



TRAINING OF MINDS AND SOULS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY TO INITIATE PERSONAL CHANGE AND EFFECTIVE PROBLEM SOLVING

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the usefulness of replacing automatic negative thoughts (ANTs). ANTs are irrational thoughts that seem to simply appear in one's mind. These thoughts often reflect a fear, and they prevent action. They create a self-fulfilling prophecy. ANTs are often associated with cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), a technique used by some clinical psychologists to help clients. The literature suggests that CBT – which emphasizes “cognitive restructuring”- is compatible with the Islamic perspective. The literature on ANTs in the management literature is quite limited. This study would fill that gap. A group of 117 undergraduate students spent one semester learning to replace ANTs, change their behaviour and solve other people's problems. The discussion focuses on the relevance of these skills to Muslims.

Key words: *Automatic negative thoughts, Islamic perspective, Cognitive restructuring*

INTRODUCTION

For some years, this author has researched automatic negative thoughts (ANTs). ANTs are thoughts that simply pop in our minds (Greenberger & Padesky, 1995). These thoughts are often irrational and unquestioned. They can destroy people's positive feelings. Generally, people are unaware of their automatic thoughts. Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) helps clients become aware of their ANTs, to question their validity and replace them with more rational thoughts (Greenberger & Padesky, 1995). Therapists don't necessarily replace ANTs with positive thoughts. But they replace irrational and unquestioned ANTs with more objective thoughts, allowing individuals to cope with their problems in a more productive manner (Wood & Wood, 2000, p.436). Although studies that look at ANTs specifically are rare in the management literature, there are numerous studies that look at the consequent of ANTs.

For example, researchers have found that most human behaviour is automatic. The cost of this automaticity is an inability to learn and adapt (Langer, 2009). This author assumes that ANTs would reinforce automatic behaviour. Researchers have explored how incidental emotions distort the decision-making process (Bachkirov, 2015). This author would argue that ANTs contributes to incidental emotions. Researchers have shown that negative self-reflection negatively impacted self-efficacy, emotional exhaustion, and job satisfaction (Seggelen-Damen & Van Dam, 2016). This author would argue that ANTs lead to negative self-reflection. Thus, if these assumptions are true, ANTs lead to a reduced ability to learn and adapt, to poor decision-making, to reduced self-efficacy, to emotional exhaustion and reduced job satisfaction.

However, replacing ANTs with objective thoughts is a skill that can be taught. If it can be taught and it can increase the well-being of employees, their performance, and the performance of the organisation as a whole, it is the responsible of HRD professionals to better understand ANTs and how to train employees to replace ANTs with objective thoughts. Such research might be in the future. However, this study looks at how Muslim students react to ANTs.

It should be noted that much of this article was written before the COVID-19 pandemic while the data collection was only done after the pandemic was over. During the pandemic, the mental health of individuals experiencing social isolation became a concern in many countries. Although this dimension (social isolation) was not considered in this study, the pandemic did highlight how vulnerable people of all ages were to negative thoughts.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

In order to see the benefits of training Muslims to develop the skill of replacing ANTs, the author considered that undergraduate Muslim students can serve as a representative sample. If they can learn this skill and they find it useful, presumably any Muslim can learn this skill and they would find it useful.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Mind

There has been huge progress in the understanding of the brain and the mind. The brain is the hardware, and the mind is the software. Fontaine (2015) notes that prior to the 1990s, psychologists had little idea of what happened inside the brain when people did things. But since the 1990s, new imaging technology allowed neuroscientists to better understand why, how and when people act. Scientists have concluded that, “*the human nervous system is best characterized as a hybrid system that has both hierarchical, deliberative control system and quasi-independent decentralized control system*” (Morsella, 2009). Kahneman (2011) calls the Reflective-Impulsive Model “system 1 and system 2”. System 1 is the impulsive system and system 2 is the reflective system. System 1 processes information automatically. It is non-verbal and rely on heuristics. System 2 processes information more slowly. It requires cognition. It has the ability to correct system 1.

System 1 is very fast and efficient in processing information. Some experts state that 99 percent of a person’s daily activities is controlled by system 1. However, system 1 can become inefficient due to cognitive biases (Fontaine, 2015). Underlying this research is the premise that automatic thoughts is a system 1 activity and that they can be modified by individuals if they keep a diary.

Automatic Thoughts

Automatic negative thoughts were discovered in the 1960s (Beck, 2011, Flintoff, 2012). Since then, the list of commonly recurring automatic thoughts has been documented. According to Flintoff (2012), they include:

- Black and white thinking (e.g. “*I have completely failed*”)
- Mind reading (e.g. “*People will think I am stupid*”)
- Negative predictions (e.g. “*There is no point. It won’t work*”)
- Overgeneralizing (e.g. “*Women can’t drive*”)
- Disqualifying the positive (e.g. “*I scored a B+. Anybody can do that*”)
- Drama queen (e.g. “*I forgot my purse. I must be going senile*”)
- Unrealistic expectations (e.g. “*I should work harder, even though I am already tired*”)
- Name calling yourself (e.g. “*Idiot*”)
- Personalizing (e.g. “*She is quiet. I must have done something wrong*”)
- Catastrophizing (e.g. “*If this doesn’t work, my whole career will be threatened*”)

There are other automatic thoughts apart from the ones identified by Flintoff (2012). One well known ANT is emotional reasoning, which is when assumes that something is true because one feels that it is. ANTs are rooted in poor critical thinking, confusing facts with opinions or emotions. Psychologists note that some ANTs are helpful. For example, the thought “*if I don’t wear a seatbelt, I am sure to have an accident*” is not logical but it encourages individuals to behave in safer manner. Too many ANTs though lead to anxiety, depression and learned helplessness (Seligman, 2006, Beck, 2011, Flintoff, 2012).

To combat ANTs, the standard method is to write down ANTs as they happen, analyse them, rate them and consciously replace them with a more rational thought (Greenberger & Padesky, 1995, Beck 2011). Flintoff (2012) calls ANTs his “inner critic” and he suggests drawing a cartoon character and giving him a name. This allows individuals to “*externalise the problem*” and makes it easier to silence the inner critic.

Replacing automatic thoughts with rational thoughts should not be confused with replacing them with positive thoughts. Positive thinking *if it is not accompanied by work* can be as bad as negative thinking. Seligman (2006) proposes the following experiment. At the beginning of the semester, take a group of students who on average scores B. Tell them to have positive thoughts. At the end of the semester, check their results. Most probably, their performance will not have improved. A better approach is to be honest about the problem but to stress that the problem is temporary and to find ways to deal with the problem (Seligman, 2006). In other words,

- Automatic negative thoughts assume that problem is permanent, and nothing can change the situation (e.g. “*She doesn’t talk to me. I guess she doesn’t like me, and she will never like me in the future*”)
- Positive thoughts assume that problems never exist (e.g. “*She doesn’t talk to me. I guess she likes me*”)
- Rational thoughts assume that a problem may exist but suggests a course of action to improve the situation (e.g. “*She doesn’t talk to me. Let me ask her if everything is all right*”).

Typically, individuals that listen excessively to their automatic thoughts develop a pattern of thinking that convinces them that nothing can be done. They fall into a pattern of inaction and procrastination. The difference between individuals that need to see a psychiatrist is that their ANTs prevent them from having a normal life. Most individuals at work are functional (i.e. they do not need to see a psychiatrist) but ANTs prevent them from being as productive, as successful and as fulfilled as they could be. As such, most of the experts that help individuals at work come from a psychological background (i.e. generally, they have been CBT-trained) and they are into coaching, human resource development or leadership development (Zaccaro, Foti, & Kenny, 1991; Ducharme, 2004; Leimon, McMahon & Moscovici, 2005; Flintoff, 2012; McCarthy, 2014). Typically, participants are taught to write records and then analyse their own records. One approach is to use the 3R format (see Table 1).

Table 1: The 3R Format

<i>Record</i>	<i>Rationalise</i>	<i>Replace</i>
I am working too hard. This job will destroy my family life.	Catastrophizing	As I work hard, I will become more efficient.
The marketing division is resisting any change	Over-generalising	I can help them change by explaining things to them
I will not be able to change my weight	Black and White Thinking	I know that I can change my weight if I exercise more and eat less

Source: The author

Typically, participants find this format somewhat awkward at the beginning. However, once they practice filling out this form, participants can start keeping records. When participant experience a significant event in their life, they can quickly write down their automatic negative thoughts (Greenberger & Padesky, 1995). Later, participants can replace them with rational thoughts. After a few times, they are able to see a clear pattern. As participants become more adept, they can create these records in their head and replace the automatic negative thoughts with more rationalise ones.

The Limits of ANTs

Although recording ANTs is considered a useful technique, Bennett-Levy (2003) argues that recording ANTs is a very intellectual approach (i.e. it relies on system 2). In reality, human behaviour is very much influence by one's non-rational self (i.e. it relies on system 1) so that behaviour behavioural experiments (BE) provide a more holistic approach and better long-term results.

Furthermore, a very naïve view of human behaviour is that all positive emotions are good, and all negative emotions are bad. In many cases, negative emotions have an important functional role. For example, Pink (2022) looked at how regret allows individual to improve themselves. Regrets fall into two categories. A "positive regret" that Pink (2022) associates with the formula "at least", such as "I know that I got a C+, but at least I passed." On the other hand, "negative regret" is associated with the formula, "if only", such as "I know that I got a C+. If only I had studied earlier, I would have gotten a B." Pink (2022) argues that the "positive thinking" movement – epitomised by slogans like "I have no regrets"- that developed in the 1960s is counter-productive to the development of a healthy individual. Pink (2022) reviewed the vast literature and showed that regrets of past mistakes ("if only" kinds of regrets) often lead individuals to make better decisions in the future (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Responding to Regret

Regret	Response		Result
	Feeling is for ignoring		Delusion
	Feeling is for feeling		Depression
	Feeling is for thinking	Thinking leads to doing	Better decisions Improved performance Deeper meaning

Source: Pink (2022, p. 55)

Pink (2022) argued that there are four core types of regrets: foundation regrets (“if only I had done the work”), boldness regret (“if only I had taken that risk”), moral regrets (“if only I had done the right thing”), and connection regrets (“If only I had reached out”). These core regrets allow psychologists to discover what people value the most (Table 2).

Table 2: Core Regrets and the Needs they Reveal

	<i>What it sounds like</i>	<i>The human need it reveals</i>
<i>Foundation</i>	If only I had done the work	Stability
<i>Boldness</i>	If only I had taken the risk	Growth
<i>Moral</i>	if only I had done the right thing	Goodness
<i>Connection</i>	If only I had reached out	Love

Source: Pink (2022, p.150)

In short, negative emotions should not be automatically dismissed. They should be analysed and reflected upon before replacing them with rational thoughts.

Another point that comes out from the literature is that learning to replace ANTs alone may not be enough. Seligman (2006) for example did an intervention in which he taught children to develop optimistic expectations and develop their problem-solving skills. One skill alone is not enough. Both skills are necessary for someone to deal with their challenges in life. But what is the Islamic perspective on these issues?

The Islamic Perspective on CBT

As has been mentioned, automatic negative thoughts are mostly associated with CBT. Muslim researchers have noted that, “*CBT is more a therapeutic modality and less a paradigmatic framework, it offers considerable flexibility for practitioners’ to adapt to clients’ own personal*

and religious values.” They concluded that several Muslim researchers have concluded that CBT is compatible with an Islamic orientation in general (Haque, Khan, Keshavarzi, & Rothman 2016).

Other Muslim researchers have recommended that the CBT should be slightly modified to address certain concerns. In particular, they put more emphasis on ayat of Qur'an – such as “*It may be that you dislike a thing while it is good for you and it may be that you like a thing that is bad for you, and Allah knows while you do not know*“(2:216)- that helps with cognitive restructuring (Haque, Khan, Keshavarzi, & Rothman 2016).

Although the literature highlights the compatibility of CBT within the Islamic framework, no explicit mention is made of automatic negative thoughts.

METHODOLOGY

This is an exploratory study that relies on qualitative data. The author has been working on this project since 2015. He has tried it with MBA students and undergraduate students almost every semester. He continued giving this assignment during the COVID-19 crisis but he preferred to wait until face to face meetings were possible again before publishing the data. A total of 117 undergraduate students completed an ANTs assignment from March 2022 to June 2022.

Apart from their ANTs assignments, these 117 students had two semester-long assignments. One assignment focused on personal change. They were first taught a personal change model in class. Throughout the semester, they experimented with ways to change something about their lives by accessing their social network or learning to change their environment. The other assignment focused on helping others improve their lives. They were taught a problem-solving model and then helped one of their friends solve a specific problem.

LEARNING TO REPLACE ANTs

By the end of the semester, every student learned to replace ANTs. This indicates that replacing ANTs is quite a feasible task once someone is motivated. In the case of the students, this assignment was worth 20% of their course. The quality of their work varied. Some of them worked alone while others worked in groups. Some students were physically on campus while other students were overseas. Three examples are presented below (Tables 3, 4 and 5).

Table 3: Alif

<i>Record</i>	<i>Rationalise</i>	<i>Replace</i>
I have internship place to find in short period of time. I will never make it in time	Negative predictions	I am planning to go back to my hometown seeking for internship place. I can ask my friends and my parents as they have past experiences in this regard. Sure, there will be viable suggestions

Table 4: Nur Anis

<i>Record</i>	<i>Rationalise</i>	<i>Replace</i>
At this age, I watch many of my peers already married and even have a child, I feel so old and lonely.	Drama queen	I understand that humans deserve to have all those feelings whether happy, sad, lonely etc. because that's a part of life. I try to remind myself that it's okay to be alone and to avoid feeling lonely I always distract myself by joining societies and clubs in IIUM because when I'm busy I don't have time to feel lonely.

Table 5: Nur

<i>Record</i>	<i>Rationalise</i>	<i>Replace</i>
I am such a loser and I hate myself for being low self-esteem	Name calling	The real difficulty is to overcome how you think of yourself. If I think about my strengths rather than just focusing on my weaknesses, I would never hate myself. In addition, I will set myself a goal and give myself a challenge. Don't limit your challenges but challenge your limits. Therefore, challenging myself is the path which leads to growth.

Throughout the semester, the author reminded students that the exercise was not to simply to replace ANTs but to understand oneself. For example, if student A tends to have negative predictions about the future, that awareness will help student A every time he or she needs to plan something about the future. If student B tends to call himself or herself bad names (e.g. “*I am so stupid*”), that is obviously a very different problem.

Among the 117 students who submitted assignments. There was only one student who did not follow the proper format but who used a diary format. An example of this student comments follows:

April 2nd

So today is the first day of getting myself to become more motivated to do things as well as change my outlook on life, currently I don't really see much value in life as I constantly think about how every time I tried something I have always messed it up and it ended up making unable to do that activity again, I mainly remember my

failures during futsal tournaments as well as my grades in high school and they constantly make me remember that every time I try I end up failing.

At some point I realized that this needs to change and that I need to take steps in order to change my behaviour, and this assignment is the first step to a better version of myself and hopefully I can be as happy and motivated as I once was, because before I can do any form of external change I need to change internally.

Later, he wrote,

April 17th-April 22nd

It has been 3 weeks since I have started this assignment, and after everything that has happened and with the time that has passed, I can confidently say I have made significant improvements to my attitude compared to when I started albeit there are certain elements that have yet to go away.

To begin with I have more motivation to do things now as slowly but surely getting close to Allah and allowing myself to experience different activities and hobbies has allowed me to get a better control of my emotions as previously I had no other outlet to let out any bottled emotions, this led to anger outburst from time to time that were not healthy for me, for example, earlier in the week I finally have begun to pick up the pace on my assignments such as marketing principles as well as organizational behaviour, I have also dedicated more time to studying other subjects and changing the environment in which I study from time to time as well so as to avoid being tired as well as burnout, however some bad habits while they have lessened in frequency and intensity but are still ever present such as my anger issues as well as being quite pessimistic regarding my ability in answering questions as I still second guess myself.

Furthermore I have also been able to improve my outlook on life ever so slightly, now I still do not think that life here has any meaning however I have begun to see the beauty of it and that I shouldn't be wasting my life doing absolutely nothing, this was all thanks to the experiences I have had these past 3 weeks, improving my daily routine, dividing my time, and focusing on doing productive activities have definitely helped me in regards to having a more positive outlook, while not all outlooks are positive it is at least improving compared to when I first started this assignment, I feel like focusing on one problem at a time seemed to have helped me to fix my issues one by one instead of making a giant leap in hopes of changing.

The author would like to comment on these entries. Initially, the ANTs, the personal change assignments, and the problem solving were seen as three separate assignments intended to develop three separate set of skills. by the author. It was only when the semester was over, and he was reading the assignments that he realised to what extent the three assignments complemented one another. Replacing ANTs is not simply a cognitive exercise. The person who writes these more rational thoughts need to believe that these rational thoughts make more sense than the automatic thoughts that pop in their mind. By experimenting with personal change and problem solving (often successfully), students realise that they are more able than they previously thought. They can change things in their lives and solve problems using a

systematic approach. They can learn to measure the positive outcome. The complementary nature of these assignments reminded the author of Seligman (2006). Seligman (2006) helped people develop optimistic thoughts and taught them effective problem-solving skills. As all the students were Muslims, the author linked these ideas to *surah ad-Duha* and *surah al-Asr*.

SURAH AD-DUHA AND SURAH AL-ASR

To help his students relate these points to the Qur'an, the author relied on the English translation of the explanation of the Qur'an by Ibn Kathir translated by al-Mubarakpuri (2003). *Surah ah-Duha*, the 93rd *surah* of the Qur'an, was sometimes used as template to help students think about how to replace ANTs. The context of this *surah* is that revelation ceased to come for several weeks. The Prophet (peace be upon him) worried that he had done something to upset Allah. *Surah ad-Duha* was then revealed. The main arguments of the *surah* are,

- Allah gave you shelter and food when you were an orphan. Why do you think he would not continue to do so in the future?
- Allah gave you a source of sustenance and companionship when you were an orphan. Why do you think that he would not continue to do so in the future?
- Allah gave you guidance when you were seeking a purpose to your life. Why do you think that he would cease to do so in the future?

In short, by reflecting on one's past, one realises that things always workout. In the majority of cases, our worst fears never materialise. Even when things do not work out as planned, one often learns critical lessons that make us wiser. This point was discussed in class. One session was dedicated to students sharing stories how past disappointments turned out to be blessings in disguise. Another *surah* that is relevant turns out to be *surah al-Asr*.

Surah al-Asr makes two key points. The first is that the majority of people will be in a state of loss. The second is that the only exceptions are those who have faith, do a few good deeds, advise one another to the truth and advise one another to patience (al-Mubarakpuri, 2003).

From the literature review, the importance of the *ayah* which includes the statement, "*It may be that you dislike a thing while it is good for you and it may be that you like a thing that is bad for you, and Allah knows while you do not know*" (2:216), has been highlighted. Although cognitive restructuring is clearly important in Islam, the emphasis on helping people who are in worse condition than oneself is central to the Islamic perspective.

The whole point about ANTs is that these are lies that simply pop in our minds. So, learning to replace ANTs is part of "advising one another to the truth". However, the concept of "advising one another to the truth" also requires skills related to personal change and problem solving.

PERSONAL CHANGE AND PROBLEM SOLVING

Although the main thrust of this study was ANTs, it seems appropriate to briefly describe the other two assignments.

The second assignment, focusing on personal change, was based on the work of Patterson, Grenny, Maxfield, McMillan, and Switzler (2008). They developed the model presented in Table 6.

Table 6: The Six Influences Model

	<i>Motivation</i>	<i>Ability</i>
<i>Personal</i>	Intrinsic Motivation	Deliberate practice
<i>Social</i>	Social Support	Social Knowledge
<i>Structural</i>	Rewards and accountability	Space

Source: Patterson, Grenny, Maxfield, McMillan, and Switzler (2008)

Their research suggests that many individuals are unable to change things in their lives because they rely exclusively on personal motivation and personal skill. People who are able to change use all their sources of influences effectively – especially controlling one’s space. Most students experimented with small changes (e.g. sleeping earlier, exercising more, or modifying one’s diet) and most of them met some degree of success. The point of the assignment was that change is a process. One needs a model and one simply experiments with the model until one succeeds. As the model relies on iterations, there is an element of “trial – initial failure- learning from the failure – another trial- success”. Throughout the semester, the instructor emphasised that failure was part of the process.

The third assignment required students to help one of their peers by using a problem-solving model. This model (define the problem, understand it, and identifying options) complements nicely the personal change model. As students were acting as “consultants”, their job was to help their friend define and understand the problem. They were also tasked with helping the other person identify as many alternatives as possible. However, the final decision was the responsibility of their friend.

In the third assignments, many students reported some kind of accomplishments. First, they perfected their problem-solving skills. Second, their objective was to help someone else. This created another layer of complexity that forced students to perfect their communication and negotiation skills. One student wrote,

“Being at the same pace with our client in terms of understanding, measuring, and overcoming their problem was quite difficult at times.”

However, as the main focus of this study is on ANTs, the question of the usefulness of replacing ANTs will be explored.

THE USEFULNESS OF REPLACING ANTs

One participant wrote,

“It is a very valuable experience. This is the first time that I learned to control negative thoughts that crosses my mind very deeply. Usually, when people give us advice, they

simply tell us to stop having negative thoughts. However, learning to kill ANTs gives us detailed way of doing it. It's not easy at the beginning because negative thoughts come to us unconsciously. To make it our own way of thinking, we need time to practice it. Then slowly, we can use it more frequently. Now, I feel calmer and more peaceful. I don't worry about people reaction anymore. In addition, it helps me not to become angry easily. I also don't worry about the worst impact that actually never happens. Learning about ANTs helped me in making decisions peacefully. Actually, the world in my mind and the real world is totally different."

Another participant wrote,

"I found that I went through several stages. First, I could identify the negative thoughts, but I had to write them down straight away before I forgot them. At that stage, I would ask myself a lot of questions. Writing these ANTs encouraged me to ask my more experienced colleagues what to do. After several weeks, recognizing the ANTs was easy. I found that asking myself a lot of questions helped me replace negative thoughts with more rational thoughts. After more experience, I realised that most of my negative thoughts are false, and I learned to argue with myself. Typically, before this, I used to believe that the problem was with me. Now, I realise that the problem is generally with the situation. Once I realised that, I realised I simply needed to change the situation for the problem to disappear."

Another participant wrote,

"Honestly, I would say that the process of me recognizing my own negative thoughts and then trying to reframe them actually helps me a lot specially to put things into perspective and thinking to have a more positive conversation with myself. Before this, I would not even bother to have these thoughts in my daily life because I am always like this, I think. Well, I do still blame and think negatively about myself. But there is a difference between the old me and the new version of me after going through this experience for the past weeks. The keyword is I am aware of it now. Whenever I have these negative thoughts, I always ask myself why I always have these unhealthy thoughts? Is it because of the trauma? Is it because my faith is too weak or low? Is there any way that I can look at it from a different view? Maybe a little positive? I always ask these kinds of questions especially if I want to replace them with good ones."

Generally, participants went through several stages. The first was a sort of denial and to question the relevance of the exercise. The next stage was simply becoming aware of negative thoughts. The next stage was learning the different categories of ANTs (e.g. what is the difference between negative predictions and catastrophizing). Lastly, becoming adept at replacing negative thoughts with rational thoughts. To help participants develop proficiency, this author spent one hour during the semester discussing examples and answering questions. By far the biggest problem was clarifying the difference between having rational thoughts and having merely positive thoughts.

In some cases, participants sought the help of friends to help them replace ANTs as they said that it was too hard to do it by themselves. These conversations with trusted friends helped them develop a more objective view of themselves.

Students were asked to rate the assignment by using a scale from 0 (useless) to 10 (excellent). The majority scored either 8, 9, or 10. It is very rare that a student scores 7 or less. One student wrote,

“Based on the practice that I have done using this method, I found that it is really useful to remove the negative thoughts in myself. It amazed me because I can feel a big difference in managing myself this semester than the previous one before I used this method. I already know that I always think about negative things, but I did not know how to manage it. At first, I feel doubt about this assignment, and I think that it will not work for me. However, after doing 2 entries, I become calmer and easier to manage myself if I have negative thoughts on something that bother my mind. When I list the negative thoughts in myself and replace them with something positive, it taught me to be patient in everything that I do and it opened my mind broadly, especially to accept my flaws and not to envy others for their specialties especially in studies. It makes me more grateful to Allah and less complaining about hard situation that I got. From my sincere heart, I will give 9.9/10 for this assignment because it works well and make a lot of changes for me.”

Most students were not as expressive, but most shared a similar sentiment. Due to space limitations, additional examples cannot be shared.

Discussion

During the course of this study, the author went through two stages.

In the first stage, the author focused entirely on ANTs. Having used this assignment in class since 2015, he was quite confident about the results. It was more a question of going through the process of updating the literature review and publishing the data. This semester though, he put greater emphasis on helping students differentiate between positive thoughts and rational thoughts.

After the semester was over, he had to go through the data collected – not simply on ANTs, but also on the student’s personal change diaries and their problem-solving assignments. It dawned on the author that these assignments complement one another quite well, in line with *surah al-Asr*. Apart from relying on the English translation of Ibn Kathir, he also had several personal communications with Associate Professor Dr Ibrahim Nuhu, a scholar in Islamic studies attached to the faculty of economics and management sciences at the International Islamic University Malaysia.

With regards to whether it was easy or difficult to learn ANTs, almost all the students did learn how to do it. However, it was obvious that most students are not used to analysing their personal thoughts so that keeping a diary of their thoughts is something unusual for them.

As a teacher, the sequence in which the literature review was presented seems quite important. Very Muslims seem to be aware that we have one brain but two minds. This is something that he needs to repeat in the class several times throughout the semester. Most students are able to identify negative thoughts, but they sometimes label them incorrectly. Thus, seems to be a minor problem. However, the fact that there can be good sides to negative thoughts is

something quite counter-intuitive. It requires that students put aside their preconceived ideas. This is an area in which class discussions.

Another concern that the author has is the lack of reference to ANTs in the management literature. As a lecturer who teaches organizational behaviour, it is obvious that there is a huge gap between the management literature and the psychology literature with regards to understanding human behaviour. The management literature still portrays individuals as “rational animals”. The psychology literature puts a greater emphasis on exploring the weaknesses of individuals and ways to overcome these weaknesses. In this light, the author hopes that this paper will make a modest contribution to rectifying the idealistic view of human behaviour that is often found in the management literature.

The author intends to continue giving these assignments together, but he will explain to his students how these three assignments complement one another. This might help students reflect on these assignments in a more sophisticated way.

CONCLUSION

The idea that individuals experience automatic negative thoughts is something well established in the clinical psychology literature. It is a theme that is generally absent though from the management literature.

Muslims, as *surah ad-Duha* and *surah al-Asr* suggest, are expected to reflect on their past, be grateful for Allah’s blessings, and help one another to be upon the truth and to be patient (al-Mubarakpuri, 2003). Although this is generally understood in a narrow way (e.g., calling other people to Islam), it can be understood more broadly. For example, if someone assumes that a manager is not going to accept their ideas and refuses to share them, a Muslim colleague should question that assumption. Is that assumption factual or is it simply an automatic negative thought?

In the light of the qualitative data collected, it seems obvious that learning to replace ANTs is quite easy and very beneficial. However, there is an argument that simply learning to replace ANTs may not be enough. Ideally, Muslims should also learn skills such as effective problem solving and managing personal change. Further research needs to confirm these initial reflections.

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