Published online: 07 Apr 2026

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To cite this article:
Yucel, Salih. "The Metaphysics of Emotion: Said Nursi's Contribution to Positive Psychology." *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies* 11, no. 1 (2026): e105. https://doi.org/10.55831/ajis.v11i1.1255.

THE METAPHYSICS OF EMOTION: SAID NURSI'S CONTRIBUTION TO POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

Salih Yucel*

Abstract: Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (d. 1960) is one of the most influential theologians of the modern Islamic world. Although he did not write a dedicated work on psychology or wellbeing, both themes are interwoven throughout his Magnum Opus, the *Risale-i Nur* (Epistle of Light). Having endured persecution, imprisonment, exile, and constant surveillance for approximately 35 years under Jacobin-style secularism, Nursi developed and practised a form of positive psychology not only in theory but also in his daily life. This positive psychology is reflected in his concept of *nazar* (positive outlook) and *müspet hareket* (positive action), which shaped his social relations even with oppressors and adversaries. In addition, Nursi formulated a methodology for regulating emotions. He argues that each person possesses thousands of emotions, each with two dimensions – figurative and real – and every emotion is inherently infinite and cannot be satisfied by finite objects. When emotions are not directed toward the purposes for which they were created, a human being cannot attain genuine or lasting happiness in the mind, soul, or heart. Nursi's understanding of positive psychology is firmly grounded in Qur'anic metaphysics and traditional Islamic ethics. This article first offers a brief overview of positive psychology, which is discussed under the concept of *husnu zann* (positive thinking), *ilmun nafs* (carnal soul), *ruh* (soul), *sa'adah* (happiness), and *qalb* (heart). It then examines Nursi's conception of positive psychology and its manifestation in his daily life. Finally, it explores how Nursi regulated and rationalised his emotions during the most challenging periods of his life.

Keywords: *positive psychology*, *Islam and positive psychology*, *Said Nursi*, *regulating emotions*, *metaphysics of emotion*

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INTRODUCTION

Historically, Muslim intellectual traditions have produced exceptionally rich and systematic reflections on concepts that modern scholarship now classifies under the umbrella of positive psychology. Although they did not use contemporary psychological terminology, their ethos implicitly anticipates positive psychology themes, particularly optimism, cognitive reframing, and life satisfaction. Importantly, their work is not based solely on reason but also on the soul, the heart and Islamic sacred texts.

Many classical and modern Muslim scholars developed their psychological insights through lived experiences of oppression, exile, imprisonment, and/or persecution. Figures such as Imam Azam Abu Hanifa (d. 767), Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 855), Imam Shafi'i (d. 820), Imam Rabbani (d. 1624), Hasan al-Banna (d. 1949) and Said Nursi (d. 1960) exemplify this tradition. Their reflections on human flourishing and inner strength were intellectual and spiritual responses forged amid hardship, calamity, and political tyranny.

In contrast, contemporary positive psychology, most prominently associated with American psychologist Martin Seligman, has gained global academic recognition. While Seligman's contributions to the scientific study of wellbeing are significant, his framework is primarily grounded in cognitive and empirical models of the mind. It does not arise from the same integration of experiential suffering with the spiritual heart and soul that characterises classical Islamic tradition.[1] As such, it tends to conceptualise the human being primarily through psychological and behavioural constructs rather than through a fully integrated spiritual anthropology.

By contrast, the contributions of Muslim scholars, which may be described as positive psychology, were not the product of *ʿaql* (reason) alone. Their insights included the lived experience of suffering combined with teachings from the Islamic sacred texts. They arose from an integrated epistemological framework combining rational enquiry, revelation (*waḥy*), spiritual experience and suffering of the heart, mind, and soul. In this sense, they viewed human psychology from a holistic perspective rather than focusing purely on cognitive wellbeing. This experiential and revelatory grounding arguably renders it distinct from, and in certain respects broader than, contemporary Western formulations of positive psychology.

Furthermore, classical Islamic philosophers, theologians, physicians, and Sufi thinkers have examined happiness (*saʿādah*), flourishing, virtue, character development, and the cultivation of wellbeing in ways that parallel, anticipate, and sometimes challenge contemporary psychological frameworks. These themes are explored through concepts such as *ilmun nafs* (carnal soul), *ruh* (soul), *saadah* (happiness), and *qalb* (heart), which are discussed in detail by Sufi scholars.[2] Their works do not merely resemble modern positive psychology; they form an

1 See Martin E. P. Seligman, and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, "Positive Psychology: An Introduction," *American Psychologist* 55, no. 1 (2000): Christopher Peterson and Martin E. P. Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* (Oxford University Press, 2004), Martin E. P. Seligman, *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being* (Free Press, 2011).

2 Rasjid Skinner, "An Islamic Approach to Psychology and Mental Health," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 13, no. 6 (2010), https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2010.488441.

integrated science of the soul in which epistemology, ethics, metaphysics, and spirituality intersect. Closely related to these themes is the concept of *ḥusn al-ẓann* (having a good opinion), which resonates with the notions of positive cognition and constructive interpretation.[3] The principle of *ḥusn al-ẓann* has been extensively discussed by Islamic scholars throughout history as a moral, spiritual, and psychological disposition central to inner wellbeing.

The development of Islamic psychology from the Islamic Golden Age to the early 21st century has been examined extensively by contemporary scholars. Their works trace the discipline's roots in Islamic sacred texts while highlighting key historical figures and conceptual developments. In doing so, modern scholars provide valuable contextual support for the argument advanced in this article. Rasool, for example, dedicates a chapter to the contributions of several historical scholars to psychology.[4] Haque discusses the contributions of 17 great Muslim scholars to psychology, including positive psychology, from the 9th to the 13th centuries.[5] Among these figures is Ibn Sina (d. 1037), who is known as Avicenna in the West and may be regarded as a foundational contributor to what is described as "physiological psychology." In particular, he recognised the interaction between emotional states and physical illness.[6]

Lala and Alwazzan, in their examination of Ibn Sina's *A Compendium on the Soul*, explore his understanding of happiness and the structure of the human psyche.[7] Haque notes Ibn Sina's observation that strong emotions can "destroy temperament" or even lead to death, highlighting the physical cost of a negative affect. Conversely, his use of psychological methods to treat physical ailments suggests an early understanding of subjective wellbeing as a protective factor for physical health.[8] Ibn Sina's hierarchical cognitive architecture anticipates key themes in positive psychology, including cognitive integration, emotional intelligence, imagination and creativity, mind–body coherence, meaning-making, and the cultivation of virtues.

The tradition reaches one of its most systematic articulations in the works of al-Ghazali (d. 1111), whose *Kimiyaʾ al-Saʾadah* (The Alchemy of Happiness), presents a comprehensive theory of human flourishing.[9] Soleh highlights al-Ghazali's "tiered" approach, which aligns with modern concepts of self-regulation and personal growth. By categorising the self into aspects like appetence, reason, and heart, the article mirrors the "Strengths and Virtues" model. The "Heart as Leader" concept is an executive function in which mindfulness and spiritual

3 Salih Yucel, "The Notion of 'Husnu'l Zann' or Positive Thinking in Islam," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 4, no. 6 (2014).

4 Hussein Rassool, *Islamic Psychology: Human Behaviour and Experience from an Islamic Perspective* (Routledge, 2021), 28–51.

5 Amber Haque, "Psychology from Islamic Perspective: Contributions of Early Muslim Scholars and Challenges to Contemporary Muslim Psychologists," *Journal of Religion and Health* 43 (2004), https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-004-4302-z.

6 Rassool, *Islamic Psychology*, 39.

7 Ismail Lala and Reham Alwazzan, "Transcendental Happiness in the Thought of Ibn Sina and Ibn Arabi," *Religions* 14 (2023), https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14060729.

8 Haque, "Psychology from Islamic Perspective," 357–67.

9 Achmad Khudori Soleh, "Al-Ghazali's Concept of Happiness in The Alchemy of Happiness," *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization* 12, no. 2 (2002).

alignment enable an individual to transcend "animalistic" impulses to achieve higher-order flourishing. According to al-Ghazali, the heart is not just an organ of the body but the essence of emotions and remembrance.[10]

Soleh and Mufid analyse al-Qushayri's (d. 1072) concept of *faqr* (spiritual poverty/ neediness) as a "therapy for stress" rather than as a lack of resources. By reframing life's hardships as opportunities for spiritual growth, al-Qushayri offers a form of cognitive appraisal that prevents despair.[11] In this way, he contributes to positive psychology by preparing the mind and soul to navigate challenges.[12] He teaches practitioners to observe their thoughts and impulses, a key component of emotional intelligence and stress reduction, according to modern research.

Rothman et al. argue that modern positive psychology has expanded beyond pathology to foster positive traits, paralleling Islamic emphases on holistic wellbeing centred on spirituality. However, while psychology views character development as a means to self-actualisation, Islam frames it as purifying the self and seeking Divine pleasure.[13]

Extending this trajectory into the modern period, contemporary scholar Said Nursi articulated concepts that resonate strongly with positive psychology. Among these are "*nazar*" (a holistic positive outlook) and "*müspet hareket*" (positive action). The latter is a social aspect of positive thinking, focusing on constructive and peaceful efforts for God's pleasure, avoiding negativity, revenge, or political conflict, and instead building unity, serving belief through good deeds, and renewing society from within, contrasting sharply with destructive or reactionary methods. It means transforming challenges with patience and gratitude, emphasising common ground over disputes, and dedicating oneself to building rather than tearing down.[14] However, a detailed discussion of positive action (*müsbet hareket*) is beyond the scope of this article.

Central to Nursi's pedagogical framework, and directly relevant here, is the concept of *nazar*, which emphasises seeing good in every circumstance, even those that appear painful or unjust. For instance, during his imprisonment, Nursi referred to the prison as the "School of Joseph," alluding to the Qur'anic narrative (Chapter 12) in which imprisonment became the means of spiritual and social elevation for Prophet Joseph (Yusuf).[15] His method of reinterpreting prison as the School of Joseph is conceptually similar to cognitive reframing in

10 Rassool, *Islamic Psychology*, 67.

11 Achmad Khudori Soleh and M. Mufid, "The Meaning of Faqir in the Perspective of Sufism Imam Qusyairi An Naisaburi: Therapeutic Study of Stress Diseases," *International Journal of Humanities, Education and Social Sciences* 7, no. 3 (2025).

12 Al-Qushary, *Lataif al-Isharat* [Subtleties of the Allusions], accessed December 17, 2025, https://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=3&tTafsirNo=108&tSoraNo=2&tAyahNo=155&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=2.

13 Abdallah Rothman et al., "Early Muslim Scholars' Conceptions of Character Development and Contemporary Applications in Mental Health and Well-Being," *Journal of Muslim Mental Health* 18, no. 1 (2024).

14 Salih Yucel, "Serving Islam Peacefully During the Aggression and Said Nursi's Kalamisation of Positive Action for Social Harmony," *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies* 3, no. 2 (2018), https://doi.org/10.55831/ajis.v3i2.115.

15 Said Nursi, *The Rays Collections*, trans. Sukran Vahide, accessed December 17, 2025, https://www.erisale.com/index.jsp?locale=en#content.en.204.252.

psychology, in which negative experiences are reframed as opportunities for growth. He illustrates how believers can develop a lens that sees wisdom and growth in adversity, rather than succumbing to despair.[16] Similarly, when law enforcement authorities prevented his students and sympathisers from visiting him at a hotel in Istanbul, he responded with gratitude rather than resentment, embodying the disposition he sought to instil.

In Nursi's epistemology, "those who see the good in things have good thoughts, and those who have good thoughts receive pleasure from life."[17] The inverse implication of this statement is equally instructive: one who habitually perceives ugliness generates negative thoughts, and negative thoughts give rise to sorrow and inner distress. In this way, perception becomes morally and psychologically consequential. That is to say: "One who sees ugliness thinks ugly thoughts, and one who thinks ugly thoughts suffers sorrow and torment in life."[18] When life and its trials are viewed through the lens of faith, the wisdom and beauty within them manifest. Through recognising these deeper meanings, the individual develops contentment, gratitude, and ultimately a stable form of happiness rooted not in circumstance, but in interpretive orientation.

Like optimism in positive psychology, *nazar* encourages seeing good even in adversity. As is well known, positive expectations can generate positive emotions that buffer stress and contribute to resilience.[19] Keskin argues that when Nursi's life is considered as a whole, it appears he experienced almost all sufferings mentioned by Schopenhauer.[20] Despite suffering under oppression and a Jacobin secularism, he forgave all who had caused this for 60 years of his life. From a positive psychology standpoint, developing a positive outlook can yield measurable benefits on subjective wellbeing. Positive cognitive frameworks correlate with increased life satisfaction and positive emotions. For Nursi, if a human being uses their emotions in accordance with the purpose of creation, they can attain happiness.[21] In the next section, Nursi's view on regulating emotions will be discussed.

NURSI AND THE METAPHYSICS OF EMOTION

In his *Risale-i Nur*, Nursi offers a rich and integrated account of human emotional life. His original contribution was to formulate *muspet hareket* (positive action), which classifies

16 Ahmad Nabil et al., "Said Nursi's Psycho-Spiritual Therapy for Psychological Reactions of Patients with Physical Illnesses," *IIUM Medical Journal Malaysia* 18, no. 3 (2019), https://doi.org/10.31436/imjm.v18i3.209.

17 Said Nursi, *The Letters*, trans. Hüseyin Akarsu (Light, 2007), 451.

18 Sorularla Risale, "Guzel Goren Guzel Dusunur Guzel Dusunen Hayatindan Lezzet Alir Cumlesini Izah Eder Misiniz" [Can you Explain this Sentence "Those who see the Good in Things have Good Thoughts, and those who have Good Thoughts receive Pleasure from Life?"], accessed December 31, 2025, https://sorularlarisale.com/guzel-goren-guzel-dusunur-guzel-dusunen-hayatindan-lezzet-alir-cumlesini-izah-eder-misiniz.

19 Ciro Conversano et al., "Optimism and its Impact on Mental and Physical Well-Being," *Clinical Practice and Epidemiology in Mental Health* 6 (2010), https://doi.org/10.2174/1745017901006010025.

20 Zuleyha Keskin, "Inner Peace in the Life of Said Nursi," *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies* 4, no. 3 (2019), https://doi.org/10.55831/ajis.v4i3.24.

21 Salih Yucel, "Purpose-Driven Life in Islam and Emotional Stability: Examining Said Nursi's Perspective," *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies* 9, no. 2 (2024).

emotions as figurative and real, and *nazar* (positive outlook), a perspective that aligns with themes explored in contemporary positive psychology. He argues that, for stability, emotions should be used with the purposes for which they are created. His writings reveal a sophisticated spiritual anthropology in which emotions are purposeful, educable, and central to moral and religious flourishing. Rather than seeing emotions as impediments to rationality or spirituality, Nursi frames them as dynamic faculties that guide the human being toward Divine knowledge, self-regulation, and psychological wellbeing, as articulated in the Islamic sacred texts. Across his works, *The Words*, *The Letters*, *The Flashes*, *The Rays*, the *Damascus Sermon*, and *The Gleams*, Nursi develops a multidimensional theory of emotion that significantly overlaps with contemporary positive psychology yet remains firmly grounded in Qur'anic metaphysics and traditional Islamic ethics.

This section explores how Nursi conceptualises emotions, the purposes they serve, and how they should be regulated, with attention to love, fear and envy. It also examines how Nursi's broader theological framework, rooted in Qur'anic metaphysics, shapes his views on emotional wellbeing.

Nursi argues that phenomena perceived as destructive, unpleasant, or aesthetically "ugly" often conceal deeper layers of order, purpose, and beneficence.[22] He elucidates one of the inner meanings of the verse, "(God is He) who has perfected everything He created."[23] He explains:

> In all things, even those that appear unattractive, there is a real aspect of beauty. Indeed, everything in the universe and every event is either beautiful in itself, which is called intrinsic beauty (*ḥusn bi-dhātihi*), or beautiful in its consequences, which is called derivative beauty (*ḥusn bi'l-ghayr*). There are certain phenomena whose outward appearance is ugly or disorderly, but beneath that external veil lie exceptionally radiant forms of beauty and order.[24]
>
> However, since human beings are both inclined toward outward appearances and self-centred, they judge by what is apparent and conclude that something is ugly. From the standpoint of self-interest, they evaluate matters solely by outcomes that concern them and thus judge them to be evil.[25]

Nursi provides examples to support his argument:

> Beneath the outward veils of events, such as storms, earthquakes, and epidemics, many spiritual "flowers" unfold like seeds, after enduring pressure, germinate and become more beautiful. It is as if all upheavals and great transformations are a kind of spiritual rain. In truth, while the purpose of things in relation to human beings may be one, their purposes in relation to the Divine Names of their Maker are a thousand.[26]

This misalignment between human judgment and deeper reality which he refers to, also applies to scriptural expressions that may appear improper but are, in fact, inherently refined

22 Said Nursi, *The Words*, trans. Huseyin Akarsu (The Light, 2005), 242.
23 Qur'an 32:7.
24 Nursi, *The Words*, 243.
25 Ibid., 244.
26 Ibid.

when understood in relation to their purposes and the artistry of their composition. Ultimately, seemingly disorderly or unattractive aspects of the world are portrayed as intricately ordered manifestations of Divine wisdom, their "veils" concealing profound beauty and intentional design.[27]

THE NATURE AND PURPOSE OF HUMAN EMOTIONS

Emotions are "tools" entrusted to human beings to discover Divine truths and fulfil ethical responsibilities. Rassool examines types and major theories of emotions. He reviews the neural substrates of emotion, including limbic structures, the prefrontal cortex, and autonomic pathways, and outlines major theories such as the James–Lange, Cannon–Bard, Schachter–Singer, and appraisal models. Additionally, Rasool analyses non-verbal emotional communication, conceptually and empirically explores the concepts of love and emotional intelligence, identifies core emotional competencies, and situates emotional intelligence and Qur'anic portrayals of emotion within an Islamic spiritual framework.[28]

Each emotion corresponds to a dimension of spiritual training (*tarbiya*). This section explores how Nursi conceptualises emotions, the purposes they serve, and how they should be regulated, with attention to love, fear, and envy. Nursi notes that much human sorrow arises not from lack of blessings but from failure to appreciate them emotionally.[29] The section also examines how Nursi's broader theological framework, rooted in Qur'anic metaphysics, shapes his understanding of emotional wellbeing. Across his works, Nursi presents an intricate, spiritually oriented psychology in which emotions are not obstacles but instruments through which individuals can know themselves, understand their responsibilities toward God, and cultivate ethical and spiritual maturity.

For Nursi, emotion is an essential aspect of human nature rather than a peripheral or accidental feature. He maintains that God endowed humans with thousands of emotions,[30] sensibilities, and inner faculties, including will, intellect, affect, and spiritual intuition, each oriented toward a Divine purpose. He categorises emotions into two types: figurative and real.[31] Real emotions are inherently infinite and cannot be satisfied by finite objects. Figurative emotions, by contrast, are not infinite; although humans may perceive them as real, they are metaphorical in nature. For example, involuntary sickness of scruples (*wahm*), along with excessive doubt or negative assumptions, can develop into figurative emotions.[32] The will is ultimately aimed at worship, the intellect at knowledge of God, the emotions at love of God, and the subtle inner faculties at witnessing Divine realities. Emotional life, therefore, is teleological: it is structured to lead the human being away from self-centeredness (*nafs*) and toward God-centred awareness. Nursi points out,

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27 Ibid., 242.
28 Rassool, *Islamic Psychology*, 221–240.
29 Nursi, *The Words*, 163.
30 Said Nursi, *Gleams*, trans. Huseyin Akarsu (Tugrah Books, 2008), 51.
31 Ibid., 52.
32 Nursi, *The Words*, 288.

> Man's actions result from the inclinations of his heart and emotions. They come from the sensibilities of the spirit and its needs. The spirit is stirred into action through the light of belief. If an act is good, he does it; if it is evil, he tries to restrain himself. Blinder emotions will not drive him down the wrong road and defeat him.[33]

Emotions are mediators between the human spirit and moral world. They initiate action, direct attention, and shape moral sensitivity. Yet Nursi also acknowledges the fragility of emotional life: left unguided, emotions are easily swayed by immediate desires, misleading pleasures, or the ego's demands. Many destructive behaviours, especially among youth, are attributed to the dominance of "blind emotions," which ignore long-term consequences in favour of fleeting satisfaction.[34] This blindness explains why people may act against reason, moral knowledge, and even firmly held religious beliefs. Emotional misalignment, therefore, is not a failure of belief but a failure of emotional regulation.

EMOTION REGULATION

Nursi's understanding of emotion regulation is deeply rooted in the practices of spiritual discipline. If emotions precede reason or are not controlled by reason, they most often cause emotional instability. Because emotions are part of human nature, regulation does not require changing or suppressing them; rather, they should be channelled towards positive aims or the common good. Nursi argues that emotions must be educated, directed, and harmonised through remembrance (*dhikr*), reflection (*tafakkur*), and conscious moral striving. Rather than suppressing emotions such as envy, anger, ambition, or love, which are natural elements of human psychology, he proposes transforming them into constructive virtues. When preachers instruct people to suppress their emotions, such advice is ineffective because it contradicts human nature. Instead, emotions must be channelled toward their proper ends and integrated into a higher ethical framework.

Nursi says,

> One reason why preachers' advice is ineffective nowadays is that they invite people to change their nature. They advise: "Do not be envious or ambitious, do not feel enmity or be obstinate, do not love the world," and so on. Such advice is useless, for it is against human nature. Instead, these energies can and should be channelled into good deeds and directed toward positive aims. For example, love for the world can be channelled into love for the other world, enmity can be directed against one's carnal self, and envy can become a means for competing to do good deeds.[35]

Nursi argues that human emotions are often blind to consequences and inclined to prefer an ounce of present pleasure to tons of future joy, thereby prevailing over reason. The only effective way to rescue the dissipated from vice is to confront those emotions directly. This is achieved by revealing the pain concealed within their pleasures, thereby undermining the power of desire. Although such individuals are aware of the diamond-like rewards and eternal

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33 Said Nursi, *Damascus Sermon*, trans. Sukran Vahide (Sozler Nesriyat, 1996), 69.
34 Nursi, *The Words*, 164.
35 Nursi, *Gleams*, 52.

pleasures of the Hereafter, as indicated by the verse "They deem lovable the life of this world,"[36] they nevertheless, despite being believers, choose worldly delights. These pleasures are like fragile pieces of glass, dazzling in appearance yet destined to shatter. Thus, the only way to protect them from excessive attachment to the world and from the danger of succumbing to it is to expose the hell-like torments and sufferings that worldly indulgence already inflicts in this life.[37] Due to the limits of this article, the following sections examine how Nursi addresses the regulation of love, fear, and envy.

A Reorientation of Love

Love (*muhabbah*) occupies a central place in Nursi's theory of emotion. He argues that love is the most powerful spiritual emotion. Human beings, he maintains, are created with an innate and limitless capacity to love, which is ultimately directed towards the Creator of the universe.[38] He writes, "Furthermore, the tiny heart of the human can contain a love as great as the universe."[39] Humans naturally love beauty, grace, excellence, perfection, and generosity, and their love grows in proportion to the degree in which these qualities are perceived. Because these qualities exist infinitely in the Creator, they call forth infinite love from humankind. Although the human heart appears small, it can encompass vast realities, just as the human memory can contain immense amounts of information despite its physical minuteness. This demonstrates that the human heart can symbolically "contain" the universe and sustain boundless love.[40] Nursi therefore distinguishes between metaphorical love and true love:

> Feeling it for mortal beings either throws lovers into endless pain and sorrow or, since mortal beings are not worth so sincere a love, leads lovers toward seeking the Permanent Beloved One. In the latter case, it becomes real love.[41]

Nursi emphasises that the Creator's infinite beauty, perfection, grace, and favour are clearly manifested in His works in the universe, in the artistry of creation, and in the countless bounties bestowed on living beings. Since humans are the most comprehensive, needy, conscious, and yearning of all creatures, they are uniquely equipped to respond to these Divine qualities with limitless love. Consequently, the Creator has a greater right than anything else to be loved infinitely.[42]

Nursi elaborates on a central principle: finite objects of love, whether people, wealth, or status, cannot bear the absolute love that belongs to God alone. Misplaced love leads to suffering because transient things inevitably perish. Since love is infinite by nature, it must be directed to the Infinite One (God). This raises an important question: if love arises naturally and irresistibly for family, food, beauty, youth, life, nature, and the world, how can one be

36 Qur'an 14:3.
37 Nursi, *Damascus Sermon*, 19–20.
38 Nursi, *Gleams*, 74.
39 Ibid., 52.
40 Ibid., 75.
41 Ibid., 53.
42 Ibid., 76.

asked to direct all love toward God? The answer does not deny these loves but transforms their direction and meaning.

For Nursi, the first key point is that while love is not voluntary, its orientation is. Love can shift from the apparent object to the true source behind it. Created things are not meant to be loved independently or absolutely; rather, they act as mirrors, signs, or veils pointing to the One truly worthy of love (God). When the temporary or imperfect nature of created things is recognised, love can turn from the metaphorical to the real Beloved God.[43]

The second and central point explains that the solution is not to abandon love for worldly things, but to love them for God's sake and in His name. Enjoying food, for example, becomes an act of loving God's Names the All-Merciful and Bestower when it is accompanied by gratitude and moderation rather than mere self-indulgence. Love for parents, when grounded in recognition of Divine mercy and wisdom, deepens rather than weakens, especially as they grow old and can no longer offer worldly benefits. Such love is tested through patience, kindness, and selflessness.

Similarly, love for children is transformed when they are regarded as trusts from God. True God-centred love manifests as gratitude and submission, even in times of loss, recognising Divine ownership and wisdom. Love for friends becomes an extension of love for God when it is grounded in shared faith and goodness. Love for one's spouse is refined by focusing not on fleeting physical beauty but on the enduring qualities of character, compassion, and moral grace that uphold dignity and rights over time.

The same principle applies to love of life, youth, spring, beauty, and the world. Life is to be loved as a priceless capital for eternal gain; youth as a Divine blessing to be used wisely; spring as a display of Divine artistry; and the world as a temporary guesthouse, a field for the hereafter, and a mirror reflecting God's Names. When loved in this way, worldly things are no longer distractions but guides.[44]

For Nursi, genuine love is love of the Divine through the beauty, perfection, and grace reflected in God's Names as manifested in creation.[45] This love is not only spiritually elevating but also psychologically stabilising: it protects the heart from excessive dependence on transient pleasures and from the emotional volatility of worldly attachments. Properly directed, love becomes a source of joy, meaning, and moral motivation.

Nursi explains that love for God's Names deepens as one becomes aware of human need and Divine compassion. God's Names, especially the All-Merciful and All-Compassionate, encompass and care for all loved ones across time and eternity. When love is redirected in this way, natural affections remain, but they become sources of pain-free pleasure, gratitude, and an ever-growing love for God. Nursi's view can be summarised as, "Love the created for the

43 Nursi, *The Words*, 649.
44 Ibid., 649–51.
45 Said Nursi, *Al-Mathnawy al-Nuri: Seedbed of the Light*, trans. Huseyin Akarsu (Light, 2007), 202–3.

sake of the Creator."[46] In this sense, Nursi develops a concept similar to what modern psychology describes as secure attachment.[47] Emotional security is achieved not by eliminating love but by rooting it in what is eternal and unchanging. All other loves reflect this fundamental Divine relationship.

Fear: Rationalise and Channelise

Said Nursi's reflections on fear held prescriptive significance for many Muslims of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In continuity with earlier thinkers, Nursi identifies the "sense of fear" as one of the most fundamental human emotions and regards it as a primary source of human vulnerability. Yet fear, in his view, is not primarily dread of punishment but an awareness of one's moral responsibility before a just and compassionate Creator.

His writings highlight three principal forms of fear. The first is positive fear, known as *tatlı korku* (sweet fear), which he understands as an innate mechanism embedded in human nature for preserving life. The second is *wahm*, imaginary or figurative fear, a type of exaggerated apprehension that often results in considerable harm. The third is external fear, arising from a clear or imminent threat.[48] While the first two forms originate internally from the human *fiṭra* (primordial disposition), the third derives from outward circumstances.

Nursi suggests that the emotion of fear should be channelled toward fear of God, which, he argues, will become a "pleasurable abasement,"[49] as it draws human beings to embrace Divine mercy. Otherwise, this fear becomes directed toward other creatures and results in grievous distress.[50] Through this positive theology of fear, Nursi redirects an innate human emotion away from destructive imaginary fears of the unknown and toward a theocentric fear that becomes a spiritually enriching state of servanthood. If not oriented toward God, this natural emotion becomes misdirected toward created beings and, in his view, culminates in profound spiritual distress.

Nursi illustrates the deceptive nature of imaginary fear through the example of a distinguished scholar who avoids travelling by boat across the Bosphorus, fearing it might sink and cost him his life. In their dialogue, Nursi reasons with the scholar by demonstrating the improbability of such an event. He says,

> An important man (may God's mercy be upon him) was afraid to travel by boat. One evening, we went to the Galata Bridge to take the ferry to Eyüp in Istanbul. He did not want to get on, saying that he feared he would drown. When I asked him how many boats were in the Golden Horn, he replied that there might be as many as one thousand. When I asked him how many boats sank each year, he replied, usually one or two, and sometimes none.

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46 Talat S. Halman, "Turkish Humanism and the Poetry of Yunus Emre," *Tarih Araştırmaları Dergisi* 6, no. 10–11 (1968), accessed December 15, 2025, https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/783236.

47 Mario Mikulincer and Phillip R. Shaver, "The Attachment Behavioral System in Adulthood: Activation, Psychodynamics, and Interpersonal Processes," *Psychological Inquiry* 18, no. 3 (2007).

48 Nursi, *The Words*, 368.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid., 367.

> I made this analogy: "Since a year has 365 days, your chance of drowning is 1:365,000. Why does such a small chance scare you?" I asked: "How much longer do you expect to live?" He answered: "Maybe 10 years; I am old already." I continued: "As there are 3,650 days in 10 years, your chance of dying today is 1:3,650. But since we do not know when we will die, you could die at any time…Seeing the truth in my words, he got on the boat even though trembling. On the boat, I told him:
>
> Almighty God gave the sense of fear to preserve life, not to destroy it! He did not give life to make it burdensome, difficult, painful, and torment. If fear is due to a possibility of one in two, three, or four, or even one in five or six, it is a precautionary fear and may be licit. But to have fear at a possibility of one in twenty, thirty, or forty, is a groundless fear, and makes life torture.[51]

In this way, Nursi employs rational argumentation to reinforce his premise that, although fear is a natural human instinct endowed for the preservation of life, it should not be misused or allowed to become excessive. He reiterates the classical Islamic understanding that imbalance or extremity in fear can lead to despair and spiritual harm; therefore, warns against its distortion and exaggeration. Nursi also examines external forms of fear, which he attributes primarily to ignorance. To illustrate this, he cites the example of thunder and lightning: many people, he observes, become terrified of the sound of thunder, which poses no real danger, while showing far less apprehension toward lightning, which has the capacity to kill. Fear born of ignorance, he argues, often stems from mistaken assumptions or a misunderstanding of reality. He further notes that those with malicious intent can manipulate this emotion, using fear as a powerful tool to shape and control society's reactions.

Regulation also requires strengthening the rational and spiritual faculties so they can govern emotion. The heart and intellect must be illuminated by faith to avoid being "defeated" by impulsive desires. When rightly guided, emotions become harmonious and contribute to stable moral character, which Nursi identifies as *taqwa* or comprehensive piety.

Envy: The First Misused Emotion in Human History

Envy is a powerful emotion that can be misused and is associated with the first sin recorded in the Islamic sacred tradition.[52] Envy can function as a motivation for growth and achieving goals, and as a cause of depression, aggression, and conflict. It is also presented as a central factor in the conflict among the sons of Prophet Jacob (peace be upon him).[53] In a hadith, it is stated: "Faith and envy cannot coexist in the heart of a servant."[54]

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51 Nursi, *The Letters*, 402.

52 Qur'an 5:27–29.

53 Serdar Abdulkadir, Psikolojide Haset ve Kıskançlık" [Jealousy and Envy in Psychology], Risale Haber, accessed December 31, 2025, https://www.risalehaber.com/bilal-tanriverdi-psikolojide-haset-ve-kiskanclik-25642yy.htm.

54 Abu Amina Elias, "Hadith on Hasad: Faith and Envy never Coexist in Heart," November 2, 2012, accessed April 4, 2026, https://www.abuaminaelias.com/dailyhadithonline/2012/11/02/iman-never-combined/.

Like many great scholars in Islamic history, Nursi argues that envy is inherent in human nature and leads humans to compete with one another rather than to destroy one another.[55] However, if it is not regulated by reason and heart, it becomes one of the most misused emotions. Nursi even describes it as more destructive than disbelief in human history.[56] Envy causes a person to suffer inward torment from others' blessings and to feel pleasure at their misfortunes, amounting to an objection against Divine decree and mercy. While envy corrodes the soul, it can be transformed into motivation for moral excellence, just as obstinacy can be redirected into steadfast commitment to truth.[57]

Nursi does not attempt to suppress envy through psychological repression; instead, he redirects it toward admiration or positive emulation, beginning with engagement of reason. Through rational analysis, he contends that envy primarily harms the person who harbours it. He states, "Envy ultimately consumes the one who harbours it, while leaving the one envied largely unharmed."[58] To him, those seeking to cure themselves of envy should reflect on the fleeting nature of what provokes it: beauty, strength, status, and wealth are temporary. Their benefit is small, yet the burden they impose is great. Envy directed at spiritual merit is even more dangerous, as it may conceal hypocrisy or lead one to unjustly accuse others of it.[59] Rejoicing in another's misfortune or grieving over their success reflects dissatisfaction with Divine decree and compassion. Those who object to destiny harm only themselves, and those who oppose mercy are deprived of it.

Nursi emphasises that the positions, status, beauty, worldly possessions, and knowledge that are envied are all bestowals from God. Envying such blessings, he argues, amounts to criticising Divine mercy. Consequently, the envious individual risks being deprived of that mercy.[60] Ultimately, envy leads to inner torment, resentment toward God's decree, and spiritual loss, while gratitude, sincerity, and trust in Divine mercy offer true peace and healing. As Nursi observes, envy ultimately consumes the one who harbours it, while leaving the one envied largely unharmed.[61]

Three distinguishing features may be identified that set Said Nursi apart from his contemporaries with respect to positive psychology. First, the form of positive psychology he articulated emerged from lived experiences of suffering, hardship, endurance in the face of persecution, engagement in devotional practices (such as the recitation of litanies and supplications), and an emphasis on the integration of reason, heart, and spirit as dimensions of the human self. Second, rather than focusing on suppressing or resisting maladaptive emotions, he emphasised redirecting them toward morally and spiritually constructive ends. Third, and perhaps most significantly, he did not treat positive psychology merely as a theoretical framework; he embodied it in practice, thereby exerting substantial social and moral influence.

55 Nursi, *The Letters*, 53.
56 Ibid., 412.
57 Ibid., 285.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid., 284.
60 Ibid., 285.
61 Ibid.

Finally, throughout his writings, Nursi warns against the distortions caused by the ego (*nafs*), which misdirects emotions toward self-serving ends. Misalignment occurs when love becomes obsession, anger becomes tyranny, fear becomes paranoia, or hope becomes heedless indulgence. These distortions arise not from the emotion but from forgetting God and losing the spiritual centre that anchors emotional life. Correcting emotional misalignment requires spiritual remembrance, moral discipline, and conscious redirection of emotional energy. When aligned with Divine consciousness, emotions become sources of strength, clarity, and moral motivation rather than chaos.

CONCLUSION

Said Nursi offers a comprehensive spiritual psychology in which emotions are not disruptive forces but essential elements of moral and spiritual life. His concept of *nazar* (positive outlook) offers a robust framework that aligns with core findings in positive psychology. While grounded in Qur'anic and prophetic sources, *nazar* parallels psychological constructs such as optimism, cognitive reframing, and meaning-making. From a positive psychology perspective, this outlook supports wellbeing by enhancing adaptive coping, resilience, and life satisfaction.

By recognising the interplay between cognitive interpretation, emotional states, and narratives of meaning, Nursi's writings and empirical research underscore the transformative potential of a constructive outlook on human flourishing. He provides a nuanced account of emotions such as fear, hope, love, gratitude, sorrow, and compassion, showing how each can be transformed into a path toward inner peace and ethical living. For Nursi, emotional regulation is achieved not through suppression but through redirection, meaning-making, and spiritual grounding. His writings present a rich framework that aligns with many contemporary insights in positive psychology while offering a distinctively theological vision of emotional flourishing. Thus, in Nursi's view, a positive outlook is inseparable from faith-informed cognition that shapes not only theological interpretation but one's emotional experience of life. This transformative approach anticipates contemporary positive psychology by emphasising strengths, adaptive reappraisal, and purposeful redirection rather than repression.

In Nursi's system, psychological health cannot be separated from spiritual orientation. Emotional wellbeing arises when the heart, intellect, and will are harmonised and directed towards a transcendent purpose. Ultimate emotional security comes from connection with the Divine, but a person comprises physics and metaphysics side by side. So, if the mind, heart, and emotions are oriented towards the Divine, the person ascends spiritually and this positively impacts their wellbeing. Conversely, if they prioritise this world and materialistic concerns, they will experience emotional instability.

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