

UNDERSTANDING MENTAL CONDITIONS IN THE ELDERLY BASED ON RELIGIOUS/SPIRITUAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Introduction – The elderly who lack a sense of meaning in life and do not live mindfully often experience discomfort that leads to emotional turmoil. This phenomenon highlights the fact that becoming elderly requires both physical and mental preparedness. This search influences one's mindset and understanding of closeness to God, and it has the potential to enhance one's spirituality. This paper aimed to examine the mental condition of the elderly through their religious/spiritual aspects – beginning with their search for meaning in life, their independent efforts, and their insight into personal circumstances.

Methods – This research was conducted as qualitative research with interpretation in a phenomenological aspect. All participants took part in each session of the interview, which was conducted by the author. All participants' statements were used as content analysis by Colaizzi's seven-step analysis.

Results – Analysis of the data obtained from the verbatim interview results led to five major themes and 17 sub-themes, which led to the meaning of getting old, self-uncomfortableness, mental condition, the meaning of Allah's presence, the meaning and need of liqo'.

Discuss – The elderly who are mentally prepared for old age, mindful, and who need Allah as the source of life, peace, the beginning, and end of life, will attain a high level of religious/spiritual. That refers to being closer to Allah in of natural way, flowing, and calming need, as if it were a primary need.

Conclusion – Elderly individuals with a positive outlook perceive the presence of Allah as the center of life, peace, and the source of both the beginning and end of life. The liqo' activity helps participants become the best version of themselves and strive to be Muslims with the final designation of husnul khotimah, or a good ending.

Keywords: elderly, mental conditions, religious, spiritual.

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INTRODUCTION

An exploration of mental health in older adults prompts reflection on the psychological factors – thoughts, emotions, and behaviors – that foster empowerment and integrity in later life.¹ Healthy older adults who do not have any residual symptoms of severe or persistent physical illness, and who are not affected by specific mental health issues, are generally better able to move around and participate in daily activities – thus achieving a state of ideal mental development. However, not all older adults are in such optimal condition; one contributing factor is an imbalance in religious or spiritual aspects. The influence of religious and spiritual dimensions is not only a topic of debate among adolescents and adults. Still, it extends across all age groups, depending on how deeply individuals internalize religious experiences and the meaning of God's presence in their lives.^{2,3}

The elderly who lack a sense of meaning in life and do not live mindfully often experience discomfort that leads to emotional turmoil. This often stems from an inability to regulate themselves,⁴ self-stigma and public stigma towards the presence of older adults,⁵ loss of identity and self-functioning abilities,⁶ feeling isolated in the hustle and bustle of the world,⁷ loss or separation from a family member or someone with whom one has a deep emotional connection.⁸

This phenomenon highlights the fact that becoming elderly requires both physical and mental preparedness. Growing old does not always follow the expected course of life, but instead prompts reflections on mental readiness and the desire to leave a positive impact on oneself, others, and the environment.⁶ Feeling of helplessness often causes discomfort, prompting individuals to search for meaning in life through their religious/spiritual instincts.² This search influences one's mindset and understanding of closeness to God, and it has the

potential to enhance one's spirituality. Based on this, the author aims to examine the mental condition of the elderly through their religious/spiritual aspects – beginning with their search for meaning in life, their independent efforts, and their insight into personal circumstances.

METHOD

This research was conducted as qualitative research with interpretation in a phenomenological aspect. All participants took part in each session of the interview, which was conducted by the author. All participants' statements were used as content analysis by Colaizzi's seven-step analysis. This step was chosen because it was considered appropriate to explain and classify textual data, considering the individual cultural and contextual effects on phenomena.⁹⁻¹¹

Participants were selected based on purposive sampling with a specific focus on the elderly who joined an Islamic religious or liqo' group, which is called Pengajian Lansia Sabtu Pagi Forum Kajian Bina Muslim Kaffah (FKBMK) in Malang, Indonesia. Recruitment was primarily conducted by the chief of an Islamic religious FKBMK group based on a recommendation by a psychiatrist who assessed the risk of a neuropsychiatric disorder. Inclusion criteria included the elderly in good health, minimum attendance at 10 sessions of

liqo' on Saturday mornings since August 2024, and willingness to be interviewed. Then, exclusion criteria such as the elderly having difficulty communicating, cognitive problems, and a history of neurovascular and psychiatric disorders that could affect their thinking capacity. The authors discontinued when the analysis reached data saturation, the participants' statements encountered repetitive messages, without any new themes emerging from the interviews. As a result, a total of 20 elderly people were finally enrolled in this study.

Data collection was carried out from January 2025 to May 2025. The interviews were conducted at liqo' building in Malang, and each interview lasted from 30 to 45 minutes. The authors completed the transcription and cross-checked each other to ensure the accuracy of the content. The final interview outline was formed based on the literature, the purpose of the study, and the feedback from the participants (Table 1).

This research was permitted by the ethics committees in the Medicine Faculty University of Brawijaya provided full ethical approval for all aspects of the follow-up (Ethical Clearance No. 135/EC/KEPK/07/2020). Informed consent has been obtained from the participants, and all participants were willing to contribute to this research.

Table 1. List of questions for participants

No.	Questions
1.	What does growing old mean to you?
2.	What kind of self-discomfort have you experienced or are currently experiencing in your elderly age?
3.	What experiences or advice can you draw upon when you successfully overcome difficulties at an earlier stage of life?
4.	What does Allah's presence mean to you?
5.	What are your expectations for participating in the liqo' activity?
6.	What materials will you need in the future from the regular liqo'?

Table 2. Characteristics of participants

Characteristics	Number
Gender	
Male	10
Female	10
Age	
60-69	2
70-79	6
80-89	12
Educational level	
Basic education	3
Bachelor's degree	8
Master's degree	6
Doctorate	3
Marital status	
Married	12
Widow	8
Retired employment status	
Housewife	4
Trader/ entrepreneur	5
Educator	4
Professor	1
Military / police	4
Doctor/ healthcare workers	2

Table 3. Themes and subthemes

Themes	Subthemes
The meaning of getting old	• Become old with integrity and power • Providing opportunities for gratitude and self-reflection • Becoming an opportunity, a chance of improving, and more intimate with religious/spiritual aspects
Self-uncomfortableness	• Detaching oneself from worldliness • Physical limitations • More than one physical illness and chronic treatment • Unable or powerless to move independently • Loneliness, emptiness, or futility
Mental condition	• A few obstacles, but still grateful • Limited and slow, but still wanting to be useful
The meaning of Allah's presence	• The source of all life • The source of peace in life • The beginning and end of human purpose
The meaning and need of liqo'	• Helping to understand the purpose of creation in the world • Filling and completing worldly emptiness • Gathering with righteous people • Preparing oneself to achieve a good end of life

**Picture 1. Word cloud based on participants' thoughts**

RESULT

This study included 20 participants (Table 2), equally divided between male and female elderly, with a range of ages from 60 to 89, and a history of marriage. All participants had varying levels of education (3 had elementary education, 8 had bachelor's degrees, 6 had master's degrees, and 3 had doctorates). Since all participants are elderly, the majority are retirees from various fields of work (4 housewives, 5 traders/entrepreneurs, 4 teachers, 1 professor, 4 military/police, and 2 doctors/ healthcare workers).

Forum Kajian Bina Muslim Kaffah is one of the Islamic foundations in Malang that has been engaged in Islamic preaching and mental health based on a religious/ spiritual approach since 2005. This Islamic foundation has reached its 20th year and has produced several positive initiatives that promote meaningful living for the elderly from an Islamic perspective. The regular Islamic study program, known as *Pengajian Lansia Sabtu Pagi*, is held every Saturday, starting at 7 a.m. and consisting of one hour of religious lectures. Another regular program is the Ramadhan Liko' Program for the Elderly, which is held every 10 days early in Ramadhan, featuring activities such as learning the Qur'an, health screenings, religious counseling, and mental health counseling. During the COVID-19 pandemic, religious studies were conducted online via Zoom and live on YouTube. In practice, the number of study participants fluctuated due to several participants who had begun to suffer from dementia, severe illness, and were unable to engage in regular mobility, family issues, and death. New members who joined had certain considerations, such as seeking positive activities during old age, finding a comfortable place to study religious studies, similar to what all participants in this study did.

Analysis of the data obtained from the verbatim interview results led to five major themes and 17 sub-themes (Table 3). The interview results in the verbatim excerpts were coded according to the participants' statements (p1-p20), which can be explained as follows:

Theme 1: The meaning of getting old

Almost all participants shared the same opinion that growing old is a natural process and an opportunity for self-improvement.

Become old with integrity and power

"Growing old ideally means becoming a better person than you were in your younger years. Not everyone is allowed to grow old, such as my younger sibling and child, who passed away at a young age before reaching 20 years old. This means that I am still given the opportunity by Allah to leave behind something positive that makes us elderly of integrity and strength. We should not become people who are merely resigned, silent, doing nothing, and passing on ignorance to the next generation." (p1).

Providing opportunities for gratitude and self-reflection

"There is a concept that says growing old is inevitable, but maturity is a choice. However, in my opinion, growing old is not a certainty; what is certain is how we end our lives with kindness. The moment of growing old that ultimately allows us to be more grateful for the blessings of Allah that we have received, to understand where we are now, to correct ourselves for past shortcomings, and to move toward goodness in this world and the hereafter. Sometimes, we often discuss how we need good health to be able to worship more perfectly." (p20).

Becoming an opportunity, a chance of improving, and more intimate with religious/spiritual aspects

"This discussion is very interesting. In my opinion, growing old allows us to improve our religious/spiritual aspects. If there are religious leaders or 'alim ulama who say that mosques are filled with elderly people, that is true and a fact. Why? Because we have more free time than young people. Allow us to enliven the mosques and majlis taklim because we need more intimate, closer, and more intimate time to be with Allah." (p3).

Detaching oneself from worldliness

"In Javanese terms said 'dadi tuo kuwi ojo kedunyan' means that growing old should not be filled with wordliness. This is the age to detach oneself from worldly matters. Enough with wordliness, this is an opportunity to get closer to Allah, so let's make good use of it. Don't let this opportunity pass by without giving meaning to goodness." (p16).

Theme 2: Self-uncomfortableness

Physical limitations

"The discomfort caused by physical limitations – actually, many people want to participate in liqo', but their path may be blocked, they can't find public transportation, or they may not be familiar with the online system. Sometimes, even a short walk can be difficult, especially if they have a history of heart or lung disease." (p9).

More than one physical illness and chronic treatment

"Of course, there are limitations. Limited movement due to knee pain, even slight head movement triggers vertigo, and blurred vision makes it difficult to see both near and far objects. Sitting for long periods in an uncomfortable chair inevitably causes lower back pain. If described in detail, physical discomfort can be found from head to toe. Not to mention the need to visit the hospital for chronic medication checks, as there are conditions like diabetes, hypertension, gout arthritis. But, well, the body has been used for a long time; it's time to fix it – that is how I think about it, rather than getting stuck in constant thoughts of pain or discomfort." (p18).

Unable or powerless to move independently

"There are times when even the slightest movement feels exhausting, as if you have no energy left. So, if our thoughts become toxic, it is true that we feel incapable, powerless, and even moving our buttocks feels like a heavy burden" (p13).

Loneliness, emptiness, or futility

"While others may experience discomfort due to physical issues, for me, it stems from psychological issues. I was once informed by a psychiatrist that I had experienced depression related to grief and empty nest syndrome. One of my children passed away, and shortly after, the other children returned to their workplaces miles away from my home. I am not demanding that my children be here with me right now, but I cannot deny that the feelings of loneliness, emptiness, and void are constant. My psychiatrist suggested I join a liqo' group, hoping it would help fill that emptiness in my heart. Alhamdulillah, it turned out to be good and relieving. This year

is my 10th year to participate in this liqo' group every Saturday." (p14).

Theme 3: Mental conditions

A few obstacles, but still grateful

"Alhamdulillah, my mental condition is good, I am ready to grow old, no problem at all. Even if there are a few obstacles, inshaAllah, I will remain grateful to Allah." (p16).

Limited and slow, but still wanting to be useful

"Alhamdulillah, I have no mental obstacles, but I indeed have limitations, such as slow writing and reading. However, I still want to be useful, at least for myself and my family. Slowly, I was able to participate in studies at the neighborhood mosque. I shared about the liqo' situation, and I was very happy to be able to attend activities like this." (p2).

Theme 4: The meaning of Allah's presence

The source of all life

"Allah is everything to me, the source of all life. Even the things that stick to me, whatever they may be, would not be possible without Allah's permission. This is especially evident when we feel restless, bored, or monotonous. Oh, it's time to get closer to Allah. Alhamdulillah, I feel lighter, calmer, and more at ease after that." (p5).

The source of peace in life

"Allah is the source of peace in my life. There are situations where I feel very anxious when my child does not come home immediately, my husband is sick, and I cannot leave my work. Life feels very difficult. But I remember to immediately ask for forgiveness, worship, and draw closer to the source of peace. Alhamdulillah, everything passed well." (p11).

The beginning and end of human purpose

"Allah is always the starting point and the end goal of our lives. If we live without Allah's permission and mercy, then we will not have blessings. Including Allah in our lives makes us better with all the sufficiency that we have." (p15).

Theme 5: The meaning and need of liqo'

Helping to understand the purpose of creation in the world

"For me, liqo' has become a necessity. There is an urgency to attend, listen, reflect, and practice as much as possible. I need to understand again the meaning of the purpose of human creation, including myself, in this world. If I am asked to worship, then what kind of worship can I perform?" (p4).

Filling and completing worldly emptiness

"For me, liqo' is a place to gather, but this Saturday's liqo' is different because the discussion is always fresh, encouraging us to think about religious aspects in a better and more balanced way. It is not monotonous, focusing only on reciting verses, but there is also time for mutual contemplation." (p19).

Gathering with righteous (sholih) people

"There is a strong urge to participate in this liqo' activity as part of an effort to gather with the righteous or sholih people. I am deeply moved by the hadith of the Prophet Muhammad, which explains that gathering knowledge is a garden of paradise or Jannah. Logically, who would not want that? So, bismillah, may I be granted a long life so that I can gather with righteous or sholih people and be involved in righteous deeds until the end of my life and become husnul khotimah" (p12).

Preparing oneself to achieve a good end of life

"There is a personal desire to end one's life on a good note. There have been many regular guidance sessions given by the Ustadz every week. The hope is to attend the study sessions regularly to receive the material consistently, so that it can serve as a personal reminder that can be practiced at any time." (p7).

DISCUSS

In Indonesia, there are many religious foundations that have reached entities in the fields of religious outreach, health, and business. These entities are not limited to Islam alone; some are general or universal, serving all religions. These services differ from those provided by elderly care homes or nursing homes, which focus on physical health care. The da'wah services provided by the Forum Kajian Bina Muslim Kaffah Malang are one of the religious Islamic services based on contemporary da'wah studies and the application of psychoreligious principles. The uniqueness of these services is directed towards healthy elderly individuals who have a motivation to seek religious knowledge, thereby demonstrating a genuine need to study the content of each presentation.

The mental readiness of an elderly person can be measured by their earnestness in seeking out and participating in weekly studies, leading to a state of mindfulness, accepting old age as a part of life, and feeling a sense of shared circumstances that require religious/spiritual guidance with other elderly people. This triggers a deepening and application of the desire to compete in goodness, known as *fastabiqul khairat*.

Education is one of the factors that contribute to the ability of older adults to find meaning in life, seek help with difficulties they experience, and decide where to go to deepen their religious knowledge. All participants had a good educational background, which gave them the chance to think clearly about their choices for living wisely in old age according to their beliefs and efforts to fulfill their religious/spiritual needs. These findings were similar to research by Singh and Mehra (2020), which explained that spirituality among the elderly across educational qualifications revealed that spirituality increased significantly with higher education. Graduate elderly were significantly more spiritual than those less educated, and post-graduates were observed to be even significantly more spiritual than graduates. The same trend was observed on the psychological well-being component. Graduate elderly were significantly more psychologically well than those less educated, and post-graduates were observed to be even significantly more psychologically well than graduates.¹²

Participants in the study shared the common goal of participating in liqo' as an effort to interpret aging in a more positive light. That aging is part of sunnatullah, which needs to be fulfilled, interpreted, and strived for as a good end to life.

This aligns with the research by Humboldt *et.al.* (2013), which successfully analyzed the process of adapting to aging, highlighting the importance of spirituality as a long and meaningful component that leads to altruism, spiritual community, spiritual beliefs, spiritual activities, existential meaning, sense of limit, valorization of age, and valorization of time.¹³

The similarities in this study point to the fact that each participant has an altruistic aspect to do good, pass on goodness to the next generation, the urge to gather with righteous people, and the belief and need for the presence of Allah. Meanwhile, the differences in the research setting are more focused on the small scope within the liqo' community, which emphasizes religious activities such as prayer, remembrance of Allah, recitation of the Qur'an, reflection of the Qur'an, and structured religious studies. This is one of the strengths of this research, as it does not limit the approach to spirituality to aspects such as meditation, yoga, or solitude, as is often done in other studies.

As with most elderly who experience discomfort related to physical conditions and obstacles due to aging, all participants also expressed discomfort related to physical limitations, medical needs, thoughts or concerns about not being able to move independently or needing help from others, as well as feelings of loneliness. Older adults with a health condition experienced limiting symptoms and impairments, such as stiff and painful joints or dizziness, which often changed their perceived physical capabilities to be active. Health symptoms could vary day to day depending on previous activities and sleep, which influenced future mobility decisions, and medication side effects, such as drowsiness, reduced perceived capability to be active.^{14,15} Other factors underlying older adults' physical activity in this review included the short-term embodied sensations and emotions associated with movement (e.g., pleasure and pain). Older adults tend to avoid negative states, such as expectations of daily pain.

The elderly face increased risks of disease, disability, geriatric conditions, dementia, and mental health challenges that strain healthcare systems primarily designed for care. Many of them will encounter challenges related to insecurity, lack of adequate caregiving support, age-related discrimination or ageism, elder abuse concerns, limited transportation options, and social isolation – all impacting well-being and community engagement.¹⁶ A key cultural influence impacting older adults' physical activity in the current review was the sociocultural ageing stereotypes and discourses, including tensions between ageing as decline (i.e., decline is inevitable, older people are inactive and need to rest) and positive ageing discourses (i.e., pressure to use physical activity in the self-management of health and avoidance of disease). In line with social gerontology literature, negative stereotypes of ageing could create self-stigma, which could result in avoidance of physical activity, or using physical activity as a way to challenge marginalisation through deconstructing negative ageing stereotypes.¹⁷ However, the positive side of the participants is that they do not give up in the face of circumstances or discomfort. The participants have learned to ignore feelings of loneliness, divert their attention to positive activities, make more friends during liqo' opportunities, and continue to deepen their religious/spiritual aspects.

Based on a growing number of studies and theories of aging suggesting that the levels of spirituality increase during a person's lifetime, one would expect an increase in the levels of spirituality along the study follow-up.^{18,19} The elderly who are

mentally prepared for old age, mindful, and who need Allah as the source of life, peace, the beginning and end of life, will attain a high level of religious/spiritual. That refers to being closer to Allah in of natural way, flowing, and calming need, as if it were a primary need.

Limitation of study – There has been no quantitative measurement of the spiritual condition of each participant before and after participating in the liqo' activity, so it is not sufficiently known what measurable aspects of religion/spirituality are and how they are interpreted. Another limitation is that it focuses on psychospiritual activities based on Islam's perspective. This research merely captures the mental condition and readiness of each participant in their journey toward old age from a phenomenological perspective, without providing a specific and in-depth interpretation.

Future research direction – this research has the potential to be developed in various aspects and different perspectives, including based on various religions, the existence of pre- and post-activity measurements, quantitative evaluation as a complete and whole model, and involving the medical field and relevant practitioners.

CONCLUSION

The elderly who are knowledgeable and mindful of their mental condition are prepared to become elderly with integrity and strength, with the hope of leaving a legacy of goodness for younger generations. Aging leads to physical and mental discomfort due to physical limitations, multiple chronic illnesses, inability to move independently, and deep feelings of loneliness. Some elderly with mental preparedness have a positive perception and mindset that aging is not merely a part of life's journey, but also provides meaning and opportunities to become closer to Allah, gather with fellow righteous individuals, and prepare for a good end of life. Elderly individuals with a positive outlook perceive the presence of Allah as the center of life, peace, and the source of both the beginning and end of life. The liqo' activity helps participants become the best version of themselves and strive to be Muslims with the final designation of husnul khotimah, or a good ending.

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