

ISLAMIC PSYCHOSPIRITUAL SELF-CARE AS A COUNSELLING INTERVENTION TO ENHANCE WELL-BEING OF MENTAL HEALTH CLIENTS: A CONCEPTUAL PAPER

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Abstract

The recent global health crisis caused by the rapidly spreading Covid-19 pandemic has sparked a great deal of interest and concern about the escalating burden and troubling problems of mental health disorders around the world, particularly in Malaysia. The Ministry of Health Malaysia reported a prevalence of 29% among adults, a threefold increase from 10% in 1996, indicating a high incidence of suicidal behaviour. Indeed, as the country's economic burden grows, mental illness is one of the leading causes of disability and health loss. While there have been numerous evidence-based methods of psychotherapy and counselling interventions available, including psychoanalysis, behaviourism, cognitive psychology, and humanistic psychology; all of these approaches emerged from western and secular worldviews. They refute man's dualistic nature and the purpose and reason for his creation, employ non-judgmental principles in the non-indoctrination of religious beliefs and values during treatment, are incompatible with the Islamic approach, and have been deemed ineffective. Adolescent mental health issues have made it abundantly clear that they must be addressed and resolved, and Islamic-based psychospiritual approaches for psychological psychotherapy and counselling treatments and interventions based on the Al Quran and Sunnah should be investigated further. As a result, the purpose of this concept paper is to review the literature on mental health and the impact of the most common mental issues like depression, anxiety, and stress, both globally and in Malaysia, as well as the spiritual and religious counselling treatment and interventions available, particularly in self-care counselling treatment from Islamic perspectives.

Keywords: *Islamic Counselling, Psycho-Spirituality, Self-Care, Well-Being, Mental Disorders*

INTRODUCTION

The recent global health crisis emanating from the fast-spread of Covid-19 pandemic has raised a lot of interests and concerns with regards to the escalating burden and worrying problems of mental health disorders worldwide, specifically in Malaysia where the most recent epidemiological data, published in 2015 by the Ministry of Health Malaysia reported prevalence of 29% among adults, a dramatic threefold increase from the 10% in 1996; with suicidal behavior found highest among students aged 13, according to 2017 National Health Morbidity Survey. In fact, mental illness is one of the leading causes of disability and health loss in the country due to an increased economic burden. Mental health problems in the workplace were estimated to cost the Malaysian economy RM4.46 billion in 2018 (Raaj, Navatnathan, Tharmaselan & Lally, 2020). This does not bode well for Malaysia as it is expected to transition to a high-income economy between 2024 and 2028, a reflection of the country's economic transformation development trajectory over past decades (World Bank, 2021).

Mental health is a vital and crucial aspect of overall health. The Constitution of the World Health Organization (WHO) of 1948; defined health as, “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”; implying that mental health encompasses more than the absence of mental illnesses. WHO (2004), further, defined mental health as “a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community”. Hence, mental health has been regarded as an integral part of health, as there is no health without mental health

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This is a conceptual paper in which the research methodology used in this study is library research which reviews literature on mental health and mental issues such as depression, anxiety, and stress, both globally and in Malaysia, as well as the spiritual and religious counselling treatment and interventions available, particularly self-care treatment from Islamic perspectives. Comparisons between western and Islamic approaches to addressing mental, psychological, and emotional issues affecting the current mental health crisis have also been extensively researched.

Secondary sources such as research journals, books, published papers and proceedings, reports, newspapers, and other writings or articles from previous related research have been needed for this research. Using keywords such as Islam, psycho-spirituality, self-care, counselling, well-being, depression, anxiety, stress, and mental

health, the researcher also used Google Scholar to find online references that can be trusted as reputable and credible sources.

FINDINGS

Global Mental Health

According to WHO (2022), 1 in every 8 people, or 970 million people worldwide - including 14% of the world's adolescents - had a mental disorder in 2019, with anxiety and depressive disorders being the most common. In light of the Covid-19 pandemic, the number of people suffering from anxiety and depression increased significantly in 2020. Initial estimates show a 26% and 28% increase in anxiety and major depressive disorders, respectively, in just one year. At its most extreme, depression can lead to suicide, which is the second leading cause of death among individuals aged 15 to 29 worldwide (World Economic Forum, 2020). While effective prevention and treatment alternatives exist, most people with mental disorders do not have access to effective care due to stigma, discrimination, and human rights violations according to the same WHO (2020) report.

Malaysian Mental Health

Mental illness is becoming a major concern in Malaysia, and it is growing at an alarming rate, particularly among young adults. By 2020, mental disorders were expected to be the second most serious health problem afflicting Malaysians, after heart disease (Bernama, 2018). According to the 2019 National Health and Morbidity Survey, half a million Malaysians have depression symptoms, with an increase in cases of depression and anxiety following the recent Covid-19 pandemic (The New Straits Times, 2022). According to reports, nearly 2% of Malaysians aged 16 and up are currently depressed, with a high prevalence among university students (Nahas et al., 2019).

National Health and Morbidity Survey (Institute for Public Health, 2015) reported Malaysians' mental health problems increased from 10.6% in 1996 to 29.2% in 2015. This means that three out of every ten Malaysian adults suffer from mental health problems. The age group most affected is 16-18 years old. In Malaysia, mental illness is one of the leading causes of disability and health loss, accounting for 8.6% of total disability-adjusted life-years [DALYs] (Raaj, Navatnathan, Tharmaselan & Lally, 2020). According to Teh et al. (2015), the prevalence of depression, anxiety, and stress among Malaysian undergraduate students ranges from 13.9% to 29.3%, 51.5% to 55.0%, and 12.9% to 21.6%, respectively. Failure to detect and treat these emotional disorders will unfortunately result in increased psychological morbidity with negative consequences throughout their careers and lives. Given the global prevalence of

mental health issues, including in Malaysia, there is an urgent need to examine the best solution to this crippling issue.

Religion & Spirituality

In recent decades, researchers' interest in religion and spirituality, in relation to mental health, has expanded, with substantial evidence indicating that religious participation is generally associated with good mental health outcomes (Baetz & Toews, 2009; Koenig, 2009; Dein, 2010) such as lower incidences of cancer, heart disease, alcoholism, and mental illness, as well as improvements in the quality of life (Nilsson, 2022). Despite the positive development, there still remains a "spiritual gap" between mental health patients and health professionals in the practice; due to clinicians being generally less spiritual than their patients (Forrester-Jones, Dietzfelbinger, Stedman, & Richmond, 2018), and often felt ill-equipped with religious framework within a therapy (Meer & Mir, 2014).

Psychotherapy paired with Quran teachings and Islamic prayer among Malaysian Muslims was similarly successful in treating depression (S. B. Bonelli et al., 2010). Studies have revealed Islamic approach playing a significant role as therapeutic tool in psychotherapy and counselling interventions, particularly prayer as a healing process (Abdul-Rahman, 2017; Keskinoglu & Ekşi, 2019; YalnaazLakdawala et al., 2018) and people from Muslim backgrounds are likely to use religious coping techniques. Consistently, previous findings provide support for the effectiveness of Islamic psycho-spiritual treatment and its significant role as a therapeutic tool in psychotherapy and counselling intervention (Hanin Hamjah & Mat Akhir, 2014; Yaacob, 2013b). It has been contended that ideas, solutions, and answers to mental health issues in today's world would be found in the Qur'an and Sunnah and not from secular or conventional western mental health facilities or experts in psychology and psychiatry (M. K. Hassan, 2020b). Notwithstanding, the western dominance of human knowledge has emphasised the physical and external dimensions of human life due to the secular civilisation, which does not even acknowledge the existence of the soul, and in some cases, even the existence of God; thus, the urgent need for spiritual development, which is indispensable for any intellectual discipline (Al-Badawi, 2002).

Indeed, the late Prof. Dr. Malik Badri (Badri, 2016), known as the father of modern Islamic psychology, and many other Muslim psychologists and psychotherapists argued that western psychological perspectives, whether humanistic psychology, cognitive psychology, behaviourism, or psychoanalysis, all stem from secular worldviews that reject the concept of the soul, which is the Islamic foundation of human nature (Abdul Razak et al., 2011); using non-judgmental principles in the non-indoctrination of religious beliefs and values during psychotherapy and counselling treatment, which is contradictory to the Islamic approach, as a result, the Western

method is deemed ineffective (Razak, Razak, & Zaroum, 2019). It has also been argued that the refusal of western psychology to recognise the dualistic nature of man, its spiritual and physical being, and the purpose and reasons for man's creation, are the root causes of the psychological and social problems confronting global societies today (Sudirman, 2017). The serious issues of mental health among adolescents made it abundantly clear that the serious issues of mental health need to be addressed and resolved; in particular, through the application of psychological psychotherapy and counselling treatments and interventions; of which Islamic-based psychospiritual approaches, based on the Al Quran and Sunnah, should be further explored.

Islamic Psychospiritual Therapy

Islamic psychospiritual therapy, rooted in Sufism or Tassawuf – study of the Soul, commonly referred to as Islamic Psychology; has been widely and extensively used for the management and treatment of behavioural and mental health problems; and from which the Islamic counselling approach was developed (Parveen & Khan, 2019). Islamic psychology, also known as the science of the Nafs, the inner Self, which refers to the soul, the psyche, is the philosophical study of the psyche or mind from an Islamic perspective. It focuses on the development of human spirituality through the soul (Nafs/psyche/Self), spirit (Ruh), heart (Qalb), and intellect ('Aql), and its foundation is self-purification of the heart, in order to protect the soul from spiritual diseases of the heart, including mental illness caused by a neglected heart; and achieve a harmonious relationship between man and his Creator (Sa'ari, 2019). In contrast to the teachings of the Al Quran and Sunnah, which place the heart at the centre of human physical and spiritual existence; western psychology has placed great emphasis on the brain as the centre of the human psyche (Maslahat, 2022) which forms the human personality. Comparative studies on Islamic psychology and human personality and the three main schools of western psychology, psychoanalysis, behaviourism, and humanism, revealed significant differences that can be likened to the "difference between chalk and cheese", having no similarities (Razak et al., 2017).

Islamic Psychospiritual Self-Care

Despite the fact that religiously based psychotherapy and counselling interventions, as well as those that are not religious but are spiritual, have been shown to be effective in improving mental health and well-being; recent research has looked at self-care as another type of treatment intervention for the management mental health especially depression, anxiety, and stress, where self-harm and suicides are devastating outcomes and are not in line with Islamic beliefs. WHO (2022) defines self-care as the capacity of individuals, families and communities to promote health, prevent disease, maintain health and cope with illness and disability with or without the assistance of a health worker. Self-care can support with mental health maintenance, as well as

treatment and recovery from mental illness (National Institute of Mental Health, 2021). But more importantly, it can be used as a preventative measure against the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world, in which the environment we live in is constantly and inevitably posing threats to people's psychological, emotional, and social well-being, and hence their susceptibility to mental disorders. In line with the current trend of positive psychology that emphasises health and well-being, self-care focuses on overall mental health rather than mental illness (Mogahed, 2021) which is coherent with Islamic teachings.

There is growing evidence, and medical professionals are becoming more aware, that self-care can also enhance patient health, reduce morbidity and death, and cut overall healthcare treatment costs (Riegel et al., 2021; Tol, Alhani, Shojaeazadeh, Sharifirad, & Moazam, 2015). In fact, with the increasing prevalence of mental disorders and rising healthcare costs, it is essential to consider self-care as an additional approach to preventing mental illness and promoting mental health and well-being. WHO (2022) asserted that 100 million people are plunged into poverty each year because they must pay for healthcare out of their own pockets; and hence, there is an urgent need to develop innovative strategies, such as self-care interventions, that go beyond the conventional health sector response for treatment and recovery.

In view of the growing prevalence of mental health issues among adolescents and their devastation to society, it is crucial, then, to develop effective Islamic psychological and counselling solutions via self-care treatment to address the problems of depression, anxiety and stress. Unlike psychotherapy intervention, which involves a developmental process in treatment on a broader range of issues and requires a longer duration to assist in recovery, counselling intervention offers more short-term therapy, and therefore, on-going self-care programme, with a systematic daily regime can be integrated into counselling treatment to provide coping skills for clients with depression, anxiety and stress (The Society for the Advancement of Psychotherapy, 2021).

Dualistic Human Nature

In order to understand the Islamic-based psychospiritual approaches to psychotherapy and counselling treatment and self-care interventions; counsellors, psychologists, and therapists must first understand the dualistic human nature from the perspectives of the soul and the body, both the spiritual and physical dimensions, so that clients can receive the appropriate treatment and intervention for the underlying cause of their psychological distress.

In this context, one of the best ways to understand man from the inner dimension of creation is through a Sufistic approach, also known as the study of Sufism or Tassawuf, practised and respected by both the Eastern and Western worlds; emphasising self-reflection and spiritual closeness with Allah SWT to achieve true happiness and well-being, for this world and the Next, of which Abu Hamid Al Ghazali (1058-1111), also known as Imam Al Ghazali, is one of the greatest and influential Sufi scholars and leaders. A literature review using content analysis methodologies to examine the concept of mental health and well-being developed a model based on Imam al-Ghazali's thoughts and identified a person with mental and spiritual well-being, consisting of five characteristics (Hasan & Tamam, 2018) that will enable them to live a prosperous and well-being existence: "al-falah", or true success, holistic well-being, happiness, bliss, and prosperity in this world and the next (M. K. Hassan, 2021). The five elements of mental and spiritual well-being are having:

- (1) the aqidah solidarity,
- (2) the liberation from the spiritual heart disease,
- (3) the development of noble character,
- (4) productive social relations, and
- (5) the attainment of happiness in the world and the Hereafter (Hasan & Tamam, 2018).

Therefore, Islamic psychospiritual wellbeing can use these five elements as counselling treatment variables in overcoming their mental health issues during counselling intervention in order to enhance the well-being of clients with mental disorders. Its validity and reliability as a counselling treatment can be tested through quantitative research design using quasi experiment where pre and post result can be measured and compared, whether or not it shows any significant level of improvements in well-being.

DISCUSSION

Review of available information sources argued that Islamic scholars have not yet disseminated extensive knowledge on the notion of self-care directly from an Islamic perspective; indicating a research gap (Marzband & Zakavi, 2017). Accordingly, this paves the way for additional research opportunities to develop an Islamic psychospiritual counselling treatment utilizing a self-care as a tool for counselling intervention for mental health treatment and recovery; but more importantly too, as a preventative tool to help overcome mental and emotional distress in order to enhance the spiritual and psychological wellbeing. Understanding psychospiritual well-being from the Islamic worldview is necessary when studying Muslims and Islam; otherwise, relying solely on Western ideas to define Muslim mental health and well-being is doomed to fail (Abu-Raiya, 2012).

With the current mental health issues plaguing the world, and Malaysia being no exception, it is crucial to consider new innovative interventions that can assist in resolving this grave problem, especially now that Malaysia and the rest of the world have entered the endemic phase of Covid-19, which is having an economic impact on society. Indeed, there is an urgent need for new innovative approaches, such as incorporating self-care programmes and practises into counselling treatment and intervention, to reduce the risk of suicide among this population (S. N. Chua & Rao, 2021).

As a result, this research is critical in addressing Malaysia's current mental health issues because it will provide evidence-based self-care as a counselling treatment and intervention tool that can improve self-reliance as a protective factor and source of mental well-being. This research will impact and benefit the growing adolescents who are potential next generation of Malaysian leaders and also the helping professionals like counsellors, psychologists and therapists or people in the helping profession. It will also contribute to a new body of knowledge and research on Islamic Psychospiritual Self-Care as a counselling intervention tool, filling a current research gap, and, more importantly, the 2030 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), where good mental health and wellbeing are among the United Nations' 17 sustainable development goals, to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.

Given that the 1988 National Education Philosophy advocates the concept of "Sejahtera Diri" or "Self-Well-Being" as an outcome of the Malaysian Education system; producing graduates who are socially, intellectually, spiritually, emotionally, and physically balanced and harmonious; aligned with UNESCO's Education 2030 Agenda to enable them to contribute to the harmony and betterment of the family, society, and nation; the high prevalence of mental health issues amongst adolescents can pose a threat to the implementation of the Sejahtera philosophy in Malaysian education. Hence, research on Islamic-based psychospiritual self-care counselling intervention with the primary goal of enhancing inner self-well-being in adolescents with mental disorders can, therefore, contribute to this national education agenda and benefit the higher institution providers in Malaysia as well as the education community.

CONCLUSION

Expanding counseling and psychological interventions to address adolescents' mental health using spiritually integrative approaches can help counselors increase their awareness, knowledge, and skills in order to better support this young and vulnerable population and produce fruitful therapeutic outcomes, particularly with Muslim clients (Cakmak, 2021). Adolescents who are easily influenced by external issues will benefit from Islamic-based psychospiritual interventions and counseling treatment.

More research on psychospiritual-based psychological intervention and treatment with the integration of the efficacy Islamic theory and principles is needed to address depression, anxiety, and stress among one-third of Malaysian adolescents and young adults who will be our country's future leaders.

The researcher needs to examine the efficacy of psychospiritual self-care for Islamic counselling treatment in order to provide a solution to Malaysia's current mental health crisis, which is also experiencing a spiritual crisis due to a lack of inner spiritual dimensions. This is especially important for Muslims, whose faith is deeply rooted in the Islamic way of life. This is the purpose of this study, which focuses on Islamic psychospiritual self-care as a counselling intervention to enhance the well-being of clients suffering from depression, anxiety, and stress.

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