

رَمَضَانَ – Ramadan & Me

For many non-Muslims this word has little relevance but for Muslims this word is a capsule. It holds the sense of excitement, the sweet aromas we scent our homes with, the smell of traditional cooked foods filling the air, the sounds of laughter from loved ones as we break our fast, the hangry personality that we adopt when counting down the seconds to finally eat, hearing the calm recitations of the Quran, the lack of sleep due to the late night prayers performed in the mosque or at home, getting closer to our faith, reading, engaging and pushing ourselves through a marathon of a month in the hope and faith that we end the month coming out as better individuals spiritually and physically. It's a rollercoaster to say the least but for a lot of Muslims it can be the best part of the year. The one time of the year where everyone comes together and feels this communal belonging to becoming better and closer to their faith whilst remembering to look after one another.

So, to many who don't understand this word it's important to ask, what is Ramadan? For Muslims, Ramadan is one of the five pillars in Islam and a compulsory month that we all observe. There is an assumption that it is a month only about not eating and drinking water from dawn to dusk, but there is so much more to it. To fast also means to not engage in sexual acts, swear, lie, and take part in any act that would be classed as a sin as this can also break the fast. There are individuals who are exempt from the fasting including menstruating women and individuals that if they were to fast it would cause more harm than benefit. The latter gives a compensation through charity. The fast starts at dawn and therefore just before it begins, Muslims wake to eat and this time is known as "suhoor"/ "sehri"/ "futohala", depending on the culture of the individual. The fast is then broken at dusk and this is referred to as "iftar".

Muslims follow the lunar calendar and this year Ramadhan falls in the month of March and lasts 30 days. Ramadhan is split into three parts where the first ten days are focused on the Mercy of God, the second ten days are focussed on seeking God's forgiveness and the last ten days are focussed on seeking protection from the Hellfire. It is within the last ten days in which the first verses of the Qur'an were first revealed. Therefore, some describe Ramadhan as the month of the Qur'an and why many Muslims focus on getting closer to the Qur'an by reciting it more, understanding the meaning and even memorising the verses. For many Muslims, it is an opportunity to improve themselves spiritually and physically, giving more in charity, giving up bad habits and starting good new habits. Evenings in Ramadhan are occupied with the night prayer, Tarawih, in which Muslims can optionally perform by going to the mosque or praying at home. Commonly, within the 30 days, the whole Qur'an is recited during Tarawih hence this prayer can be long but there is reward in taking part in this.

Ramadan is a communal time where individuals from different cultures come together under the umbrella of one faith, to improve themselves. Therefore, as a medical student on an out placement it can often feel isolating when not around a community having to navigate a new environment, an area that may not have a huge Muslim population and maybe being the only Muslim in the placement. The early starts and late evenings can have an impact on students especially when having to get to placement for an early morning start. Exams can also feel extra stressful because many students feel compromised with wanting to increase their spiritual relationship with their faith but also having to spend their time revising for exams. Each medical student has a very different relationship with their faith during this time, some find it easier than others and so each journey through this month is a unique one. In the Southwest it is important for us to be acknowledge that the population of Muslim students is a lot lower than many other areas of the United Kingdom. Therefore, it means it is of even more importance to have a better understanding as General Practitioners, especially those teaching Muslim medical students, of a month that holds great significance for a minority in the year.

As a fifth-year student, it has been an interesting experience navigating Ramadan during my General Practice placement. I am from Manchester which has meant I am often very far from

family which can make me feel homesick at times and isolated when it comes to placement, especially when I am not with friends who observe Ramadan with me. What I have found helpful are the small things that my GP has done to accommodate such as making me aware of spare rooms for my prayers, checking in with me if I seem extra tired that day, asking me what I will be doing for Eid (the celebration at the end of the fasting month) and showing an interest in the month. Particularly, I have appreciated the empathy shown when my GP supervisors are conscious of the time I start and end my placement, ensuring I can get back to my accommodation in time for iftar and allowing me to have a later start as they understand I have been up at night engaged in prayer.

There is such importance in understanding that every experience is unique. Asking questions, not being afraid of talking to your students about what they would find easier and showing interest are simple ways to make an environment more accommodating and it's a way to get to know the demographic you may be teaching. Muslims love to open their doors to others during this time and if you are intrigued or interested in attending an iftar with your students or colleagues, the Muslim medic society at Bristol this year is part of the "Grand Iftar" on 25th March and will be raising funds for the earthquakes in Turkey and Syria.

I'd like to end on suggesting being inquisitive, be polite and be open to getting to know your students and colleagues better and a simple yet effective way of doing this is simply asking "how can we make placement easier for you?"