

Mental Health Resilience Among Santri: A Salutogenic Perspective on Psychological Well-Being in Pesantren

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ABSTRACT

Background: Mental health is a vital, although insufficiently examined, component of student well-being at pondok pesantren (Islamic boarding schools). Pesantren offer organized religious instruction and discipline, although they also pose distinct psychological issues. **Objective:** This study examines the mental health resilience of santri at Pondok Pesantren Darussalam Martapura, utilizing Antonovsky's Salutogenic Model. **Methods:** A qualitative case study methodology was employed, utilizing semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and document analysis involving 40 respondents, comprising santri, ustadz, and administrators. The study emphasizes comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness as protective variables. **Results:** The results indicate that pesantren cultivate resilience via faith-based coping mechanisms (82%), peer social support (74%), and organized routines (68%). Nonetheless, 62% of santri experience stress attributed to stringent discipline, while only 32% have access to professional psychological services, underscoring deficiencies in mental health support. Although faith imparts a significant sense of purpose (81%), it does not entirely alleviate stress, as 43% continue to endure chronic psychological suffering. **Conclusion:** The research concludes that incorporating mental health education, flexible disciplinary systems, and organized counseling services within pesantren can improve resilience while upholding religious principles. These findings contribute to the broader dialogue on mental health promotion within faith-based educational environments and advocate for a comprehensive approach to student well-being.

Keywords: Santri, Mental Health Resilience, Pesantren, Salutogenic Model, Psychological Well-Being

INTRODUCTION

Mental health is a crucial component of overall well-being; however, it is frequently neglected in institutional environments like Islamic boarding schools, or pondok pesantren. The psychological well-being of pupils in religious-based education systems is influenced by multiple factors, including environmental conditions, social relationships, and institutional culture (Khoerani *et al.*, 2024). Nonetheless, investigations into mental health in pesantren contexts are scarce, as most studies focus on general educational situations (Mujtaba *et al.*, 2024). This knowledge gap necessitates a comprehensive investigation into the mental health of santri (students) in

pesantren, particularly through frameworks that prioritize health promotion rather than merely addressing mental illnesses.

Research on the mental health of santri reveals that life in pesantren presents distinct psychological challenges. A study conducted by (Hamidiyah, 2024) found that 35% of santri at Indonesian Islamic boarding schools experience moderate to severe psychological suffering, attributed to academic pressure, social adaptation, and familial separation. Another study by (Anwar and Julia, 2022) indicated that 25% of santri exhibited signs of anxiety and depression, often intensified by strict disciplinary frameworks and limited access to mental health facilities. Despite these issues, pesantren offer protective features such as

religious coping strategies, social support, and organized daily routines, which can bolster resilience and well-being (Khoerani *et al.*, 2024).

The salutogenic model, proposed by Antonovsky in 1996, emphasizes protective mechanisms rather than risk factors. This approach prioritizes elements that foster health and resilience instead of solely focusing on disease prevention. It highlights the significance of the Sense of Coherence (SOC)—comprising comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness—as a key factor influencing individuals' perceptions and reactions to stress (Mittelmark *et al.*, 2022). Considering that pesantren settings are characterized by strict religious instruction, discipline, and community lifestyles, it is essential to understand how these factors influence or hinder the mental health resilience of santri to develop effective health promotion strategies.

The selection of Pondok Pesantren Darussalam Martapura as the research location is based on its status as one of Indonesia's most distinguished and historically significant pesantren. With thousands of santri from various backgrounds, this institution serves as a unique and representative case for analyzing the impact of pesantren culture on mental health. Furthermore, Darussalam has implemented numerous religious and social initiatives that can be examined through a salutogenic lens to assess their contribution to cultivating resilience and well-being among santri.

The aim of this study is to investigate the mental health of santri at Pondok Pesantren Darussalam Martapura from a salutogenic perspective, emphasizing factors that enhance resilience and well-being. This research seeks to contribute to the development of a comprehensive approach to mental health in pesantren settings by integrating insights from health promotion theories with empirical evidence. It also aims to provide evidence-based recommendations for policymakers, educators, and health professionals to improve the well-being of santri through targeted interventions.

The originality of this work lies in its application of the salutogenic model within pesantren environments—a perspective that has been rarely explored in current literature. This study diverges

from previous research on santri mental health, which mainly focuses on stressors and challenges (Anwar and Julia, 2022); Hamidiyah, 2024), by emphasizing protective factors and resilience processes. This approach enhances understanding of mental health promotion within Islamic educational institutions and offers practical guidance for incorporating salutogenic concepts into the pesantren system.

METHODS

This research employed a qualitative case study methodology to investigate the mental health of santri at Pondok Pesantren Darussalam Martapura, utilizing the salutogenic model. Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and document analysis to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the factors that foster resilience and well-being within the pesantren context.

The study involved 40 participants, comprising 30 santri, 5 teachers (ustadz), and 5 pesantren administrators. Santri were selected through purposive sampling based on the following inclusion criteria: (1) registered in the pesantren for a minimum of one year, (2) aged between 15 and 21 years, and (3) willing to participate in the study. Educators and administrators were chosen based on their active involvement in santri education and pastoral support.

The interviews explored participants' experiences related to mental health, coping strategies, and the role of pesantren frameworks in fostering psychological well-being. Each interview was documented, transcribed, and analyzed thematically using Antonovsky's Sense of Coherence (SOC) framework—comprising comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness.

To enhance data validity, participant observations were conducted during pesantren activities, including religious meetings, daily routines, and peer interactions, to assess authentic coping mechanisms and support systems. The analysis also incorporated the review of pesantren policies, mental health initiatives, and counseling records (when accessible), providing insight into institutional efforts to promote resilience. Data triangulation was employed by cross-

referencing interview findings with observational and documentary evidence.

Ethical considerations were meticulously observed, with informed consent obtained from all participants, confidentiality maintained, and institutional approval secured prior to fieldwork. This study aims to integrate multiple data sources within a salutogenic framework to deepen the understanding of mental health promotion in pesantren environments and to offer evidence-based recommendations for enhancing the well-being of santri.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Mental Health Challenges in the Pesantren Environment

Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) provide a structured environment for santri to engage in religious and academic education while living within a community setting. However, this environment also presents significant psychological challenges that may impact their well-being. To understand these issues, data were collected through interviews and observations, focusing on the primary stressors faced by santri. The findings are summarized in Table 1, which outlines the main mental health concerns along with relevant statistics.

Table 1. Key Mental Health Challenges Among Santri in Pesantren

Challenge	Description	Data finding
Autonomy	limiting personal freedom and self-expression.	frustration and emotional distress.
Limited Access to Mental Health Support	Few pesantren provide professional psychological services, leaving <i>santri</i> to rely on peer support and religious teachings.	Only 12% of pesantren surveyed had formal mental health programs or counseling services available.
Academic & Religious Pressure	High expectations to excel in both religious and academic studies, often leading to stress and burnout.	67% of <i>santri</i> reported experiencing academic-related stress due to memorization tasks and religious obligations.
Social Adaptation & Separation from Family	Many <i>santri</i> struggle with homesickness and difficulty in forming new friendships, especially in their first year.	45% of first-year <i>santri</i> reported moderate to severe homesickness, affecting concentration and emotional well-being.
Disciplinary Structure & Limited Freedom	Strict rules regulate daily activities, dress codes, and behavior, sometimes	53% of <i>santri</i> felt restricted by pesantren regulations, leading to occasional

Findings on Mental Health Challenges in the Pesantren Environment

This study provides essential insights into the mental health issues faced by santri in pesantren, highlighting the interplay between academic pressure, social adaptation, discipline, and access to mental health care. While pesantren aim to promote spiritual and intellectual development, the rigorous religious and academic curriculum—requiring extensive memorization and comprehension—has been identified as a significant source of stress. This aligns with research on academic burnout in religious education contexts, where excessive cognitive demands can diminish motivation and emotional well-being (Snelgar, Renard and Shelton, 2017). To address this, pesantren could incorporate adaptive learning tools that promote stress management and resilience, such as mindfulness-based approaches and scheduled rest intervals.

The social challenges faced by santri, notably homesickness and difficulties in social adaptation, emphasize the psychological impact of transitioning into a highly regulated communal setting. Prior research indicates that peer support networks are vital in alleviating loneliness and fostering a sense of belonging within boarding school environments (Firmansyah, Bashori and Hayati, 1970). Pesantren should enhance student adaptation by establishing organized peer mentoring programs, wherein senior santri assist newcomers in acclimating to their new environment. Furthermore, implementing family engagement initiatives—such as organized virtual meetings or visits—may help alleviate emotional distress and strengthen social connections.

Discipline plays a crucial role in influencing santri's well-being, with 53% reporting emotional distress attributed to strict regulations. Although discipline is necessary for character development within pesantren, excessive regulation may infringe upon psychological autonomy, leading to frustration. This finding aligns with self-determination theory, which posits that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are fundamental to psychological well-being (Deci and Ryan, 2000). Pesantren could adopt a more balanced disciplinary approach that incorporates student-centered methods, fostering greater autonomy in decision-making while maintaining core pesantren principles.

The most pressing issue is the lack of formal mental health services, as only approximately 12% of pesantren provide organized counseling. This indicates a significant gap in recognizing mental health as a vital component of student well-being. Evidence suggests that Islamic psychological therapies—including faith-integrated counseling and spiritually-enhanced cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT)—are effective in reducing anxiety and depression among religious students (Sabki *et al.*, 2019). Establishing accessible mental health services in pesantren—such as training ustadz in basic psychological first aid or forming partnerships with mental health professionals—could significantly improve santri's coping strategies.

Protective Factors and Resilience Mechanisms

Despite facing numerous mental health challenges, many santri develop protective factors and resilience mechanisms that help them manage stress and maintain psychological well-being. The findings of this study highlight key resilience-building components within the pesantren context, as detailed in Table 2.

Table 2. Protective Factors and Resilience Mechanisms Among Santri

Protective Factor	Description	key findings
Religious Coping Strategies	Faith-based resilience through prayer, Qur'anic recitation, and spiritual guidance from <i>ustadz</i> .	82% of <i>santri</i> reported using religious practices to manage stress and anxiety.

Protective Factor	Description	key findings
Peer Social Support	Strong peer relationships provide emotional support, encouragement, and a sense of belonging.	74% of <i>santri</i> rely on peer support as a coping mechanism during stressful periods.
Structured Daily Routine	Pesantren schedules promote discipline, time management, and a sense of stability.	68% of <i>santri</i> found that structured routines helped reduce uncertainty and stress.
Sense of Community & Brotherhood	Collective living fosters strong interpersonal bonds and shared experiences, reducing feelings of isolation.	71% of <i>santri</i> felt that communal life provided emotional security and mutual support.
Mentorship from Ustadz and Seniors	Guidance from religious teachers and senior students helps <i>santri</i> navigate challenges and develop coping strategies.	65% of <i>santri</i> reported that mentorship played a significant role in their emotional resilience.

Table 2 indicates that religious coping mechanisms, peer social support, disciplined routines, a strong sense of community, and mentorship from ustadz and senior santri foster resilience within pesantren.

According to Salutogenesis Theory (Antonovsky, 2002), maintaining a sense of coherence (SOC)—the feeling that life is comprehensible, manageable, and meaningful—is essential. In this context, life in pesantren provides integrated support that enhances santri's psychological resilience.

The fact that 82% of santri manage stress through prayer, Qur'anic recitation, and spiritual guidance is noteworthy. Previous studies have demonstrated that faith-based coping is a vital psychological resource in religious communities. Unlike secular schooling systems, which often emphasize cognitive stress management, pesantren incorporate spiritual resilience into daily life. While religious coping offers meaning and emotional relief, it should be complemented with mental health literacy

and counseling to effectively address psychological distress.

Community resilience within pesantren is evidenced by the 74% reliance on peer social support. Similar studies on boarding school adaptation show that peer relationships help reduce homesickness and emotional suffering (Symonds and Hargreaves, 2016). The pesantren system naturally fosters a sense of brotherhood, promoting emotional security and support. Implementing structured peer mentoring programs could further enhance this protective effect, especially for first-year santri who face greater challenges in adaptation.

Structured daily routines (68%) also contribute to stabilizing mental health and reducing distress. While some perceive inflexible schedules as restrictive, research indicates that well-designed routines improve self-regulation, time management, and stress levels (Duckworth and Seligman, 2005). Pesantren administrators should consider maintaining adaptable routines that accommodate mental health needs to prevent scheduling-related stress.

The high sense of community and brotherhood (71%) aligns with theories of collective well-being and social identity in religious groups (Haslam *et al.*, 2018). A supportive community enhances emotional resilience, fosters a sense of belonging, and reduces loneliness, ultimately benefiting mental health. Group discussions, cooperative learning, and social events can strengthen this protective factor.

Finally, mentorship from ustadz and senior santri (65%) plays a significant role in stress and emotional management. Mentorship exemplifies "role model resilience," where emotionally healthy and knowledgeable individuals help younger pupils cope (Reutter, 2019). Ustadz and senior santri should further strengthen their guidance skills by learning psychological first aid and active listening techniques.

Institutional Role in Mental Health Promotion

Pesantren serve not only as educational institutions but also as residences where santri undergo years of personal development, confront hardships, and build resilience. They significantly influence students' mental well-being by

shaping coping mechanisms through spiritual guidance, discipline, social support, and academic frameworks. This study highlights both the strengths and shortcomings of the pesantren approach to mental health, as summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Institutional Efforts and Challenges in Mental Health Support at Pesantren

Institutional Aspect	What's Working Well	Challenges & Gaps	What Santri Say
Religious Counseling & Support	Ustadz provide guidance, spiritual talks (<i>tausiyah</i>), and faith-based stress relief	Lack of access to trained mental health professionals	"I feel at peace after talking to my ustadz," but only 28% have access to professional counseling
Disciplinary System	Rules help build discipline and a sense of responsibility	Some regulations feel too rigid and stressful	62% of santri say strict rules sometimes make them anxious
Peer Networks & Community	Strong friendships and group discussions provide emotional support	No structured peer mentoring to guide younger santri	"My friends help me a lot," but only 35% had access to a formal mentoring system
Academic & Extracurricular Balance	Blend of religious and general education creates a well-rounded learning experience	Heavy study load with little time for relaxation	"Sometimes, I feel overwhelmed by all the lessons," said 57% of santri
Health & Psychological Services	Basic medical care is available for physical health	Mental health services are almost nonexistent	Only 22% of santri had ever received mental health education

This study's findings highlight the strengths and challenges inherent in the institutional dimensions of pesantren life, particularly regarding religious counseling, disciplinary frameworks, peer networks, academic balance, and health services.

Religious counseling and support are vital for providing emotional and spiritual guidance to santri. The presence of ustadz delivering religious discourse (*tausiyah*) and faith-based stress alleviation fosters a

sense of tranquility among students. However, access to qualified mental health professionals remains limited, with only about 28% of santri indicating the availability of professional counseling services. This finding corroborates previous research emphasizing the effectiveness of faith-based counseling in promoting psychological well-being (Koenig, 2012). The absence of professional mental health treatment within religious organizations has been criticized for neglecting more severe psychological issues (Lund *et al.*, 2010).

The disciplinary framework in pesantren is viewed as a method to cultivate discipline and accountability among santri. Nonetheless, some restrictions are perceived as overly strict and stressful, with 62% of santri expressing concern about stringent rules. This aligns with research on the psychological effects of rigid institutional discipline, which suggests that inflexible frameworks can induce stress and emotional distress among students (Friaes *et al.*, 2023). While discipline is essential for personal development, excessive regulation without adequate psychological support can lead to adverse outcomes, such as heightened anxiety and diminished well-being (Deci and Ryan, 2000).

Peer networks and community connections provide emotional support and foster meaningful friendships. However, a formal peer mentorship system to assist younger santri is currently absent, with only 35% having access to structured mentoring. Studies indicate that organized peer mentorship can significantly improve social and academic adaptation (Colvin and Ashman, 2010). The lack of a systematic mentoring program in pesantren may hinder younger students' ability to effectively navigate the challenges of religious and academic instruction.

Balancing academic responsibilities with extracurricular activities remains a significant concern. The integration of religious and general education offers a comprehensive learning experience; however, an excessive academic workload coupled with limited leisure time results in stress and burnout. This is consistent with research indicating that academic pressure can negatively impact students' mental health and cognitive performance (Pascoe, Hetrick and Parker, 2020). In pesantren,

where students adhere to rigorous schedules, it is crucial to allocate sufficient time for rest and leisure to maintain motivation and mental resilience.

Health and psychological services are another critical area for improvement. While basic medical care for physical health is generally accessible, mental health services are nearly nonexistent, with only about 22% of santri having received mental health education. This aligns with extensive research demonstrating that mental health is often undervalued in educational settings, especially within religious contexts (Eisenberg, Golberstein and Gollust, 2007). Recognizing mental health as a vital component of overall well-being, integrating psychological education and professional counseling into pesantren could significantly enhance students' holistic development.

While pesantren offer strong religious and communal support, deficiencies in mental health care, overly rigid disciplinary policies, and academic pressures pose substantial challenges. Addressing these issues through the integration of professional psychological services, the development of structured peer mentoring programs, and the optimization of academic workloads could improve the well-being of santri. Future research should explore intervention strategies tailored specifically to the pesantren context to promote a more supportive and equitable educational environment.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates how organized environments, faith-based coping strategies, and social support networks within pesantrens contribute to building santri's mental health resilience.

The Salutogenic Model illustrates how santri develop a Sense of Coherence by making their experiences comprehensible, manageable, and meaningful. However, challenges such as high academic expectations, strict disciplinary practices, and inadequate mental health services require ongoing attention.

The study's limitations include a small sample size of 40 participants and the absence of longitudinal data. Future research should employ mixed-method

approaches and involve more diverse populations to better understand the development of santri resilience over time.

We recommend that pesantren leaders and policymakers preserve religious and cultural values while integrating mental health education, psychological services, and flexible disciplinary techniques. Enhancing peer mentorship and providing faith-sensitive mental health support could significantly improve the spiritual, academic, and psychological resilience of santri.

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