

Ramadan For New Muslims

Second Edition



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Preface

Ramadan is the most blessed month of the year. What does Ramadan mean to Muslims in general and how can a new Muslim benefit from his first Ramadan?

Regarding Ramadan, Allah says in His book what means:

[O you who believe! Fasting is prescribed for you, even as it was prescribed for those before you, that you may ward off (evil); (Fast) a certain number of days; and (for) him who is sick among you, or on a journey, (the same) number of other days; and for those who can afford it there is a ransom: the feeding of a man in need - but who so does good of his own accord, it is better for him: and that you fast is better for you if you did but know - The month of Ramadan in which was revealed the Quran, a guidance for mankind, and clear proofs of the guidance, and the Criterion (of right and wrong). And whosoever of you is present, let him fast the month, and whosoever of you is sick or on a journey, (let him fast the same) number of other days. Allah desires for you ease; He desires not hardship for you; and (He desires) that you should

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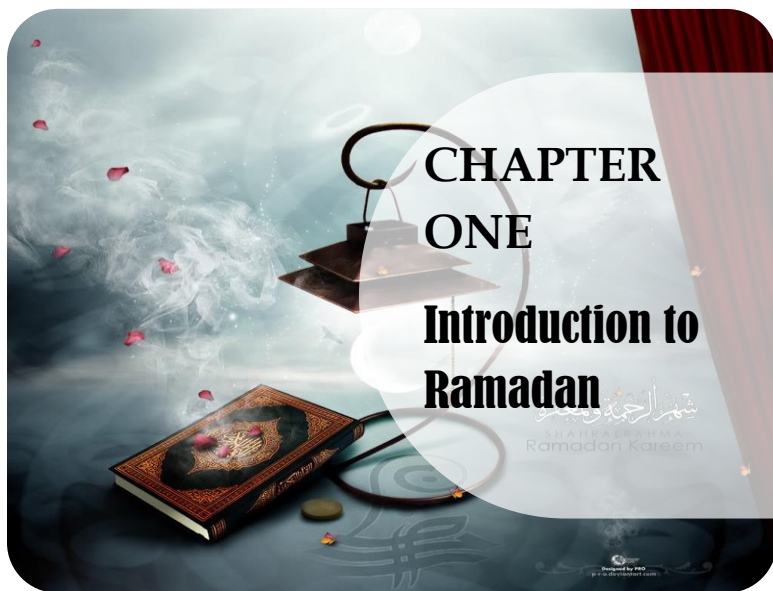
complete the period, and that you should magnify Allah for having guided you, and that peradventure you may be thankful.]

(Quran - Al-Baqarah 4: 183-185)

To attain God-conscience and the great reward of Allah, a Muslim needs to learn the morals and lessons from fasting the month of Ramadan.

OnIslam.net, therefore, produces this book, whose contents are based mainly on informative articles, to help new Muslims, and even non-Muslims, understand the month of Ramadan and how it impacts our lives.

We ask Allah Almighty to guide us all to what is best in this world and in the Hereafter, *Ameen*.



- *Month of the Quran*
- *Other Acts of Worship*
- *How Muslims Fast?*
- *Charity in Ramadan*
- *The Last Third*
- *Eid Al-Fitr*
- *It's Not Over Till It's Over*

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Fasting the lunar month of Ramadan is such an important Pillar of Islam that Muslims believe that if one dies without having made up the missed fasts, the guardian (or heir) must make them up, for they are a debt owed to Allah. The Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) said:



“Whoever observes fasts during the month of Ramadan out of sincere faith and hoping to attain Allah's rewards then all his past sins will be forgiven.”
(Al-Bukhari)

Muslims believe that the influence of the devils on the believers who obey Allah is diminished. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said:

“When the month of Ramadan starts, the gates of the heaven are opened and the gates of Hell are closed and the devils are chained” (Al-Bukhari)

Month of the Quran

Muslims believe that the first verses of the Quran (Surat Al-`Alaq 96:1-5) were revealed in the month of Ramadan while Muhammad (peace be upon him) was in spiritual retreat in the cave of Hira outside of Makkah. Years later when the fast of Ramadan was made compulsory, the Angel Jibreel used to come to Muhammad (peace be upon him) every day during Ramadan so that the latter could recite all that had been revealed so far of the Quran. In his final year, the Prophet recited the entire Quran twice in Ramadan.

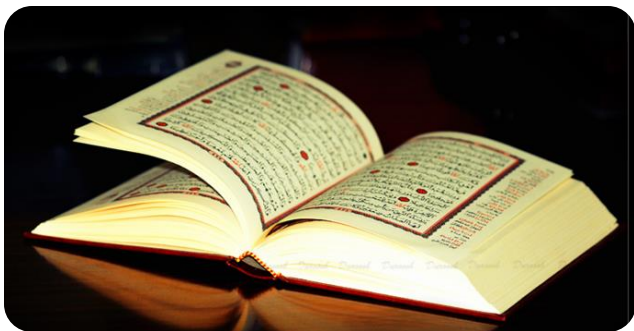
Muslims continue the tradition of reading the entire Quran at least once during Ramadan. In Muslim countries, it is not at all unusual in this month to see many people reading the Quran while riding the bus or metro to and from work. Others find time early in the morning, late at night, or at intervals throughout the day.

Many others read or recite the Quran during *Tarawih* Prayers, which are held only during Ramadan, or in private late night Prayers called *Tahajjud*.

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Muslims who cannot yet read Arabic will spend some time each day listening to a tape or CD of the Quran being recited. Muslims consider Ramadan to be a good time to get into the habit of reading at least some of the Quran or its translation every day, and if they haven't read either of them cover to cover, Ramadan is the time to do it.



Other Acts of Worship

In addition to reading the Quran, Muslims try to spend more time in *dhikr* (remembrance of Allah) during this month and make an effort to perform *Tarawih* Prayer, preferably in congregation. Muslims also sometimes perform the late night Prayer called *Tahajjud*. They may do this before or after eating the pre-dawn meal, just before the *Fajr* (Dawn) Prayer.

Ramadan is also a favorite time for *Umrah* - a visit to the Kaabah in Makkah. When performed in Ramadan, *Umrah* takes the same reward as *Hajj* (pilgrimage), but it does not replace the obligatory *Hajj*.





How Muslims Fast?

According to Muslims, fasting means abstaining not only from food and drink, but also from sexual intercourse, lying, arguing, and back-biting. While fasting, Muslims must be careful to restrain their tongues, temper, and even their gaze. Ramadan is the time for Muslims to learn to control themselves and to develop their spiritual side.

Basically, Muslims try to have a pre-dawn meal, known as *sahur*, before they begin fasting. The fast lasts from dawn to sunset. As soon as the sun has set, Muslims break their fast without delay. Generally, Muslims may break their fast with a small amount of food - the *sunnah* is to do so with an odd number of dates - and then perform the *Maghrib* (Sunset) Prayer before eating a full meal.

For more information on the rules of fasting, including who is exempted, see [Fasting: Meaning and Rules](#) and [All About Ramadan](#).

Charity in Ramadan

Ramadan is also the month of charity. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said, "...Whoever draws nearer (to Allah) by performing any of the (optional) good deeds in (this month), shall receive the same reward as performing an obligatory deed at any other time; and whoever performs an obligatory deed in (this month), shall receive the reward of performing seventy obligations at any other time. It is the month of patience, and the reward of patience is Paradise. It is the month of charity, and a month in which a believer's sustenance is increased. Whoever gives food to a fasting person to break his fast shall have his sins forgiven, and he will be saved from the Hell-Fire, and he shall have the same reward as the fasting person, without his reward being diminished at all." (Ibn Khuzaymah)

Ibn Abbas, one of Muhammad's Companions, narrated: "The Prophet was the most generous amongst the people, and he used to be more so in the month of Ramadan when Jibreel visited him, and Jibreel used to meet him on every night of Ramadan till the end of the month. The Prophet used to recite the Holy Quran to

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Jibreel, and when Jibreel met him, he used to be more generous than a fast wind (which causes rain and welfare).” (Al-Bukhari)

Thus Muslims should try to give generously in Ramadan, both *sadaqah* (optional charity) and *zakat al-mal* (obligatory charity). *Sadaqah* does not only have to be money. It can also be a good deed -such as helping another person - done for the sake of Allah and without expecting any reward from the person. Most Muslims pay their *zakah* during Ramadan because the reward is so much greater in that month.

It is obligatory for every Muslim to pay a small amount of *zakat al-fitr* before the end of Ramadan. This money is collected and given to the poorest of the poor so that they may also enjoy the festivities on Eid Al-Fitr.

And because of the great reward for feeding a fasting person, in many places *iftar* (the break-fast meal at sunset) is served in mosques, with the food donated or brought by individuals to share pot-luck style. In some Muslim countries, tables are set up on the sidewalks or outside of mosques to serve *iftar* to the poor and others. Such

traditions also build a sense of brotherhood and community.

Families and friends also like to share *iftar*. However, sometimes this generosity is exaggerated so that Ramadan becomes a month of lavish tables and overeating.

This goes against the spirit of Ramadan and should be avoided. (See also: [Distinguishing Culture from Religion in Ramadan](#))





■ The Last Third

Muslims also believe that the last ten days of Ramadan are the holiest of all, and try to make even greater efforts at that time to increase their worship. The holiest night of all, *Laylat Al-Qadr*, falls on one of the odd numbered nights of the last ten days.



Eid Al-Fitr

The public celebration at the end of Ramadan, on the first day of the month of Shawwal, is called *Eid Al-Fitr*. After sunset on the 29th of Ramadan, Muslims wait for the announcement of whether the new moon has been sighted, which means that Ramadan is finished and the next day is *Eid*. In that case, there are no *Tarawih* Prayers that night. If the moon has not been sighted, then there is one more day of fasting and the *Tarawih* Prayers are performed.

The *Eid* is celebrated with public Prayers and a sermon, often followed by some form of *halal* (lawful) celebration such as games for the children or sweets shared by everyone. It is a happy day for all. Although *Eid Al-Fitr* lasts only one day, in Muslim countries, schools, offices, and shops are often closed for two or three days.



■ It's Not Over Till It's Over

If any of the days of fasting were missed, they must be made up before the next Ramadan. Muslims generally should try to make them up as soon as possible because any days that are missed are considered as a debt to Allah. Muslims believe that if someone dies without having made up the fasts, the guardian or heir should fast the remaining days.

For Muslims, it is a *sunnah* to fast six days during the month of Shawwal, the lunar month immediately following Ramadan. Muslims believe that if a Muslim fasts all of Ramadan and then fasts any six days in Shawwal, the reward will be as if he or she has fasted the whole year. Many Muslims do take advantage of this mercy from Allah.



CHAPTER TWO

Ready For Your First Ramadan? Practical Advice

- *Getting Into Fasting Shape*
- *Understanding Your Hunger Cycle*
- *Know What to Eat and Drink*
- *Know How to Get Over the Mental Fog*
- *Distract Yourself*
- *Don't Be Negative*
- *Take a Nap*
- *Don't Give up*
- *Reflect on the Spiritual*

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For new Muslims or those who plan on fasting for the first time this Ramadan, the month looms largely. It is a source of hope and excitement.

But for those new to fasting, it can also be a source of anxiety especially when Ramadan falls in a summer month when days are long and hot.

Add to anxieties the fact that a new Muslim may not have the foundations of faith to take spiritual advice on fasting to heart yet. And all this can take the joy right out of Ramadan.

To ease anxieties, new Muslims or those new to fasting can start preparing now before Ramadan even begins. This preparation for the newcomer should include understanding the physical logistics of fasting. And once this foundation is laid the New Muslim can begin to rely on a spiritual strength to succeed in Ramadan.

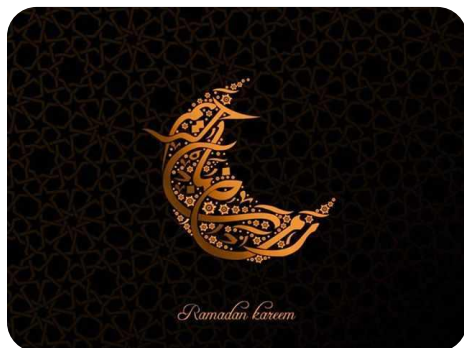


■ Getting Into Fasting Shape

No one would expect a 95lb person to lift a 200lb weight. But it is not impossible for that person to become strong enough to do so over time.

The same building of strength is true of fasting.

Many born Muslims have been trained throughout their lives to become adapted to fasting. They have been in fasting training. As someone new to fasting you haven't had this lifetime opportunity. But you do have a couple of months to gear up and practice fasting to get into the swing of things.





■ Understanding Your Hunger Cycle

As you fast you will feel hungry. This is the nature of the fast and it has its purpose. But you have to understand that hunger pains are cyclical. During the day hunger pains will come and go. It is easy to resist eating or drinking when you understand that hunger pain doesn't just build and build and build without easing. If you just have patience, ease will come.

And as you continue this practice day by day, the pains will be less frequent, your stomach will eventually adjust and fasting will become easy.



Know What to Eat and Drink

If you can't make it the whole day in your pre-Ramadan fasts, that is OK. That's why you started early to train for the main event. If this is the case and you break your optional fast early, try to take a look at what you are eating before sunrise and after sunset.

If you are stuffing yourself with too much food at these meals, you will stretch your stomach. Being overly full causes more fatigue and sluggishness at the time of the morning and evening meals (and the prayers that coordinate with them). A stretched stomach will also cause more hunger later, making it harder to fast.

If you are eating sweets and foods with not a lot of nutritional value, it will be difficult to sustain your fast. Eat foods with high carbohydrates, protein and fiber content. These foods will keep you fuller for longer and will help you maintain mental clarity and focus throughout the day. Oatmeal, beans or quinoa are fasting musts because they are all nutritional powerhouses.

Even if you do not feel like eating, which might happen as your stomach shrinks, you should try to eat a little at these times to give yourself the strength you need, even if it is just a date.

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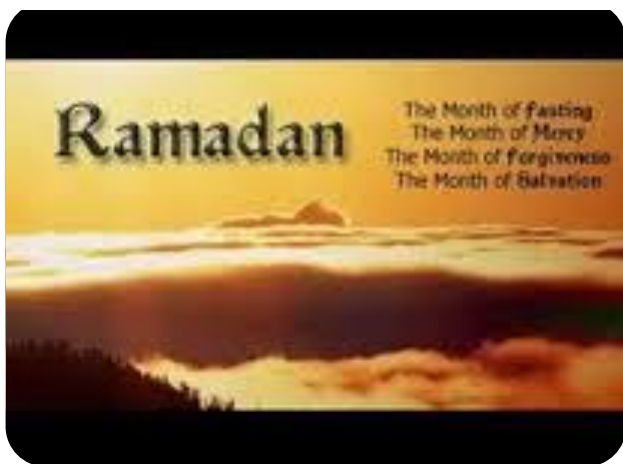
Don't forget to hydrate. The body can survive for long periods without food but can only survive 3-5 days without water. Try to steer clear of sodas that contain calories but no nutrition. Water or sports drinks are best.



Know How to Get Over the Mental Fog

Physical challenges of fasting are one thing, but you may also experience a mental fog.

What you eat at sunrise and sunset can help with this. But also, when you feel your mental acuity slipping, allow yourself a few moments to space out. Then breathe deeply and move, even if it is just standing up and sitting down. This will allow the oxygen to circulate through your body and invigorate you.





Distract Yourself

Don't let this oxygen invigoration go to waste. Introduce yourself to a serious distraction. TV or movies won't be enough to distract you from your hunger or thirst—especially with the amount of food and drink commercials that come on—and are not beneficial use of your Ramadan time. If you are at work, become obsessed with your work. If you are in school, throw yourself into your studies.

When day to day obligations have been met, become obsessed with learning about Islam. Learn the history of Ramadan. Learn what the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and his companions (may Allah be pleased with them) would do while fasting. Learn Quran. Do something and do it with your entire mind. This will take you away from thoughts of your stomach.

Don't Be Negative

While you are becoming obsessed, don't turn to negative thinking. When thoughts do drift away from you, take control and steer them toward the positive. Remind yourself that if it were impossible to fast, Allah would not have required it of us.

Too often we let our own lack of self-confidence affect our outcome. Remind yourself of times when your strength was greater than you imagined. And draw on that strength to stay the course.



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Take a Nap

It was the habit of the Prophet and his companions to nap during midday. If you are in the office or school, use your lunch time to close your eyes and rest. It only takes a 15-30 minute nap to feel revived.



■ Don't Give Up

Don't let fasting slip-ups set you back. Keep on trying. We all fail, but failure doesn't mean defeat when Allah is the most merciful.

Even if you are committing some sins in your life, don't let it hold you back from fasting or any other obligatory acts. The obligatory acts are where we get the strength to leave the sins behind. How will we leave the sins if we leave the obligatory?



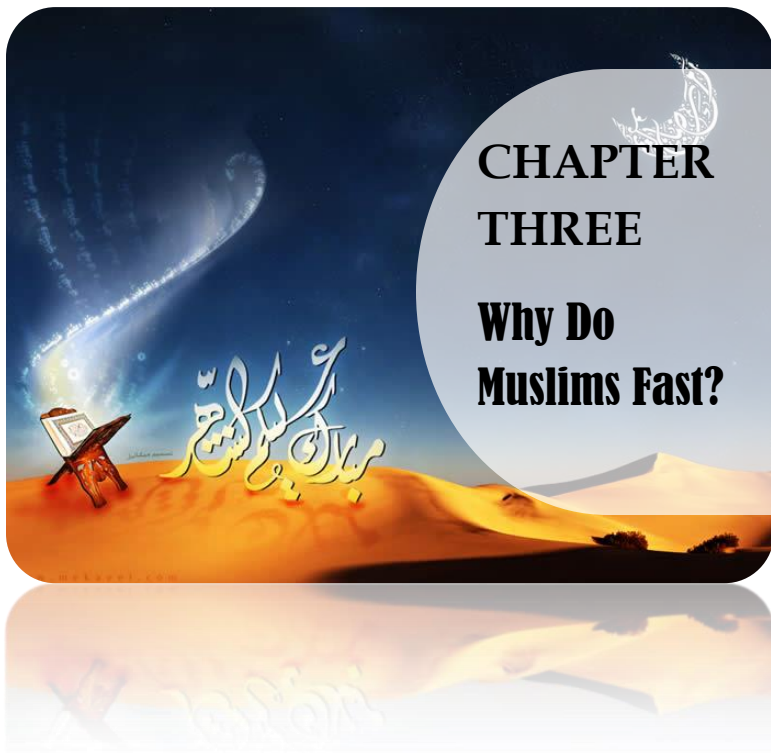


Reflect on the Spiritual

Once you have disciplined your body to fast, notice how you feel spiritually when you are in the middle of a fast compared to how you feel when you are stuffed after a meal. You will start to recognize a stark difference between the two states. When our stomachs are full we often feel spiritually numb. And when our spirits are full it becomes easier to ignore the impulses of the body.

We spend most of our lives feeding our bodies and ignoring our souls, especially those of us living in the West. Take this time to reflect on how you feel spiritually. Reflect on how it feels to rely on Allah and the spiritual strength He has given you. Use this strength to increase in your faith little by little like the 95lb person builds a little muscle at a time to lift heavier and heavier weights.

There is nothing in this world that is sweeter than the taste of faith; a sweetness, which we get the opportunity to taste during Ramadan.



- *Fasting Prescribed in All Religions*
- *Among The Best Righteous Deeds*
- *The Ritual Level*
- *The Physical Level*
- *Medical Benefits*
- *The Libidinal Level*
- *The Emotional Level*
- *The Psychological Level*
- *The Spiritual Level*

Most of us who are fighting the battle of the bulge have experimented with some form of fasting, like an all fruit fast, a water fast or a sugar-free fast, you name it.

But what many may find rather strange and intriguing is a whole nation of people; be it man or woman, old or young, rich or poor; going completely without food and drink from dawn to dusk for a whole month - Ramadan.

What is the significance of Ramadan beyond shortened work hours?

Is it not a very harsh practice?

Is it merely a time when Muslims sleep and fast and hardly work all day; and eat, drink, enjoy and stay awake all night?

What really is the spirit of Ramadan?



Fasting Prescribed in All Religions

In English “fasting” means to abstain from food or from certain kinds of food voluntarily, as an observance of a holy day or as a token of grief, sorrow, or repentance.

This practice can be found in most of the major religions of the world. For example, in Hinduism, fasting in Sanskrit is called upavaasa. Devout Hindus observe fasting on special occasions as a mark of respect to their personal gods or as a part of their penance. Most devout Indians fast regularly or on special occasions like festivals. On such days they do not eat at all, eat once or make do with fruits or a special diet of simple food.

For Jews, the day Yom Kippur (“Day of Atonement”) is the last of the Ten Days of Repentance observed on the 10th of Tishri. It is forbidden on that day to eat, drink, wash, wear leather, or have sexual relations. In addition, prohibitions on labor similar to those on the Sabbath are in force. It should also be noted that Moses (peace be upon him) is recorded in the Torah to have fasted.



“And he was there with the Lord 40 days and 40 nights, he neither ate bread nor drank water.” (Exodus 34:28)

For Catholics among Christians, Lent is the major season of fasting, imitative of the forty-day fast of Jesus (peace be upon him). In the fourth century it was observed as six weeks of fasting before Easter or before Holy Week. It was adjusted to forty days of actual fasting in most places in the seventh century. Jesus (peace be upon him) is recorded in the Gospels to have fasted like Moses.

[And he fasted 40 days and 40 nights, and afterward he was hungry.] (Matthew 4:2 & Luke 4:2)

It is in this context that God states in the Quran:

{O believers! Fasting has been prescribed for you as it was prescribed for those before you in order that you become more conscious of God.} (Al-Baqarah, 2:183)

■ Among the Best Righteous Deeds

Although in most religions, fasting is for expiation of sin or atonement for sin, in Islam it is primarily to bring one closer to God, as stated in the above-mentioned verse. Since, God-consciousness is the prerequisite for righteousness, great stress is placed on fasting in Islam. Thus, it is not surprising to find that when Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, was asked:

“Which is the best deed?” He replied, “Fasting, for there is nothing equal to it.” (Al-Nasa’i)

There are as many levels of fasting as there are facets to being human. Proper fasting should encompass all dimensions of human existence for it to have the divinely intended effect. The following are some of the major levels of fasting:



■ **The Ritual Level**

This level of fasting requires that the basic rules for fasting be fulfilled, which are avoiding food, drink and sexual intercourse between dawn and sunset for 29 or 30 days each year. On this level, one is basically following the letter of the laws regarding fasting without particular consideration for the spirit of fasting. It is the entrance level which must be fulfilled for the fast to be Islamically correct, but the other levels must be added for the fast to have any real impact on the fasting person.

Fasting on this level alone will not benefit one spiritually, except from the perspective of submission to divine instructions, if one chooses to follow the ritual consciously and not merely according to tradition. Thus, by itself, the ritual level will not purify one of sin or atone for sin.

■ The Physical Level

Fasting on the “physical” level causes the fasting person to experience the pangs of hunger and thirst when the prophetic (*Sunnah*) way of fasting is observed. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) used to consume a very light meal before the dawn (*suhoor*) and moderate meal (*iftaar*) to break the fast at sunset, while scrupulously avoiding filling his stomach.

He is reported to have said:

“The worst container a human being can fill is his stomach. A few morsels of food to keep a person’s back straight are sufficient. However, if his desire overcomes him, then let him eat a third, drink a third and leave a third for breathing.” (Ibn Majah)

The Prophet used to break his fast with a few fresh or dried dates and a glass of water just before beginning the sunset prayer. This level allows the

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fasting person to experience the pangs of hunger and thirst and thereby develops sympathy in him or her for those starving and dying of thirst in other parts of the world.



Medical Benefits

On the physical level, some chemicals in the brain that transmit messages and create feelings, called neurotransmitters, are affected by fasting. Fasting encourages the endorphin neurotransmitter system, related to the feeling of wellbeing and euphoria, to produce more endorphins and, in fact, makes us “feel” better. This is similar to the effect of exercise (but without the physical work).

It has also been noted by medical experts that fasting improves the physical health in numerous ways. For example, during the fast the body uses up stored cholesterol (fat) that is often deposited in the blood system, as well as in other fatty areas of the body. Thus, it helps to keep the body firm and minimizes the danger of heart attacks.

The difference between the ritual level 1 and the physical level 2 is that a person doing only ritual fasting may eat large meals prior to beginning the fast and immediately upon ending the fast, and thus not feel any hunger or thirst throughout the whole month. However,

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like level one, if the fasting person does not incorporate the other levels of fasting, the fast will only be physically exhausting. The Prophet said:

“Perhaps a fasting person will gain nothing but hunger and thirst from fasting.” (Ibn Majah)



The Libidinal Level

The sexual instinct and drives (libido) are harnessed on this level of fasting. In these times where the media continually plays on sexual desires to promote and sell products, the ability to control these powerful desires is a plus. Fasting physically reduces sexual desires and the fact that the fasting person has to avoid anything which could stimulate him psychologically helps to further lower the libido. Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, said:

“O youths, whoever among you is able to marry let him do so, for it restrains the eyes and protects the private parts. He who is unable to marry should fast, because it is a shield.” (Al-Bukhari)

By restraining oneself from sexual acts which are permissible, the fasting person makes it easier for himself to restrain himself from forbidden sexual acts when he is not fasting.



The Emotional Level

Fasting on this level involves controlling the many negative emotions which simmer in the human mind and soul. For example, among the most destructive emotions is anger; fasting helps to bring this emotion under control. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), said:

“When one of you is fasting, he should abstain from indecent acts and unnecessary talk, and if someone begins an obscene conversation or tries to pick an argument, he should simply tell him, ‘I am fasting.’”
(Al-Bukhari)

Thus, on this level, whatever negative emotions challenge the fasting person must be avoided. One must abstain from lewd conversation and heated arguments. Even when one is in the right, it is better to let that right go and keep one's emotional fast intact. Likewise, the negative emotion of jealousy is reduced, as every fasting person is reduced to the common denominator of abstinence; no one is externally superior to another in this regard.

The Psychological Level

This level helps the fasting person psychologically to control evil thoughts and trains him or her, to some degree, how to overcome stinginess and greed. The Prophet was reported to have said:

“Allah has no need for the hunger and the thirst of the person who does not restrain himself from telling lies and acting on them even while observing the fast.” (Al-Bukhari)

In this age of immediate gratification, when the things of the world are used to fulfill human needs and desires almost as soon as they have them the ability to delay gratification is an important skill. What is between immediate gratification and delayed gratification is patience. During the fast, the believers learn patience and the benefits of it.

From a psychological perspective, it is good to be somewhat detached from the things of the world. There is nothing wrong with enjoying a good

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and full life - in fact, one can and should expect that. However, it is important that we are able to detach ourselves from material things so that they do not become the most important part of our lives. Fasting gives one the opportunity to overcome the many addictions which have become a major part of modern life. Food, for many people, provides comfort and joy, and the ability to separate oneself from it gives the fasting people the psychological benefit of knowing that they do have some degree of control over what they do and what they do not do.



The Spiritual Level

In order to establish this, the highest and most important level of fasting, the level of God-consciousness, Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) made the renewal of the intention for fasting a requirement before every day of fasting. He was reported to have said:

“Whoever does not intend to fast before *Fajr* (the dawn) will have no fast.” (Abu Dawud)

The daily renewal of intention helps to establish a spiritual foundation of sincerity essential for the spiritual cleansing effects of fasting to operate. Sincere fasting purifies and atones for sin, as the Prophet said:

“Whoever fasts Ramadan out of sincere faith and seeking his reward from God, his previous sins will be forgiven.”

He was also reported to have said,

“From one Ramadan to the next is atonement for the sins between them.”

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Sincere fasting brings one closer to Allah and earns a special reward. The Prophet informed that there is a gate in Paradise called *Rayyan* reserved for those who fast and he also said:

“When Ramadan comes, the gates of Paradise are open.” (Al-Bukhari)

Fasting is primarily between the person and God, as no one can be sure that any person is actually fasting. Because of this intimate aspect of fasting, Allah was quoted by the Prophet as saying:

“Every act of Adam’s descendants is for themselves, except fasting. It is meant for Me alone, and I alone will give the reward for it.” (Muslim)

When combined with the previous levels of fasting, this level transforms a person from within. It restores, revives and regenerates the fasting person’s spirituality and radically modifies his or her personality and character. These are the precious products of a heightened state of God-consciousness.

On the first day of the following month, after another new moon has been sighted, a special celebration is made, called *Eid al-Fitr*. A quantity of staple food is donated to the poor (*Zakat al-Fitr*), everyone has bathed and put on their best, preferably new, clothes, and communal prayers are held in the early morning, followed by feasting and visiting relatives and friends.

There are other fast days throughout the year. Muslims are encouraged to fast six days in Shawwal, the month following Ramadan, Mondays and Thursdays, and the ninth and tenth, or tenth and eleventh of Muharram, the first month of the year. The tenth day, called *Ashurah*, is also a fast day for the Jews (Yom Kippur), and Allah commanded the Muslims to fast two days to distinguish themselves from the People of the Book.

While fasting per se is encouraged, constant fasting, as well as monasticism, celibacy, and otherwise retreating from the real world, are condemned in Islam. Fasting on the two festival days, *Eid al-Fitr* and *Eid al-Adha*, the feast of the Hajj, is strictly forbidden.

CHAPTER FOUR

Ramadan Countdown for New Muslims

- *Working Through a Meaningful Ramadan*
- *Cultivating the Good, Breaking the Bad*
- *Set a Schedule Pre-Ramadan*
- *Pick-up a Quran*
- *Get in Touch With Muslims*
- *Commit to Helping a Charity*
- *Start Panning Meals*
- *Smile*

This is going to be my first Ramadan. I am excited. I am going to fast for the sake of Allah.

Fasting means withholding food and drink from sunrise to sunset. That means I won't have meals during the day, and when I'm thirsty, I won't drink either – up until it's time to break my fast.

I'll break my fast with dates, because that's the *sunnah* – dates and plain water. Then I'll have a meal. Hmm, should I cook? Should I buy out?

Should I go to the Masjid? What about *Taraweesh* (night prayers)? Maybe I should go to the Masjid, which means, I should get a Quran that's just the right size; maybe one that can fit into my bag. Gee,





will I be tired by the end of the day? Especially when I'm working the whole day.

When will I cook? What should I cook? How about *suhoor* (late night meal), what type of meal should I have then?

If I'm occupied the whole day, when should I read the Quran? Am I supposed to take advantage of the month and brush up on my prayers as well? What about my recitations? All this, for about thirty days? Could I really do this? I think I'm overwhelmed.

Are you overwhelmed?

Are you nervous about the countdown to Ramadan?

Is this your first time fasting during the Holy Month?

Ramadan, despite its spiritual goodness, can be daunting for first-timers. Doing something they have

never done before and doing it for a month, maybe alone, is a feat to be reckoned with. But with this Pillar of Islam, comes ease – it just takes a little planning and preparation, and anyone, with the best of intentions, can make their First Ramadan, a Ramadan to remember.





■ Working Through a Meaningful Ramadan

Du'a and intention are the first steps for anything when it comes to being a Muslim. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) reminded that *du'as* and intentions are only worthy when they are enveloped by God. Thus it is important for everyone who makes intention for a meaningful Ramadan to have the right intention to please God first.



Cultivating the Good, Breaking the Bad

After intention, there has to be action; a lot of action. And one of the benefits of Ramadan is that it sets the tone for change. Perhaps this is best to be kept simple, as little changes do add up. Setting too many goals may be overwhelming for some, so it's important to stay realistic with the goals you want to achieve. The best deeds are those that are consistent.

If this is your first Ramadan, think about what you would like to get out of it. Take a look at yourself and think about the new habits you want to cultivate and those that you want to break, as a new Muslim. Write them down and again, make intention to work through Ramadan in light of these goals and objectives. If you can pull this off with a positive mindset, you will surely reap the spiritual upgrade that Ramadan has to offer.



Set a Schedule Pre-Ramadan

A practice run-up to Ramadan is a good idea. If there is still time, try fasting on Monday and Thursday as per the *sunnah* as a simple warm up. A whole month of a new regiment could cause a slight shock to one's body, so a practice schedule may help.

Otherwise, try waking up a little earlier for breakfast and being a little more disciplined about food intake. Try cutting down on snacks, and taking a rest in the mid-morning. This will help with *Taraweeh* prayers that come later at night. This is also a good time to start cultivating good sleeping habits and to curb staying up late unnecessarily.



Pick-up a Quran

Having a Quran as a companion is a great way to spend Ramadan. A small Quran would be just nice to carry to classes or even to work, even if it's the translation of the Quran. There's nothing more meaningful than reading a few verses every day, as and when it is possible as there are blessings in every letter of the Holy Scriptures.



Get In Touch With the Muslims

Ramadan is a great time to cultivate ties between the *Ummah*, but beforehand, seek out good friends and relatives (if any) who will act as companions throughout the month. Fasting together, enjoying *iftar* together, attending Islamic talks together, and praying together are amongst the blessings of Ramadan. Having good company keeps our focus on the virtues of Ramadan. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) reminded that we shall follow the religion of our friends, so do choose good companions to help you through the month.



Commit to Helping a Charity

As we all know, Ramadan is a good time for self-reflection, and especially reflecting on what we are grateful for. It's also a great reminder to help those in need. Get in touch with a charity beforehand and see how you can help out during the month. It could be something simple as sponsoring some *iftar* meals, or visiting a few times a week to help tidy up. This would actually help in keeping determined on the fast as it helps remind us of the hardship of others and the importance of extending a hand of aid.



Start Planning Meals

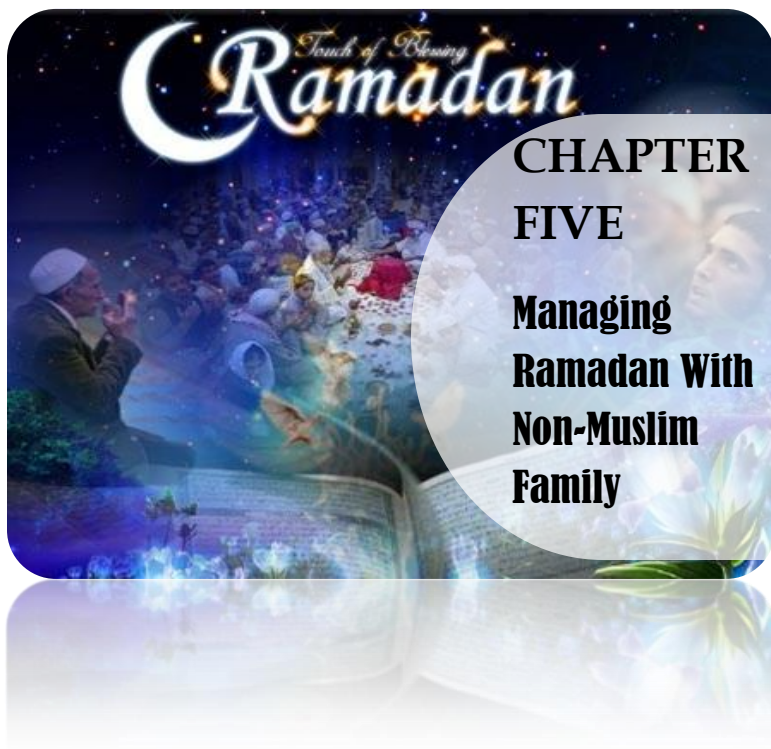
You have stocked up on dates, honey and raisins... and all the other good foods in the Quran, but now it's time to start planning your meals. It may sound simple to start planning meals, so do it for the entire Ramadan. Meal preparation is the last thing you want to think about and so is running around the kitchen preparing food. Get a meal plan started now with your favorite, easy-to-make dishes on the menu, and even better, those that can double up as meals for *suhoor*. If you aren't able to plan for the month, consider planning out a week's worth of meals and repeating them through the week. Also, be smart with ingredients, as this is the perfect time to eat healthily, especially when it is important to stay active and alert throughout the daylight hours.





It sounds like you have a plan. Smile and brace Ramadan positively. Read up on Ramadan and learn of the virtues, how it helps us with ourselves, how it helps us help others, how it helps us strengthen our relation with God. Again make du'a over and over again for an enlightening Ramadan and to walk away with a full fledged spiritual upgrade.

Say: "This is going to be my first Ramadan. It gives me an opportunity to learn about my faith. It gives me an opportunity to learn about myself. I will have the opportunity to help others, to break my bad habits and to cultivate new ones. Ramadan instills discipline, good health, and new friendships. I look forward to *suhoor*. I look forward to *iftar*. I look forward to *Taraweeh*. And I surely look forward to having the Quran as my companion. This is my first Ramadan and *insha Allah*, I will make it the Ramadan to remember.



CHAPTER FIVE

Managing Ramadan With Non-Muslim Family

- *Show Understanding to Their Point of View*
- *Being Gently Firm*
- *Drink Plenty and Eat Healthy*
- *Spend Quality Time With Your Family*
- *Make It Easy For Your Parents*

Living with your non-Muslim family as a new Muslim poses many different challenges and in my experience, Ramadan is one of the biggest challenges.

The challenges of course vary from family to family, but can be particularly challenging if they aren't open to your new-found faith or to certain aspects of it.



As in any household, there are always compromises to be made, but when the family members have different beliefs and ways of life, the balance is a very fine one that can easily be tipped one way or the other. It sometimes feels as if you are walking on a bit of a tightrope trying to please everyone, and yet keep true to Islam.

During most of the year, minor adjustments and compromises can be made, as a new Muslim tries to keep within the bounds set by God, but still maintaining the family ties. The timing of activities, such as praying can be adjusted to fit into the family routine, Islamic activities can

happen outside the house and friends not invited round to avoid arguments and clashes.

But when it comes to Ramadan, one of the five pillars of Islam, it's not as easy to make compromises, as the timings for fasting are strictly prescribed and the prohibitions are absolute (other than due to the lawful exceptions). And God's commands have to take priority over family wishes:

{But if they endeavor to make you associate with Me that of which you have no knowledge, do not obey them but accompany them in [this] world with appropriate kindness...} (Luqman 31: 15)

So how can you manage to do that in Ramadan? It's impossible to give one standard answer to that question, but the following are some ideas that I have tried while living with my family or that others have tried.

■ Show Understanding to Their Point of View

It can be very easy in the early flushes of your new faith to be so enthusiastic about it that you forget how strange some of the rituals of Islam seem to other people. They don't have the same belief as you and therefore find it very difficult to understand why you have to fast for a whole month and be so strict about it. They can't understand your motivation for doing it and everything about fasting may seem to clash with their own understandings of life and how it should be lived.

If you are facing this type of challenge, one of the best ways to explain about Ramadan I have found is to research the health benefits of fasting. Although this is not our main motivation for fasting, explaining it from a scientific perspective may help your family to accept it better. Booklets like the "[Ramadan Health Guide](#)" supported by the National Health Service can be a great help with this, as it's produced by a trusted scientific organization.



■ Being Gentle But Firm

Some of my biggest challenges with my family have been when they have tried to tell me what God does or doesn't want from me or when they have tried to impose their interpretation on me of how I should practice my faith.

Looking back, I can see how my practice of Islam may have been confusing, as over the years, when I have learned more and grown into Islam, I have gradually adopted slightly different practices. This may have made it seem as if it is possible to pick and choose what I practice and make it seem as if I could be persuaded to change what I had planned. But in the end, as I will be the one standing in front of God accounting for my life; I will be the one who has to justify my actions based on my best understanding of my faith. So I have therefore had to gently stand firm for what I have understood to be the best thing for me to do and used the "broken record" technique; simply repeating my position and not succumbing to persuasion.

This hasn't always been easy to do at the time and has resulted in some emotional conversations, but in the end, when it became clear that I was standing firm, it was accepted, even though that may have been done grudgingly. And maybe I gained some respect for holding onto my beliefs along the way, even though they weren't necessarily agreed with.





Drink Plenty and Eat Healthy

One of the things that non-Muslims find most difficult to understand is the fact that not only we do not eat during the daylight hours in Ramadan, but we also don't drink anything. Contemporary medical advice encourages people to drink water regularly to keep hydrated, so when your parents see you not drinking, they naturally get worried that you are harming yourself.

So make sure that you do drink plenty during the night, and let them know that you are. Also make sure to eat a healthy balanced diet and take a short nap if you need to, to show them that you are being responsible about your fasting.



Spend Quality Time With Your Family

If your family normally eats together, it will be strange for them to know that you are in the house and not eating with them. It may be even more uncomfortable for you to sit with them but not eat. The ideal would of course be if they would be willing to change their mealtimes to eat with you, but if that doesn't happen, there are several things you could do.

You could try to make up for missing mealtimes by finding as much quality time to spend with them at other times during the day as you can. You could help to prepare the dinner and clear away after it or better still, cook meals for them! Look out for other ways that you could show your appreciation for this being a difficult time for them.



Make It Easy For Your Parents

My father used to find Ramadan so stressful that he once suggested that I should move out for the month, so they didn't have to deal with it. It didn't actually come to that, but instead I try to make it easier and more natural by taking as many opportunities as I can to go out and have *Iftar* with friends; this makes me not eating with them on those days seem more normal. When I bring back food for them, it also lets them know that I was thinking of them while I was out. If you are able to go away for some time in Ramadan, it may also help to relieve some of the stress and maybe going to *I'tikaf* (retreat) might benefit you all!

Whatever you decide to do, you will need to do it with respect, as you are living in parents' house and this can be a powerful tool for *daw'ah*.

**CHAPTER
SIX**

**Remembrances
of a First
Ramadan**

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After converting to Islam, I was quick to learn *salah* (prayer) and wear *hijab*. I was incredibly grateful to Allah Almighty (*subhanahu wa ta`ala*) for the *hidaya* (guidance to the true path) I was given and I wanted to be identified in public as a Muslim.

I could hardly wait for my first Ramadan because this would be the pillar of Islam that I would do with the whole Muslim community. It is true that fasting is an individual act. However, breaking the fast and sharing *iftars* (meals to break the fast) along with performing the *Tarawih* Prayer are things that are usually done collectively.

Before converting to Islam I had fasted the 40 days of Lent; however, it was not the same as the fast of Ramadan because I did drink water during the day. Even though I had this experience of fasting previously, I was still quite anxious about going without food and water during the day. I was not sure if I could do it, especially being in America where most people are not Muslim and daily life is not adjusted for Ramadan. But I knew that if Allah commanded me to do it then it was possible.

I recall being very lonely during my first Ramadan. I was a new convert and I was single. Basically, I woke up for *suhoor* (meal before fasting) and ate it alone, broke my fast alone and prayed *Tarawih* Prayer alone. I was a university graduate student and I lived alone.



The Muslim Students Association at my university was dominated by brothers and consequently the *iftars* they held were for brothers only. So I really could not attend them. I did not know many sisters at that time and the local *Masjid* was very far from where I lived. I did not have a car to drive to the *Masjid* for community *iftars* and *Tarawih* Prayer. *Al-hamdu lillah*, I did feel however, that Allah was always with me. In a way, I began to feel very close to Allah.

One of the best things that happened during my first Ramadan was that I got married, *al-hamdu lillah*. I was

actually engaged but because of my circumstances and lack of family support we decided it would be best to marry even though it was Ramadan.

Al-hamdu lillah, I was then able to eat *suhoor* with my husband, pray, and break the fast with him. It brought me a great sense of peace and contentment, *al-hamdu lillah*. I also was able to go to the *Masjid* for the *Tarawih* Prayer one time, and I loved the entire experience of praying with so many sisters. I began to feel that I was part of the larger community of Muslims.

One of my friends, Aminah, is also a convert. I asked her about her experiences during her first Ramadan and I found we shared a similar experience of being anxious. Sister Aminah also had a wonderful experience when meeting other Muslims. Aminah told me she felt "strangeness because I wasn't used to being treated like family from people I barely knew. Especially since I was used to the kind of people who only treated you right when they wanted something."

Sister Aisha is another convert friend who lives in Kenya. Aisha explained to me that she found her first Ramadan to be spiritually fulfilling even though it was

also a bit lonely for her. Aisha told me, "I really needed to replenish my spiritual needs and I loved the sacrifice. I visited the *Masjid* several times and from then my *Masjid* phobia disappeared for good. I had this phobia to go to the *Masjid* because I wasn't sure I would be able to say the prayers correctly, as I had learned to pray on my own through books and used to do it in the house."

When Aisha told me about her *Masjid* phobia I smiled because I went through the same experience. Aisha also told me that her *Eid* was rather uneventful because she, along with her husband and small daughter, had no other Muslim family. However, they were thankful to Allah the Almighty for everything. Aisha explained, "You see both of us being reverts, we have no close Muslim ties, this is a time Muslims want to be with their close ones and so no one seems to want guests. That is when I came up with a dream to set up a house for reverts where they can feel at home especially during times like Ramadan!"

I think Aisha's idea is a great one and I pray it comes to fruition. I was able to spend my first *Eid Al-Fitr* with my husband and his family but I still felt a bit lonely. Perhaps it is because my own family was not able to celebrate with

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me. Allah promises to test us and I just view all of my lonely experiences as a test from Allah the Most High. These experiences are also a reaffirmation of my reason for converting to Islam, which was for the sake of Allah alone and not for pleasing people or for other worldly benefits.

*May Allah help you to find the best way to please Him
and to spend your Ramadan beneficially!*

Wishing you a Blessed Ramadan

