

Addressing Negative Thinking and Waswas:

A Faith-Based Cognitive Approach

Using Ibn al-Qayyim's Model for Mental Fortification

Context

Students and staff alike may experience negative or intrusive thoughts – known in Islamic tradition as waswas – which can contribute to anxiety, guilt, or low self-worth. These thoughts often intensify in times of spiritual or emotional vulnerability.

Ibn al-Qayyim (rahimahullah) outlined a progression of thought that can lead to internal suffering if not intercepted:



If not stopped early, a single waswasah can lead to destructive behaviours or spiritual despair.

Faith-Informed Thought Intervention Steps

Step	What to do	Example
Notice the passing thought (khatrah)	Identify the negative or self-critical idea early.	"I'm such a bad Muslim for missing Fajr."
Interrupt with dhikr and awareness	Say "A'udhu billahi min ash-shaytan ir-rajim" and recall Allah's mercy.	"This is a whisper, not a fact. Allah is the Most Forgiving."
Reframe the thought	Use cognitive reappraisal through Islamic lenses.	"I missed Fajr, but I can make it up and strengthen my habits, in sha Allah."
Take small righteous action	Do something positive right away to shift the state.	Make wudu and pray two rakat. Use it as tawbah, not self-punishment.
Build new thinking habits	Repeat these steps to form habitual resilience.	Keep a du'a or Qur'an verse near your bed to read before sleep.

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Example Scenario (High School Student)

Fatimah feels like she's "pretending to be religious" because she gets distracted during salah. She begins to think: "Allah probably doesn't accept my prayers."

Using the model:

- **Step 1:** She notices the thought and says "This is a whisper. Not truth."
- **Step 2:** She recites A'udhu billah and remembers: "Allah judges effort, not perfection."
- **Step 3:** She reframes: "I'm still showing up for salah. That's valuable."
- **Step 4:** She adds one minute of quiet dhikr after salah to calm herself.
- **Step 5:** She journals her progress and makes du'a for spiritual focus.

Key Islamic Anchors

"Verily, in the remembrance of Allah do hearts find rest." (Qur'an 13:28)

"The Shaytan threatens you with poverty and orders you to immorality, while Allah promises you forgiveness and bounty." (Qur'an 2:268)

"The pen has been lifted from the one who forgets or makes a mistake." (Tirmidhi)

Practical Tools for School Use

- Classroom poster: "Not every thought is truth."
- Staff training: Recognising signs of intrusive thinking and guiding students in reframing
- Chaplain/Counsellor tools: Du'a cards, self-compassion scripts, Ibn al-Qayyim thought ladder worksheets

This tip sheet integrates classical Islamic psychology with evidence-based cognitive strategies to build student and staff resilience.