



RAMADAN AND EATING DISORDERS

WRITTEN BY
FIRST STEPS ED



Understanding Ramadan



During the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, Muslims celebrate Ramadan. Ramadan is a very important time in the Islamic calendar for spiritual devotion and an opportunity to demonstrate commitment to your faith.

A key element to Ramadan includes fasting from sunrise to sundown for 30 days, where the practice of abstaining from food and water brings worshippers closer to Allah (or God). This religious event is held in high regard, which can be challenging for those living with an eating disorder.

Ramadan can be a triggering time for someone who is struggling with an eating disorder or relationship with food, or has previous experience of this. Individuals may use this time to disguise their disordered eating under the pretense of their dedication to faith. Those in recovery, or post-recovery, may find this period uncomfortable for many reasons (which we will discuss further in this guide.)

Important!

Whether or not you celebrate Ramadan, it's important to make an effort to understand different cultures and the impact they have on us. Together we can learn how to support friends and family, and promote safe spaces within our communities and wider society.



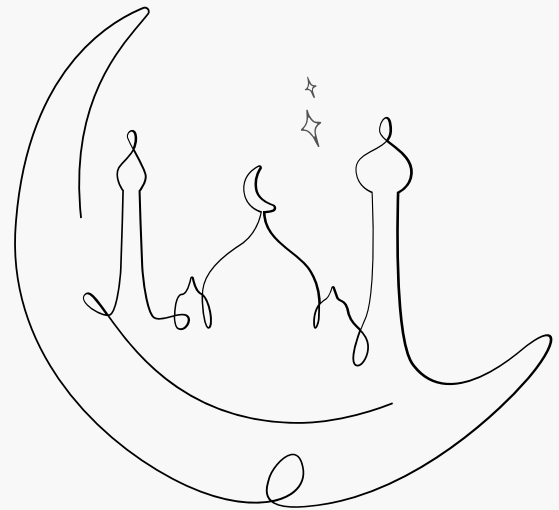
Coping With An Eating Disorder During Ramadan



Fasting is one of the Five Pillars of Islam (the other pillars are faith, prayer, charity and making the pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca.) Whilst Ramadan is also a time for reflection, prayer and time spent with family and friends, fasting is an important act during Ramadan as Muslims believe it enhances their devotion to their faith and brings them closer to Allah.

During Ramadan, Muslims are expected to fast throughout the day with a meal before sunrise known as Suhoor, and an evening meal after sunset known as Iftar. The prolonged month of fasting, with specific timings of meals can be challenging for people with eating disorders.

Ramadan, and other religious festivals which involve periods of fasting, can impact individuals with an eating disorder in a number of ways. Some may struggle with the act of fasting and fall into previous disordered eating behaviours or an old ED old mindset. Others may find themselves in a destructive cycle of bingeing and/or purging, followed by feelings of guilt and shame relating to their recovery, potential relapse and ability to engage in Ramadan and acts of faith.



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I've always loved Ramadan but whilst in recovery for my eating disorder the sense of community and celebration was replaced by isolation and unworthiness. Not knowing the answers or who I could turn to made me question recovery, myself and even my faith but I got there.

Note: not all Muslims who fast for 30 days will have an eating disorder. It is a time for celebration and most Muslims will approach Ramadan as a month of reflection and blessings.

What About Iftar?

Iftar marks the end of each day's fast, brings together the community. It is a part a Ramadan that emphasises a renewed commitment to generosity and charity. Traditionally, it is the formal breaking of the fast with dates and either water or a yogurt drink. Then a pause for prayer and then a full-course meal, consisting of soup, salad, appetisers and mains.

Iftar is very much a social event, involving family and community members. It is common for people to host others for dinner, or to gather as a wider community. It is also common for people to invite and share food with those less fortunate (the spiritual reward for charitable giving is considered to be especially significant during Ramadan.)



Some considerations:

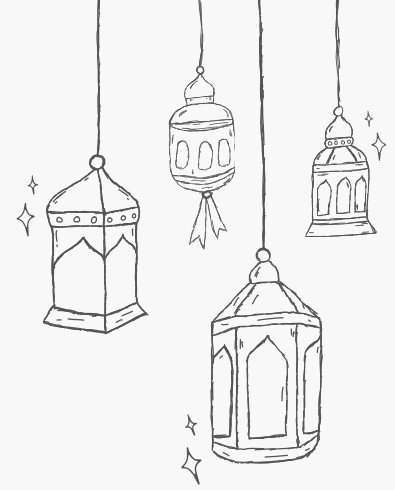
- Make sure you stick to your diet plan or recovery goals, and this might mean structuring Suhoor or Iftar meals around your needs.
- **If you choose to fast**, it is important not to miss Suhoor or Iftar, as this could cause you to relapse or fall back into disordered thoughts and behaviours.
- Likewise, try not to restrict during Iftar because you're worried about a potential binge.
- After the Iftar meal, you might feel full, and for some this can trigger the urge to engage in purging or compensatory behaviours. Remind yourself that it is okay to feel full and think of any distraction techniques you can use during these times (reciting and reflecting on the Qur'an, meditating, watching TV, or undertaking charitable acts)
- Remind yourself of the purpose of Ramadan and meaning of breaking the fast.

Note: If you're worried about yourself or a loved one there are a number of organisation available to offer you advice, support and further signposting. Speak to First Steps ED today to learn more.

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I have struggled with an eating disorder for a while now, for many years undiagnosed due to a dangerous mix of denial, shame and a touch of fear. I'm in a good place now, largely recovered, but I have never regained the full joy that used to come with the holy month of Ramadan. A couple years ago, I made the decision not to fast.

Deciding Whether It's Safe To Fast



The month of Ramadan changes each year with the lunar cycle. Once the dates are confirmed, Muslims will practice fasting from sunrise to sundown for 30 days to demonstrate their dedication to their faith in the face of any external influences and to practise patience and discipline. It is also a time of reflection, gratitude and charity where individuals can gain a greater understanding of the experience of those less fortunate.

Being that it is one of the five pillars of Islam, Fasting is a mandatory practice for Muslims, with the exception of children, pregnant women, the elderly and those who are ill.

Unfortunately, in many communities eating disorders (and other mental illness) are not always recognised to fall under the umbrella of illness which leaves many individuals feeling isolated in their eating difficulties, causing worsening symptoms, relapse or worse.

If you're deciding whether to fast for Ramadan this year, there are a number of key considerations:

- **Who are you fasting for?** Is it Allah, or your eating disorder.
- **Do you have a solid support network?** This can be professionals, or close family and friends who know and understand your situation.
- **Are you in a good place in recovery?** You might recognise that engaging in fasting right now could put you at risk of a relapse which could jeopardise your recovery.

Know that Ramadan will look different this year whether you choose to fast, or not. What is important is that you make a decision that works for you.

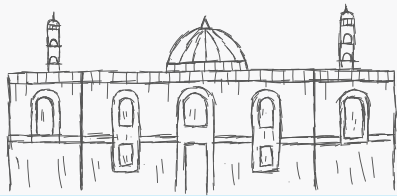
Note: Those who suffer from eating disorders should consult their Doctor before fasting. Fasting does create a medical challenge, and due to potential health complications, you do not have to fast if it is not safe to do so.

In the Quran, the Book of Islam, God (Allah in Arabic) revealed,

“Fast the prescribed number of days; except if any of you is ill or on a journey, let him fast a similar number of days later. For those who cannot endure it for medical reasons, there is a ransom: the feeding of the one poor person for each missed day” [chapter 2 verse 183].

If you decide not to fast...

If you are unable to fast this year, remember there is more to Ramadan than fasting alone. Think about other ways you can connect with your faith and community through prayer, reciting the Quran, donating to charities and volunteering your time, feeding those fasting and, of course, making time for reflection.



So, what next?

- Think of ways you can connect with the meaning of Ramadan and demonstrate your devotion to your faith and Allah. Your community leader might signpost you to local organisations and charities for you to support or get involved with, for example.
- Find someone you can talk to about this decision. This can help you process any underlying emotions such as guilt, worry or sadness around not feeling able to engage in fasting this year.
- Make a plan to ensure you have the food you require during the day, as well as some alone time to do this so not to disturb any family or friends who are fasting. (If others in your household are also not fasting, try to share meals together.)

You might feel like a failure in making this decision, or guilty for not fasting. You might also feel anger towards professionals who have agreed that it is not safe for you to fast.

Something to remember when you feel overwhelmed by these feelings is, **what matters before Allah is you**. It is important to recognise that your eating disorder is a mental illness, and something which you cannot control right now. You can still engage in the spirit of Ramadan in other ways and receive the same reward.

Prioritising yourself and your recovery today means you can engage more fully in Ramadan in the future when you're more able to connect with Allah through fasting, without the distraction of ill health.

What happens if I do engage in disordered eating behaviours?

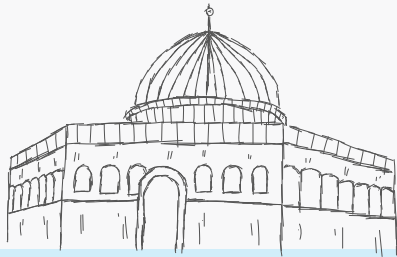
Ramadan can be a challenging time, so try not to be too hard on yourself if you engage with your eating disorder. Try to understand why this happened and what you can do differently next time. If you need to, ask someone for help or increase your planned strategies.

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Whilst fasting is a huge part of Ramadan, it is also a time for celebration and inner reflection. "I am no less of a Muslim if I cannot fast" I say to myself. I prioritise my recovery, and I focus on my inner reflection. I read the Quran, volunteer and help out in my local communities and celebrate with them. Your recovery matters. You matter.

If you decide to fast...

Some individuals will feel as though they are ready for Ramadan and the challenges involved in recovery. And if this sounds like you, a good first step would be to think about any triggering moments or situations which might arise so you feel more prepared.



Other considerations:

If you choose to fast but find yourself struggling with negative thoughts try to be kind to yourself. Know that you can observe Ramadan in other ways so find something that feels right for you and your health. That might mean only fasting on selected days, or choosing not to fast for the remainder.

Family and friends may comment on your decision to fast and have doubts as to whether you're 'up to it.' Whilst this can feel frustrating, know that this comes from a place of warmth and concern for you. Explain how you came to the decision and shut down any conversations you find triggering.

It is a personal choice whether or not to fast. However, if you do choose to fast, then it is important to speak to a professional, your doctor or someone from your healthcare team. It is also important to involve someone you trust in any planning so they can provide support throughout Ramadan and check-in with you.

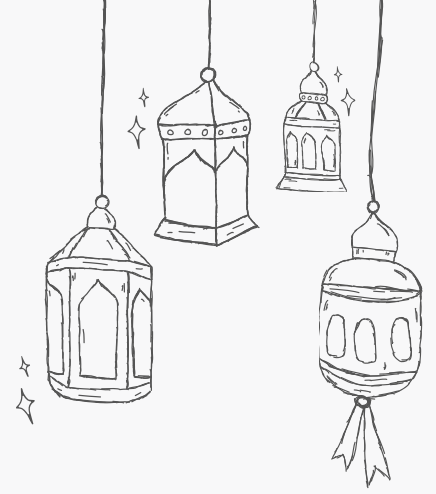
You might decide that rather than observing every fast throughout the 30 days, you review how you're feeling day-to-day. Each morning you can ask yourself:

- How am I feeling today?
- How will fasting make me feel?

What happens if I do engage in disordered eating behaviours?

Do not give up and try to learn from the experience. It might be useful to think about what you might do differently next time. If you need to, ask someone for help or increase your planned strategies. Look back at what has worked before when you have had the urge to engage in any ED behaviours.

Managing Difficult Conversations



It's can be difficult to speak to your family and community about your illness and feelings about Ramadan. Eating disorder impact people of all ages, genders and sizes, so you may look okay to them even if the reality is very different.

If you can, talk to them in advance and let them know how you're feeling (any fears, thoughts and anxieties around the holy month.) It might feel difficult but the more aware they are of your need, the more able they are to support you.

It might be that you choose to only speak to one member of the family to confide in. That's okay too, and they could help you inform others when you feel more confident.

If all of the above sounds difficult, you could try to write down your feelings first. Don't forget to write down some ways they can support you, and ways you'll be managing any difficult situations so they know what to expect.

Other considerations:

You'll notice an emphasis on food and fasting during conversations this month which can be triggering for those struggling with and eating disorder. It's important to think about how to manage different conversations and topics which might arise over the next 30 days, and think of our key responses or alternatives to help you navigate if these situations arise. Check out some of our ideas above.

DIFFICULT COMMENTS

"Why aren't you fasting?"

"Are you not dedicated to your faith?"

"Wish I had your willpower..."

"Fasting must be quite easy when you have an ED"

"Ooh that's a lot of food, well done."

POSSIBLE REPLIES

"Ramadan will be a time for restoring my connection with God and myself."

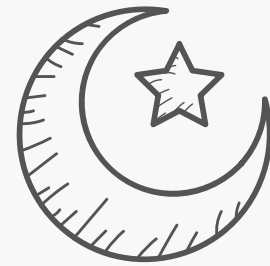
"Many people will be exempt from fasting, and sometimes the reasons are not visible. This is my business and something I have thought a lot about,"

"I'd appreciate it if we can talk about something else. "

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It took a lot for me to be in that place, to accept that I would not be able to enjoy Ramadan in the conventional sense and in the same way as my community might be. At the time I felt guilty and questioned my own commitment and connection to God. I felt isolated from my community, and worried about the stigma and shame around mental illness.

Supporting Someone With An Eating Disorder



If you know someone who is struggling with an eating disorder and navigating Ramadan, it is important to be mindful of their experience. There will be many individuals who will not be able to fast due to illness or other personal reasons so be kind to each other this Ramadan.

If a family member has an eating disorder...

- If they are struggling to decide what to do, remind them that they are exempt from fasting due to illness (no matter what their weight, shape or appearance.)
- If they decide not to fast, accept their decision. It's likely they have given it a lot of thought and have decided that they need to prioritise their health. Instead, help them find alternative ways to celebrate Ramadan and worship God.
- Be mindful of any comments you make around fasting, food and the eating disorder.
- Make sure to include them in Suhoor and Iftar, even if they are not fasting.
- Do not pressure them into eating too much during these times.
- As a parent or relative, you might worry about possible consequences within your community. Try to feel confident that despite what others may feel, this is what is right for your family. Find comfort in listening to those with lived experience, and share any resources with your community to raise awareness for eating disorders and their impact.



There is a lot of misunderstanding when you are a Muslim with an eating disorder. Your doctors want to you prioritise recovery, and your community want you to prioritise your faith. It isn't easy to choose a side because both arguments are convincing. For me it was heartbreaking.

If someone you know has an eating disorder:

- Offer them support and understanding throughout Ramadan and involve them in any activities or events they feel comfortable with.
- Educate yourself around eating disorders and what they might be experiencing at the moment.
- Make an effort to raise awareness to help break down stigma in your local community. Whilst this isn't a direct way of supporting them, they'll appreciate the effort you're making.

First Steps ED is a leading specialist Eating Disorder charity, offering an array of therapy and person-centred support services to people of all ages, genders and backgrounds. Our programme of psychotherapy, peer support, groups and creative therapies helps those with eating disorders and associated mental health problems.

Alongside our specialist eating disorder services is our community engagement work. This includes our psycho-educational workshops in schools and groups within the community, helping young people and adults change their body image perception and relationship with food.

We also deliver professional training to healthcare professionals, GPs, Dentists, social care staff and teachers and mental nurses in schools amongst other staff working in roles that support young people to help them spot the signs and provide support.

NEED MORE INSIGHT?

Visit our website

www.firststepsed.co.uk

