

GRATITUDE

its role in wellbeing

الحمد لله

A Qur'anic perspective.



By Dr Sara Kadir

From an Islamic perspective, saying 'Alhamdulillah' or 'All Praise and thanks are to God' is a declaration of gratitude to God.


Gratitude has been defined in many ways, it is generally explained as a positive emotion that arises as a result of an external source and requires that a person/people acknowledge that their good fortune has materialised due to the actions of someone or something else. It has also been explained as an expression of positive emotion for what one has, and so focusing on the positive aspects of life.

The importance of showing gratitude or being grateful is emphasised across world religions, philosophies and cultures. From a very young age we are taught to show thanks or gratitude towards others, and in the religious context this includes God.

Gratitude has long been established as being an integral component of positive mental health and wellbeing, lowering stress and depression levels in people who exercise it over time.

Within the contemporary wellbeing discourse gratitude is integrated into practices by encouraging awareness of interconnection between the self and others, and encouraging mental focus on positive narratives and outlooks. Within wellbeing these concepts are often incorporated in meditative techniques and in day-to-day routines by, for example, encouraging individuals to write down or think about the things or the interactions they are grateful for at the end of each day.





The Qur'an closely relates the concept of gratitude with that of remembrance, where one is to be mindful of the blessings they possess and in doing so praise and thank God for them. The following verses are examples of this:

فَاذْكُرُونِي أَذْكُرْكُمْ وَاشْكُرُوا لِي وَلَا تَكْفُرُونِ

So remember Me, and I shall remember you. Give thanks unto Me, and disbelieve not in Me.

(Qur'an 2: 152)

وَاذْكُرُوا نِعْمَةَ اللَّهِ عَلَيْكُمْ وَمِيثَاقَهُ الَّذِي وَاثَقَكُمْ بِهِ إِذْ قُلْتُمْ سَمِعْنَا وَأَطَعْنَا وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ بِذَاتِ الصُّدُورِ

And remember God's Blessing upon you, and His covenant by which He bound you, when you said, 'We hear and we obey.' And reverence God. Truly God knows what lies within breasts.

(Qur'an 5:7)

وَإِذْ قَالَ مُوسَىٰ لِقَوْمِهِ يُقَوْمِ اذْكُرُوا نِعْمَةَ اللَّهِ عَلَيْكُمْ إِذْ جَعَلَ فِيكُمْ أَنْبِيَاءَ وَجَعَلَكُمْ مُلُوكًا وَآتَاكُمْ مَا لَمْ يُؤْتِ أَحَدًا مِّنَ الْعَالَمِينَ

And when Moses said unto his people, 'O my people! Remember God's Blessing upon you, when He appointed Prophets among you, and appointed you kings, and gave you that which He gave unto no other in all the worlds.

(Qur'an 5:20)

فَاذْكُرُونِي أَذْكُرْكُمْ وَاشْكُرُوا لِي وَلَا تَكْفُرُونِ

So remember Me, and I shall remember you. Give thanks unto Me, and disbelieve not in Me.

(Qur'an 2: 152)



وَهُوَ الَّذِي جَعَلَ اللَّيْلَ وَالنَّهَارَ خِلْفَةً لِّمَنۢ أَرَادَ أَن يَذَّكَّرَ أَوْ أَرَادَ شُكُورًا

And He it is Who made the night and the day successive, for whosoever desires to reflect* or desires to be thankful.

(Qur'an 25: 62)

*Please note that here, the Arabic word 'yadhikr' / 'to remember' has been translated to 'reflect'

Furthermore, the Qur'an states, people are often heedless of God's blessings. This is in line with the current explanations found in the positive psychology discourse that holds that the human psychology has 'negativity bias', a phenomenon which describes the natural tendency for the mind to absorb and 'store' negative experiences around us disproportionately to that of positive experiences, giving the illusion that the bad outweighs the good. The examples of the verses of the Qur'an that emphasize this 'negative bias' are:

وَإِنَّ رَبَّكَ لَذُو فَضْلٍ عَلَى النَّاسِ وَلَٰكِنَّ أَكْثَرَهُمْ لَا يَشْكُرُونَ

And truly thy Lord is Possessed of Bounty toward mankind, but most of them do not give thanks

(Qur'an 27:73 and 40:61)

وَإِن تَعُدُّوا نِعْمَتَ اللَّهِ لَا تَحْصُوهَا ۗ إِنَّ الْإِنسَانَ لَظَلُومٌ كَفَّارٌ

and were you to count the Blessings of God, you could not number them. Truly mankind is wrongdoing, ungrateful.

(Qur'an 14:34)

إِنَّا هَدَيْنَاهُ السَّبِيلَ ۖ إِمَّا شَاكِرًا وَإِمَّا كَفُورًا

Truly We guided him upon the way, be he grateful or ungrateful.

(Qur'an 76:3)



Furthermore, there are numerous verses in the Qur'an that allude to the importance of showing gratitude for one's blessings, through the contemplation of creation and especially for the blessings of sight, hearing and the heart. Some examples of which are found below:

وَهُوَ الَّذِي أَنشَأَ لَكُمُ السَّمْعَ وَالْأَبْصَرَ وَالْأَفْئِدَةَ قَلِيلًا مَّا تَشْكُرُونَ

He it is Who brought into being for you hearing, sight, and hearts. Little do you give thanks!

(Qur'an 67:23)

وَمِن رَّحْمَتِهِ جَعَلَ لَكُمُ اللَّيْلَ وَالنَّهَارَ لِتَسْكُنُوا فِيهِ وَلِتَبْتَغُوا مِنْ فَضْلِهِ وَلَعَلَّكُمْ تَشْكُرُونَ

Out of His Mercy He made for you night and day, that you may rest therein, and that you may seek of His Bounty, and that haply you may give thanks.

(Qur'an 28:73)

Moreover, it was also observed numerous verses that indicate that showing gratitude will lead to an increase in abundance:

وَإِذْ تَأَذَّنَ رَبُّكُمْ لَئِنْ شَكَرْتُمْ لَأَزِيدَنَّكُمْ وَلَئِنْ كَفَرْتُمْ إِنَّ عَذَابِي لَشَدِيدٌ

and when your Lord proclaimed, 'If you give thanks, I shall surely grant you increase, but if you are ungrateful, truly My Punishment is severe!'

(Qur'an 14:7)

وَسَيَجْزِي اللَّهُ الشَّاكِرِينَ

and God will reward the thankful

(Qur'an 3:144)

نِعْمَةٌ مِّنْ عِنْدِنَا كَذَلِكَ نَجْزِي مَنْ شَكَرَ

as a blessing from Us. Thus, do We requite whosoever gives thanks

(Qur'an 54:35)

According to Al-Ghazali, to be thankful in the true sense, one must be mindful that all things are from God alone. To expand, Al-Ghazali explains that although one should acknowledge and show gratitude towards the person/people that have shown them favour or kindness, one should also acknowledge that they were simply a means by which God granted the blessing and not the source. However, this is not to down play the importance of showing gratitude to others, as showing others gratitude is also an acknowledgement of God's blessing, the Prophet Mohammed (pbuh) is reported to have said:

'He has not shown gratitude to God, who has not shown gratitude to people.'

Here, gratitude is understood as being mindful that God is the source of all things and showing thanks for that.

Moreover, in the book of 'patience and gratitude' in Al-Ihya, Al-Ghazali states; God unites gratitude with dhikr or remembrance, the true expression of which resonates from the heart. Al-Ghazali explains, gratitude should not be shown to the worldly blessing but rather because the blessing draws one closer to God in proximity, through the remembrance of God and the utterance of 'Alhamdulillah', the result of which are feelings of 'joy' and peace.

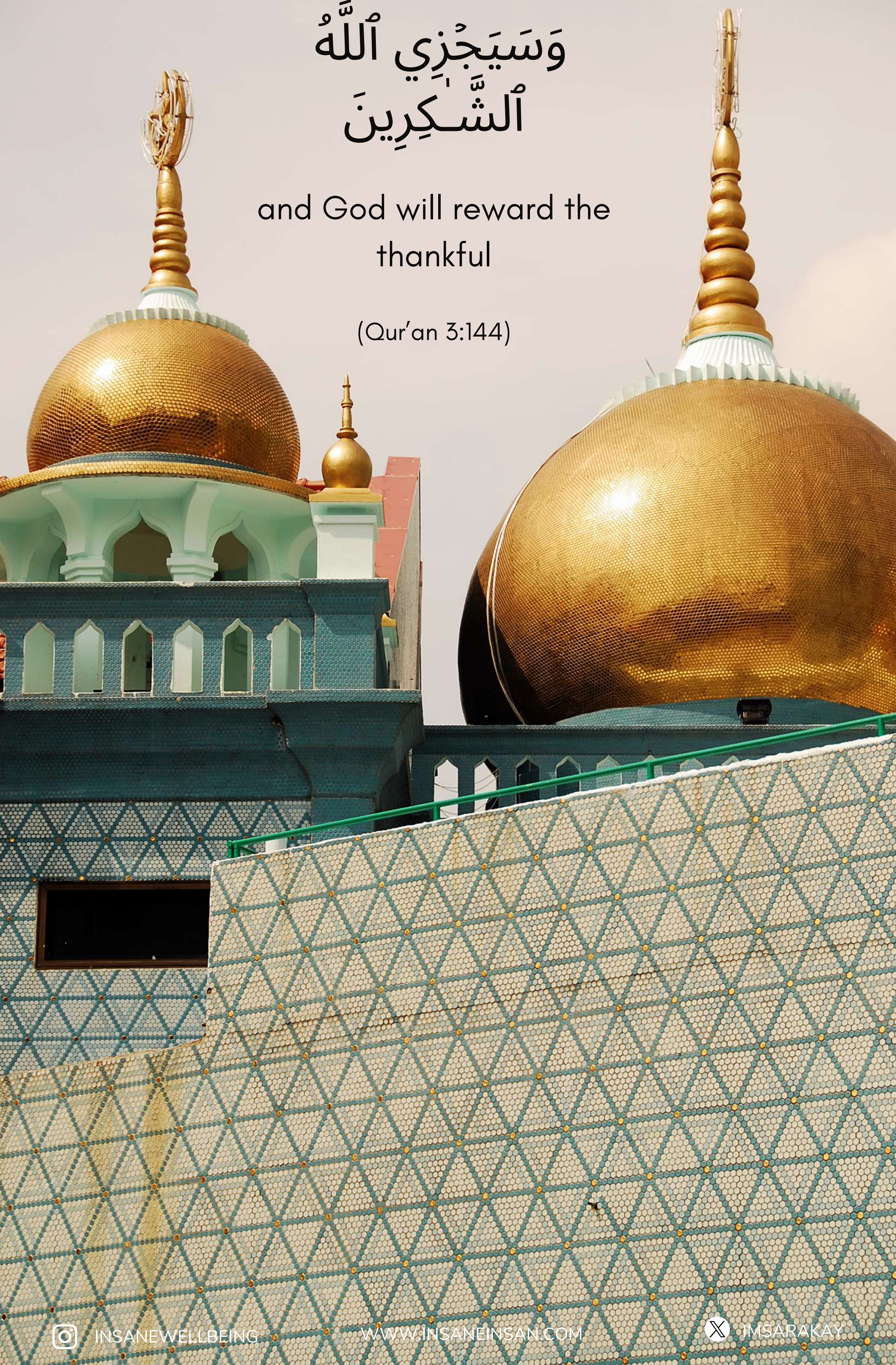
Here, the understanding is that gratitude prompts a person to be mindful of God's blessings and mercy, which in turn leads to positive general wellbeing. Therefore, within the Islamic context, it is not the feeling of gratitude per se that results in positivity, but rather its capacity in being a means of remembering God, and it is this remembrance of God which yields positive emotions.



وَسَيَجْزِي اللَّهُ
الشَّكِرِينَ

and God will reward the
thankful

(Qur'an 3:144)



Furthermore, the Qur'an encourages the showing of gratitude at all times and reprimands those who base their belief in God upon their worldly condition i.e., only turning to Him in times of need or only showing gratitude in times of happiness.

وَإِذَا مَسَّكُمُ الضُّرُّ فِي الْبَحْرِ ضَلَّ مَنْ تَدْعُونَ إِلَّا إِلَهُهُ فَلَمَّا نَجَّكُمْ إِلَى الْبَرِّ أَعْرَضْتُمْ
وَكَانَ الْإِنْسُنُ كَفُورًا

And whenever affliction befalls you at sea, forgotten are those whom you would call upon, save for Him. Then when He has delivered you safely to land, you turn away. Man is ever ungrateful!

(Qur'an 17:67)

وَإِذَا أَنْعَمْنَا عَلَى الْإِنْسَنِ أَعْرَضَ وَنَأَىٰ بِجَانِبِهِ وَإِذَا مَسَّهُ الشَّرُّ كَانَ يَئُوسًا
قُلْ كُلُّ يَعْمَلُ عَلَىٰ شَاكِلَتِهِ فَرَبُّكُمْ أَعْلَمُ بِمَنْ هُوَ أَهْدَىٰ سَبِيلًا

And whenever We bestow a blessing upon man, he turns away and withdraws. And whenever evil befalls him, he is in despair. Say, 'Each acts according to his disposition, and your Lord knows well who is more rightly guided on the way.'

(Qur'an 17:83-84)

وَلَيْنُ أَذِقْنَا الْإِنْسَنَ مِنَّا رَحْمَةً ثُمَّ نَزَعْنَاهَا مِنْهُ إِنَّهُ لَيَئُوسٌ كَفُورٌ

And if we cause man to taste Mercy from Us, and then withdraw it from him, verily he is despondent, ungrateful.

وَلَيْنُ أَذِقْنَاهُ نَعْمَاءَ بَعْدَ ضَرَّاءَ مَسَّتْهُ لَيَقُولَنَّ ذَهَبَ السَّيِّئَاتُ عَنِّي إِنَّهُ لَفَرِحٌ فَخُورٌ

And if We cause him to taste some favor after adversity has befallen him, he will surely say, "The evils have gone from me." Verily he is exultant, boastful,

إِلَّا الَّذِينَ صَبَرُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ أُولَٰئِكَ لَهُمْ مَغْفِرَةٌ وَأَجْرٌ كَبِيرٌ

save those who are patient and perform righteous deeds; it is they for whom there shall be forgiveness and a great reward

(Qur'an 11:9-11)

Al-Ghazali writes, gratitude should be expressed even when things are not seemingly going one's way, as this is a sign of true submission to God, and *peace* is found in this submission. This notion is similar to the concept of 'acceptance' found within the secular wellbeing discourse, where an individual is encouraged to accept all thoughts and feelings with no judgement. Furthermore, within the contemporary context, there is also encouragement to focus on the positive aspects of life, including negative experiences showing acceptance and gratitude towards them, all of which is said to enhance positive feelings.

It is also of relevance to note, the expression of gratitude and ingratitude, according to Al-Ghazali, does not just stop at the presence or absence of verbal utterance of thanks to God, but rather encompasses bodily action. Al-Ghazali explains, breaking off a tree branch for no good reason is an expression of ingratitude towards God's creation, similarly hoarding money and riches for fear of poverty or appearing wealthy is denial of God's Majesty and Mercy, and is therefore an act of ingratitude. Here, gratitude is linked to the question of ethics and morality, where true gratitude should govern one's behaviour and lead to good action, like giving charity to the poor or safeguarding the environment. Gratitude therefore, is not just a mere verbal expression of thanks but a feeling that starts with the heart and manifests in acts of kindness that seeks to amplify and replicate the feeling of gratitude in others.

The relationship between gratitude and feelings of wellbeing has long been a point of exploration, numerous studies exist that demonstrate the positive effects of feelings of gratitude in both the religious and secular contexts on mental health and overall wellbeing. Although, very few of these studies explore gratitude in the Islamic context, of that which have been conducted within the Islamic context, results are found to be consistent with findings that indicate gratitude does have a positive effect on feelings of wellbeing and positivity.

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ اذْكُرُوا نِعْمَتَ اللَّهِ
عَلَيْكُمْ هَلْ مِنْ خَلْقٍ غَيْرِ اللَّهِ
يَرْزُقُكُمْ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ وَالْأَرْضِ لَا
إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ فَانِى تُؤْفَكُونَ

O mankind! Remember God's
Blessing upon you. Is there a
creator other than God who
provides for you from Heaven and
earth? There is no god but He. How,
then, are you perverted?

Quran 35:3



IN SUMMARY

The concept of gratitude, from a Qur'anic perspective, gains its relevance and significance to wellbeing, in that a person is encouraged to look upon creation and life in a positive way, showing thankfulness to God by way of chanting 'Alhamdulillah'. The subsequent gratitude felt should then influence a persons in a way that creates feelings of peace within, whilst safeguarding the wellbeing of those around the person who is practising gratitude, resulting in feelings of peace and general wellbeing for all.



Salaam! I'm Sara and I have a PhD in "Mindfulness and psychological wellbeing from a Qur'anic perspective'. Much of my research relied upon the works of Imam Al-Ghazali in his book "The Revival".

I launched 'INsane' after noticing people were genuinely interested in my research. The INsane logo has a double meaning, it can also be read as the Arabic word for human 'insan'. You can find more about the project and me on my podcast, the link for which is on the website.

I am passionate about informing Muslims on wellbeing from an Islamic perspective. I see this as a duty and a privilege.

This guide will be the first of many (insha'Allah). You can download it free from the INsane website.

I pray that the knowledge i share brings you clarity and courage. Because finding peace takes courage.

Sara K



Feel free to contact me for collaborations, feedback or thoughts on: the insane website or on twitter @imsarakay