

LIVE CRASH COURSE

# Islamic psychology, made simple

One map of the inner self. Three fictional people.  
Two lenses, side by side.



Original episode



**ASK**

drop your question in chat

FIRST, A DEFINITION

# Not “psychology for Muslims”

## Psychology for Muslims

Western methods, adapted for Muslim clients

≠

## Islamic psychology

‘ilm al-nafs: a map of the soul, its faculties and how it grows

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ROOTS · AROUND 900 YEARS AGO

# Al-Ghazālī and the heart

## Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn

Revival of the Religious Sciences



## Marvels of the Heart

how the heart, mind and self interact



## Disciplining the Soul

murāqabah: watch yourself  
muḥāsabah: review your day  
train habits step by step

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A STORY · AL-GHAZĀLĪ AS A STUDENT

# The robbers and the notebooks

As a young student, al-Ghazālī was travelling home with his notebooks: years of lessons, written by hand. Robbers stopped the caravan and took everything. He ran after their leader and begged for one thing back: his notes.

The leader laughed. "You claim to know this knowledge, yet we take your papers and you know nothing?" Then he threw them back.

Al-Ghazālī later said this was a warning from God, spoken through a thief. He spent the next three years learning by heart what he had only written down, so that no one could ever take it from him again.

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A STORY · AL-GHAZĀLĪ AT THE HEIGHT OF HIS FAME

# When the famous professor lost his voice

Years later he was the most celebrated scholar in Baghdad, teaching hundreds of students at the Nizāmiyya. Then, at the height of his fame, his tongue would not move. He could not teach, he could barely eat, and the doctors found nothing wrong with his body.

He saw the truth: his heart was chasing reputation, not God. So he left it all, position, wealth and applause, and spent about ten years in quiet, prayer and honest self-examination.

What he wrote after that journey, the *Iḥyā'*, has helped people tend their hearts for nine hundred years. His lesson for us: knowledge has to live in the heart, not just on paper. And when the inner life is unwell, the body may tell us before we are ready to admit it.

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ROOTS · THE HOSPITALS

# The **bīmāristān**

## Baghdad

al-‘Aḡudī · 10th century

## Damascus

al-Nūrī · 12th century

## Cairo

al-Manṣūrī · 13th century



gardens



running water



music



recitation



good food

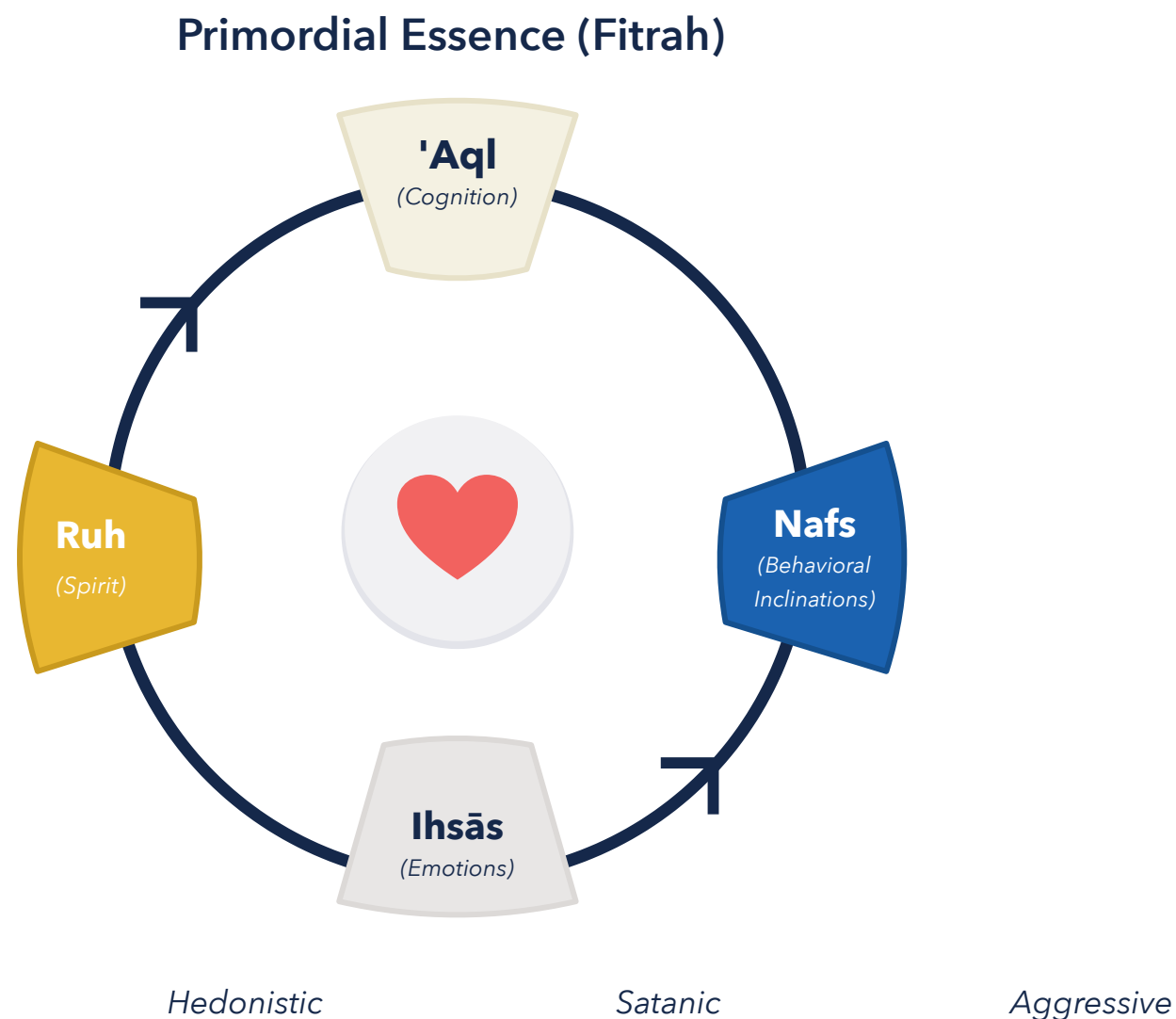


free care

The setting was part of the treatment.

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## THE MODEL IN ONE PICTURE

- **'Aql**      cognition: thinking, judgement
- **Nafs**      behavioural inclinations: urges, habits
- **Ihsās**      emotions
- **Rūḥ**      the spirit
- **Qalb**      the heart, at the centre

Khan, Keshavarzi et al. (2024), Figure 1 · redrawn

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HOW THE SELF GROWS

# Three states of the **nafs**

## Ammārah

the self that pushes

*Qur'an 12:53*



## Lawwāmah

the self that blames itself

*Qur'an 75:2*



## Muṭma'innah

the self at peace

*Qur'an 89:27*

**LOCATE**

## where are you this week?

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## CASE A · FICTIONAL · NAFS-PRIMARY · 1 / 4

Sam, early 30s: **what's going on?**

## WHAT WE SEE

Late-night scrolling and spending · snaps when tired · guilt, then broken promises

The problem as Sam and family would describe it.

## PRIMARY · NAFS

**Nafs leading**

Urges and habits are in the driving seat.

## 'AQL · COGNITION

**Knows, but overruled**

Sam knows better; in the moment, the urge wins.

## IḤSĀS · EMOTIONS

**Guilt = *lawwāmah* awake**

The guilt is conscience waking up: a good sign.

## QALB · THE HEART

**Unsettled**

At the centre, the heart feels pulled and restless.

## WHAT KEEPS IT GOING

**Habits of the nafs, weak restraint**

Each time Sam gives in, the next urge gets stronger.

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CASE A · FICTIONAL · NAFS-PRIMARY · 2 / 4

# What we'd do: the Islamic lens

## 1 Muḥāsabah

5-minute nightly review

A daily self-check: what pulled me, what helped, what next?

## 2 Dhikr pause

when the urge hits

Remembering God puts a gap between the urge and the act.

## 3 Akhlāq

practise ṣabr, restraint

Character is trained like a muscle: small, repeated wins.

## 4 Community

an accountability friend

Someone trusted checks in, so it is harder to slip.

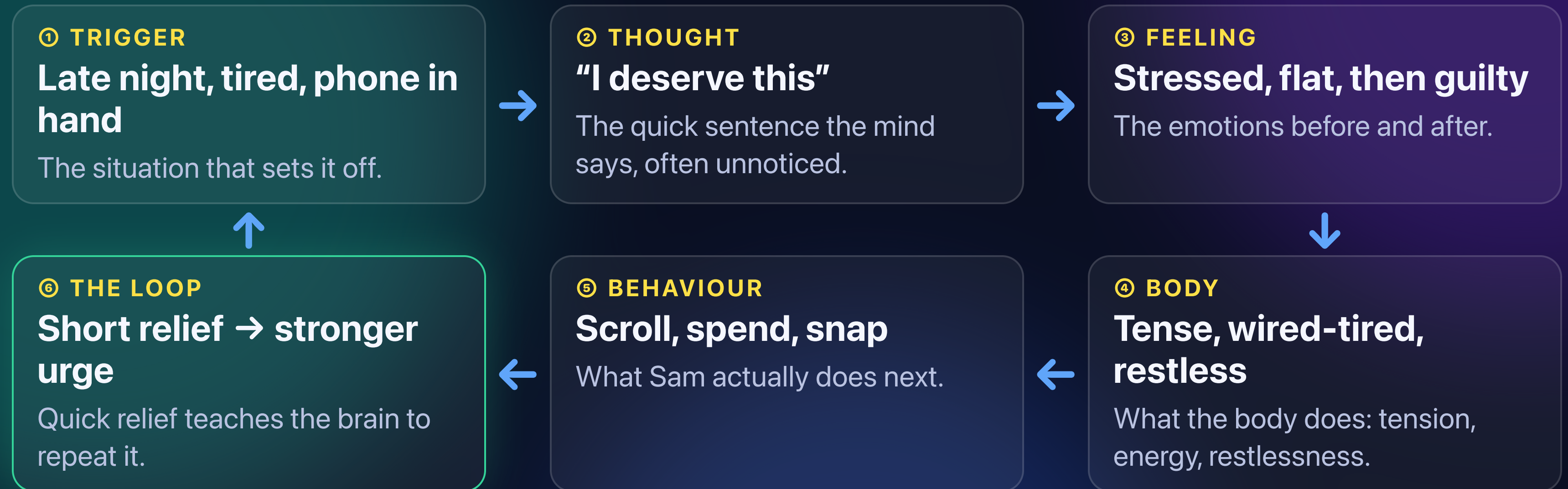
Aim: toward *muṭma'innah*, the self at peace

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## CASE A · SAME PERSON, WESTERN LENS · 3 / 4

# The CBT cycle: how the loop runs



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## CASE A · SAME PERSON, WESTERN LENS · 4 / 4

# What we'd do: the Western lens

**1 CBT thought check**  
Spot the "I deserve this" thought and question it.

**2 Motivational interviewing**  
Draw out Sam's own reasons to change, without lecturing.

**3 Urge surfing**  
Watch the urge rise and fall, like a wave, without acting.

**4 Stimulus control**  
Change the setting: the phone charges outside the bedroom.

**LENSES MEET****Both track triggers, build a pause, use support**

Aim: fewer episodes, and choices that match Sam's values.

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CASE B · FICTIONAL · RŪḤ-PRIMARY · 1 / 4

# Alex, early 40s: what's going on?

## WHAT WE SEE

**Copes at work · prayer feels empty · life feels flat · “going through the motions”**

Fine on the outside, empty on the inside; not in crisis.



## PRIMARY · RŪḤ

### Feels cut off

The spiritual connection feels distant, though the rituals continue.

## IḤSĀS · EMOTIONS

### Flat

Feelings are muted: little joy, little sadness.

## QALB · THE HEART

### Dulled (*qaswah*)

*Qaswah*: a hardened heart that feels little, even in prayer.



## WHAT KEEPS IT GOING

**Routine without presence; distance from purpose**

Acts done on autopilot stop nourishing, so the gap widens.

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CASE B · FICTIONAL · RŪḤ-PRIMARY · 2 / 4

# What we'd do: the Islamic lens

## 1 Khushū'

presence over quantity

Keep the obligatory prayers; slow one down, be fully present.

## 2 Tafakkur

reflection, time in nature

Slow down and notice creation; let wonder return.

## 3 Dhikr

a daily anchor

A short daily remembrance that keeps the heart tethered.

## 4 Khidmah

serve others · good company

Helping people, in good company, refills what routine drained.

Aim: a **living connection** with God

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## CASE B · SAME PERSON, WESTERN LENS · 3 / 4

# The 4P map: **why now, why stuck?**

**FIRST, CHECK****Screen for depression: mood, interest, sleep, appetite**

Flat meaning and depression can overlap; both deserve care.



## PREDISPOSING

**Years of pushing through**

What made Alex vulnerable, long before now.

## PRECIPITATING

**Busy stretch; drifted from friends**

What tipped things recently.

## PERPETUATING

**Withdraw → less reward → flatter**

The loop that keeps it going now: our target.

## PROTECTIVE

**Work, family, faith still matter**

Strengths to build on: what is still working.

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## CASE B · SAME PERSON, WESTERN LENS · 4 / 4

# What we'd do: **the Western lens**

## 1 Behavioural activation

Act first, motivation follows: schedule small rewarding activities.

## 2 Activity + mood diary

Notice which activities lift mood, even slightly.

## 3 ACT · values

Name what matters most, then take one small step.

## 4 ACT · defusion

See “nothing matters” as a thought, not a fact.

### LENSES MEET

## At values and meaning

Aim: a life that matches Alex's chosen values.

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CASE C · FICTIONAL · 'AQL-PRIMARY · 1 / 4

# Jordan, late 20s: **what's going on?**

**WHAT WE SEE**

**Overthinks every choice · replays conversations · needs certainty ·  
late-night what-ifs**

A mind that won't switch off, especially at night.

**PRIMARY · 'AQL****Overloaded, working alone**

The thinking mind is trying to carry everything by itself.

**ALSO AT WORK*****Waswās* feeds doubt**

Intrusive, whispered doubts that keep reopening settled questions.

**QALB · THE HEART****No rest in *tawakkul***

Without trust in God after effort, the heart can't rest.

**WHAT KEEPS IT  
GOING****Trying to control outcomes alone**

More thinking feels safer, but it feeds the doubt.

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CASE C · FICTIONAL · 'AQL-PRIMARY · 2 / 4

## What we'd do: the Islamic lens

**1 Tafakkur**  
bounded reflection, not rumination  
Think it through once, with a limit, then stop.

**2 Istikhārah → act → tawakkul**  
pray, decide, let go  
Ask God for guidance, decide, then leave the outcome to God.

**3 Murāqabah**  
return to the present  
Gently bring attention back to now, aware God sees.

**4 Learn**  
from a trusted teacher  
Correct mistaken beliefs that fuel doubt, with someone knowledgeable.

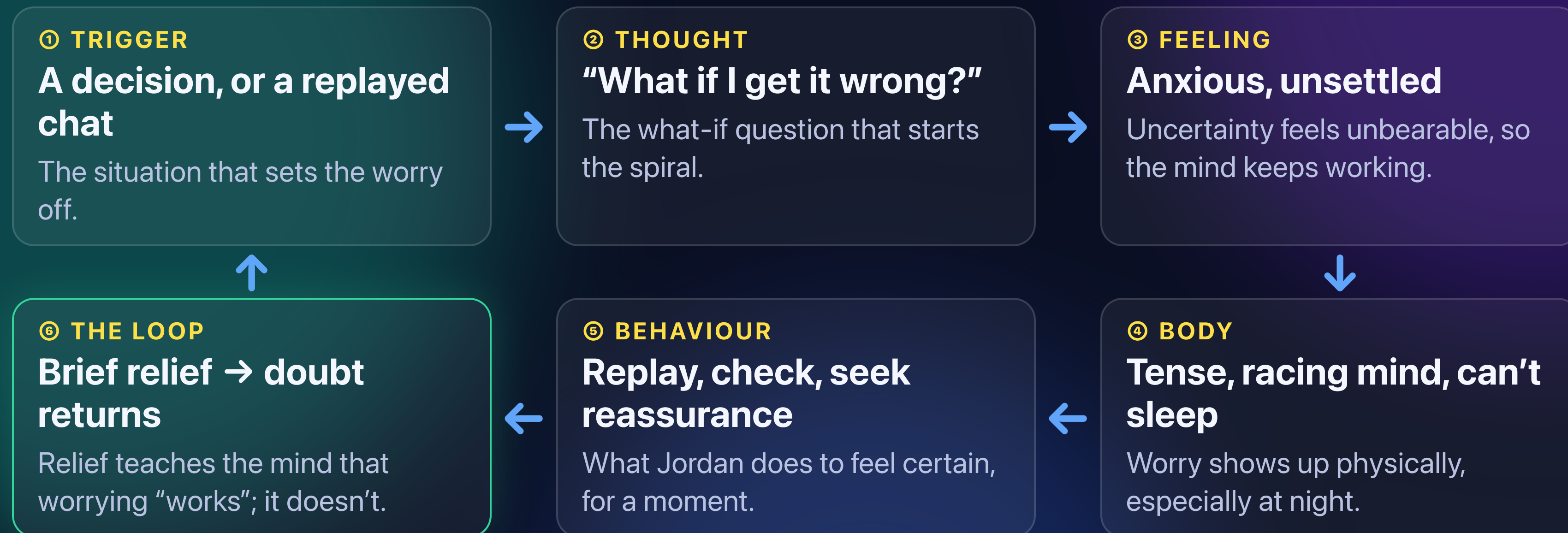
Aim: a clear mind, **a heart at rest** · compulsive religious doubt? refer: possible OCD

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## CASE C · SAME PERSON, WESTERN LENS · 3 / 4

# The worry cycle: how the loop runs



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## CASE C · SAME PERSON, WESTERN LENS · 4 / 4

# What we'd do: **the Western lens**

**1 CBT restructuring**

Weigh the evidence: how likely is the feared outcome, really?

**2 Worry time**

Park worries for one set 20-minute slot each day.

**3 Metacognitive work**

Change beliefs about worry itself, e.g. "worrying keeps me safe".

**4 ERP, only if OCD**

With a clinician: face the doubt, without the compulsion, until anxiety settles.

**LENSES MEET****Stop feeding the loop; come back to now**

Aim: act despite uncertainty, with a heart at rest.

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## CORE VIRTUES AS WORKING TOOLS

**Ṣabr**

patient  
steadiness

*≈ distress tolerance*

**Shukr**

gratitude

*≈ gratitude practice*

**Tawakkul**

effort, then trust

*≈ acceptance*

**Iḥsān**

doing it well, as if  
seen

*≈ mindful attention*

**Ḥilm**

calm forbearance

*≈ emotion regulation*



**PICK**

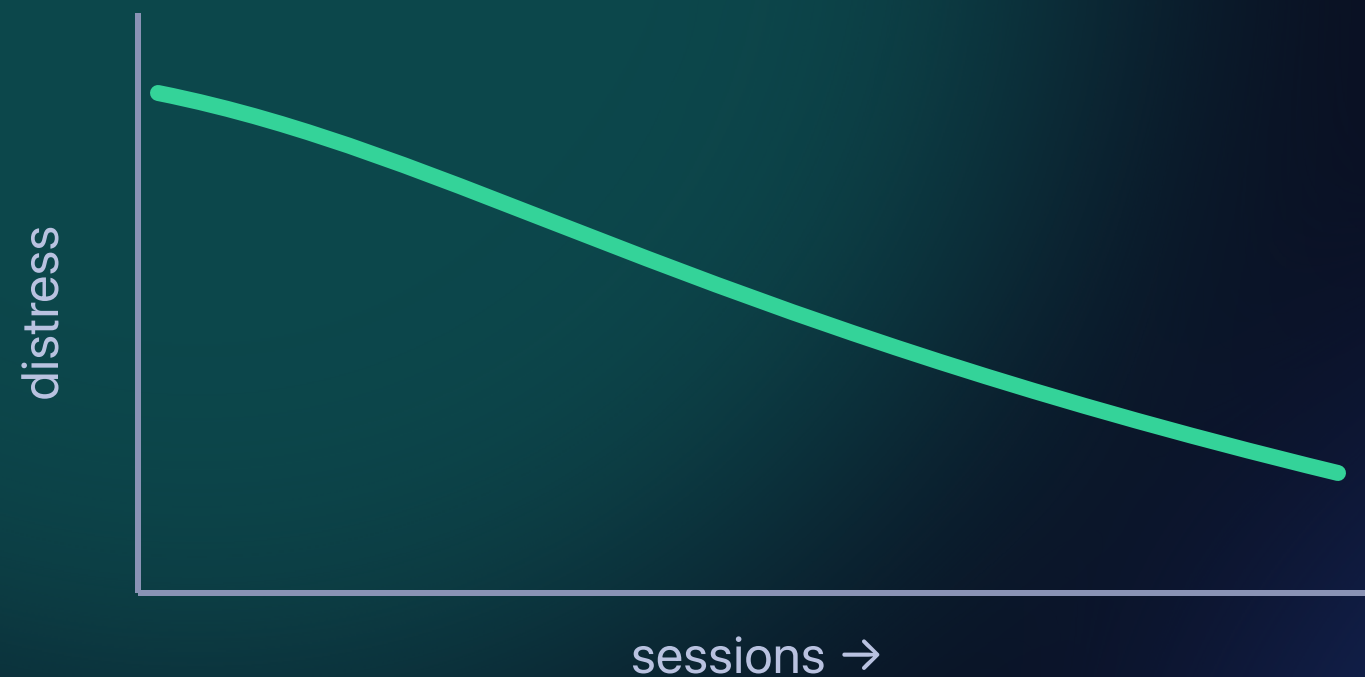
**one virtue for this week**

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WHAT ONE OUTCOME STUDY FOUND

# Islamically integrated therapy: early data



**5** clinicians  
**107** patients  
**420** sessions

Illustrative line, not study data · preliminary, no control group

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READ FURTHER

# References

1. Rothman, A., & Coyle, A. (2018). Toward a framework for Islamic psychology and psychotherapy: An Islamic model of the soul. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 57(5), 1731–1744. [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6132620](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6132620)
2. Khan, F., Keshavarzi, H., Ahmad, M., Ashai, S., & Sanders, P. (2024). Application of Traditional Islamically Integrated Psychotherapy (TIIP) and its clinical outcome on psychological distress among American Muslims in outpatient therapy. *Spirituality in Clinical Practice*. [psycnet.apa.org/fulltext/2024-29380-001.html](https://psycnet.apa.org/fulltext/2024-29380-001.html)
3. Cambridge Muslim College. Developing a model of Islamic psychology and psychotherapy. [cambridgemuslimcollege.ac.uk](https://cambridgemuslimcollege.ac.uk)

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## RECAP

**Nafs**

Case A

**Rūḥ**

Case B

**‘Aql**

Case C

**Qalb**

the heart, at the centre

# Your questions



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**ASK**

your question now