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MUSLIM YOUTH ISSUES: JUDGMENT STIGMA

Addressing judgment and shame in the American Muslim community through awareness, constructive criticism, and practical solutions. | July 2020

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Introduction

About Young Muslims

A Generation to Believe In: In 1991, Muslim youth leaders from across the nation met to discuss the future of a generation they believed in. Within weeks, Young Muslims (YM) was established. Twenty-nine years later, YM is now the largest Muslim youth organization in North America.

We are a grassroots movement that continues to develop the next generation of proactive American Muslims engaged in their communities at the local and national level. Our members mentor and facilitate the development of Muslim youth to become positive forces in society. This is done through leadership and spiritual development in the form of regular halaqat, study circles, retreats, conferences, tournaments, service events, overseas relief trips, and more.¹

YM Muslim Youth Issues: Judgment Stigma

With the growing presence of YM across the country, we realized the need to adapt our approach to the dynamic experiences of American Muslim youth in order to remain beneficial and relevant. One of the ways we plan to accomplish this is to address challenging contemporary issues through our national public platforms and local training efforts. We hope these efforts advance our long-term goal to educate, facilitate, and develop American Muslim youth to become religiously-grounded, intellectually balanced, and emotionally literate forces in society who work individually and collectively to establish Islam as the root of the way they understand and interact with the world. Ultimately, we seek Allah's (SWT) grace and pleasure.²

The first challenge we have chosen to address is that of judgment stigma in the American Muslim community. Judgment stigma is a mark of disgrace which results from the judgment by others.³

To address this challenge, the YM National Shura, wrote this report under the guidance of scholars, religious leaders, and counselors.^{4,5} Section I: Survey Findings summarizes the findings of a survey we sent out in February 2020 and key takeaways that highlight the prevalence of judgment stigma in the American Muslim community. Section II: Overcoming Judgment Stigma addresses subtopics that fall under the overarching theme of judgment and shame. We worked

¹ Halaqat: Religious gatherings.

² Allah (SWT): Allah is the Arabic word for God, and (SWT) is short for Subhanahu Wa Ta'ala, which is Arabic for "The most Glorified, the most High".

³ Please see: [Definitions](#)

⁴ YM National Shura: YM's national governing body

⁵ [Acknowledgements](#)



with our experts to evaluate and identify major subtopics to address through the Islamic lens by providing guidelines from sacred Islamic sources, including the Qur'an, Hadith, Sunnah, and Seerah.⁶

Disclaimer: YM strives to create safe spaces for Muslim youth across the country. We acknowledge any incident of judgment and shame within our organization and seek to learn from our shortcomings.

Purpose

The purpose of the *YM Muslim Youth Issues: Judgment Stigma* initiative is to raise awareness of judgment and shame within the American Muslim community, share the Islamic ethical norms on this issue, and present practical solutions and strategies to counteract judgment stigma within our communities. Our resources for this initiative include this report, infographics, presentations, and training webinars as resources to address this issue.

Definitions

Official Terms

- **Guilt culture⁷ (noun)** – a culture in which conformity of behavior is maintained through the individual's internalization of a moral code.
 - Shame is experienced individually (with God).
 - The Prophet Muhammad (S) promoted this culture through the teachings of Islam.⁸
- **Shame⁹ (noun)** – a painful feeling of humiliation or distress caused by the consciousness of wrong or foolish behavior.

⁶ Qur'an: The central religious text of Islam, believed by Muslims to be a revelation from God; Hadith: Sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (S), believed by Muslims to be source of guidance; Sunnah: The actions and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (S), believed by Muslims to be a source of conduct; Seerah: The life of the Prophet Muhammad (S).

⁷ Guilt culture. (2019). In Oxford University Press (OUP). Retrieved from https://www.lexico.com/definition/guilt_culture

⁸ See: [The Prophetic Community](#)

⁹ Shame (2019). In Oxford University Press (OUP). Retrieved from <https://www.lexico.com/definition/shame>



Definitions (cont.)

- **Shame culture¹⁰ (noun)** – a culture in which conformity of behavior is maintained through the individual's fear of being shamed.
 - Shame is experienced socially (with others).
 - A person in this type of culture may ask, “How would people look at me if I do Y?” Shame cultures are typically based on the concepts of pride and honor, and appearances are what count.
- **Pass judgment¹¹ (verb)** – to criticize or condemn someone from a position of assumed moral superiority.
- **Stigma¹² (noun)** – a mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality, or person.

Coined Terms

- By combining the definitions for passing judgment (verb) and stigma (noun), we have coined the term **judgment stigma (noun)** as a mark of disgrace which results from the judgment by others.
- **Muslim space (noun)** – any formal gathering of Muslims.

¹⁰ Shame culture. (2019). In Oxford University Press (OUP). Retrieved from https://www.lexico.com/definition/shame_culture

¹¹ Pass Judgment. (2019). In Oxford University Press (OUP). Retrieved from https://www.lexico.com/definition/pass_judgement

¹² Stigma. (2019). In Oxford University Press (OUP). Retrieved from <https://www.lexico.com/definition/stigma>



Section I: Survey Findings

In February 2020, we conducted a nationwide survey to collect data on perceptions and experiences of judgment and shame in the American Muslim community. This section presents the data from the survey and key takeaways that highlight the prevalence of these issues.

Survey Results

The statistical breakdown of our findings are as follows:

Number of Responses: 542

Age Breakdown of Respondents:

- Range: Age 12-34
 - < 14 years old: 1%
 - 14-18 years old: 41%
 - 19-23 years old: 48%
 - > 23 years old: 10%

State Breakdown of Responses:

- 23 unique states
 - Around 80% of the data came from Florida, New Jersey, Texas, and Illinois.

Percentage Breakdown of Responses:

How practicing of a Muslim would you consider yourself?
A. Not practicing: 1% (5/542)
B. Somewhat practicing (on and off): 25% (137/542)
C. Regularly practicing (consistent): 60% (324/542)
D. Regularly involved (committed volunteer, organizational role, etc.): 28% (151/542)



Survey Results (cont.)

How involved are you in your local Muslim community?

A. Not involved (detached/not up-to-date): 6% (31/542)

B. Somewhat involved (will occasionally attend events): 23% (123/542)

C. Between somewhat and regularly involved (occasional event attendee and volunteer): 34% (185/542)

D. Regularly involved (committed volunteer, organizational role, etc.): 28% (151/542)

E. Very involved (takes up a good portion of your time): 10% (52/542)

How often do you interact with Muslims in your age group?

A. Not often (hardly any Muslims): 6% (35/542)

B. Somewhat often (balanced): 47% (253/542)

C. Very often (mostly/only Muslims): 47% (254/542)

How comfortable do you feel around Muslims in your age group?

A. Uncomfortable: 4% (20/542)

B. Somewhat comfortable (with friends, company around, etc.): 27% (149/542)

C. Between somewhat comfortable and confident: 29% (156/542)

D. Confident: 40% (217/542)

How often do you interact with Muslim leaders? (Imams, community leaders, etc.)

A. Not often: 47% (253/542)

B. Somewhat often: 37% (203/542)

C. Very often: 16% (86/542)



Survey Results (cont.)

How comfortable do you feel around Muslim leaders? (Imams, community leaders, etc.)

A. Uncomfortable: 9% (48/542)

B. Somewhat comfortable (with friends, company around, etc.): 42% (225/542)

C. Between somewhat comfortable and confident: 28% (150/542)

D. Confident: 22% (119/542)

How often do you interact with Muslim elders? (adults in the community)

A. Not often: 27% (144/542)

B. Somewhat often: 50% (273/542)

C. Very often: 23% (125/542)

How comfortable do you feel around Muslim elders? (adults in the community)

A. Uncomfortable: 13% (73/542)

B. Somewhat comfortable (with friends, company around, etc.): 41% (222/542)

C. Between somewhat comfortable and confident: 27% (148/542)

D. Confident: 18% (99/542)

Have you ever felt judged or shamed by another Muslim in a Muslim space?

A. No: 30% (165/542)

B. Yes: 70% (377/542)



Survey Results (cont.)

How comfortable do you feel attending the Masjid?

A. Not comfortable: 4% (24/542)

B. Somewhat comfortable (with friends, company around, etc.): 20% (111/542)

C. Comfortable (will independently attend): 75% (407/542)

How comfortable do you feel in Muslim spaces outside of the Masjid? (events, etc.)

A. Not comfortable: 6% (32/542)

B. Somewhat comfortable (with friends, company around, etc.): 52% (283/542)

C. Comfortable (will independently attend): 42% (227/542)

How would you rate your general experiences with Muslims?

A. Very negative: 1% (3/542)

B. Mostly negative, some positive: 6% (33/542)

C. Balanced: 24% (131/542)

D. Mostly positive, some negative: 51% (276/542)

E. Very positive: 18% (99/542)



Key Takeaways

1. Seventy percent of people surveyed felt judged by a Muslim in a Muslim space. This indicates the prevalence of the judgement stigma in American Muslim communities.
2. Having friends accompany you in Muslim spaces significantly increases the level of comfort.
3. Muslim youth interact with their peers and their elders most often. Therefore these two groups need to be mindful of their words and actions, as they are likely to have the strongest impact on the prevalence of judgement stigma within communities.
4. Overall, the data collected here is not final. While it has revealed valuable insights, there is much to be studied further.

Disclaimer: This survey was created with the purpose of highlighting the existence of judgment stigma and its prevalence in Muslim spaces. The solutions proposed in Section II: Overcoming Judgment Stigma are not derived from survey data points but rather are a collection of advice from scholars, counselors, and community leaders who deal with these issues on a daily basis. We acknowledge that the data collection process needs refinement in the future, and that there are many opportunities to further this research. This includes but is not limited to incorporating gender specific data to get a closer look at how judgment stigma affects various Muslim demographics.



Section II: Overcoming Judgment Stigma

This section aims to address the issues of judgment stigma in the American Muslim community. We worked with experts to identify the following underlying problems within communities that lead to judgment stigma, and each one is addressed in this section. The problems are as follows:

1. Expectations of external and internal piety: Appearance vs. Piety
2. Embodying good partially: Good Muslim ≠ Bad Person
3. Forgetting: The Gravity of Forgotten Sins
4. Giving and taking advice without caution: The Art of *Naseeha*
5. Trouble establishing and honoring personal/communal boundaries: Minding One's Business: Navigating the Lines
6. More sympathy than empathy: Prophetic Empathy
7. Forgetting that: Everybody Makes Mistakes
8. Lack of proper emulation of the Prophet Muhammad (S) in character and morality: Our Ultimate Role Model
9. Often unwelcoming, judgmental, and prejudiced, unlike: The Prophetic Community.

By addressing these specific problems, we hope to raise awareness, provide constructive criticism, and present practical solutions to overcome judgment stigma within ourselves and in our communities.



Appearance vs. Piety

The Prophet Muhammad (S) says, “Beware of suspicion, for suspicion is the most false of tales. Do not seek out faults, do not spy on each other, do not contend with each other, do not envy each other, do not hate each other, and do not turn away from each other. Rather, be servants of Allah as brothers (and sisters).”¹³ Additionally, Allah (SWT) asks that “believing men and believing women think good of one another.”¹⁴ This is the Islamic principle of husun ad-dhan, or to have a good opinion (of others).

What is found in the American Muslim community, however, is not this principle, but rather warped **expectations** about the external appearance of practicing Muslims. These expectations unfortunately become the standard by which someone is deemed pious and devout. To really understand this point, we can use the example of modest dress. Those who dress according to the Islamic guidelines of modesty are seen as pious, and those who do not, are seen to the contrary.

While a person cannot be blamed for perceiving an individual who chooses to dress this way as pious, as the choice to dress modestly is an act of worship and a public expression of Muslim identity, this in no way implies that the individual does not sin habitually. Rather, to assume that someone in modest dress is trying to be a good Muslim is an aspect of morality and good character as it would fall under the principle of husun ad-dhan.

That said, the external physical appearance of a person does not always equate to their piety. No person is free from sin (see [Everybody Makes Mistakes](#)), and piety is based upon what is inside the heart and can only be judged by Allah (SWT). The Prophet Muhammad (S) told us, “Allah (SWT) does not look at your appearance or your wealth, but He looks at your hearts and your deeds.”¹⁵ The external physical appearance of a person is not always a representation of piety. Sometimes the modest dress is there because piety is also there within the person, whereas other times there is no piety except the dress, which is the only part the individual is able to hold on to while entangled in other sins.

Within American Muslim communities exist people who may performatively appear pious but whose hearts are far from Allah (SWT). Our communities also have people whose appearance

¹³ Sahih al-Bukhari 78:94, Sunan Ibn Majah Vol. 5, Book 37, Hadith 4143

¹⁴ Qur'an 24:12

¹⁵ Sahih Muslim 45:42



Appearance vs. Piety (cont.)

does not fit a falsely constructed idea of what “religious” is, but whose hearts are close to Allah (SWT). Assuming that someone whose appearance does not match a falsely constructed standard is not pious or close to Allah (SWT) is contradictory to the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (S). The all-or-nothing standards we hold each other to, where those who look “religious” are held to unrealistic expectations and those who do not appear as such are looked down upon, result in severe consequences. Allah (SWT) will hold us accountable for every time our judgments and assumptions cause us to act in a manner that pushes people away from the beauty of Islam.



Good Muslim ≠ Bad Person

What is morally and ethically “good”? Though this may seem like a basic question, Muslims tend to forget the source of morality and the nature of goodness. As Muslims, we believe that the source of all good is Allah (SWT). He states about Himself in the Qur’an, “Allah does not order immorality,” and the Prophet Muhammad (S) has said that anything that is good is from Allah (SWT).^{16,17}

Given that Allah (SWT) wills ultimate goodness, a good Muslim – one who fully submits to the will of Allah (SWT) – cannot be a bad person. Thus, being a good Muslim equates to being a good person.

This brings up an important question: why are there apparently “religious” Muslims who are judgmental? A Muslim who says they are Muslim should be the most morally upright and ethical person. Given that this is often not the case, it can be argued that when those who are Muslim perform an immoral act it may be one of two things:

1. They may not know better (see [Prophetic Empathy](#)).
2. They are committing a sin.

It is also important to reconsider who we view as “religious” or “practicing” Muslims. We may have internalized an incorrect assumption of piety based on external appearance and representation (see [Appearance vs. Piety](#)). But Allah (SWT) speaks about true piety, saying:

“Virtue does not lie in turning your faces to the East or to the West. The truly good are those who believe in Allah and the Last Day, the Angels, the Book and the Prophets, and who, despite their love for it, give away their wealth to their relatives and to orphans and the very poor, and to travelers and beggars and to set slaves free, and who establish salat and pay zakat; those who honor their contracts when they make them, and are steadfast in misfortune, adversity, and times of danger. It is these who are truthful and it is these who are righteous”¹⁸

¹⁶ Qur’an 7:28

¹⁷ Sahih Muslim 6:240

¹⁸ Qur’an 2:177



Good Muslim ≠ Bad Person (cont.)

Though important, there is more to Islam than ritual practice. Muslims who advocate for truth and justice, who fight for the oppressed and disadvantaged, who spend generously from their wealth in charity – they are all practicing Muslims. **A good Muslim should inherently be a good person.** It follows, therefore, that a practicing Muslim cannot be a bad person.

For further reading on religiosity and goodness, please visit the following resources: [Know God, Know Good: God & Objective Morality](#) and [Can a "Good Muslim" Be a "Bad Person"? Aligning Faith and Character](#).^{19,20}

¹⁹ Tzortzis, H. "Know God, Know Good: God & Objective Morality." Retrieved from https://www.hamzatzortzis.com/know-god-know-good-god-objective-morality/#_edn4

²⁰ Parrot, J. (2019, Jul 3). "Can a "Good Muslim" Be a "Bad Person"? Aligning Faith and Character." Retrieved from <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/justin-parrott/can-a-good-muslim-be-a-bad-person-aligning-faith-and-character/>



The Gravity of Forgotten Sins

Judgment and shame hurt our communities and they are rooted in a number of other serious sins. Not only are the Qur'an and Sunnah explicit in their prohibition of these sins, but a number of them are also categorized as major sins.^{21,22} Often, we are unable to recognize when we fall into these sins, and they are further exacerbated by social media and gossip culture. The following is a noncomprehensive list of these forgotten sins:

Arrogance:

Arrogance is detrimental for our hearts and it is often difficult to recognize in oneself. When talking about others, we may end up looking down on them and delude ourselves to thinking we are better. It is therefore imperative to remember that no one is free of flaws (see [Everybody Makes Mistakes](#)). The Prophet Muhammad (S) said, "No one will enter Paradise who has even a mustard seed's weight of arrogance in their heart."²³ In Imam Mawlud's *Purification of the Heart*, (translated into English by Hamza Yusuf) the arrogance of believing we are better than others is classified as a spiritual disease of the heart.²⁴

Insults:

Mockery, ridicule, and insults are also associated with arrogance. It is actually an outward manifestation of the arrogance that is embedded in the heart. In the Qur'an, Allah (SWT) prohibits the believing men and women from insulting or ridiculing others as, "perhaps, they may be better than them."²⁵ Allah tells us in this verse that mockery is an indication of arrogance and pride in one's heart. It was this very sin of arrogance and pride that led Satan be cursed by Allah (SWT) for disobeying Allah's (SWT) command to bow before Adam (AS). This is a clear indication of the severity of this sin.

In his *Beginning of Guidance*, Imam Ghazali warns us to guard our tongues, "for they make you lose face, diminish people's respect for you, cause people to have an aversion from you, and damage hearts."²⁶ One of the most dangerous actions one can inadvertently do is to hurt someone who is a wali (close friend) of Allah (SWT). In a Hadith Qudsi, Allah (SWT) declares war on anyone who hurts a wali of His, and only Allah (SWT) knows who these beloved individuals are.²⁷

²¹ Sunnah: what the Prophet Muhammad (S) was reported to have said, done, or permitted others to do.

²² False testimony, false utterance, and slandering chaste women are classified as major sins. See Sahih Muslim 1:165 and 1:168

²³ Sahih Muslim 1:172

²⁴ Yusuf, H. (2012). "Purification of the Heart: Signs, Symptoms and Cures of the Spiritual Diseases of the Heart." Sandala, 110-112.

²⁵ Qur'an 49:11

²⁶ Ghazzālī, Al-'Allāf Mashhad, & Yusuf, A.-R. I. (2017). "The Beginning of Guidance: the Imam and Proof of Islam: Complete Arabic text with Facing English Translation". London: White Thread Press, 102.

²⁷ Sahih Bukhari 81:91



The Gravity of Forgotten Sins (cont.)

Backbiting:

Judgment of others is intertwined with the dangers of backbiting, slander, and gossip. Unfortunately, many Muslims have lost sight of what these sins entail. The Prophet Muhammad (S) once described backbiting as, “talking about your brother in a manner he does not like. If what you said about him is true, then it is ghībah (gossip), and if what you said is not true, then it is namīmah (slander).”²⁸ Whether the matter is true or false, Islam prohibits backbiting and classifies it as a major sin. Allah (SWT) commands us to not “spy or backbite each other. Would one of you like to eat the flesh of his brother when dead? You would detest it.”²⁹ The Qur’an describes the punishment in hell for people who backbite as the guilty “scratching their chests and faces with their copper nails.”³⁰

When we backbite, we dishonor and disrespect another individual, yet one of the objectives of Islam is the preservation of people’s honor.³¹ Imām ibn al-Qayyim has said that backbiting “is worse than physically hurting someone or taking someone’s wealth because [an individual] uses their physical body and wealth to establish their reputation.”²⁹

Exposing Others:

Everyone is susceptible to sin and has shortcomings (see Everybody Makes Mistakes). Some people’s mistakes are simply better hidden than others. If Allah (SWT) exposed the hidden sins – all the vices and addictions – and made them apparent for all to see, we would be unable to go in public out of shame.

Allah (SWT) rewards those who do not expose others. The Prophet Muhammad (S) said, “whoever conceals (the fault of) a Muslim in this world, Allah will conceal him (his faults) in this world and in the Hereafter.”³² In another instance, the Prophet Muhammad (S) said, “a believer is a mirror for a believer, and a believer is the brother of a believer; he safeguards him from destruction and protects him in his absence.”³³ The protection of believers in their absence means the preservation of their respect, honor, and rights in front of others.

²⁸ Sahih Muslim 18:13

²⁹ Qur’an 49:12

³⁰ Sunan Abi Dawud 4878

³¹ al-Haj, H. (2019, December 13). “Shari’ah in Today’s World: Renewing Islamic Discourse.” Retrieved from <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/hatem-elhaj/shariah-in-todays-world-renewing-islamic-discourse/>

³² Sahih Muslim 45:93

³³ Al-Adab Al Mufrad 12:2



The Gravity of Forgotten Sins (cont.)

Unfortunately, we regularly commit these sins and violate the rights of our fellow Muslims. It is important to ask Allah (SWT) for forgiveness, and if possible, the person who we have harmed. If appropriate, we must be willing to have uncomfortable conversations to ask for forgiveness.

Finally, it is of benefit to be mindful of the gatherings we are in, especially when they involve backbiting, exposing others, or insult. Allah (SWT) tells us that when we “come across people who speak with scorn about Our revelations, turn away from them until they move on to another topic. If Satan should make you forget, then, when you have remembered, do not sit with those who are doing wrong.”³⁴ Our role in preventing these sins when in the presence of those indulging in them will be situational, but the least expected of us is to hate these actions with our hearts (See [Minding One’s Business, Navigating the Lines](#)).

³⁴ Qur’an 6:68



The Art of *Naseeha*: Giving and Taking Advice

Giving Advice:

Giving advice, or *naseeha*, may seem simple enough, but in order for it to be impactful, there must be a **meaningful connection** between the one giving and the one receiving *naseeha*. The following analogy of a transaction is a useful frame:

- If you are purchasing low-cost items, such as cleaning supplies or phone accessories, you'll likely be comfortable with buying from Target. However if you are purchasing higher-end appliances, like televisions or laptops, you will likely trust Best Buy, with its better quality and money-back guarantees.
- As you up the ante of an expensive purchase, you will want to buy it from a **reputable and credible source**.

The more significant a transaction, the more trust is needed. With *naseeha* being one of the most intimate exchanges between two individuals, it cannot be treated as an easy and meaningless transaction. It must come from a trusted source. The more personal the nature of the *naseeha* (i.e. regarding one's character or behavior), the more intimate, trusting, and meaningful the relationship needs to be between the two individuals in the exchange.

If that type of intimate relationship is not present, the **groundwork** to build it, by getting to know each other genuinely and developing trust, must be established before giving *naseeha*. Unfortunately, we become so impatient with the - often unrealistic - expectations that we place on individuals, that we lose sight of the purpose. The timeline we need to work in is the one that focuses on building a meaningful and trusting relationship with the person who needs advising, not the personal timeline we place on individuals to quickly reform. The latter leads to frustration when expectations are not met. Allah (SWT) has already set the timeline of every individual's journey to Him, and He grants guidance to whom He wills.

Case Study: Abu Umamah Al-Bahily (RA) narrated that once a young man came to the Prophet Muhammad (S), asking permission to commit *zina*.³⁵ When the Sahaba around the Prophet Muhammad (S) heard this, they were shocked at the audacity of this young man to ask such a question and began reprimanding him.³⁶ In contrast, the Prophet Muhammad (S) **gently asked him** to come closer, sat knee to knee with him, and asked him a series of questions: "Would you like that for your mother?" (meaning would he want someone to commit *zina* with her). The young man swore by Allah (SWT) saying he would not like the described scenario to happen. The Prophet Muhammad (S) then asked the same

³⁵ Zina: unlawful sex.

³⁶ Sahaba: Companions of the Prophet Muhammad (S).



The Art of *Naseeha*: Giving and Taking Advice (cont.)

question but in the context of “...your daughter ...your sister?” (and so on), receiving the same response each time. Finally, he (S) **placed his hand on the young man’s heart and prayed for him**, “Oh Allah, forgive his sins, purify his heart, and protect his chastity.”³⁷

The following lessons can be drawn from this Prophetic example:

1. *Naseeha* requires **compassion, gentleness, wisdom, and emotional intelligence**. How you say something is just as important as what you are saying.
2. The young man was **comfortable** enough to go to the Prophet Muhammad (S) and admit his desire, even while understanding the gravity of the sin. This was because their relationship was one of trust – he respected the Prophet Muhammad (S) and trusted his (S) *naseeha*.
3. The young man was able to count on not being judged, shamed, or shunned by the Prophet Muhammad (S) (see [The Prophetic Community](#)).

When this model of *naseeha* is exemplified, it is more influential and likely to be accepted. The one being advised is also likely to have a better perception of Muslims and/or the Muslim space where the advice was given. Thus, the role we play when ‘tying the camel’ and doing our part is to:

1. Cultivate trusting and meaningful relationships with each other.
2. Patiently wait for the right time to offer *naseeha*.
3. Give the *naseeha* with sincerity, *adab* (good character), and empathy (see [Prophetic Empathy](#)).
4. Make frequent *dua*.

The rest – the individual’s reform – is left to Allah (SWT).

“Call [people] to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good teaching. Argue with them in the most courteous way, for your Lord knows best who has strayed from His way and who is rightly guided.”³⁸

³⁷ Musnad Ahmad 21708

³⁸ Qur’an 16:125



The Art of *Naseeha*: Giving and Taking Advice (cont.)

Taking Advice:

While giving advice, or *naseeha*, seems easy, accepting it is very difficult.

The shame culture emphasis on communal shame has led Muslims to feel judged by each other, and this fear of judgment has kept Muslims away from the Masjid and Muslim spaces. However, it is important for us to understand that the individuals giving *naseeha*, no matter how harsh or judgmental in their manner, may have good intent. Islam emphasizes giving sincere advice to uplift and encourage one another to become better versions of ourselves by following the footsteps of the Prophet Muhammad (S) who said, “the deen (religion) is *naseeha*.”³⁹ Another point to consider is that Allah (SWT) could have sent those advising us as a sign to improve and better ourselves. Filtering out the manner in which the *naseeha* was given from the content of the *naseeha* can open doors to personal development.

The following are questions to keep in mind when offered advice:

1. Have I given myself enough time to process the *naseeha*?
2. Would I take the same *naseeha* from a different person?
3. Can I justify dismissing this *naseeha*?
4. Is there a possibility that I am wrong?
5. Can I learn from this experience?

Being on the receiving end of *naseeha* can be challenging. However, remembering our own sincerity and intent when we are the ones advising others, as well as the responses we expect, can help us shift our perspective and empathize with those who seek to offer us *naseeha*.

³⁹ Sahih Muslim 1:103



Minding One's Business: Navigating the Lines

When should someone be advised? What is the line between noninterference in people's lives and guiding them to goodness? The Prophet Muhammad (S) said, "Indeed among the excellence of a person's Islam is that he leaves what does not concern him."⁴⁰

Abu Sa'id al-Khudri (RA) reported that the Prophet Muhammad (S) said, "Whoever among you sees evil, let him change it with his hand. If he is unable to do so, then with his tongue. If he is unable to do so, then with his heart, and that is the weakest level of faith."⁴¹ This Hadith provides guidance on getting involved when evil or sin is seen. There is wisdom behind the Prophet teaching us to get involved neither with our hand nor our tongue, and that is because **sometimes we should not say anything at all**. Further, The Art of Naseeha: Giving and Taking Advice teaches us to advise with wisdom, which requires us to step back, assess the situation, understand the context, and then follow the principles of providing feedback.

When it comes to navigating the line between addressing a situation and minding one's own business, it is useful to consider the Islamic legal principle that states that **there are certain rules**, or defaults, and there are also exceptions to those rules. However, **rules are never made out of exceptions**. The following was compiled in consultation with our scholars (see Contributions):

The Rule: When it comes to navigating the nuances between minding one's business and addressing matters, the **general rule is to not say anything unless the following conditions are met**:

1. The sunnah is being contradicted, *and*
2. Other people are harmed.

The Exception: If a Masjid, Muslim space, or Muslim organization has **policies** in place (i.e. regarding behavior or dress code), then those not abiding to the policies can be addressed to modify their actions. This is not considered *naseeha*, or advice, but simply information sharing. Individuals are usually more understanding and less offended when this is the case. However, this requires community leadership to be open and willing to have uncomfortable conversations internally about what standards they deem appropriate so that they do not run into problems externally, and once those decisions are made, transparency is crucial.

Scenario 1: If somebody walks into the Masjid or a Muslim space in clothing that *does not contradict the Sunnah* but *only makes someone feel uncomfortable*, should he/she be addressed?

Answer: No. [The Rule]

⁴⁰ Jami' at-Tirmidhi 36:14

⁴¹ Sahih Muslim 1:84



Minding One's Business: Navigating the Lines (cont.)

Scenario 2: If somebody walks into the Masjid or a Muslim space in clothing that *only contradicts the Sunnah* but *does not make someone feel uncomfortable*, should he/she be addressed?

Answer: No. **[The Rule]**

Scenario 3: If somebody walks into the Masjid or a Muslim space in clothing that *does not contradict the Sunnah* but *makes someone uncomfortable*, and is *in violation of the space's policies* can he/she be addressed?

Answer: Yes, with empathy if there are policies that are clearly not followed (see Prophetic Empathy). **[The Exception]**

Scenario 4: If somebody walks into the Masjid or a Muslim space in clothing that *contradicts the Sunnah and makes someone feel uncomfortable*, should he/she be addressed?

Answer: Yes, but with proper *naseeha* and empathy. (See The Art of Naseeha: Giving and Taking Advice and Prophetic Empathy.) **[The Rule]**

Scenario 5: If an organization's leader begins to fall into an unhealthy lifestyle, should he/she be addressed by fellow board members?

Answer: No, unless the one advising has a close and meaningful relationship with him/her **[The Rule]**; or the organization has policies that require its leadership to maintain healthy lifestyles. **[The Exception]**. (See The Art of Naseeha: Giving and Taking Advice.)

Minding our business also means to not discuss someone's personal matters in front of others. The trap of gossip and backbiting is one that is easily fallen into, but the consequences are grave. (See The Gravity of Forgotten Sins.)

Scenario 6: If you happen to learn that someone you know has fallen into substance abuse, should you address him/her?

Answer: No, unless the one advising has a close and meaningful relationship with him/her. **[The Rule]**; or the effects of the substance abuse begin to directly harm others **[The Exception]**. However, this does not warrant exposing the individual by speaking about the issue with others. (See The Art of Naseeha: Giving and Taking Advice and The Gravity of Forgotten Sins.)

It is also important to distinguish between judgmental behavior and the Islamic principle of *amr bil ma'rūf wa nahī 'anil munkar* – enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong. Our



Minding One's Business: Navigating the Lines (cont.)

communities have a responsibility to advise against sins that negatively affect and harm others. When these harmful sins and behaviors are addressed with empathy and compassion, that should not be labeled as judgmental. We should strive for judgment-free communities that follow the practice of giving and taking *naseeha* (See [The Art of Naseeha: Giving and Taking Advice](#)).

In order to cultivate inclusive and welcoming spaces for our community members, especially for converts and Muslims who are detached from Islam and are finding their way (back), these principles must be kept in mind. Keep it simple – if the Sunnah is not contradicted and other people are not affected, leave it alone.



Prophetic Empathy

Empathy, or the ability to understand and share the feelings of another, is one of the Prophet Muhammad's (S) most beautiful traits. This was seen not only in his (S) ability to relate to and understand the people around him, but in his love for people he had yet to meet, until the end of time, all of whom he prayed and shed tears for.

The Prophetic model of empathy that Muhammad (S) set was the gold standard. He understood and shared with others in their suffering time and time again. The Qur'an mentions how he (S) "grieve[s] over your losses and is concerned over you and to the believers is kind and merciful."⁴² The Prophet Muhammad (S) encouraged us to feel empathy for each other, saying, "the believers in their mutual kindness, compassion, and sympathy are like one body. When one limb suffers, the whole body reacts with sleeplessness and fever."⁴³

A prime example of the importance that Allah (SWT) has placed on empathy and being wary of dismissiveness and judgment can be found in the revelation the Prophet Muhammad (S) received regarding the companion Abdullah Ibn Umm Maktum (RA). In Surah Abasa, the beloved Prophet Muhammad (S) is reminded to not turn away from Abdullah (RA), who was blind and could not see him turning away, irrespective of how valid the reason may have been. In our self-righteous delusion, we may find ourselves openly judging and mocking those who are actively trying their best to come closer to Allah (SWT). Here, although the Prophet Muhammad (S) did not judge or utter a single word of disdain, Allah (SWT) reminded him that Abdullah (RA) "might be purified. Or be reminded and the remembrance would benefit him."⁴⁴ **It is crucial to never be the reason that someone is turned away from Islam.** Something as small as a scoff, harsh glare, sarcastic comment, or not offering Salam can be reason enough to negatively impact someone. That impact is as costly to our own deeds as it is to their hearts.

For those who have been on the receiving end of judgment, there is comfort to be found in the numerous examples in the Prophet's (S) life of maintaining the **higher moral ground** or being the "bigger person." Key moments include the Prophet's journey to Ta'if, his treatment of prisoners after the Battle of Badr, and the Liberation of Makkah. Each of these are beautiful examples of taking the higher road, wherein the Prophet Muhammad (S) not only forgave the wrongdoers, but also made beautiful prayers for them.

⁴² Qur'an 9:128

⁴³ Sahih Bukhari 78:42

⁴⁴ Qur'an 8:3-4



Prophetic Empathy (cont.)

Often, when we are wronged, we feel it is justified for the wrongdoer to suffer a form of punishment that is similar to the wrong we experienced. This is called **retributive justice** and can be understood through the common saying “an eye for an eye.” In Islam, there is the permissibility of retributive justice when dealing with major sins that are physical in nature and the abuse of the rights of creation. The Qur’an specifically mentions “an eye for an eye, a nose for a nose, an ear for an ear.”⁴⁵ However, this type of justice is exclusively for grave sins of a physical nature, and even then, it is followed by an exhortation to forgive the wrongdoer in exchange for a greater reward with Allah (SWT). In any circumstance, there is no basis for social retribution. It is not justifiable for a Muslim to slander a slanderer or lie to a liar. It follows that there is also **no basis for judging those who judge us.**

Exemplifying **Prophetic empathy** when on the receiving end of judgment is a challenge and emotionally difficult, but it is also the best response to the situation. The manner in which we react determines whether we follow the example of the Prophet Muhammad (S) and take the high road, or sink down to the level of one who slanders a slanderer.

⁴⁵ Qur’an 5:45



Everybody Makes Mistakes

The Prophet Muhammad (S) drove home the reality that every single one of us makes mistakes when he (S) said, “had you been a nation that did not sin, Allah would have replaced you with people who do sin so that they would seek forgiveness from Him and He would forgive them,” and **“all children of Adam are sinners, and the best of sinners are those who repent.”**^{46,47} Even the Sahaba, his blessed companions who were the best generation of his *ummah* and were vouched for by Allah (SWT), were susceptible to mistakes and were corrected by the Prophet Muhammad (S).^{48,49} If our *iman*, or faith, only ascended, and we possessed no shortcomings, the angels would walk among us and shake our hands.⁵⁰ This does not give us the green light to sin. Rather it emphasizes that making mistakes is inherent to being human, and that it is okay as long as we repent to Allah (SWT), and strive to learn and grow from our mistakes.

Every individual is on a predetermined path to Allah (SWT). Persistently holding a person to their mistakes is indicative of tunnel vision that does not comprehensively consider the good in a person. To mitigate this, we must recognize our own shortcomings, and when we see the shortcomings of others, love for them what you would want for yourself by making sincere dua for their guidance.⁵¹

For those who have been on the receiving end of judgment, it is a difficult and painful experience. With a slight change in perspective however, it is possible to transform it into a learning experience. We can keep in mind that in such an interaction, the judgement exerted was a shortcoming for the individuals on the giving end, and that we have likely been in a similar situation. We have all, at some point, wrongfully judged others. As we would want those judging us to realize their mistakes, so too must we realize our own shortcomings.

⁴⁶ Sahih Muslim 50:13

⁴⁷ Sunan Ibn Majah Vol. 5, Book 37, Hadith 4251

⁴⁸ Ummah: The whole community of Muslims bound together by ties of religion.

⁴⁹ Qur'an 33:23

⁵⁰ Sahih Muslim 50:15

⁵¹ Sahih al-Bukhari 2:6



Our Ultimate Role Model

More than any other revered figure, whether civil rights icon, media star, or prominent politician, the Prophet Muhammad (S) is the ultimate role model for us. There is not a single aspect of our lives that does not benefit from emulating him in character or action. No matter the situation or experience one is going through, there is always a parallel to be found in his life that one can learn from.

During the time of the Prophet Muhammad (S), judgment stigma was heavily prevalent and Muslims sought relief from being judged. Much like the contemporary American Muslim community, the Muslims at the time of the Prophet (S) were the ones who received the ugly glares and heard the echoes of slander. Yet those Muslims persevered and did not shrink away from their practice of faith. They upheld their moral and ethical standards of behavior and they did so because of the example they had in Muhammad (S).

The Prophetic model of character and morality was so profound that Allah (SWT) immortalizes it in the Qur'an by stating, "indeed you are of exalted, good character."^{52,53}

Despite such perfection of being, the Prophet Muhammad (S) was wrongfully judged by people. This demonstrates two key things:

1. No matter how perfect one may be, people will judge regardless, just as they judged the Prophet Muhammad (S), who embodied perfection.
2. Despite judgment from others, one must continue to strive for *ihsan*, or excellence.

The Prophet Muhammad (S) spent much of his life trying to eliminate judgment stigma from the society he (S) lived in and loved, as seen in his lifelong fight for beauty, morality, balance, and love, and his fight against classism, racism, nepotism, and tribalism. Since he (S) is the perfect role model, it follows that we strive to emulate his path and his lifelong commitment to improve his community. Following his (S) example requires familiarity with and knowledge of the Prophetic biography.

⁵² [The Prophetic Community](#)

⁵³ Qur'an 68:4



The Prophetic Community

The Prophet Muhammad (S) nurtured and developed a model community that serves as a framework for us today. We find in the *seerah*, his biography, the following characteristics of his (S) community:

Welcoming – it supported newcomers:

- The Prophet's (S) community welcomed everyone, from the poor and destitute of Mecca, like Ammar ibn Yasir (RA), to the wealthy and elite, like Abdur-Rahman ibn Awf (RA), from migrants like Abu Hurairah (RA), to former enemies of Islam like Khalid ibn Walid (RA). They were welcomed with a smile, salam (the greeting of peace), open arms, a blank slate, no judgment, and complete acceptance.

Virtuous – it excelled in morality and good character:

- Empathetic
 - During the Battle of Uhud, the Prophet Muhammad (S) was overwhelmed with grief over the martyrdom of his beloved uncle, Hamza (ra). However, when he (S) saw that the father of Jabir ibn Abdullah (ra) had also passed away in the battle, he (S) put aside his sorrow and went over to the young Jabir, and consoled him with words of comfort.⁵⁴
- Guilt Culture (see [Definitions](#))
 - An alcoholic and classic prankster, the companion Nuayman ibn Amr (RA) struggled greatly to overcome his vice. Rather than being shamed, in the Prophetic community, his dignity was preserved and he was treated with utmost respect. The Prophet Muhammad (S) made it a point to intervene and defend Nuayman's honor if he was ever demeaned or cursed, stating, "indeed he loves God and His Messenger, and his sin does not put him outside the community as the mercy of God is near to the believers." This is an example of how the Prophet Muhammad (S) developed a guilt culture, where community members felt genuine remorse for their mistakes, but they never shamed one another. It was because shame was distinguished as something to be experienced with God alone, that companions like Nuayman (RA) were able to comfortably pray with the community, despite openly struggling with sins.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Sunan Ibn Majah Vol. 1, Book 1, Hadith 190

⁵⁵ Musnad Ahmad, vol. 6 pg. 316; Usdul Ghabah, vol. 5 pg. 330; Al Isabah, vol. 6 pg. 36



The Prophetic Community (cont.)

- Loving
 - The Prophetic community was one where each member felt as if they were the most beloved to the Prophet Muhammad (S). Each of his (S) relationships contained such depth, trust, and meaning that people's hearts were moved. Amr ibn al-As (RA) once went to the Prophet Muhammad (S) and asked him, "who do you love the most?" The Prophet Muhammad (S) responded with "Aisha (RA)," his wife. When Amr (ra) repeated the question, the Prophet Muhammad (S) responded with "her father," (Abu Bakr (RA)), and this continued a few times until Amr (RA) eventually stopped asking.⁵⁶ This story shows that the love Amr (RA) felt from the Prophet Muhammad (S) was so deep that when asking this question, he expected his own name in response. It also highlights the relationship Amr (RA) had with him (S) was one where he was comfortable enough to ask such intimate and personal questions.
- Forgiving
 - The Battle of Uhud was one of the most difficult and heart-wrenching times for the Prophetic Community. Over 70 Muslims were martyred, including some of the most beloved leaders of the community, including Hamza ibn Abdul Muttalib (RA), the beloved uncle of of the Prophet Muhammad (S) who was also like a big brother to him, Musab ibn Umair (RA), the first ambassador of Islam, and Abdullah ibn Amr (RA). Though the Muslims were initially winning this battle, when the group of 50 archers whom the Prophet Muhammad (S) had strategically placed to defend a vulnerable hill left their flank, the battle was lost and the Muslims fell to a surprise attack. This led to the death of many beloved companions and the Prophet Muhammad (S) being injured. In the aftermath, the community could have shunned the archers whose decision to abandon the hill led to the loss of life and the loss of the battle. However, the Prophet Muhammad (S) forgave each and every one of them and verses of forgiveness came down from Allah (SWT).⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Sahih al-Bukhari 62:14

⁵⁷ Qur'an 3:129, 133-136, 159



The Prophetic Community (cont.)

Anti-racist and anti-prejudice – status was determined by piety (and that was only determinable by Allah (SWT)):

- The Prophet Muhammad (S) said in his final sermon, “all mankind is from Adam and Eve, an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also a white has no superiority over a black nor a black has any superiority over a white – except by piety and good action.”⁵⁸
- The tribes of Arabia were very classist and prejudiced and the Prophet Muhammad (S) worked to eliminate this. His own closest companions were diverse individuals who varied across socioeconomic status, generation, race, nation, and culture.⁵⁹ Those closest to the Prophet were white, black, poor, rich, strong and frail, and they were the strongest in faith.

Disclaimer: In the process of creating this report, we’ve seen the movement towards racial equality grow in strength and open the eyes of many to the institutionalized racism that exists. Although this report was initially intended for a wider audience of American Muslims, it is clear that even the Muslim community is not immune to racial prejudices. To ensure that our report does not ignore these injustices, we are including resources and action items that can be taken to educate ourselves on this crucial issue and work towards healing our communities from this disease of racism:

- bit.ly/ym-blm-solidaritymessage
- bit.ly/ym-blm-actionitems
- bit.ly/ym-antiracismalkingpoints

⁵⁸ البيان والتبيين / al-Bayān wa-al-tabyīn (in Arabic). Taḥqīq and sharḥ by ‘Abd as-Salām Muḥammad Hārūn (7th ed.). al-Qāhirah: Maktabah al-Khānjī, pp. 31–33.

⁵⁹ Nadwi, A. H. A. (2014). Prophet of Mercy. Turath Publishing, 48-50.



The Prophetic Community (cont.)

Nurturing – the Prophetic community nurtured members by valuing engagement and promoting a culture of learning:

- The Sahaba were not afraid to ask questions, rather the Prophet Muhammad (S) encouraged and welcomed them to do so. This cultivated a constant environment of learning. Many of the hadith, or the Prophet's (S) sayings, that we know today came from questions asked by the Sahaba, and **no question was deemed unimportant or embarrassing**.
- Having recently joined the community, Salman al-Farsi (RA), was able to participate in and contribute to the strategic planning that occurred in preparation for the Battle of the Trench. Although he proposed a strategy that was completely unheard of to the Arabs in the area – the digging of trenches to fortify defenses – the Prophet Muhammad (S) did not disregard him, but rather **valued his input** to the point that it was implemented as the primary defense mechanism to protect the city of Medina. This strategy ultimately led to their victory.⁶⁰

Belonging – the community fostered a sense of home and belonging for members:

- Salman al-Farsi (RA) was enslaved by a wealthy farm owner. The owner demanded that Salman's (RA) freedom would only be bought with a large sum and the planting of 300 date palm trees – effectively a price that was out of reach for Salman (RA). When he approached the Prophet Muhammad (S) with this, the Prophet Muhammad (S) gathered the entire community together to dig 300 spots for the date palms, paid off the sum to buy Salman his freedom, and then individually planted each date palm seed into the holes dug by the community with his (S) own blessed hands. This grove of dates is present to this day in Madinah. This was one of the many instances in which the Prophetic community came together to welcome and support individuals with unconditional love and acceptance.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Nadwi, A. H. A. (2014). Prophet of Mercy. Turath Publishing, 222-229.

⁶¹ Hamid, A. W. (1995). Companions of The Prophet: v.1. Muslim Education and Literary Services.



Conclusion

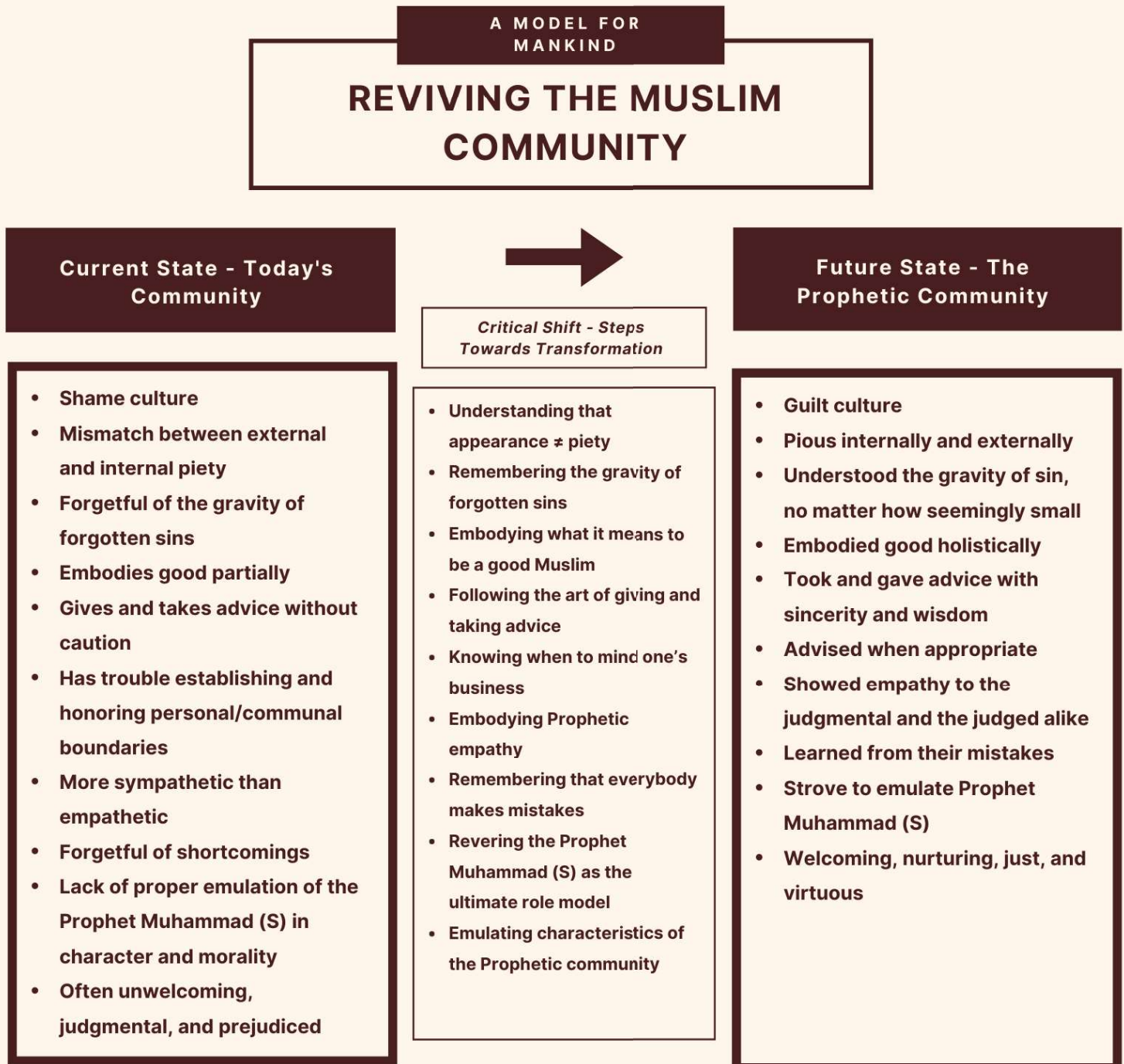
Judgment stigma is a prevalent issue in the American Muslim community, and our communities are hurting from people feeling unwelcome or being pushed away in the name of religion. The stories of judgment and shame in the American Muslim community continue. There is hope, however, to heal if we look to the Seerah and exemplify the beauty and the values the Prophet Muhammad (S) embodied. His example embodied the Qur'an, which cultivated the Prophetic community. By following his (S) example, we can do the same.

The table on the next page presents an overview of characteristics found in the American Muslim community, and it lists the lessons from the subjects covered in Section II: Overcoming Judgment Stigma as the steps towards change: Appearance vs. Piety, Good Muslim ≠ Bad Person, The Gravity of Forgotten Sins, The Art of Naseeha, Minding One's Business: Navigating the Lines, Prophetic Empathy, Everybody Makes Mistakes, Our Ultimate Role Model, and The Prophetic Community.

As we strive to implement these steps towards transformation in our daily life, our communities will be closer to reviving characteristics found in the Prophet Muhammad's (S) community, if God wills it - InshaAllah.



Conclusion (cont.)



Endnotes

Contributions

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This report was put together and reviewed by the National Shuras of Young Muslims and the following individuals. We ask that Allah (swt) accepts and guides all those involved.

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Further Resources

For access to the full Judgment Stigma campaign resources (including infographics and more), visit www.youngmuslims.com.

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The goal of Young Muslims shall be to seek the pleasure of Allah (may He be Glorified and exalted) by educating, facilitating, and developing the Muslim youth in becoming literate, balance-minded contributors of society that work individually and collectively to establish (the true, unadulterated teachings of) Islam in their lives.

