# Efforts To Foster Mental Health Through Riyadhah An Nafs

**Ulin Nihayah\*, Mungin Eddy Wibowo, DYP Sugiharto, Ali Formen**

Universitas Negeri Semarang, Indonesia

\*Corresponding Author: ulinnihayah@students.unnes.ac.id ulinnihayah@walisongo.ac.id

**Abstract.**

The practice of riyadhah an nafs, a form of spiritual therapy in Islam, has been recognized as a potential approach to fostering mental health. This study aims to explore the efforts to improve mental health through the implementation of riyadhah an nafs. Mental health has become a growing concern globally, with increasing rates of disorders such as depression and anxiety. Islamic teachings emphasize the importance of spiritual well-being, and riyadhah an nafs, which involves disciplining the self and purifying the soul, has been proposed as a means to address mental health challenges. This research employed a qualitative approach using a literature review methodology, where relevant literature was systematically examined to gather data on the practice of riyadhah an nafs and its impact on mental health. The findings indicate that the practice of riyadhah an nafs, which encompasses various spiritual exercises and disciplines, can positively contribute to the improvement of mental health, with practices such as dhikr (remembrance of Allah), contemplation, and self-reflection being effective in reducing stress, anxiety, and depression, while also promoting a sense of inner peace and well-being. It is recommended that healthcare professionals and religious leaders collaborate to incorporate riyadhah an nafs-inspired practices into comprehensive mental health programs, and further research is suggested to explore the empirical link between riyadhah an nafs and measurable mental health outcomes.

**Key words:** Mental health, riyadhah an nafs, mental health problem

## Introduction

In an increasingly complex and stressful world, mental health has become one of the most crucial yet often overlooked aspects of our lives. While physical health has always received great attention, mental health often takes a backseat, hidden behind stigma and lack of understanding. However, the reality shows that mental health is as important as physical health, and often the two are closely related.

Mental health is a crucial aspect of overall well-being, yet it often receives less attention than physical health (Soomar, 2020; Franjić, 2022). This underprioritization is a global issue, with mental health remaining a neglected priority in many countries (Mahomed, 2020; Russell & Patrick, 2018). The stigma associated with mental illness further exacerbates this problem, making it difficult for individuals to seek help and care (Soomar, 2020). Despite the significant burden of mental health disorders, there is a severe underinvestment in mental health and well-being, which needs to be addressed from a human rights perspective (Mahomed, 2020).

Arias et al., (2022) highlights the significant global burden of mental disorders, estimating that they accounted for 16% of global disability-adjusted life years in 2019, with an economic cost of USD 5 trillion. Wang et al., (2020) further underscores the vulnerability of individuals with mental disorders, particularly depression and schizophrenia, to COVID-19 infection and related adverse outcomes. This is particularly pronounced among African Americans and women. Kang & Yang (2022) provides specific data on the prevalence of depressive disorders in China, noting higher rates among women, the unemployed, and those who are separated, widowed, or divorced. These studies collectively emphasize the need for

targeted interventions and support for individuals affected by mental health disorders.

Individuals with mental illness face significant challenges in their daily lives, particularly in their relationships and activities of daily living (Kester et al., 2021; Vecchio et al., 2000; Salles, 2009). These challenges can be exacerbated by social consequences such as poverty, homelessness, and inadequate healthcare (Vecchio et al., 2000). However, good mental wellbeing is crucial for building healthy relationships and reaching one's potential (Braithwaite, 2017). Therefore, it is important to raise awareness of the barriers created by mental illness and to provide adequate support and care to those affected.

The modern era has seen a significant increase in mental health issues, attributed to a range of factors including fast-paced lifestyles, economic instability, and the impact of civilization (Das, 2020; Malhotra, 2023)This has led to a rise in conditions such as depression and stress, particularly in the context of postmodern culture (Roa, 2002). The burden of mental illness is widespread and has significant social and economic costs, particularly for vulnerable groups (Bitanihirwe, 2014)These findings underscore the urgent need for comprehensive, society-wide responses to address the growing mental health crisis.

Research indicates that spiritual therapy, rooted in religious values and beliefs, can be effective in treating mental disorders. Spirituality, distinct from religion, involves direct experiences of higher consciousness and can play a significant role in meaning-making, identity formation, and coping for individuals with mental health difficulties (Chandler et al., 1992; Kumar, 2023). Koenig (2012) further supports this, noting the development of religious psychotherapies in both Christian and Muslim traditions. These findings suggest that spiritual therapy can offer a holistic approach to understanding and treating mental disorders.

Riyadhah an nafs, as a spiritual practice in Islam, offers an interesting approach to research in the context of mental health. This practice, which focuses on self-control and purification of the soul, has the potential to provide an alternative or complement to conventional methods of managing stress and improving psychological well-being.

Research on the effectiveness of riyadhah an nafs in the context of mental health is not only important from a scientific perspective, but also has significant practical implications. This could pave the way for the development of religious and cultural-based interventions that are more appropriate to the context of Indonesian society, which is predominantly Muslim.

By understanding and implementing practices such as riyadhah an nafs, it is hoped that we can contribute to efforts to overcome increasingly complex mental health challenges in the modern era, as well as bridging the gap between spiritual and psychological approaches in mental health care.

## METHODS

The aim of this research is to determine efforts to improve mental health through riyadhah an nafs, where riyadhah is a form of implementation of spiritual therapy in Islam. Data collection is through descriptive qualitative through literature studies. A qualitative approach was used to reveal data related to riyadhah practices carried out as an effort to improve mental health. Data collection uses the literature review method, where the researcher conducts a thorough exploration and analysis of various literary sources, such as books, journals, articles, and other relevant materials discussing riyadhah an nafs and its influence on mental health. The data obtained through the literature review will then be analyzed qualitatively to uncover the practices of riyadhah an nafs and their impact on the improvement of mental health. This research methodology is expected to identify and understand the efforts to improve mental health through the practice of riyadhah an nafs as a form of spiritual therapy in Islam.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Mental Health problem

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines mental health as "a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community. Mental health is a complex and multifaceted concept, encompassing an individual's ability to realize their potential, cope with life's stresses, work productively, and contribute to their community (Cook, 2018; Lateef 2024, Pérez 202). It involves various aspects of wellbeing, including cognitive, behavioral, emotional, social, and psychological factors (Richardson, 2020a). Maintaining mental health is crucial for handling stress, overcoming challenges, and making positive choices (Richardson, 2020b).

Characteristics of a mentally healthy person encompass a range of traits and behaviors that contribute to overall well-being. Research suggests that mentally healthy individuals tend to exhibit stable personality attributes such as agreeableness, intelligence, and optimism (Tamir & Thornton, 2018). They are also described as perceiving themselves and the world around them more accurately compared to individuals with mental health issues (Asendorpf & Ostendorf, 1998). Furthermore, individuals in good mental health typically demonstrate relatively stable personality traits throughout their lives, with changes occurring slowly and gently (Pocnet et al., 2011). Maintaining good mental health is also associated with healthy sleep habits. Research indicates that understanding the relationship between sleep and mental health is crucial, especially for individuals with generally healthy sleep patterns, as even minor sleep disturbances can have significant implications for mental health (Milojevich & Lukowski, 2016). Additionally, factors such as trait energy, fatigue, and emotional intelligence play a role in mental health. For instance, trait mental and physical fatigue, as well as mental energy, can modify the effects of substances like caffeine on mood and cognitive performance (Fuller et al., 2021).

Emotional intelligence is another component that differs between alcohol-dependent individuals and mentally healthy individuals, highlighting the importance of emotional regulation in mental well-being (Mohagheghi et al., 2015). Moreover, mentally healthy individuals are often perceived as having a balance of masculine and feminine traits, emphasizing the importance of a harmonious blend of characteristics for overall mental health (Воробьева & Stadnyuk, 2016). They are also more likely to engage in healthy behaviors such as quality sleep, physical activity, and avoiding tobacco use, which are predictors of good mental health (Kim et al., 2015). Additionally, mentally healthy individuals are viewed favorably in terms of ethical aspects of clinical research participation, suggesting a positive outlook on contributing to research efforts (Kim et al., 2015). In conclusion, mental health is a multifaceted concept that encompasses stable personality traits, accurate perceptions of oneself and the world, healthy sleep habits, emotional intelligence, and engagement in positive behaviors. These characteristics collectively contribute to the overall well-being and resilience of mentally healthy individuals.

Mental health problems encompass a wide range of conditions that can significantly impact individuals' well-being. Research indicates that untreated mental health issues, such as depressive symptoms and substance use, can have serious repercussions (Miller, 2013).These problems often emerge during young adulthood, a critical period for developing lifelong health behaviors and accessing preventive health services (Massetti et al., 2017). Early recognition of mental health problems, especially in children, is crucial as it can help minimize long-term negative outcomes (Burke et al., 2016). Studies have shown that mental health problems are associated with various factors such as sleep quality, lifestyle choices, and demographic characteristics. For instance, high rates of mental health diagnoses and symptoms have been observed in adolescents, highlighting the importance of addressing sleep problems and mental health symptoms in this population (Van Dyk et al., 2019). Additionally, family dynamics, including maternal depressive symptoms, can influence children's mental health outcomes (van Doorn et al., 2016). Furthermore, mental health problems can have a significant impact on families, leading to increased burden and stress (Mahomed, 2020). Family members caring for individuals with mental disorders experience emotional and behavioral consequences, which can be conceptualized as a source of social stress(Avison & Comeau, 2013). Additionally, the relationship between children's mental health and family functioning emphasizes the importance of considering family dynamics in addressing mental health challenges (Roberts and Kim, 2014).

Mental health problems are characterized by various symptoms and behaviors that can significantly impact an individual's life. There are : Emotional Instability: Individuals may experience intense and fluctuating emotions, including excessive sadness, irritability, or anger. Cognitive impairment is a common symptom in various mental health disorders, including major depressive disorder (MDD) and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Papakostas & Culpepper, 2015; Seal et al., 2016). Individuals with mental illness often struggle to maintain connections with friends, family, and romantic partners due to barriers in emotional and physical intimacy (Kester et al., 2021). Social network interventions, particularly those supporting social activities, show promise in improving social connections for people with mental health issues (Brooks et al., 2022a) (Brooks et al., 2022b; Chasnoff et al., 2018). For young people, school- and internet-based approaches, such as interpersonal psychotherapy-adolescent skills training (IPT-AST), may help prevent worsening depressive symptoms (Filia et al., 2021). Constructs like loneliness, social isolation, and social support are associated with various mental health conditions and symptom severity, with depression and psychosis being the most frequently studied (Pearce et al., 2023). However, more high-quality, longitudinal research is needed to fully understand the relationship between social constructs and mental health across a wider range of conditions (Pearce et al., 2023). Substance Use: Increased use of alcohol, drugs, or other substances as a coping mechanism for mental health issues (Volkow et al., 2021). These characteristics can vary in intensity and combination depending on the individual and the specific mental health condition. It is crucial to seek professional help if these symptoms are present and interfering with daily life.

**Mental Health Problem and Spiritual Solution**

Mental health is a critical aspect of overall well-being, influencing how individuals think, feel, and behave in their daily lives. (Bozorgi & Bozorgi, 2016) shows a positive relationship between spiritual intelligence, coping strategies, and mental health. This is particularly evident in adolescents, where guidance counseling with a spiritual approach has been found to significantly improve mental health (Mulyani, 2024). However, the role of spirituality in mental health is complex, with studies highlighting its potential as both a resource and a liability (Koenig, 2012). Nevertheless, the positive correlation between religion, spirituality, and coping with stress suggests that spiritual counseling could be an effective tool in addressing mental health problems (Graham et al., 2001). By leveraging spiritual counseling, we can better address the mental health challenges faced by individuals, promoting overall well-being and resilience in the face of stress.

Spiritual therapy has been recognized as a valuable approach to mental health treatment, with studies highlighting its positive impact. (Rachmawanti & Gunawan, 2023) and (Leite, 2013) both emphasize the importance of spirituality in mental health care, with the latter specifically noting the need for professional training and further research in this area. Salleh (2022) further supports this, presenting a psycho-spiritual therapy approach based on Islamic principles as an effective method for managing mental health problems. (Hook, 2009) provides a comprehensive evaluation of the efficacy of religious and spiritual therapies, suggesting that they can be helpful for clients, although further research is needed to determine their superiority over secular therapies.

A range of spiritual therapies rooted in Islamic principles have been found to improve mental health. Uyun (2019) and Khaledian (2017) both demonstrated the positive impact of Islamic-based spiritual therapy on mental health, with Uyun focusing on the effects of repentance and forgiveness therapy on college students, and Khaledian on addicts. Abdillah (2022) further explored the role of Islamic principles in mental medicine, highlighting the use of worship as psychotherapy and the discipline of Islamic psychotherapy. Alawiyah (2019) described the spiritual values instilled by Islamic boarding school coaches to students with mental disorders, emphasizing the use of prayer, remembrance of God, and spiritual healing. These studies collectively underscore the potential of Islamic spiritual therapy in fostering mental health.

One form of spiritual health is to cleanse the soul. This form of soul cleansing is through tazkiyatun nafs. Tazkiyatun nafs, a form of spiritual health, is a concept in Islam that emphasizes the purification of the soul. It is seen as a crucial element in strengthening marriage relationships (Ahmad, 2015), enhancing teacher personality competency (Ghofar et al., 2018)and promoting mental health (Masyhuri, 2012). The method of tazkiyatun nafs, as presented by Sheikh Sa'id Hawwa, is particularly effective in educating the human soul and preventing mental health and behavioral disorders (Zainol, 2019). The following is a solution for tazkiyatun nafs as a form of effort to improve mental health.

**Riyadhah An Nafs As Solution**

Riyadhah an nafs, or spiritual practice, is a practice aimed at cleansing and purifying the soul. Riyadhah is an educational term used and developed by Imam Al-Ghazali to refer to the term training for individuals in the childhood phase, or what is known as riyadhatusshibyan. Imam Al-Ghazali in educating children places more emphasis on the affective (attitude) and psychomotor domains compared to mastering and filling the cognitive (intellectual) domain (Muhaimin, 1993). Where the attitudes that are inherent in a person will manifest in the form of morals. In Al-Ghazali's perspective, the method of moral education is carried out through the riyadhah method and the experiential method (attajribiyah). Riyadhah is a method that involves training oneself to always behave well (Al Ghazali, 1993). Through this practice, individuals can develop self-awareness, control emotions, and achieve inner calm. This is in line with efforts to maintain mental health, which requires a balance between physical, mental and spiritual aspects. In the context of mental health, riyadhah an nafs can be an effective solution. This practice can help individuals overcome various mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety, and stress. Through riyadhah an nafs, individuals can learn to manage emotions, increase self-awareness, and develop mental resilience.

One form of riyadhah an nafs that can be applied is dhikr. Dhikr, or remembering Allah SWT, can help individuals achieve mental peace and increase self-awareness. This practice can be done through reading Al-Qur'an, saying sentences of praise, or other spiritual activities. Dhikr, the practice of remembering Allah, offers numerous benefits for intellectual, emotional, and spiritual well-being. It can enhance cognitive function, reduce stress and anxiety, and improve emotional regulation (Irhas et al., 2023). In Sufism, dhikr is central to achieving spiritual awareness and closeness to Allah, with various practices such as jahr (aloud), khafi (silent), and halqi (with breathing) (Daniyarti et al., 2023). The Qur'an emphasizes dhikr's role in building emotional intelligence, promoting calmness, gratitude, and self-reflection (Sarnoto & Wibowo, 2021). Imam Al-Ghazali's perspective on self-purification through dhikr involves taṭahhur (cleansing the soul), takhallaq (adorning oneself with praiseworthy morals), and taḥaqquq (realizing noble positions) (Sari & Marhaban, 2023). Regular dhikr practice can lead to forgiveness, increased mindfulness, and a stronger connection with Allah, ultimately contributing to a more balanced and fulfilling life (Sari & Marhaban, 2023; (Daniyarti et al., 2023).

Apart from dhikr, the practice of riyadhah an nafs can also be done through meditation and self-reflection. Through this practice, individuals can learn to recognize and manage emotions, and develop the ability to be calm and wise in facing life's challenges. The practice of dhikr, or remembrance of Allah, plays a central role in Islamic spirituality and has significant benefits for intellectual, emotional, and spiritual development (Irhas et al., 2023). Dhikr can enhance emotional intelligence by promoting calmness, gratitude, and self-reflection (Sarnoto & Wibowo, 2021). Various forms of dhikr, such as silent and vocal recitations, are employed in Sufism to achieve spiritual awareness and closeness to Allah (Daniyarti et al., 2023). The concept of nafs (self) is crucial in Islamic psycho-spirituality, emphasizing self-reflection and improvement to attain moral excellence and a stronger connection with Allah (Rassool & Keskin, 2023). Regular dhikr practice can reduce stress, increase concentration, and deepen one's understanding of life's meaning (Daniyarti et al., 2023). Overall, dhikr serves as a powerful tool for personal growth, emotional regulation, and spiritual development within the Islamic tradition.

**CONCLUSION**

Mental health is an important aspect of overall well-being, and spiritual approaches have shown promising results in addressing various mental health challenges. Research consistently finds a positive relationship between spirituality, coping strategies, and mental health, especially among adolescents. Although the role of spirituality is complex, with its potential advantages and disadvantages, evidence shows that spiritual counseling and practice through riyadhah an nafs implemented through dhikr (remembrance of Allah) can be an effective tool in improving mental health and resilience. By harnessing the power of spirituality, we can better support individuals in managing stress, regulating emotions, and achieving greater overall well-being. Further research and integration of spiritual approaches into mental health services could result in significant improvements in meeting the mental health needs of diverse populations.

The practice of riyadhah an nafs (spiritual training of the soul) can be a highly effective approach to improving mental health when approached with the right mindset and support. Consistent and

committed practice, a nurturing environment that encourages and facilitates this practice, and the involvement of health professionals to guide and integrate this approach are the key elements that can unlock the profound benefits of riyadhah an nafs. By addressing these aspects, this Islamic tradition of self-development and spiritual cultivation can be leveraged as a holistic and transformative solution for enhancing mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being.

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