

The Relevance of al-Ghazali's Concept of Tazkiyatun Nafs in Strategies for Maintaining the Mental Health of Islamic Boarding School Students: A Literature Review

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Abstract

The increasing mental health issues among Islamic boarding school students require preventive and curative maintenance strategies. This study aims to analyze the relevance of Al-Ghazali's concept of *tazkiyatun nafs* (purification of the soul) as a strategic framework for maintaining the mental health of Islamic boarding school students. Through a literature review, this study highlights how Al-Ghazali's emphasis on purification of the heart, control of desires, and strengthening of spiritual awareness can be an integrative solution in building psychological resilience. The results of the study show that Imam Al-Ghazali's concept of *tazkiyatun nafs* () not only has a strong spiritual foundation but is also in line with contemporary approaches to mental health maintenance. Thus, this research study can be used as an important reference in formulating strategies for sustainable mental health in Islamic boarding schools.

Keywords: *Tazkiyatun nafs, Al-Ghazali, mental health, students, Islamic boarding schools.*

Abstract

*The increasing mental health issues among Islamic boarding school students require preventive and curative maintenance strategies. This study aims to analyze the relevance of the concept of *tazkiyatun nafs* (purification of the soul) according to Al-Ghazali as a strategic framework for maintaining the mental health of Islamic boarding school students. Through a literature review, this study highlights how Al-Ghazali's emphasis on purification of the heart, control of desires, and strengthening of spiritual awareness can be an integrative solution in building psychological-resilience. The results of the study show that Imam Al-Ghazali's concept of *tazkiyatun nafs* not*

only has a strong spiritual foundation but is also in line with contemporary approaches to mental health maintenance. Thus, this research study can be used as an important reference in formulating strategies for mental health sustainability in Islamic boarding schools.

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INTRODUCTION

Mental health has become a global issue that has received serious attention, including among adolescents and students[1]. Data from the World Health Organization (WHO) shows that around 14% of adolescents worldwide experience mental health problems, with the most common symptoms being anxiety and depression[2]. This condition raises concerns, especially in the context of higher education, because students are in a transitional phase of development that is vulnerable to academic, social, and emotional pressures[3].

In Indonesia, several previous studies have shown that students face high levels of academic stress, especially those who live in dormitories or Islamic boarding schools[4];[5]. This is because pesantren students are not only required to adapt to the academic learning system, but also face limited privacy, religious demands, and complex social dynamics[6]. As a result, this pressure often leads to various psychological problems ranging from stress and anxiety to mental exhaustion (burnout)[7].

In addressing this issue, a number of studies emphasize the need for mental strengthening strategies that are not only based on modern psychology but also in line with Islamic spiritual values[8];[9]. One of the relevant concepts used is the idea of *tazkiyatun nafs* (purification of the soul) as described by Imam al-Ghazali[10]. This concept emphasizes the purification of the heart, control of desires, and strengthening of the spiritual dimension as a way to achieve self-balance[11]. However, most studies on *tazkiyatun nafs* still focus on the aspects of Sufism and ethics, with few studies directly linking it to the maintenance of the mental health of Islamic boarding school students[12].

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On the other hand, international studies have shown that *religiosity* and spirituality have a significant contribution in the prevention and treatment of mental disorders, including depression and anxiety [14]. However, in the Indonesian context, the integration of contemporary psychological approaches and Islamic scientific traditions, particularly the thoughts of al-Ghazali, is still rarely positioned as an official framework in mental health maintenance strategies in Islamic boarding schools[13] ;[14] .

Therefore, based on this background, this study aims to examine the relevance of al-Ghazali's concept of *tazkiyatun nafs* as a strategy for maintaining the mental health of Islamic boarding school students. This study is expected to provide a conceptual framework that bridges Islamic spiritual traditions and modern psychological approaches, while also contributing practically to efforts to strengthen the mental health of students in Islamic boarding schools.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a descriptive method with a qualitative approach through a literature review. A qualitative approach was chosen because this study aims to understand Imam Al-Ghazali's philosophical concepts and spiritual values regarding *tazkiyatun nafs* (purification of the soul) in relation to strategies for maintaining the mental health of students in Islamic boarding schools. This approach is highly relevant to the research because the aspects studied are conceptual, normative, and interpretive in nature, and therefore cannot be explained quantitatively.

The research instruments consisted of various literature sources, including reputable scientific articles, books by Imam Al-Ghazali, academic works related to Islamic psychology, previous studies, and scientific reports relevant to the topics of *tazkiyatun nafs*, mental health, and Islamic boarding school education. The selection of literature was carried out systematically using the keywords: "tazkiyatun nafs," "al-Ghazali," "mental health," "santri," "pesantren," and "strategies for mental health in Islam."

The data collection process was carried out through literature searches in academic databases such as *Google Scholar*, *Scopus*, *ScienceDirect*, *Garuda Garba Rujukan Digital*,

DOAJ, or other relevant research sources. After the data was obtained, the literature was read in depth, followed by recording, grouping, and content analysis to find patterns and relevance of the concept of *tazkiyatun nafs* in the context of maintaining the mental health of santri.

The analysis stage includes several steps: (1) identifying al-Ghazali's main ideas about *tazkiyatun nafs*, (2) categorizing spiritual values relevant to mental health, (3) examining strategies for applying them in the lives of santri, and (4) drawing conclusions about the relevance of these concepts to mental health maintenance efforts in Islamic boarding schools.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Concept of Tazkiyatun Nafs

There are many terms that describe mental health, such as soul, spirit, desire, and reason. "Soul" comes from Arabic, which literally means "self," and some people interpret it as life, spirit, desire, anger, personality, and the psychophysical substance of humans. This term comes from the Greek "psyche" or "pneuma" and from the Latin "The term "soul" here refers to various perspectives held by Muslim scholars and philosophers. In general, Muslim philosophers agree that the soul is a form of perfection that originates from physical, mechanical, natural, and living properties. The soul in humans refers to itself as an immaterial entity that changes throughout life, produces and supports psychological activities, and gives life to living beings. Soul consciousness is a higher level of consciousness than physical consciousness. This is because mental consciousness has the capacity to absorb more data than bodily consciousness, which has a lesser capacity. However, this mental consciousness is only a process of consciousness between physical consciousness and true consciousness, namely spiritual consciousness.

The Arabic word "tazkiyah" refers to the development and refinement of everything until it reaches perfection[15]. According to the moral aspect of Sufism, many experts define *tazkiyatun-nafs* as *takhliyat al-nafs* (emptying oneself of moral evil) and *takhliyat al-nafs* (filling oneself with moral goodness), which allows a person to humble themselves before God. *Tazkiyatun-nafs* also means freeing the soul from shirk and its branches, and realizing its purity with *tawhid* and its branches. *Tazkiyatun-nafs* is a type

of pure ubudiyah given to God separately from rububiyah. All of this is done through a letter sent to the Prophet Muhammad SAW.

The concept of Tazkiyatun Nafs according to Imam Al-Ghazali is a process of purifying the soul that aims to achieve true happiness and closeness to Allah SWT. This process is explained through three main stages, namely *takhalli* (cleansing oneself of despicable traits such as envy, jealousy, and greed), *tahalli* (adorn oneself with praiseworthy traits such as sincerity, patience, and gratitude), and *tajalli* (achieving spiritual closeness to Allah until the heart is illuminated by His light). Al-Ghazali emphasizes that the purification of the soul not only shapes the individual's personality but also has a social impact in improving the morals of society.

In addition, the basis and purpose of tazkiyat al nafs as stated by Ust. Safik and the manager of the Al Modern Islamic Boarding School-Aly, are rooted in Islamic teachings found in the Qur'an, Surah Ash-Syam verses 9 to 10, and hadith from the narrations of Bukhari and Muslim, as well as the works of Imam Al-Ghazali (*Ihya'Ulumuddin*). Meanwhile, the objectives of tazkiyat al nafs, as stated by the administrators of the Al-Aly Modern Islamic Boarding School, are as follows: to develop good character, to bring students closer to Allah, to increase spiritual awareness, to strengthen morals and ethics, to develop compassion and empathy, to prevent bad behavior, and to shape moral leadership. According to Quraish Shihab, the policy or goal of self-esteem is also stated in his book *Tafsir Al-Misbah*, as well as in Surah Ash-Shaam, verses 7 to 10. He explains that these verses emphasize the importance of human efforts in purifying the soul. Allah has given every individual the potential to choose between the path of goodness (obedience) and the path of evil (immorality). Thus, this explanation in the opinion of Imam Al-Ghazali, in his book *Ihya' Ulumuddin*, states that Tazkiyat Al Nafs is based on Surah Ash-Shaam verses 9 to 10 and the hadith narrated by Bukhari-Muslim. It has the general objective of realizing harmony in human relationships with God, with fellow humans, with His creatures, and with humans themselves. Then, the specific purpose of self-esteem, from the component of worship, is the formation of a religious (knowledgeable) human being, a believer, an 'Abid (one who loves to worship), muqarrib (fond of drawing closer to Allah), eager to pray, do good deeds, remember Allah, aware of the limitations of their age, eager to make the Qur'an their guide in life, and able to make all their activities in life valuable acts of worship to Allah.

The Relevance between the Concept of Tazkiyatun Nafs and Mental Health

The concept of tazkiyatun nafs and individual mental health are actually inseparable. This is because everything in the tazkiyatun nafs approach can be proven by scientific knowledge in psychology. The spiritual approach through Tazkiyatun An-Nafs shows that by nurturing the inner self, individuals are able to control their emotional responses to external pressures and maintain their inner peace. Traditional Islamic spiritual meditation practices such as dhikr and recitation of the Qur'an show promising evidence as a treatment for anxiety and addiction, and can be integrated into modern mental health care[16] .

Several studies show that dzikir therapy can increase relaxation and reduce anxiety[17] . Islam offers guidance for overcoming depression through practices that bring the soul closer to Almighty Allah[18] . These practices are not only for young people but are also proven to be effective for the elderly. Findings indicate a positive correlation between regular participation in dzikir gatherings and better mental health outcomes among elderly participants[19] . Furthermore, Imam Al-Ghazali emphasizes that one will achieve success in life with a healthy and calm soul, and purify oneself through dzikir to Allah SWT[20] .

The Concept of Tazkiyatun Nafs

As for tazkiyatun nafs, it has a solid theological basis in Islamic teachings, particularly those derived from the Qur'an and the hadith of the Prophet Muhammad SAW. One of the main references is Surah Asy-Syams verses 9–10, which reads:

(١٠) قَدْ أَفْلَحَ مَنْ زَكَّاهَا (٩) وَقَدْ خَابَ مَنْ دَسَّاهَا

Artinya : "Sungguh beruntunglah orang yang menyucikan jiwanya (nafs), dan sungguh merugilah orang yang mengotorinya." (QS. Asy-Syams 9–10)

This verse contains a very profound moral and spiritual message regarding human responsibility for the management and purification of the soul. This is also explained by Quraish Shihab (2002) in Tafsir Al-Misbah, which explains that Allah SWT gives every human being two opposing potentials, namely the tendency towards goodness (taqwa) and the tendency towards evil (fujur). Therefore, a person's success in this world and the hereafter is determined by the extent to which they are able to

control their fujur potential and cultivate their taqwa potential through the process of tazkiyah (purification of the soul).

Tazkiyatun nafs in this verse does not only mean cleansing from sin and transgression, but also the development of the soul towards moral and spiritual perfection, which can be understood to encompass two dimensions:

1. The dimension of purification (takhliyah), which is the effort to remove despicable traits such as envy, jealousy, arrogance, hypocrisy, and excessive love of the world.
2. The dimension of development (tahliyah), which is filling the soul with noble traits such as patience, gratitude, trust in God, sincerity, and compassion.

Furthermore, in *Ihya 'Ulumuddin*, he emphasizes that this verse is the main basis in the process of purifying the soul. According to Imam Al-Ghazali, people who successfully perform tazkiyatun nafs will achieve true happiness (*sa'ādah haqīqiyyah*) because their hearts are filled with divine light. Conversely, those who are negligent and allow their souls to be polluted by lust will experience spiritual emptiness and existential loss.

In addition to the Qur'an, it should be noted that there is a normative basis that reinforces the importance of purifying the heart, which is also emphasized in the authentic hadith narrated by Bukhari and Muslim:

"Ingatlah, sesungguhnya dalam diri manusia terdapat segumpal daging; apabila ia baik, maka baiklah seluruh tubuhnya, dan apabila ia rusak, maka rusaklah seluruh tubuhnya. Ketahuilah, itulah hati (qalb)." (HR. Bukhari dan Muslim)

This hadith emphasizes that the heart is the center of human morality and spirituality, and purification of the heart is the essence of tazkiyatun nafs. A pure heart will lead to good behavior, while an impure heart is a source of moral and spiritual deviation. Therefore, the concept of tazkiyatun nafs can be understood as a dynamic and continuous process (continuous purification) that requires mujahadah (sincerity) and murāqabah (awareness of Allah's supervision) in every aspect of life. Tazkiyatun nafs also has a social dimension. A pure soul will radiate goodness to its surroundings, resulting in a moral, peaceful, and just society as the foundation for a harmonious and civilized social order.

Tambahan bagian Relevance

To clarify the relationship between the spiritual approach of Islam and modern psychological theory, the following table compares the concept of tazkiyatun nafs and contemporary psychological therapy principles:

Aspects of Study	Tazkiyatun Nafs (Islamic Perspective)	Modern Psychological Theory	Implications for Mental Health
Objectives	Purification of the soul to draw closer to Allah and achieve nafs al-muthmainnah.	Self-control and cognitive restructuring to achieve emotional balance.	Inner peace, self-acceptance, and emotional stability.
Methods	Dhikr, muhasabah, tawakkul, istighfar, and sabar.	Mindfulness, CBT, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT).	Reducing anxiety, depression, and stress through self-awareness.
Orientation	Transcendental (spiritual and moral).	Humanistic and psychological.	Integration of spiritual values in the mental healing process.
Expected outcomes	A calm, sincere soul that is close to God.	Mentally healthy, adaptive individuals who have achieved self-actualization.	Comprehensive well-being encompassing psychological, social, and spiritual aspects.
Approach to Emotions	Managing negative emotions through remembrance of God and awareness of divine will.	Managing irrational thoughts through cognitive restructuring.	Balanced emotional control and acceptance of life's realities.

The table shows that tazkiyatun nafs is not merely a religious process, but also has a psychotherapeutic dimension that is relevant to modern scientific approaches. Through spiritual purification, individuals are encouraged to develop spiritual awareness while harmoniously organizing cognitive and affective aspects. Thus, the tazkiyatun nafs approach can serve as the basis for developing a contemporary Islamic psychological intervention model that integrates spirituality and mental health science.

Therefore, this approach is able to respond to modern challenges in the form of increasing anxiety disorders and existential stress, which are often not addressed by conventional therapy. By combining the dimensions of remembrance, self-reflection, and inner awareness, tazkiyatun nafs becomes a healing medium that touches the deepest aspects of the human mind, heart, and spirit, while simultaneously shaping a resilient, calm personality oriented toward a higher meaning of life.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Numerous studies have discussed a religion-based approach to addressing mental health issues. The tazkiyatun nafs approach is highly suitable for all segments of Indonesian society, both young and old, especially since Indonesia is one of the countries with the largest Muslim population in the world. The tazkiyatun nafs approach encourages individuals to be aware of their spiritual condition and to draw closer to Allah.

There have been many studies discussing the influence of tazkiyatun nafs in helping to deal with mental health problems in Islamic boarding schools. A scientific study entitled Well-being based on Tazkiyatun Nafs at the Daarut Tasbih Ar-Rafi, which used quantitative research methods, explained that the tazkiyatun nafs concept in Islamic boarding schools greatly affects the mental state of students. Before the implementation of the tazkiyatun nafs approach, many students experienced boredom, academic stress, and adaptation difficulties due to the boarding school's busy routine. Symptoms that appeared included anxiety, feeling depressed, difficulty concentrating when memorizing the Qur'an, and even loss of motivation to worship. All of these factors greatly affected the students' well-being scores. Their psychological well-being scores tended to be low, as seen in the results of a quantitative survey conducted by researchers using a special instrument[11] .

After the emergence of this problem, a new approach was needed so that students would feel happier with life at the pesantren and feel less burdened. The concept of tazkiyatun nafs began to be applied in the lives of students through several activities that are part of tazkiyatun nafs itself, such as routine zikr, muhasabah, tilawah, sunnah prayers, and guidance from ustazd. This approach worked well, as evidenced by the

differences observed in the students after the concept was implemented. The results of the study showed a significant increase in the students' psychological well-being scores after participating in the tazkiyatun nafs program. In addition to feeling calmer, the students were able to control their emotions, focus more on memorization, and have higher hopes and optimism. Some students also reported that their anxiety had decreased drastically, and they found it easier to socialize with their peers. The researchers concluded that tazkiyatun nafs is effective in improving students' mental health because it addresses spiritual, emotional, and behavioral aspects simultaneously.[11] .

Proof of Effectiveness

Research on the effectiveness of tazkiyatun nafs in maintaining mental health has been conducted extensively, both in Islamic boarding schools and in a broader context. In their study researchers found that Islamic-based interventions were effective in reducing symptoms of depression and anxiety in participants, as spiritual practices were able to foster inner peace and improve psychological well-being. In addition, research from[11] (Ma'muroh, et al 2024) in Islamic boarding schools, a field study at the Darut Tasbih Islamic Boarding School (2024) showed that the application of *tazkiyatun nafs* through the habit of zikr, tadabbur, and spiritual strengthening had a positive impact on the psychological balance of students.

In addition, according to[21] (Kusumawati et al. (2025) proved that mental health literacy programs in Islamic boarding schools have been shown to increase students' understanding and reduce stigma against mental disorders. This study also proved that the application of *tazkiyatun nafs* has a significant effect in reducing symptoms of depression in adolescents, especially in Islamic school environments. This intervention helps them internalize the values of patience and trust in God so that they are better able to control their emotions. Similar findings were also produced by[22] (Miftachurrozaq & Rahman (2025), which showed that the peer counselor approach in Islamic boarding schools was able to increase mental health awareness and reduce self-harming behavior. According to him, students who undergo this spiritual training experience improvements in psychological balance and self-control. This is reinforced by research on the[2] (Aggarwal et al. 2023), which states that culturally adapted religious interventions show higher effectiveness in reducing psychological stress.

In the international arena, the results of the study[23] (Gonçalves et al., 2015) also show that religious and spiritual interventions generally have a positive impact on mental health. They noted a reduction in symptoms of depression and anxiety after individuals participated in spiritual programs. Marques et al. (2022)[24] even found that religion-based interventions contribute significantly to reducing symptoms of depression. This study shows that faith and spiritual practices cannot be separated from effective psychological interventions. Meanwhile, Oktaviani (2023)[25] proves that *tazkiyatun nafs*-based art therapy helps madrasah students manage their emotions better, especially in controlling anger and anxiety. Finally, research by Hidayat et al. (2023)[26] shows how *tazkiyatun nafs-based* spiritual therapy in Jumputrejo Village can calm the hearts of adolescents. After participating in the program, the adolescents reported a decrease in stress levels, an increase in inner peace, and healthier social relationships.

Overall, previous research shows that *tazkiyatun nafs* not only functions as a theoretical concept, but has also been proven effective in various educational, social, and clinical contexts. All of the studies cited show that the concept of *tazkiyatun nafs* is effective in treating various mental disorders. The approach taken in the concept of *tazkiyatun nafs* encourages a person to get to know themselves more deeply and control their impulses through spiritual awareness.

CONCLUSION

The concept of *tazkiyatun nafs* according to Imam Al-Ghazali's ideas has significant relevance in the development of mental health among Islamic boarding school students. In the context of spiritual purification based on the process of *takhalli* (emptying the soul of despicable traits), *tahalli* (adornment with praiseworthy morals), and *tajalli* (achieving spiritual closeness to Allah SWT), it has been proven to be effective in improving mental health by building mental and emotional resilience, reducing anxiety and stress, and strengthening self-motivation among Islamic boarding school students. From several literature reviews, we found that the integrity of spiritual values initiated by Al-Ghazali not only provides a solution to mental problems but can also function as a curative and preventive measure. From these findings, it can be stated that *tazkiyatun nafs* does not only play a role as a theoretical Sufi concept but can also be a practical strategy for mental health through a social context and education.

Thus, we can use the concept of tazkiyatun nafs as an integrative and sustainable strategic framework in managing mental health among Islamic boarding school students. This is because the concept is able to unite the spiritual aspects of Islam with modern psychological approaches. Therefore, this research makes an important contribution to the management of mental health based on religiosity and can also be applied practically in Islamic boarding schools or other Islamic educational institutions.

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