fasting is supposed to remind Muslims of the less fortunate and should create empathy, reinforcing the need to be thankful and grateful for everything in their lives such as, health, wealth, possessions, children, family down to even the things we may take for granted, such as breathing, seeing and hearing.

Fasting means not being able to consume food or drink, including water from dawn until sunset. It also prohibits you from engaging in activities such as, smoking, drinking and sexual activities whilst fasting. It is recommended to eat something healthy and filling before sunrise. This is called, "Suhoor" and can be classed as breakfast but in some cultures, can include dinner-like food.

At sunset, Muslims break their fast. This is called "Iftar". Iftar is a meal which is recommended to start with some dates and water or milk, after which is followed by a normal meal. The reasoning behind opening your fast with dates is because they are high in sugar and vitamins such as potassium and magnesium, as well as an excellent source of fibre and carbohydrates. This can help the body's glucose levels quickly return to normal. Muslims are allowed to snack/eat at night between sunset and sunrise, and are advised to drink plenty of fluids especially in the Summer months to help replenish what the body has lost during the day.

On the authority of Abu Umamah (ra)
who asked the Messenger of Allah (saw),

'Which deed is best?'

He [saw] said,

**'Take to fasting,
for there is nothing
equal to it'.**

[Nasa'i]








Muslims observe this sacred month of Ramadan to mark when Allah sent an Angel (Jibrael/Gabriel) to Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) to reveal the Quran, the Islamic holy book in 610 A.D. The night when the Quran was first revealed is known as the “Night of power” or “Laylat Al Qadr.”


The start of Ramadan is determined by the sighting of the new crescent moon by religious leaders. The month of Ramadan usually lasts between 29–30 days, depending on when the new crescent moon is sighted to signify the beginning of the new Islamic month.

Ramadan is a time for unity and spiritual reflection, and Muslims spend more time than usual praying, reciting the Quran and doing good deeds compared to the rest of the year. They give charity, spend time with loved ones and avoid lying, gossiping, confrontation and violence. These things would invalidate your fast if acted upon. This is classed as fasting of the tongue, ears and eyes and is often a point overlooked by non-Muslims, because most conversations are about abstaining from food and drink. This is a misconception, as Muslims try to abstain from all negative vices and habits.

The holy month of Ramadan is an opportunity for Muslims to become more conscious and aware of their thoughts and actions, reject anything negative, try and refill their hearts with purity and peace and to try and maintain these good characteristics all year round. Ramadan can be described as a booster to help maintain this for the rest of the year.

Fasting is one of the 5 Pillars of Islam which are the foundation of how Muslims live their lives. The other 4 pillars are, Shahadah (faith), Salah (prayer), Zakat (charity) and Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca.) This should emphasise the importance that Muslims give to Ramadan and fasting.

5		PILLARS OF ISLAM	
	SHAHADAH	Testify that none has the right to be worshipped but Allah & Muhammad is His Messenger	
	SALAH	Offering Salah (prayer) fives times a day.	
	ZAKAT	Paying the Zakat (giving alms or charity).	
	HAJJ	Going to pilgrimage to the House of Allah at Makkah.	
	FASTING	Fasting in the month of the Ramadan.	

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Potential Benefits of Fasting

Fasting is the spiritual discipline that is also practised in other religions. Examples include Lent in Christianity, Yom Kippur, Tisha B'av and The tenth of Tevet to name a few in Judaism. Buddhism, Taoism, Jainism and Hinduism also practice fasting as part of their faith.

Apart from the religious obligations upon Muslims during the month of Ramadan, fasting has countless health benefits too. These include:

- Improved weight management
- Healthier blood cell regeneration
- Anti-ageing benefits
- Better heart function
- Vascular wellbeing
- Detoxifying the body
- Appetite suppressant
- Maintaining healthy blood pressure
- Reduces brain damage and enhances functional recovery after stroke
- Improves cognition
- Stalls age-related cognitive decline
- Usually slows neurodegeneration
- Helping to control blood sugar levels

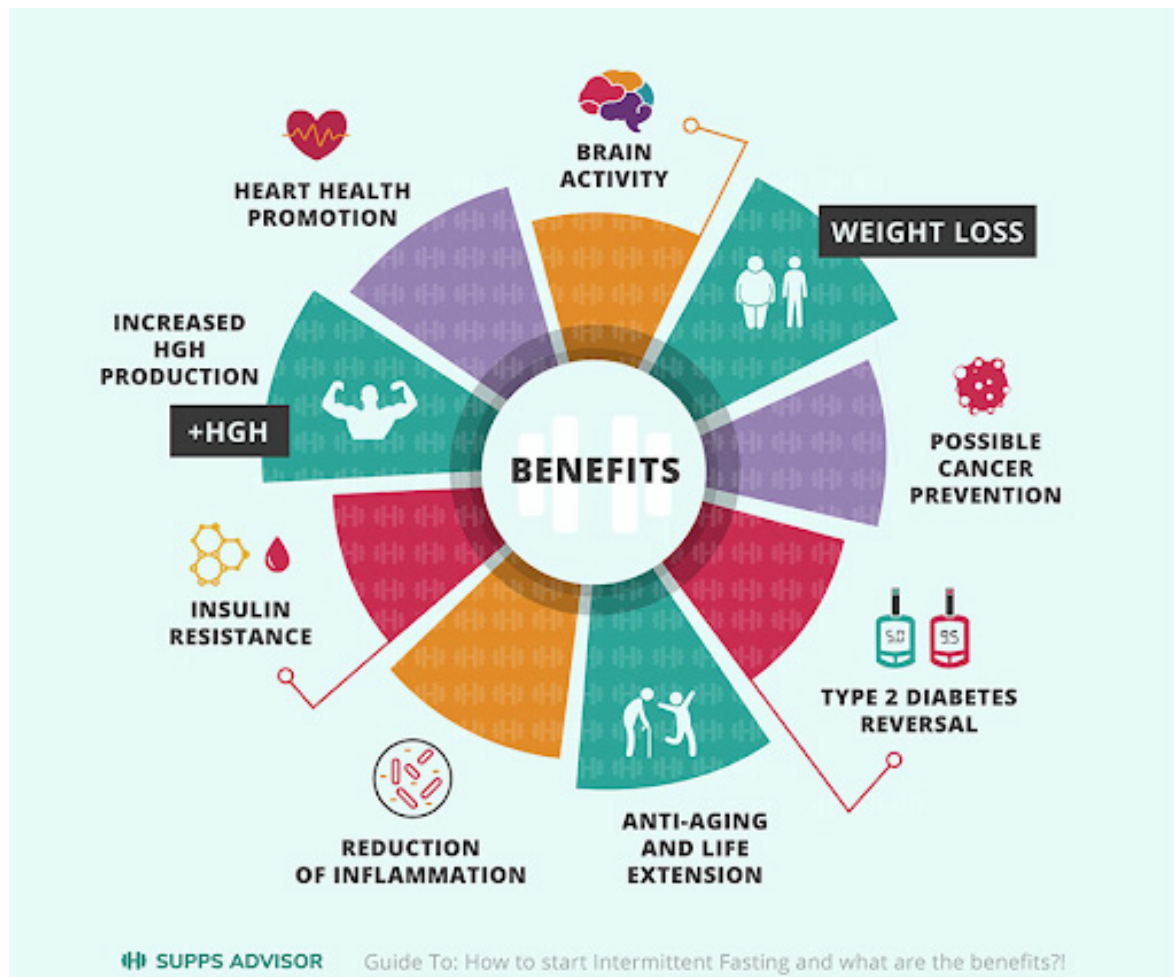
Fasting is great as an appetite suppressant because by structuring your day around everything apart from eating, the body eventually gets used to not feeling hungry. During the holy month of Ramadan, many Muslims will experience cravings during the fasting day but will find that they cannot consume much upon opening their fast. This is due to the stomach shrinking which in turn, makes you feel full after just a small amount of food.

Aisha (may Allah be pleased with her), Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) wife said, "Verily, the first trial to occur in this nation after the passing of its Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, was people eating to their fill. For when people fill their stomachs, their bodies are fattened, their hearts are hardened, and their desires are uncontrollable." ⁶

Eating too much food causes weight gain and associated health problems, obviously, but it causes spiritual harm as well. Too much food hardens the heart, dulls the mind, increases drowsiness, and makes it even more difficult to control one's lusts and desires.

For this reason, the Sunnah (things the prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said, did or liked) regarding day-to-day eating is to only eat what is necessary to maintain optimal health and energy. At most, one should fill their stomach with no more than a third of food and a third of water and leave the remaining third empty. One should not be in the habit of completely filling his or her stomach every day.

An obvious result of fasting is reducing weight. Fasting prompts the breakdown of cholesterol and fats, turning them into bile acid which converts to heat and eventually to a faster metabolism.



As a result, experts in various fields now promote intermittent fasting. Intermittent fasting can also help regulate glucose levels which can lead to prevention of Type 2 diabetes.

One of the most well-known intermittent fasting diets is the 5:2 diet. It is 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 for women and 600 for men.

Intermittent fasting can help with blood pressure, as a decrease in the body's salt intake and the loss of salt in urine lowers blood pressure.

Fasting can promote healing in the body as the body focuses its energy on the immune system and metabolism instead of focusing on digestion. Fasting is a great way of detoxifying your body as it can improve blood circulation and remove harmful toxins.

Fasting is also known to reduce mental stress, and strengthen and sharpen the mind. This is due to the reduced salt, sugar and calorie intake. Doctors have also found that cancer patients can greatly benefit from fasting.

There is peace and tranquillity for those who fast in Ramadan as people experience emotional and spiritual cleansing. This psychological betterment could be because of improved blood glucose levels as hypoglycaemia after eating can aggravate behaviour changes.

Ramadan is also about staying away from negative thinking. Many Muslims experience a higher energy level, more mental focus and greater spiritual awareness due to relaxation and meditation during Ramadan. A way that Muslims do this is by reciting the Quran more regularly than normal. This is said to produce tranquillity of the heart and mind, also improving memory and focus.

One of the biggest things that Muslims do in Ramadan is to give to charity. As previously mentioned, charity is one of the 5 pillars of Islam. A recent survey found that Muslims in the UK donated more than £150 Million to charity during Ramadan in 2020.

Give Brite, an Oldham-based online fundraising and donation platform, undertook a survey researching more than 25 charities, revealing that Muslims were more generous in 'Lockdown Ramadan' compared to previous years. This was in spite of Covid-19 lockdown issues where normal community fundraising events and collection buckets in mosques were at an all-time low. ⁸

The prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said, "Whoever gives food for a fasting person to break his fast, he will have a reward like theirs, without that detracting from their reward in the slightest." ⁹

This quote shows the importance Muslims place on giving charity, in an attempt to be selfless, and to place someone else's needs above their own.

Possible Negative Impacts of Fasting

Billions of Muslims around the world fast in the month of Ramadan. Fasting for Ramadan is down to spiritual beliefs and many fast believing that it benefits our health. But does it?

Potential negatives:

- Dehydration – People who fast can commonly experience dehydration. This is due to a lack of water as drinking is prohibited whilst fasting. It is for this reason that drinking plenty of water prior to starting a fast is encouraged to make up for the deficit during the day.
- Stress – When a person is used to having regular meals and snacks during their day, fasting can prove to be a major challenge. This can lead to an increase in stress levels and disruption of sleep. It can also lead to headaches and brain fog. The term "hangry" comes to mind when considering this.

- Heartburn/Indigestion – Fasting can also cause heartburn and indigestion. Not eating means the stomach creates less stomach acid, which digests food and destroys bacteria. But the smell of food or even thinking about it can make the brain tell the stomach to produce more acid. In addition to this, especially in the South Asian communities, people tend to open their fasts with unhealthy food which is generally fried and only adds to this issue. These foods have a high calorie content, and this could actually bring about weight gain rather than weight loss.
- Low Blood Sugar – Something else to look out for is low blood sugar. If a person is having persistent nausea, headaches, or dizziness, this is a red flag. The nausea, headaches and dizziness could also be very dangerous in certain instances, for example when driving or operating dangerous machinery.
- Lack of nutrients in the body – Sudden weight loss and a lack of proper nutrients, especially proteins, fibre and vitamins can cause many issues in the body such as hair loss, constipation, and menstrual cycle issues, such as slowing down the menstrual cycle, or even stopping it completely which can lead to potential fertility issues. Fasting can also cause flare ups of certain conditions such as gout or gall stones.
- Sleep – Fasting could also reduce the amount of Rapid Eye Movement (REM) sleep a person has. Not getting enough REM sleep can affect memory, cognitive function, and concentration.
- Social life – A lot of social interaction happens over food and drinks. Therefore, you would either have to find other ways of interacting or have the will power to stick with your fast whilst others may be eating and drinking around you. Fasting also decreases a person's energy levels and this can reduce a person's desire to interact and socialise with others.
- Fasting can also impair the body's ability to absorb certain medications and if these medications are important to maintain a healthy and functioning body, this can be very dangerous.
- There are also many negatives to fasting due to cultural issues such as being forced to fast. Fasting is compulsory in Islam for Muslims who have reached puberty during the month of Ramadan. It is important to note that this is if you are able bodied and have no health conditions stopping you from doing so. However, it is also important to note that there is no compulsion in religion and that we have free will to do as we choose, so some Muslims may decide that they do not want to. Children may be forced to fast by their parents and spouses may enforce it in their households. Pressure can also come from the community or from your peers, or even from fear of punishment from God. This leads to being indoctrinated into fasting, for fear of punishment and repercussions rather than doing it for self-improvement or for the sake of Allah. This detracts from the true purpose of fasting.

- Women who are menstruating are exempt from fasting during that time. This is difficult during the month of Ramadan as women may feel that they will be judged if people know that they aren't fasting and therefore will pretend to be fasting and eat secretly.
- Women who are pregnant and breastfeeding may choose to fast even though it would not be compulsory for them, due to the adverse health risks this could pose to the mother and child.
- Poor Muslims throughout the world fast even though they may already struggle to eat regularly or on a daily basis and may be malnourished. Is it right for them to fast if it will increase their suffering even more or make them more ill?
- Even though "I fast to empathise with the poor" is a common refrain among Muslims, statistics indicate that that Muslims are far more likely to donate to poor people in foreign countries rather than at home. This is something to consider, especially as the number of foodbanks in the UK are on the rise and more and more people are below the breadline. Perhaps Muslims should consider focusing first to improve the situation on their own doorstep.

Conclusion

It is important to note that many of the negative health problems mentioned above can be avoided through having a healthy balanced diet and drinking plenty of water between fasts. The Quran states that "there is no compulsion in religion" ¹⁰ and therefore, to fast due to outside or cultural pressures is wrong. Islam has nothing to do with coercion, force, persecution or other such destructive behaviours. So, one should abide by these rules and not force others to fast.

Fasting is done to show obedience to Allah, to create empathy for the less fortunate and to be grateful for what you have, gain oneness with Allah and be rewarded with the ultimate abode in heaven. To fast for any other reason than the above would defeat the spiritual purpose of fasting. The prophet Muhammad (pbuh) is quoted to have said, "Whoever fasts during Ramadan out of sincere faith and hoping to attain Allah's rewards, then all his past sins will be forgiven." ¹¹

The benefits of fasting were known to Muslims a very long time ago, but the western world has only recently discovered the health benefits. Until recently, it was looked down upon and the majority of non-Muslims would not understand why this was practised. It is now widely accepted in society as having major benefits if done correctly.

In conclusion, fasting is very beneficial physically, mentally and spiritually if done correctly, without being forced, pressured or through fear of punishment. Fasting should not be done by people with health issues, pregnant women or people who are worsening an already bad situation.

Case Study 1

Fatima and her family fasted for the first time in Ramadan 2020. It was lockdown due to Covid-19 and they didn't have much to do. Her family had been looking for an opportunity to start fasting and felt that this was the perfect time to start. She said that the experience was so good for the family as a whole, that even her three foster children, who are of mixed religions said they would fast every day.

Fatima said that she had fasted when she was younger but as her life got more hectic, she didn't think she would be able to continue with her daily activities if she fasted. She feared that she would get dehydrated and would have no energy from the lack of food. She also dreaded the thought of going the whole day without her many cups of tea as she felt that it would make her very ratty and unapproachable.

Fatima said that after the first couple of days (which were hard) her body adjusted to the time she was eating and her caffeine cravings reduced significantly. She said that she didn't really get dehydrated, but that was also because she had cut out non-essential going out and extra work around the house. Also, after the first couple of days, even though her stomach would rumble at lunch-time she didn't feel hungry. It was only when it would get nearer to Iftar (time to open fast,) when she knew that she could eat soon that she started to feel hungry.

Fatima said the atmosphere in the house changed. It was peaceful and the children were fighting less, (probably because they didn't have the energy to wind each other up.) She wasn't constantly worrying about making breakfast, lunch and snacks so all that time was freed up for self-reflection and self-improvement.

Everyone in the house was praying their 5 daily prayers (salah) together, which really brought everyone together. They would sit afterwards and talk about their day fasting and what they thought they had achieved.

One of the biggest changes they made was that they stopped eating fried foods and unhealthy foods, which is a common practice in Ramadan. The intention was to continue eating healthily and sensibly even after Ramadan had finished. This is something they have managed to stick to. They have cheat days but on the whole, they have managed to improve their eating habits. Their intention was to try and continue fasting occasionally after Ramadan was over.

Unfortunately, they haven't managed to fast outside of Ramadan. But they are still hoping to do that eventually. Fatima said fasting and praying together really created a lovely bond between the family. The children became more helpful because they knew she was struggling too. She said it was probably one of the best months of the year.

Fatima said that she encouraged the younger children to fast half days so that they could understand the values and benefits of fasting in Ramadan. She also said that it has become a friendly competition in the house as to who can fast the most days, with a reward on Eid day for the person who fasted the most.

Fatima has nothing but good things to say about Ramadan and the benefits and changes that it has brought about in her family. She highly recommends that anyone who is capable should fast in Ramadan as it will improve health, family bonds and spiritual connection.

Case Study 2

Zulekha is a great grandmother, aged 82. She has been fasting her whole life, since before reaching puberty. She was born in India, and in her generation skipping fasts was not acceptable. She was expected to fast from the age of 6 and was punished if she did not fast.

Zulekha said that her father was a strict religious leader in India and he would tell her and her sister that they would face his wrath now and God's punishment in the hereafter. This created such a fear in them, that they have never really missed a fast since then, even when feeling ill.

To this day, even though Zulekha now has a lot of health problems, such as diabetes, arthritis, high blood pressure and gout to name a few, she still fasts because of her fear.

She has also said that if she doesn't fast her peers and acquaintances would look down on her. She said that there have been many occasions when she has gotten very ill from fasting. Her immediate family have told her to stop fasting but she refuses to do so. She still tries to fast but will only make it half way through the day before it becomes too difficult.

Zulekha says that fasting is not all bad. As she grew older she came to realise the benefits of fasting and she used to enjoy it. However, the pressures that came from people around her, having to lie when she was menstruating and now still trying to fast even with her ill health is quite negative. She feels like these are cultural pressures rather than religious pressures and we need to take steps to eradicate this.

References

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2- Image 1:

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3- Image 2:

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9- Sunan Ibn Majah Vol. 1, Book 7, Hadith 1746

10- Quran 2:256

11- Sahih Bukhari

**Report created by the Think + Do Tank
participants supported by the MWC team.**

