



Hossain Turjo, a second-year student at New York University Abu Dhabi, says 'family is key to enduring the difficult fasts and fatigue from dehydration'. Christopher Pike / The National

Single Muslim expats living in UAE face rigours of fasting alone

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June 1, 2016 Updated: June 2, 2016 11:55 AM

ABU DHABI // His mother yelling at 4am, waking the family to eat the final meal before a 14-hour fast is what Hossain Turjo will miss most this Ramadan as he spends it in the UAE, away from home.

Family is key to enduring the difficult fasts and fatigue from dehydration, particularly during the summer, said Mr Turjo, a second-year student at NYUAD.

Without family, he said he feels every hour.

"It can feel a little disconcerting and that's when emotions get high. You're hungry and tired but the worst is knowing that you don't have a home to go back to where Mum is cooking a really great meal – it's those little things that add up," the Bangladeshi said.

The loneliness felt by Muslim expatriates during Ramadan makes fasting more difficult because they endure the equivalent of "a month of Christmas alone", psychologists said.

Going through any difficult experience, not just Ramadan, and being supported by family or loved ones, said Dr Najwan Al Roubaiy, clinical psychologist at the American centre for psychiatry and neurology, gave strength to people.

"Going through the process together, being guided by our elders and helping the young ones – just being with the family gives a heightened sense to this experience and the spiritual aspect is so much more fulfilling when with family because you are enduring the physical and mental hunger together," he said.

Mr Turjo said the nostalgia associated with Ramadan made it a really special time for him and made it harder to be away from home. Homesickness combined with an ache in the stomach seem to combine during Ramadan, he said.

"You feel it a lot more during fasting, you [family] usually start the day together, end the day together, so it does feel lonely sometimes, but I go to a school with an international community, so we're always together. For others, it must be a lot worse," he said.

Ahmed, a Lebanese bank worker in Dubai, said that being here for Ramadan was like spending an entire holiday alone.

"I miss my family and this is especially a time where you -focus on being around family," he said. "Here though it feels very lonely. There's an aspect to Ramadan, outside of fasting, that people who don't fast don't understand and that is you find comfort in being together."

This will be Ahmed's second Ramadan away from family. Last year, his first, he said that he would typically just go to the supermarket and buy a bag of Lebanese bread, hummus and a sandwich.

"I fast all day and, when it comes time to eat, I don't even have the appetite to eat," he said. "I guess that's the good part, I don't really gain weight but, honestly, there are meals that I miss so much during Ramadan. This is, of course, aside from missing my family."

Dr Thoraiya Kanafani, a clinical psychologist at the Human Relations Institute and Clinics, said that Ramadan could be an extremely difficult time for those away from home.

"It's similar to spending Christmas alone but you're doing that 30 days in a row," said the doctor. "So this lifestyle can increase feelings of loneliness, sadness and might make it difficult to feel connected. That kind of chronic loneliness can lead to depression."

"The truly lacking part for expats who are Muslim is the family. This is why I implore those with families here, who might take it for granted, to invite a colleague, or a friend who might be alone. It would mean a lot to this person if you were to invite them for iftar with you, it would make a huge difference."

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