



New Muslims Challenges

First Edition

Practical Suggestions For New Muslims



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Introduction



Introduction



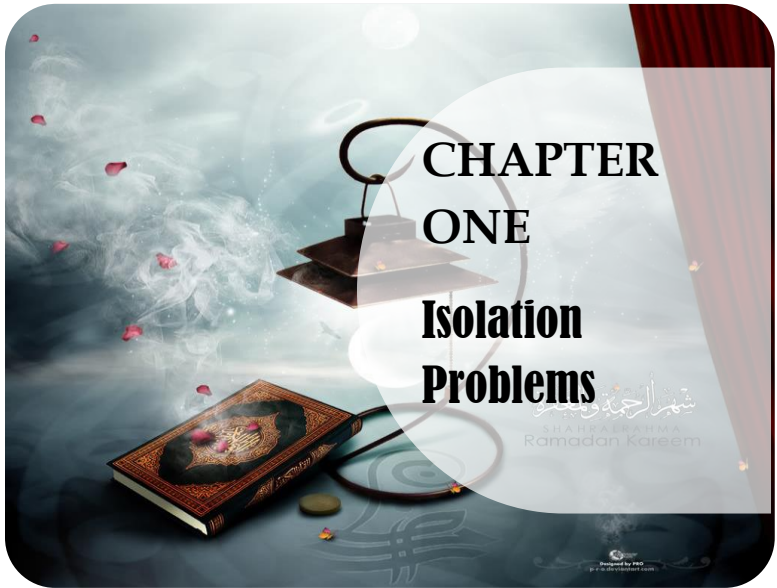
The process of conversion or reversion isn't a simple journey, and sometimes a person feels rather alone, understandably so.

While all information regarding Islam is devoured, it is without doubt, sometimes confusing with the volume and variety of sources available, so many opinions, and so many Quranic verses and *hadiths* to back up all these opinions!

For the new convert who is just learning and isn't quite yet sure what is opinion and what is the fact, may be awe-inspiring.

There are many obstacles to be found on the path of the person who has just said his or her *shahadah* and some of those start right on day one.

God brings everyone to Islam on the path that suits them best and He then sends them tests to confirm their faith. So there is no one right way to make the adjustment to the new life as a Muslim, but there are some general suggestions that could help to make the journey smoother.



- *Join a Convert Community*
- *Finding Local Islamic Groups*
- *Keeping Good Relations with Non-Muslims*
- *Get Integrated*
- *Befriend Who Leads You to God's Path*

One of the biggest issues most new Muslims have to cope with at some point is a feeling of isolation.

They are in-between two worlds; they no longer fit comfortably in the non-Muslim world and they haven't yet found their place in the Muslim world.

The process to find a place in the Muslim world that a convert feels comfortable in can be quite complex; it can take varying lengths of time and is influenced by many different factors.

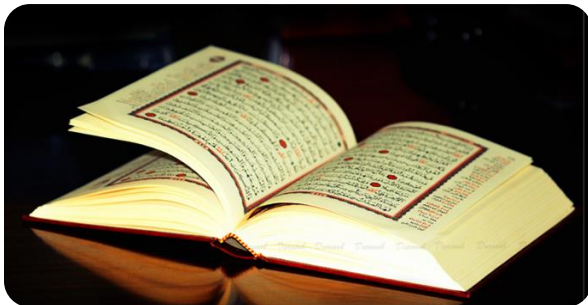
These factors include matters such as where they live; their local community; the availability of local support for new Muslims; whether they are married (to a Muslim or non-Muslim); how they came to Islam, their understanding of it and their expectations; and crucially their own personality.



■ Join a Convert Community

As a new Muslim, you will face many challenges, most of which will have been faced by others who have trodden the same path before you. So try to seek out local new Muslim support groups in your area, so you can meet people, share experiences and ideas and have some social time with others in a similar situation.

Many towns now have some type of support group, which may or may not be connected to a mosque. An internet search may reveal where your nearest group is or if you're in the UK, you could try contacting organizations like Muslim Now or the National New Muslim Project.



■ Finding Local Islamic Groups

It will be up to you, as a new Muslim, to make many of the first steps to seek out different mosques and Islamic groups in your area.

It may be confusing at first as you may hear people saying different things and worshipping in different ways from the way you originally learned, but this is just part of the rich diversity in the Muslim community; some of which is permitted by the different schools of thought and some of which is cultural.

It may be tempting to wade in there and criticize people - which some new Muslims have been tempted to do in their initial enthusiasm for the *deen* - but in the early stages, it's better to keep an open mind and just try to understand the differences.



■ **Keep Good Relations with Non-Muslims**

It is important to try to work out the best way to maintain a good relationship with your non-Muslim family. We have the example of the way the Prophet always treated his uncle with the greatest respect and accepted help from him, even though he refused to accept Islam.

We also have examples of Prophet Muhammad trading with non-Muslims and caring for their welfare, especially his neighbors, even when they didn't show him any respect or kindness.

You can never tell whose heart God may open one day and it would be better if you could have been part of that by your example.

Your non-Muslim family and neighbors have so many rights on you, so it's important to treat them kindly, as long as they don't encourage you to do anything that would be against God's commandments.

And there are so many things that you can still do together if there is good will on both sides; you don't have to forsake everything from your old life once you accept Islam, just make some modifications.



■ Get Integrated

A healthy community should aim to provide its new Muslims with ample social as well as educational opportunities. Informal events offer people a chance to connect with each other and cultivate relationships, while classes and seminars offer knowledge guidance in new terrain.

And just as it's important for the community to provide the opportunities for connections, it's as important for the new Muslims to get involved. The Internet can't substitute for real social interaction, for brothers and sisters who can demonstrate how Muslims really live, day-to-day.



■ **Befriend Who Leads You to God's Path**

Making suitable friends helps making our journey and decisions in life somewhat easier. One such journey for some is the decision to convert or revert to Islam. Despite being one of the easiest steps, it undoubtedly spells a difficult journey ahead for converts who stay on their own and avoid the community. Unfortunately these are the most likely ones to lose their way.

It is at these times one comes to appreciate good friendships, the kind of friends who will enrich our life, pull us up when we are down, and push us when we cannot go on by ourselves. These friends, while generous with praise at our successes and eager with encouragement at our struggles, will not patronize us to make us feel good for a moment, but those who will tell the truth and help us improve for a lifetime.

Making good Muslim friends adds a special meaning to life since they help us enjoy the good times and overcome the difficult ones. These friends will improve our mood in turn helping us reach our goals of becoming better, decent, God fearing, practicing Muslims.



**CHAPTER
TWO**

**At College and
the Workplace**

- *Peer Pressure*
- *A Million Pounds!*
- *Hijab at Work*
- *New Job in Hijab*

■ **Peer Pressure**

Peer pressure is something that affects everybody at some point throughout their lives, but is mostly predominant in teenagers and young adults.

What can make peer pressure even more difficult to handle is when a person is new to Islam.

Their life is changing so much and they must adapt to fit within the boundaries of Islam without appearing anti-social with peers.

My advice to all those contemplating whether they should reveal their recent conversion or keep it a secret, I would always advise an individual to be courageous and to out their religion.

My advice to people suffering from peer pressure in the work place is to be strong and not run away, it is wrong for companies to discriminate against you because of the way you look or your religion.

Don't feel pressured into fitting in or looking a certain way, what I find helpful now is to remember God and what He has ordained us to do, and that He is the All-Wise and the All-Knowing and He does not try to make this life

hard for us but to protect us, we should strive for the Hereafter not pleasing those in this life. After leaving my job I felt courageous enough to declare my Islam.

When a young Muslim encounters any pressure, it's very important not to fall at the first hurdle and giving-up in order to make other people happy. You have to think of yourself, what you want and what you believe in.

I started to gradually change my activities and started going to the prayer room at lunch to read books and meet other Muslims. Slowly, I made new friends and started to take part in different social activities like study circles, Arabic classes and cinema trips.

I didn't completely cut ties with my old friends, I just made it clear to them that I wasn't able to indulge in most of the activities I used to and after having being invited a couple of times and politely declining they got the message.

I will be the first to say that it isn't easy to completely change your lifestyle without upsetting anyone but my key advice is to decline any offers that go against Islam and perhaps suggest something else such as a cinema trip or a shopping trip. Always stick to your guns and don't change

your mind because this will show others you are weak. Be strong and don't one week say "yes" to going to the pub or a nightclub then another week say "no" because this can be confusing to others.



■ A Million Pounds

When I became Muslim, a very close friend of mine who was with me when I took my *shahadah* explained the hijab in a no nonsense way. She said if you had a million pounds would you leave it out for everyone to see and to take some whenever they wanted to? I replied no.

She then asked why would you protect money more than you are willing to protect yourself? The hijab protects you from people taking little pieces of you as and when they please. When she said this to me I understood why it was important to cover with hijab. As my faith grew, I became more confident on wearing hijab.

As a revert, I can appreciate that many new Muslim sisters don't wear hijab at first because of their circumstances. This is what happened in my case; I converted in November 2010 and kept my conversion a secret from my family which made wearing hijab very difficult. I understood that I needed to put God first, so I compromised to the best of my abilities. I used to leave the house without hijab and then run around the corner and put it on, the situation was not ideal, but it was what suited me at the time.

I would not advise anyone to lie about their conversion or hide it from their family, as this can make practicing Islam difficult. I think that when putting hijab on you must be confident in yourself to know that you have made the right decision and that *insha'Allah* He will reward you for taking that big step.

To help relieve any anxieties you may have about hijab, I think that trying to put it on different ways can help you come to terms with the physical appearance of hijab and what feels best for you. There are some websites or images on the Internet with different hijab styles which you may find useful.

I think that you must be realistic when wearing hijab and, unfortunately, prepare yourself for some not so nice comments. I only say this to prepare you and not to put you off.

The first time I received negative comments I didn't know how to take it, and I was stunned that an individual could be so offensive. The best way to deal with negative comments is to ignore them and rise about and say "God, protect me from Satan the cursed one", and this will calm your anger *inshaAllah*. Be humble and pious in these times.

■ Hijab at Work

Hijab at the workplace can be another obstacle that a sister must overcome.

I worked in a fashion store at the time of my conversion and I didn't wear the hijab at first. I was always very scared of what others would think and how they would react to my conversion, I have always gone through life people pleasing.

I started dropping hints to my colleagues asking them what they thought of hijab and Muslim women, and they said it looked ugly and they were forced to wear it by the husbands. This made me angry that they could make such a judgment without knowing a person. This made me feel even more anxious about coming into work with my hijab.

Since I worked in a fashion store there was a certain dress code to follow which often consisted of dresses and skirts. I immediately changed how I dressed for work as soon as I took my *shahadah* opting for trousers and long sleeve tops. This didn't go down well with managers and supervisors because they claimed I didn't fit in or look the part.

I had been Muslim three months and I wore my scarf

outside of work and then took it off for work out of fear of what they would say. I realize now that this was wrong, but it was how I coped with things at the time. After being Muslim for three months, they offered me a permanent job at the store. Although I loved working there and helping people choose clothes, I wanted a fresh start as Diva the Muslimah with hijab.

I decided to refuse the offer and I left. I handed out my CV again to more fashion stores which previously landed me 7 job interviews. The same CV with hijab landed me none. Although it is against the law to discriminate, people will still have their prejudices about Muslims. I advise you to persist and stand up for your rights as women to be treated equally. I eventually got a job in my local supermarket which helps me and my husband get by; it's nice really, we both work part time together as we both study at college and university the rest of the time.

Another reason why I wore hijab is to be recognized as a Muslim, as I was proud of my religion. As soon as I wore my hijab, sisters who were Muslims but kept it secret also became public about their conversion and often come to me for help or questions about Islam.

Hijab also made it easier for me to give *Dawah* as people recognized the struggle I had been through to become Muslim and I was living proof *Alhamdulillah* that your family members aren't necessarily going to disown you, they will learn to accept the new you.

I wore hijab fully when I told my family, which was three months after my *shahadah*. Gradually as I grew in faith, my dress sense changed every day from leggings to jeans to skirts to maxi dresses, and now, almost two years later, the *abayah*, *Alhamdulillah*.

My advice to any Muslim struggling with hijab is to take a day at a time and remember that it is between you and God Almighty, and He is the All-Wise and the All-Knowing.

He knows what is in your heart and your deepest darkest secrets, He knows your intentions, so *insha'Allah* make intention to wear the hijab and may Allah make it easy for you. *Ameen*.

■ **New Job in Hijab**

Last year I got a new job as a revert Muslim who covered in a local supermarket. If anything I thought this would have less pressure in it than the fashion industry. Although it wasn't the same kind of pressure it still affected me.

I received lots of nasty comments from managers and customers. I would be asked why I wear that rubbish on my head. People would say "Are you a Pakistani now then?" "You're boring because you don't drink" or "Muslims are ignorant." Managers would often say you can't wear that scarf at work, get a different color, nothing was ever good enough for them.

What made it worse were the long shifts as I often needed to take breaks to make *Salah* (prayer). People would mock me saying "make a prayer for me while you're there", "you don't need to pray you're just making it up". I had to prove my prayers to my manager by bringing a time table in so she knew I wasn't lying. This put me under a lot of pressure by other colleagues because they were kicking up a fuss saying that "if she can pray, I can break to smoke." It made going to work very difficult.

My advice to Muslims in a similar situation is to speak to your colleagues and managers personally and explain Islam and that it is obligatory to pray despite what they may think.

Finally if they are still putting you under pressure explain the law to them on equality in the work place. Whatever you do, don't run away from the situation because you have as much right to be there as anyone else.





CHAPTER THREE

Media, Stereotypes, and Racism

- *The Media*
- *Bullying and Intimidation*
- *Patience*
- *Kindness*
- *Speak Out*
- *Seek Support*
- *Do Hijrah*

■ The Media

The main factor which contributes to spreading Islamophobia and racism is the media. Don't get me wrong, although there are many positive anti-racism campaigns around, many newspapers represent Islam and Muslims in a very negative light.

Many things that people read can give them certain prejudices about a group of people or simply create a stereotype which can lead to racism. Let's be honest, there isn't much we can do about the media, there is no real way of controlling it, but there are ways of coping with racism received from the media. The obvious is: don't buy newspapers or magazines that represent a nationality or a religion in a distasteful way; you are funding them if you do.

Second, don't waste your time watching TV shows that joke about certain religion or groups of people, it is not uncommon for comedians to make jokes at Islam's expense but by watching them you're upping their viewings and funding their lifestyle.

I know it appears that I am focusing largely on the don'ts in this situation; however, by avoiding certain media

sources you can protect yourself from becoming victim to racism.

Many people's behavior has a lasting effect on others, and it is not uncommon for a person to have racist views or opinions simply because of one bad experience they had with a Muslim. Therefore to try and change a person's views on Islam or Muslims it is important to always be aware of your actions and how you're behaving, as your actions can have long lasting effects on them, so why not make them good actions?

I am aware that I am focusing largely on what you can do to help change people's opinions and to do this and do that, but I believe if you have been subjected to racism it's not your fault. There are many ways to cope with racism; one of them is to try to change people's views.



■ **Bullying and Intimidation**

Although the challenge of dealing with the bullying and intimidation that Islamophobic prejudice fuels is one faced by all Muslims, whether they were born into the faith or they are new to it, the challenge faced by New Muslims is more complex. They are sometimes facing it from their own families, from people they feel they relate to in terms of culture or in some cases, for people in the past who had already faced prejudice due to their ethnicity, this can be an additional challenge for them to bear.

So what can or should new Muslims do when they are facing bullying or intimidation?

There is obviously not a one-answer-fits-all solution, but there are many answers that we can get both from Islam and contemporary sources to shed light on possible responses.

■ **Patience**

The aim of a bully is to make the other person feel inferior and themselves superior. They feel they have succeeded if their victim's emotions are triggered, and this may be shown by tears, frustration, fear, defensiveness or changing what they are doing in response to the bullying.

The best way therefore to defeat a bully is to show strength and patience in the face of their aggression; avoiding putting yourself in danger as far as possible:

{And be patient over what they say and avoid them with gracious avoidance.} (Al-Muzzammil 73: 10)

Although Sarah's heart stopped when she was confronted by the man in the car, she was now aware enough to act as if it hadn't affected her. So she carried on walking home holding her head high. To help her, she tried to recall the memory of her successful presentation to bolster her self-confidence, and to remind herself that there were plenty of people who showed her respect and that the man in the car was part of the ignorant minority.

Kindness

One of the most difficult strategies to use against a bully is kindness, as the usual instinctive reaction is either to hit out and repel the hurt by hurting the one who has hurt you or to run away and avoid them; the fight or flight reaction.

But Allah has advised a disarming strategy, and this is the last thing that a bully will expect:

{And not equal are the good deed and the bad. Repel [evil] by that [deed] which is better; and thereupon the one whom between you and him is enmity [will become] as though he was a devoted friend.} (Fussilat 41: 34-5)

When Sarah's brother had sent the email, she had tried to disarm him by not taking the bait he was laying for her. She had tried to appeal to his better nature, but that hadn't worked, so she had just kept contact with him, keeping it to a minimum, and always talked politely to him. Perhaps she could have looked for ways to do good deeds for him, without appearing weak and intimidated into doing it.

■ Speak Out

"Whoever amongst you sees anything objectionable let him change it with his hand, **if he is not able, then with his tongue**, and if he is not even able to do so, then with his heart, and the latter is the weakest form of faith." (Muslim, 34)

Sometimes to stop bullying and intimidation, it is necessary to speak out, but only if it is felt that saying something will be effective and not inflame the situation. It should be done with wisdom and brevity.

A good model to follow is avoiding 'JADE' (Justifying, Arguing, Defending, and Explaining). There are some situations when it is beneficial to get into a discussion about your values, but when faced by a bully, it's better to be short and to the point about what you want or don't want. So statements such as: "That's not true; although you can believe what you like", "I'm not going to drink, because I choose not to" or "I wear my scarf, because I believe it is the right thing for me to do" are useful.

It's also best to avoid being drawn into saying more, so if you use the Broken Record Technique and just repeat what you have said, maybe using slightly different words, most

people will stop putting pressure on you after three repetitions.



■ **Seek Support**

If you feel that you could be danger from bullies, you should protect yourself as much as you can. Your first line of support should be Allah; turn to Him often in supplications. You can find appropriate ones for most situations in Fortress of the Muslim.

Next, you should try to avoid being alone with a bully as far as possible. Make sure that you are often in the company of others and seek support and advice from those you can trust. Whatever you do, don't let a bully isolate you. Make sure that you always have other people you can contact if you need to, preferably family, friends or even the authorities.

Your next line of contact, if you face aggression should be the police, as Sarah did when she and her son were attacked by the teenagers. Angela also contacted them when her intimidation started, but they said they couldn't do anything without proof. So she installed a CCTV camera, which caught the bullies in action, so the police were able to act.

For those living in the UK, there is now an organization that has been set up to support people who have suffered

Islamophobic intimidation: Tell MAMA. Although it is initially a public service for measuring and monitoring anti-Muslim attacks, it has helped many people to contact the police and gain redress.

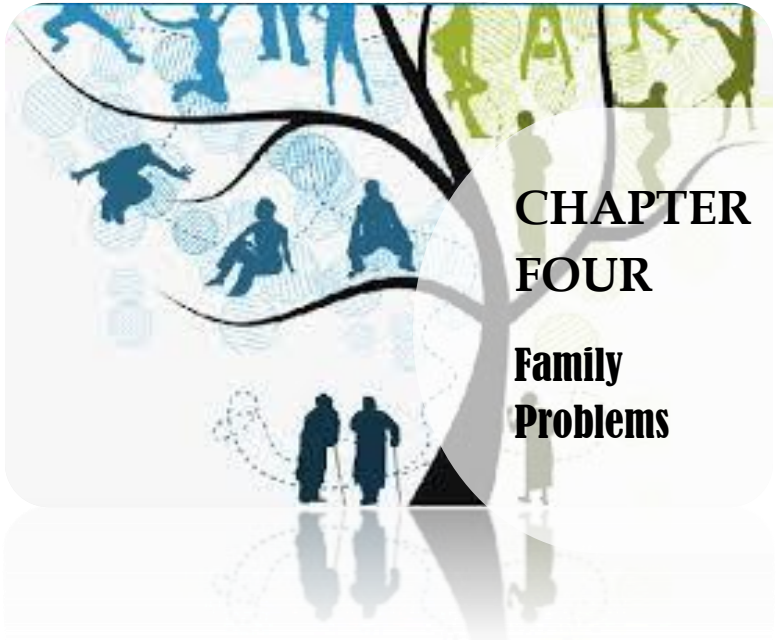
CAIR is a civil liberties organization in America that also supports victims of Islamophobia. There is also an organization called Beat Bullying that has an excellent Safety Plan that you can adapt to your own circumstances.



■ Do Hijrah

In some circumstances, if you can't avoid or distance yourself from the bullying, it is necessary to leave a situation that is extreme. This could mean leaving home, leaving a job, leaving a marriage or in some cases, as the Companions did, leaving a city or country. Allah doesn't want you to suffer unnecessarily for your religion, so in some cases it may be that you will have to make some temporary compromises to protect yourself until you are in a position to leave.

If we really want to seek the best advice on how to cope with bullying and intimidation, the best examples we have are those of the Prophet and his Companions from the early days of Islam. They showed remarkable strength in the face of extreme torture at times, even sometimes to the point of death. No one is asking you to pay that high price, although your reward will be with Allah, *insha'Allah*, if you do choose that path to preserve your religion.



CHAPTER FOUR

Family Problems

- *How to Approach Our Non-Muslim Parents*
- *Understanding Parents Worldview*
- *Some Worries*
- *Ideas to Fall Back On*
- *Spread Goodness*
- *Transparency*
- *Community Recognition*

With all the scaremongering and misinformation about Islam that is flooding the media these days, when someone chooses to embrace Islam it often comes as a great shock to their family.

The family members might think the new Muslim has 'changed'; is no longer the same person they used to know and love.

Images form in the mind, urging them to take drastic measures to make the new Muslim leave off this new and strange way of life and return to their old ways; something familiar and easily understood.



■ **How to Approach Our Non-Muslim Parents**

Whenever someone accepts Islam, his or her first concern after wanting to learn how to live as a Muslim is usually: “How can I tell my parents I have become a Muslim?”

Most people are really wary about starting this particular conversation, because they anticipate that it won’t go smoothly or they are just scared that they won’t handle it well.

It’s easy to understand why new Muslims might be worried. They have just taken a massive step in making a lifelong commitment to Islam and they did it because they have complete trust that their decision is the correct one for them. They now have a precious gift that they treasure; one which they would ideally like to share with everyone they know, but they also want to protect it.



■ **Understanding Parent's Worldview**

Having been raised in a non-Muslim world, new Muslims are fully aware of how their non-Muslim family and friends view Islam and Muslims. They too will have been battered with the negative images and biased reporting from the media, whose reports interpret the world through their own cultural and political world view.

They themselves may have even accepted what they were told as the truth, until God opened their hearts to look behind those stories to seek for the truth. So they understand how others might view them now they have converted; with curiosity, suspicion, fear and maybe even hate.

Or it may be that they have been raised in a typically segregated culture, with people who have little or no personal contact with Muslims; with people who view Muslims as 'the others' and 'different from us' and to be treated with caution.

It may have been through the rebel in them, their curiosity or just life opportunities that God led them to have contact with Muslims and through them they were able to learn about Islam. And depending on how open they have been

about their new friends to their family, they may have already had a foretaste of their family's possible reaction to their conversion from their reactions to their friends. So it's no wonder that they feel nervous about breaking the news to their family.



■ Some Worries

Many new Muslims anticipate that their parents will ask lots of questions, and although they have sound faith in Islam, they also realize that it is a fledgling faith and that their knowledge is limited. They worry that, if they are questioned, they may not be able to defend Islam in the way they would like to.

They worry that their family may try to make them change their mind or ridicule them and they won't know how to answer them. They worry that it may cause a rift in their relationship with their parents, because they won't be able to join in with the usual family meals or activities and they aren't sure how they'll cope with that.

They worry that their parents may reject them, as they have rejected their friends or other Muslims or that there may be a physical reaction or violence in response to the news. And on top of all that, they are usually aware of God's commandments to be good to parents and so they want to please Him in the best way they can:

{And We have enjoined upon man, to his parents, good treatment.} (Ahqaf 46: 15)

■ Ideas to Fall Back On

It would be wonderful if there was one answer that could be given to that question: “How can I tell my parents that I have become a Muslim?”, but the truth is that there isn’t a single answer. There are as many possible ways that it could be done as there are different family relationships, and an outsider cannot possibly know which way would be best for that particular family.

A lot will depend on the circumstances too, whether the new Muslim still lives in their parents' home or whether they are independent of them, but both situations can require careful handling. The simple answer is that the new Muslim knows their family best and is best placed to know what they can and can’t say to their parents, and how they may possibly react, but as there are often some surprises, it’s useful to have some ideas to fall back on.

■ Spread Goodness

Islam places great emphasis on behaving kindly with parents and keeping family ties. In fact, Allah puts parents' rights directly after His right to be worshipped. Allah says:

{And your Lord has decreed that you worship none but Him. And that you be dutiful to your parents...} (Al-Isra', 17: 23)

One Greek-Australian convert faced huge pressure from her parents to abandon her new religion. When she first embraced Islam, her parents refused to speak to her, but after her gentle persistence her mother invited her over to visit. However, she had not given up her intention to make the transition of her daughter as difficult as possible; she took a pair of scissors and cut all her daughter's hijabs into pieces! Being left with nothing to cover herself with, this brave, and creative, new Muslim promptly took a pillow case from the linen cupboard, tied it as gracefully as she could around her head, and went home.

Her mother finally realized that her daughter was not going to give up Islam and as she calmed down and looked at the situation objectively she noticed that her daughter had indeed become more respectful, more

responsible; a better daughter and a better person. Now after many years, the once new Muslim is firmly grounded in her faith and her mother and family are cheerful supporters and advocates.



■ **Transparency**

The most important tool is transparency! The idea that worries the loving parents most is not knowing or understanding what their child is doing or going through. The fear of radicalization is genuine and sincere and therefore must be addressed. To my personal opinion, it's the responsibility for the person who converts to take the first steps in that process.

Basically if one doesn't explain to his parents what he thinks Islam is, they will explore for themselves and find what other people think of Islam. They will find websites full of negative information, books full of misconceptions and news items of all those who've made tragic mistakes in their lives and fear their son will do the same. And if he shut them out, they will worry even more.

The best way to counter this is for a convert to give his parents insight in the changes he is making in his life and the ideas that are going through his mind. He should try to be as transparent as possible without trying to convince them to follow his footsteps (as that will blur the conversation). He should tell his parents where he keeps his books on Islam and allow them to read them as well.

Another thing to do is introduce his new brothers in faith to his parents, so they know who he is with when he goes to the mosque. Openly discuss his ideas or interpretations on Islam and don't hesitate to explain he doesn't know everything yet and he is also still searching. By letting them into this part of his life - regardless of their personal stance in relationship to Islam - they will see he is trying to live a positive life, reading positive books and meeting positive people.



■ Community Recognition

When a new Muslim comes to the mosque and declares the *shahadah*, everybody is more than willing to give this person support. Converts get free books and DVD's, are invited to *iftars* and get some extra attention from the imam or *dawah* organizations. The support our community gives to new Muslims is a good thing!

However, there is also a responsibility upon the community as a whole not only to recognize the converts as a target audience of extra support, but also their parents. In the Netherlands, we now see events being organized especially for the parents of Muslim converts. These events consist of a basic presentation of the Islamic principles, emphasize of the position of parents in Islam, the opportunity for those parents to meet others in the same situation and a nice tour through the mosque.

I once gave a presentation on Islam to a group of 10 fathers whose daughters had become Muslim. They were very enthusiastic about this. Not because they now all wanted to become Muslims themselves, but because they were recognized in their position as fathers and guardians and finally were able to see where their daughters went to every weekend. Not only does this minimize the obstacles

which could damage family ties, in fact, it brought people closer together.

In my opinion, every organization active in the field of *dawah* should have a program for the parents of Muslim converts. It should be focused on recognizing their position and making them feel welcome also as non-Muslims. The program should aim to answer any question or need brought forward by these parents.

There are so many obstacles on our way. Not all of them can be fully removed or handled, but most can. By being transparent, open and hospitable towards the parents of new Muslim converts, nearly all issues can be answered.

We should not wait for others to take the first step but do what needs to be done, being inspired to do so based on our beautiful religion.





**CHAPTER
FIVE
Marriage
Challenges**

- *Challenges Faced by New Reverts*
- *The Born –Muslim Immigrant Mindset*
- *Where to Live?*

Every era in time poses its own unique challenges on every aspect of life including marriage, and the contemporary world is no different.

One of the pressing challenges that the Muslim *ummah* faces on a global scale today is the establishment of happy, productive, love-filled and lasting marriages that overcome the trials and tribulations that sometimes commence from even the first days of their inception.

Within the realm of Muslim marriage today, a growing challenge for singles seeking righteous and compatible life partners - one that has been fueled in the past few decades by frequent job-related relocation and immigration to foreign countries - is the issue of multi-cultural ethnicities and divergent mindsets and personalities molded by a geographically variant cultural upbringing that is found in prospective marriage candidates. Concerns about the married couple's future compatibility arise very naturally as a result of disparities in their backgrounds based on these traits.

■ **Challenges Faced By New Reverts**

Single men and women who revert to Islam in Western countries, such as North America and Europe, have to face many post-reversion challenges, such as alienation from their immediate biological families; marital discord or divorce (if they are married); losing their children's custody to their ex-spouses or extended families, hostility at work, and social isolation (especially during Ramadan), to name but a few.

However, to say that finding a spouse, getting married and staying happily married isn't one of the greatest challenges they face, would be a lie. Hailing from a past devoid of Islamic belief and its practice, they are sometimes avoided warily by born-Muslim immigrant families in their area that are seeking suitors for their adult and single offspring. Even though their reversion to Islam wipes out their past completely in the eyes of Allah, born Muslims are not as big-hearted, benevolent and open-minded in their forgiveness and acceptance of reverts' non-Muslim past backgrounds and upbringing.

The major options for completing the remaining half of their *Deen* that lie before them, - and admittedly there are not too many of these to begin with,- are whether they

should marry a revert from the West like themselves, who will share with them not just a similar non-Muslim past and extended family dynamic, but who will also possess the same cultural habits and mindset; or whether they should consider proposals from born Muslim immigrants who hail from a totally different cultural background?



■ The Born-Muslim Immigrant Mindset

Stereotyping and generalizing aside, there do exist some traits and commonalities among immigrant Muslims that reverts in the West should keep in mind before jumping the gun and assuming that their marrying a born-Muslim immigrant (first, second or even third generation) would result in a problem-free marriage and that elusive picture-perfect Muslim matrimonial bliss that they so desire.

Many a time, born Muslims are not as ardent about practicing Islam at a superlative level or in enthusiastically doing full-time *da'wah*, as new Muslims are, because they were born into Islam, and grew up observing its fundamental rituals more as a habitual and cultural part of life instead of something that they passionately and proactively adopted by making personal sacrifices.

Born Muslims did not strive hard and swim against a social tide to become Muslim against all glaring odds. They did not sacrifice their family, homeland, lifestyle, or careers to embrace and practice a new *Deen* and to adopt it as a 24/7 way of life.

The nonchalance of born Muslims towards Islam might therefore come as a shock for a revert who gets married to

one of them, because they might have expected their born-Muslim spouse to share, if not exceed, their own passion and fervor for Islam.

Similarly, born Muslims who have been raised in Muslim majority countries in the East more often than not have more conservative mindsets, especially regarding gender roles and responsibilities. For example, how reservedly/freely a wife is expected to converse with her husband's friends; how much a husband willingly helps his wife out in domestic chores; whether or not a wife is expected to work and bring in a second income; and in how the elderly people of a family choose to live as dependents on their younger ones, instead of as dignifiedly independent individuals with their own income, private life and occupations.

The way such issues and concerns are perceived, handled and addressed by a married person depend upon their ingrained, culturally influenced thinking and mindset, which are determined by geographically variant socioeconomic factors and cultural upbringing.

Lastly, immigrant Muslims tend to cling tenaciously to their language, customs, traditions and culture from "back

home”, even after decades of immigrating to a non-Muslim majority country. They also, more often than not, tend to possess an “us vs. them” mindset and attitude towards non-Muslims, rarely mingling socially with, or marrying into them willingly.

A revert who has been raised in the West might have to resort to a considerable amount of adjustment if they choose to marry a born Muslim, especially in how much they’ll need to assimilate into a new cultural setup and learn to live in a tightly-knit extended family situation where there is often very little to no personal privacy, especially in living spaces.

Reverts who are by nature easy-going and flexible; who love meeting new people and forming new relationships; who like to travel and experience new places, languages, customs, lifestyles and cultures, should not have too much trouble in adjusting after marriage to someone who is a born Muslim and an immigrant to their country.

However, those reverts who enjoy close bonds and emotional attachments with their biological, non-Muslim family even after embracing Islam; who love living in the country in which they were born and raised; who value

solitude, independence, privacy, autonomy and stability in life; who make friends only with few, likeminded people sharing their local customs, language and culture should consider marrying a revert from their own region, or any other Muslim who is willing to completely assimilate into their culture and environment, instead of vice versa.

One of the biggest advantages of marrying a revert like one's self is that the common experience of embracing Islam as a new faith leads to much greater future compatibility, because both reverts might belong to families who are not Muslim, which will bring them even closer to each other, binding them and their children together into a very close-knit nuclear family unit formed upon the foundation of true monotheistic faith and sacrifice.

Otherwise, if a revert marries someone who is a born Muslim, they might have to deal with and accept the fact, that their in-laws might probably refuse to regularly meet and greet their biological, non-Muslim family, much less get along with them in a friendly, frank and easygoing manner for the remainder of their lives.

■ **Where to Live?**

As mentioned earlier, frequent relocation and immigration has become the norm on a global scale. Whether a revert Muslim marries a born Muslim or a revert like themselves, the issue of relocating from a non-Muslim majority country to a Muslim majority one can always come up, given the abruptness with which persecution on the basis of the Islamic faith (also referred to as Islamophobia) arises in any part of the contemporary world.

Regardless, the ever-present dynamics of the upbringing of their children might make any Muslim couple - whether or not one or both of them are reverts - always consider moving to another country in the world where their unique personal circumstances might allow them to raise their children the way they want to, or live the kind of Islam-based lifestyle that they aspire to.

In such a scenario, any revert Muslim born and raised in the West who marries an immigrant who has his heart attached to his “homeland”, might need to always keep in mind the imminent possibility of moving back to the latter at any point later in their marriage, and should deeply ponder upon whether or not this move will be acceptable to them or not, before entering the marriage.

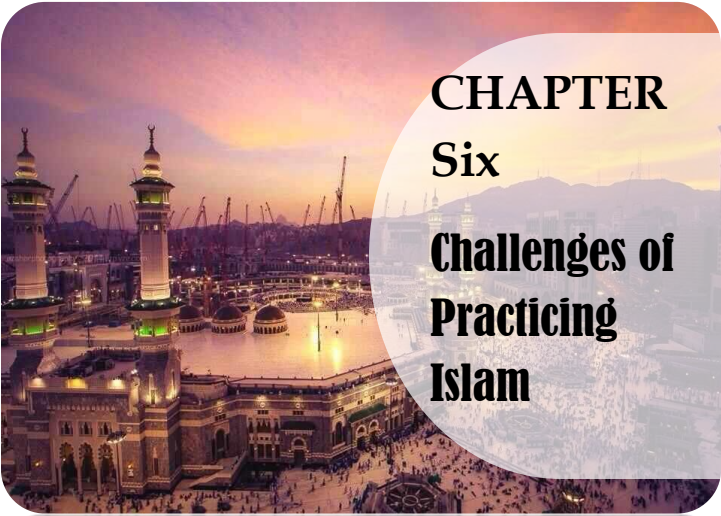
Muslim majority countries offer a rejuvenating, year-round Islamic community spirit; *halal* food and restricted (extremely taboo) alcohol consumption; complete lack of nudity and public displays of affection; and manifold opportunities to acquire in-depth Islamic knowledge from schools (*madaris*) and universities under the direct tutelage of Islamic scholars.

However, most Muslim majority countries significantly lack the overall quality of life, peacefulness, efficient law enforcement, environmental cleanliness, political stability, stellar opportunities in higher education, and civic orderliness that is prevalent in Western countries.

If a new revert is willing to make the huge adjustment to living amidst political turmoil and chaotic civic infrastructures in the tropically hot, humid, dusty and the often strife-ridden Eastern Muslim majority countries, they can marry a born Muslim and relocate to start and raise a family and hopefully enjoy a very happy married life till the end of their days.

If they however prefer living in the West and do not think that they'll be able to make this huge adjustment, they should give preference to marrying a local revert, or a third-generation born Muslim whose family has been settled in the same country as theirs, and who has been born and raised there.





CHAPTER

Six

Challenges of Practicing Islam

- *Where and How to Learn Islam*
- *Step by Step*
- *Focus on Faith*
- *Don't Worry About What Others Say*
- *Have Righteous Friends and Seek Knowledge*
- *Praying Difficulties*
- *Tips to Consider When Praying*
- *Further Study*

One of the biggest challenges new Muslims face is in regard to seeking knowledge, especially nowadays when there is so much information available and so many apparently contradictory views.

It's difficult to know where to start, where to look and who to turn to.

It's also difficult to give specific advice about seeking knowledge, as God brings people to Islam along many different paths, according to what would suit them best.

They therefore come from many different backgrounds; have many different perspectives and also many different learning styles; so it's impossible to give a one-fits-all suggestion.

The priority is to learn what will bring you closer to God in the way that He wants you to come closer to Him. And the only way you can find out how to do that is to learn about Islam from sound sources. In the early days, it's very difficult to know what the sound sources are, and it is something that will take time to discover, as it does when learning any subject. So all you can do in the early days is to find the best source that is available to you, as soon as you can.

Don't delay your learning while looking for the best source; start as soon as you can with what you have. That may be with the person who has helped you to come to Islam, a local group that supports new Muslims, someone from the mosque or even someone you have found on the internet. The main thing is to start somewhere. If later on you find a better source, you can turn to them instead, but don't wait too long as there are some things that you need to start learning about straight away.

First Priorities

You will already have learned quite a bit about Islam to have brought you to the point of wanting to say your *Shahadah* (Testimony of Faith), but it is likely that your learning will have been random and incidental and there are likely to be some significant gaps in your knowledge.

If we look at the example of how Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) taught the early Muslims about Islam, you can use that as a guide to the priorities of what gaps you should initially try to fill.

■ **Where and How to Learn Islam**

As for the where to start learning Islam, the simple answer is by asking and enquiring. But, whom to ask?

Islam teaches that if you do not know something, go to the people who have knowledge (scholars) and ask them. You have to make sure that you are asking the right person who is qualified enough to answer your queries. Some may ask where to find that qualified person?

Local mosques are the best guide. Try to find a nearby mosque and visit it frequently. Be aware of the mosques that teach odd stuff about Islam, i.e. avoid visiting sect-oriented mosques. Go the mosques that teach the Quran and the Sunnah according to the way the Prophet's Companions and their followers understood it.



■ Step by Step

Many converts forget about the golden rule of "step by step" in Islam and instead, they try to do everything at once. For example, someone starts wearing the hijab, praying five times a day including Fajr prayer, which I think is the hardest one for a new Muslim, getting rid of music, staying away from certain friends, and taking care of every single, tiny rule in Islam. Well, that sounds a good thing, right?

However, without a strong faith, you know what will happen?

You will very soon give up all of these acts and even lose your enthusiasm towards Islam because you feel it is just too hard. Let me tell an extreme example: one of my good friends actually ended up in the hospital because of such accelerated attitude.

No, Islam is not hard at all when you keep that golden rule: "everything must be taken step by step".

■ Focus on Faith

You know, at the beginning of your journey, you are just like a Muslim in Makkah at the time of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him): Islam is completely new for you, therefore, you must strengthen your faith in God and make sure deep inside your heart that Islam is the right path before you start dealing with the rules in details, what is *halal* what is *haram*. Try to learn and slowly implement what you've learned.

How?

For example, you know hijab is obligatory upon every Muslim woman, right, but you do not feel yourself ready to take it on yet? Read the words of God regarding this issue, read the *hadiths* of the Prophet, listen to lectures of knowledgeable sheikhs who wonderfully explain the beauty of the Muslim veil and encourage you to take this step.

And the most important: don't forget to pray to God to make wearing hijab easy for you, to help your parents and your friends accept it. You will find a few weeks later that you can't step out of your home without hijab and disobey God again: you will feel you must wear it no matter what.

That goes actually with everything else: quitting smoking, stopping drinking alcohol, beginning to pray...etc. Some reverts find it easy to get rid of certain *haram* stuff, but find it difficult, for instance, to wear more modest clothes or pray five times a day. Others work the opposite way.

Everyone is different, but you must work on those issues which are hard for you, and if you are really sincere, you really want that God be pleased with you and reward you, He will surely help you, do not doubt it! God says in the Quran:

{Be sure We shall test you with something of fear and hunger, some loss in goods, lives, and the fruits of your toil. But give glad tidings to those who patiently persevere.} (Al-Baqarah 2: 155)



■ **Don't Worry About What Others Say**

Some new reverts just get fed up because they cannot bear the criticism from their close friends or their family anymore. Consequently, they feel embarrassed to meet other Muslims or go to the mosque to avoid more problems.

The situation gets even worse when the person finally decides to attend a lecture, but in the mosque no one cares or even recognizes him. If a new Muslim cannot find that peace and warm brotherhood even among Muslims and feel that he can take refuge from the people's bad treatment, then would you be surprised if he turns back to his old ways?

On the gray weekdays, when there is no one who is in the same shoes as you, who shares the same way of thinking, then it is pretty hard to win the battle. So, I would advise to meet Muslims frequently, keep contact with them on a daily basis.

I know, not everyone seems helpful and friendly in the mosque, but there will be surely one or two nice and smiling sisters/brothers who you can make a closer friendship with. That's exactly the same as if you would be

in a new class or in a new workplace: if they don't open up, you need to make the first step.

If you live in a small city or a village where there is no Muslim community around, find Muslim friends on the internet. There are nowadays so many websites and forums where you might meet righteous brothers and sisters. You can try to search for those who live nearby your town, so you might even meet with them from time to time. Criticism is a very tough test, when you are all alone and everyone else is just attacking you or making fun of you. But always remember why you do all of this.

Remember that God is watching you and is so proud of you that you do not give up your faith. Read the stories of the Prophets and remind yourself at times of hardship: they received far worse treatment from the people around them than you get from your friends right now.

Remember the Muslims of Makkah, how cruelly they were tortured not only verbally but physically as well, how many of them actually died just because of saying: *la ilaha ila Allah*. Some people might say you are an idiot or a terrorist or stay away from you, but would you really bow down for their will to please them while turning away

from God and His eternal reward, Paradise? What is more important?

"The amount of reward is in accordance with the amount of suffering. When Allah loves some people, He tries them (with affliction). He who then is content (with Allah's decree) has achieved the acceptance (of Allah), and he who is dissatisfied (with Allah's decree) will attain the anger (of Allah)." (At-Tirmidhi)



■ **Have Righteous Friends & Seek Knowledge**

Some reverts see that Muslims around them are easy-going with religious issues and they take it as an ideal example, therefore, they don't feel compelled to continuously seek knowledge and to take this matter seriously.

They feel it is enough to believe in God, and His Messenger and pray sometimes. That is it. That is why it is very important to have friends, who are better and more knowledgeable than you.

My best friend, Hannah, was always strict, truly encouraging, she watched many lectures and read a lot about Islam. I remember that she always shared with me the new information she just got to know. Seek knowledge continuously, because:

"The more knowledge you have, the greater will be your fear of Allah." (Abu Bakr)

Don't pass a day without reading at least two pages of the Quran even in your language, listen to lectures by well-known scholars.

Attending lectures given by knowledgeable scholars who are certified by a recognized religious university, such as

Al-Azhar University or Al-Zaytuna University, is another channel to learn about Islam. You will find many scholars who give lectures in your language. You just have to search for those scholars by consulting your local mosque where you will surely get to know many who attend such lectures.

If you are interested in seeking deeper knowledge of Islam, travel to a Muslim country and join one of those universities. In this case, you will have to learn Arabic so that you can follow the courses offered. But for now, you will find many universities offering courses on Islam in English and in other languages.

About learning Arabic, I can tell you that it is not necessary in the very beginning. What you need is to know a few words in Arabic so that you can offer the prayers. If you cannot manage to learn them at first, start to perform the prayers in your own language.

Learning Islam comes also from reading books, but which books? Those written by people who have a deeper and better understanding of Islam, scholars who have an objective prospect of Islamic law and how to apply Islam in our daily life. Read for those that don't use literal

translations of the Quran and the Prophet's *Sunnah*.

Better still, before reading books, get a good translation of the Quran and read it. If you have a problem with understanding a certain verse, get a good commentary on the Quran to know the meaning. Many parts of the translation have been printed by the Islamic Foundation in London. I recommend Muhammad Asad's translation and Dr. Muhammad Abdel Haleem's.

After reading the Quran, try to get a biography of the Prophet's life. I highly recommend a book entitled "Muhammad, Man and Prophet: A Complete Study of the Life of the Prophet of Islam", written by Dr. Adil Salahi and published by the Islamic Foundation. Another recommended book written by Dr. Tariq Ramadan is entitled "In the Footsteps of the Prophet: Lessons from the Life of Muhammad", published by Oxford University Press, 2007.

The Prophet's biography will give a great insight on how the Prophet, peace be upon him, dealt with his wives, children, companions, and even his opponents, as you learn how he embraced Islam in his daily life from the moment he woke up till he went to sleep.

There are hundreds of books written about Islam and Muslims. Pick those written by skilled scholars.

When learning from the Internet, you have to be very cautious and selective as there are thousands of websites that talk about Islam and Muslims. Visit those authentic sites that introduce Islam based on the Quran and the Prophet's *Sunnah*.

Many websites offer some free online courses on Islam, and are another useful tool to learn Islam. If you have time, try to register in one of them and try one course. The Islamic Online University is one of those authentic web sites.

Islam wants you to believe in Allah, His angels, His messengers, His books, and the Day of Judgment. A Muslim is a person who submits peacefully to Allah. A Muslim is required to offer five daily prayers, pay the obligatory charity (*Zakah*), fast during the month of Ramadan, and to perform pilgrimage to Makkah once in his life.

A Muslim is a person who is kind, generous, and tolerant with people, including those of other faith communities. If you do this, you are indeed a true Muslim.

■ **Praying Difficulties**

For a new convert to Islam, praying in Arabic may seem a bit complicated at first.

Praying is a meeting between you and God, and if you were a Christian or a Jew before, you certainly got used to performing it in your own language.

God knows all what is in everyone's heart. He recognizes every prayer and supplication; yet, as the Quran was revealed in Arabic, we should respect it as it is.

As a new Muslim now, the first thing might come to your mind is how to communicate with God in a language you don't speak, right?

How to have devotion (*khushu'*) during prayer and have a complete attention to God while reciting in a language unknown to you?

Well, in Islam the fact that all Muslims pray in the same way saying the same words gives its real beauty; the unity of Islam. Have you seen millions of pilgrims praying at the ka'bah?

No matter where they come from or what language they speak in their everyday life, when they gather together to worship God, they all say “*Allahu Akbar*” and recite the same words of the Quran, and they all bow and prostrate together. Isn't this spirit of unity wonderful?

So due to this fact, it is obligatory upon each and every Muslim to perform their prayer in Arabic with the words and moves God taught Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

Don't worry, you don't need to be perfect in the Arabic language in order to perform your prayer and have devotion in it. Being a convert Muslim myself, I would like to give you some useful tips based on my experience on how to get used to praying in Arabic and enjoying it.

When I got interested in Islam and later became a Muslim, I already had some basic knowledge of Arabic as I used to take some courses at a language center. It's actually not as hard as it seems; it takes some days to learn the alphabet and the pronunciation, and some more weeks to get familiar with it. As with every language, one needs to keep practicing a little bit every day.

■ Tips to Consider When Praying

Regarding prayer, I actually learned how to perform it from YouTube videos; I watched many times the moves of prayer of a little Muslim figure and wrote down on a piece of paper to memorize what he was saying. Then, after watching and reading it like hundreds of times, I tried to pray on my own while imagining what the little figure did.

If I made a mistake, I kept on praying and after finishing it I checked what I said incorrectly. But if you're not familiar with Arabic at all, this is what you can do:

1. Listen to the Quran many times on a daily basis, or to some YouTube videos in Arabic; even though you don't understand the recitation, at least you will become more familiar with the sound of the Arabic language.
2. Ask one of your Arab Muslim friends or anyone who has correct Arabic pronunciation to clarify for you the words you say in your prayer, paying special attention to the letters and sounds that don't exist in English.
3. Before you stand up to pray, get a big piece of paper and write down phonetically in English what to say at certain parts of the prayer in big letters which you can read while

in a standing position. Place it in front of you while you're praying and simply read it out. Do that five times daily for a few days and you will memorize them very easily with minimum effort.

4. Pray with someone else! If it is possible, try to pray with another Muslim - or even better in a group - who already pray without difficulties. This way you will enjoy the group spirit of Islam, you will get more reward for the congregational prayer and at the same time gradually memorize what they're saying.

5. If you can't pray with someone, play any video or program teaching you how to perform prayer and follow it! Make sure before you chose either this way or to pray with someone that you already read a few times what to say exactly at each part during the prayer because, as with songs you used to listen to, sometimes you may think the singer said a certain word, but after checking the lyrics you realize that they sang actually something completely different. So be sure you don't end up memorizing your prayer wrongly.

I hope this will help you a bit to get closer to Allah.

Try also to keep the company of pious Muslims, and attend with them congregational prayers on Friday and any other day during the week as much as you can to feel this amazing unity of Islam, and to continuously strengthen your faith. While you're praying, or actually doing anything, remember that God is always watching you.

You can hide yourself from people but never from God. By this way of thinking, you won't waste your good deeds; your prayer and every action you do become for the sake of Allah and, *insha' Allah*, you will be rewarded for them as He has promised in the Quran.



■ Study Further

For most new Muslims, the above is as much as they need to learn about Islam, as this will enable them to live as a practicing Muslim, but for others this isn't enough and they want to take their studies further.

There are many different organizations being set up these days to teach Islamic knowledge in English, some of them use distance learning methods, others teaching via the internet and others are now establishing face to face degree level programs.

A good place to start for people in the UK is through a program specifically designed for new Muslims, such as The Muslim Now Retreats or the New Muslim Academy, which offers free online courses. Following on from that, there are more advanced classes online, such as the one taught by the Islamic Online University or the weekend courses run by Al Maghrib Institute and AlKauthar Institute.

It is admirable to learn as much as you can about Islam, as we need many more scholars who have come from western backgrounds, who also have a sound knowledge of Islam. Islamic knowledge in itself is necessary:

{It is only those who have knowledge among His servants that fear Allah.} (Fatir 35: 28)

"The best among you are the ones who learn and teach Quran." (Al-Bukhari)

But knowledge without practice or conviction is baseless. If you look at how the Prophet's companions used to learn the Quran you will have the best example to follow: "It is reported on the authority of Abu `Abdur-Rahman As-Salami, who said, 'We used to learn ten verses of the Quran and not to continue on to the next ten until we had made ourselves well-acquainted with its rules, as well as its commands and prohibitions.'"

So take your time, learn as much as you can about your new faith, but make sure to understand and implement it as best you can, before going onto study further.



Conclusion



Although a new Muslim may find him/herself encountering some awkward situations, in reality converting to Islam will be a wondrous and eye-opening journey, and you will be amazed at the improvements in your outlook, frame of mind, and habits.

Keeping a journal is one means of recording how you feel. Looking back on these recordings, you may see some pattern of how you feel including your highs and lows.

While being a new convert/revert, you may get excited arguing over a particular point in Islam getting carried away in heated debates. It is important to remember still that words carry a lot of weight in this world from how we say them to what we say with them, but it is through our actions that we bring things into being.

In many cases, what we say does not necessarily line up with what we do, and it becomes clear that it's easier to talk about doing something than it is to actually do it. At the same time, it is easy to keep doing something that we don't necessarily acknowledge ourselves doing verbally.

As Muslims, it is good for us to take a look every once and a while to make sure there is alignment between what we say and what we do and through this demonstrating the

beauty of our religion through actions rather than words. Remember you now represent Islam and you may influence those who wish to follow your example.

Away from the duties of praying, fasting and reading the Quran, there are many small things that may help strengthen the foundations of this wonderful faith and maybe, in turn, encourage others to follow your example and join you in your newly found faith.

While you may feel you're given a certain list of do's and don'ts, remember that Islam is much simpler than a written catalog for you to learn. For support, find forums, advice and chat with groups who share this life experience. These sites and discussion boards will definitely help you adjust to your new life, deal with day to day issues and help you to reach your full Muslim potential and in turn becoming the best Muslim you can be.

Bear in mind that Islam is a way of life, completely submitting yourself to God and in turn reaping the rewards of this simple and wholesome recipe. The Prophet said:

"So know that victory is with patience, and relief is with distress and that with hardship comes ease."
(Ahmad)

May Allah (SWT) always be with you in your journey in learning and practicing Islam, and may He always guide you to His Straight Path, and give you a blessed and happy life, here and in the Hereafter.

Ameen.

