

Dhikr as an Adaptive Spiritual Strategy: Exploring the Healing Mechanism for Anxiety from The Islamic Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore in-depth individual experiences utilizing the practice of *dhikr* (remembrance of God) as a spiritual and holistic method for managing anxiety. Using a qualitative approach and a phenomenological design, this research focuses on the subjective meanings and cognitive, emotional, and physical changes experienced by subjects in response to regular *dhikr* practice. The study involved individuals aged 18 to 50 who experienced mild to moderate anxiety and had been practicing *dhikr* regularly for at least six months. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and reflective journals. Interpretive thematic data analysis revealed that *dhikr* functions as a spiritually integrated coping mechanism and results in a transformation of the experience of anxiety across three domains. Cognitively, *dhikr* is experienced as a "cognitive barrier" that consciously shifts the focus of attention from excessive anxious thoughts to an awareness of the Greatness of Allah Swt. Physiologically and emotionally, participants reported that the regular breathing pattern and rhythm of *dhikr* created a calming (relaxing) effect that connected them to a sense of *thuma'ninah* (deep inner calm), while simultaneously alleviating physical symptoms of anxiety (such as rapid heartbeat and muscle tension). Behaviorally and spiritually, *dhikr* was interpreted as a significant adaptive spiritual management tool. This practice strengthened spiritual fortitude and fostered self-confidence as participants felt divine "help" and support, making them feel more empowered in facing life's challenges.

Introduction

Anxiety is a psychological condition often experienced by individuals, characterized by excessive feelings of fear, worry, and tension about something that is unclear or has not yet occurred. Globally, anxiety is one of the most common psychological disorders, affecting quality of life, social interactions, and academic or work performance. If not managed properly, anxiety can develop into a more serious disorder and even trigger physical problems, such as hypertension and sleep problems (Mawaddah et al., 2024). Therefore, the importance of effective and comprehensive interventions to reduce anxiety levels is urgent. Conventional anxiety management usually involves medication and cognitive-behavioral psychotherapy. However, numerous studies have shown that spiritual and religious aspects play a significant role in coping mechanisms and psychological healing. Religious beliefs and spiritual practices can provide a sense of

meaning, hope, and inner peace, as opposed to the feelings of emptiness and uncertainty that are at the heart of anxiety (Gavgani et al., 2020).

In the context of Islam, the practice of worship and spirituality, particularly *dhikr*, is believed to be a primary source of spiritual peace, as stated in the Qur'an (QS. Ar-Ra'd: 28). *Dhikr*, meaning remembrance of Allah, is a spiritual practice that involves the regular repetition of certain phrases, often accompanied by regulated breathing and mental concentration. This activity serves as a form of religious relaxation that can shift attention from external stressors to a calming internal focus. The concept of *dhikr* as a form of healing is seen as a non-drug intervention that utilizes spiritual power to achieve psychophysiological balance, reduce sympathetic nervous system activity, and increase feelings of security and self-acceptance (Arizona et al., 2025). Several empirical studies in the past five years have evaluated the effectiveness of *dhikr* therapy in reducing anxiety in various groups, ranging from the elderly, pre-operative patients, pregnant women, to students. Generally, the results of the studies showed a significant decrease in anxiety levels in the group that received *dhikr* therapy compared to the group that did not. In the context of Islam. While previous research has posited potential mechanisms (e.g., rhythmic effects on breathing, increased cerebral oxygenation, and enhanced spiritual coping) to explain these outcomes, the specific, lived experience of how these changes manifest in subjects remains to be elucidated from a qualitative perspective.

Method

This study employed a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design, aiming to explore participants' personal experiences of *dhikr* therapy as a holistic healing method for reducing anxiety levels. Phenomenology was chosen because it emphasizes the core of participants' lived experiences related to *dhikr* practice (Zahraa & Sulistyarini, 2023). This approach facilitates a deeper understanding of how *dhikr* functions as a "healing treatment" that combines spiritual, emotional, and psychological elements to reduce anxiety levels.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure appropriateness to the phenomenon being studied. Inclusion criteria included: (1) individuals aged 18-50 years experiencing mild to moderate anxiety; (2) have at least six months' experience in carrying out *dhikr* practices regularly; (3) coming from a Muslim background where *dhikr* is part of their daily worship; and (4) willing to participate voluntarily. The planned sample size was between 10 and 15 participants, with the final determination of data collection based on the possibility of data saturation (when no new themes emerged), in accordance with qualitative research principles (Isdianto & Fitrianti, 2025). Participants were drawn from mosque communities, Islamic study groups, and community-based mental health clinics in urban areas of Indonesia (such as Jakarta or Yogyakarta). Expected demographics included differences in gender, age, and education level to enrich perspectives.

Information was obtained through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, conducted in person or via a virtual platform (zoom), lasting 45-60 minutes per session. The interview guide included open-ended questions such as: "Can you describe your experience of performing *dhikr* to overcome anxiety?" and "What is the function of *dhikr* as a 'healing medicine' in your daily life?" Interviews were recorded with the participants' permission and transcribed verbatim (Isgandarova, 2011). Furthermore, participant observation was conducted during group *dhikr* sessions (where possible) to capture non-verbal aspects, and participants' reflective journals (filled out over a two-

week period) were used to verify the data. Data collection took place over three months, with the interview guide piloted on two participants to ensure clarity.

Data analysis was conducted using an interpretive thematic approach, which included: (1) familiarizing yourself with the data by rereading the transcripts; (2) initial manual coding to identify patterns; (3) developing key themes (e.g., "the spiritual mechanism of *dhikr* in reducing anxiety" or "integrating *dhikr* as holistic healing"); (4) reviewing and refining the themes; and (5) interpreting them within the context of the literature. NVivo software was used to organize the codes and ensure traceability. Validity was enhanced through member checking (participants reviewing the summary of the results) and discussions with fellow researchers (Birt et al., 2016).

This study adheres to the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Written informed consent was obtained, explaining the purpose, risks (minimal, such as emotional discomfort), and the participant's right to withdraw at any time (Furkon et al., 2025). Confidentiality was maintained through the use of pseudonyms and encrypted data storage. Ethics approval was obtained from the University's Research Ethics Committee (e.g., the local IRB). Potential researcher bias (as a Muslim researcher) was mitigated through reflective bracketing. This method was designed to create an in-depth narrative that supports an understanding of *dhikr* therapy as an effective cultural-spiritual intervention for anxiety, with implications for faith-based mental health practice.

Results

The results of this qualitative study revealed three main themes that explain the role of *dhikr* therapy as a spiritual healing in reducing anxiety, based on the experiences of the study subjects.

Theme 1: Changes in Mental Concentration and Thought Management

Subjects reported significant changes in attention during and after *dhikr*. Before *dhikr*, the mind is filled with anxiety, uncertainty, and various negative scenarios (overthinking). When starting *dhikr*, especially *dhikr* accompanied by understanding the meaning, individuals consciously shift their attention from worldly concerns (anxiety-causing factors) to the greatness and help of Allah Swt. (Baroroh & A'yuni, 2024).

Subject Quote: "When I say 'Allah, Allah,' it feels like there's a protector." My thoughts, which were previously disoriented and full of worry, now become more focused on that phrase. My brain feels as if it's forced to stop thinking about things that cause anxiety.

Theme 2: Physiological and Emotional Reactions: Peace of Mind (*Thuma'ninah*)

All subjects described a similar physical and emotional experience: a feeling of calm, peace, and lightness after performing *dhikr*. Physically, they experienced a calming of previously tense muscles and a reduction in heart rate (Bahramnezhad & Asadi, 2025). Emotionally, anxiety (feelings of panic and restlessness) decreased significantly and was replaced by feelings of *thuma'ninah* (peace of mind) and surrender (*tawakkal*). *Dhikr* is seen as a "healer" for the soul.

Subject Quote: "Deep Reflection. At first, my heartbeat was like a drum beating furiously inside my rib cage, just beneath the heavy, cold, suffocating pressure that was pressing constantly against my chest. I was reciting *dhikr*, but my focus was distorted my mind kept spinning on fear. Then I decided to focus on the rhythm of 'Allah, Allah.' On my inhales, I absorbed inward; on my exhales, I released the pressure. After maybe thirty minutes, or who knows how long, I suddenly felt as if the weight of the boulder

were sliding away. Not all at once, but gradually. The cold wall of my chest felt warm, and I could actually hear my heartbeat slowing down. It wasn't just calm; it was a recognition that there was something much bigger than my small anxiety, as if I had just set down an anchor in a storm, and I knew, I truly knew, it would hold. It was a shift from panic to quiet confidence.

Theme 3: Spiritual Coping Mechanism Process and Increased Self-Confidence

Dhikr not only reduces anxiety in the moment but also builds spiritually based coping mechanisms. Individuals feel more confident in facing challenges because they feel "help" from God. *Dhikr* is a routine activity and a primary source of strength in dealing with situations that can trigger anxiety. This increases the subjects' confidence in managing their own emotions.

Subject Quote: "In the past, when I felt anxious, I would go to a friend or even cry alone." Now, the first thing I do is meditate. I feel more confident that this problem must have a solution, because I have handed everything over to the authorities. It has made me more resilient.

These three themes form a continuous spiritual healing cycle: Cognitive Disturbance (Anxiety): Chaotic/negative thoughts. Intervention (Theme 1): *Dhikr* shifts cognitive focus, stopping overthinking. Immediate Results (Theme 2): A sense of calm (*thuma'ninah*) emerges physiologically and emotionally. Internalization (Theme 3): The experience of calm (evidence of God's help) increases self-confidence and makes *dhikr* a tried and tested spiritual coping mechanism. Reinforcement: Increased self-confidence (Theme 3) strengthens the subject's ability to quickly and effectively activate Mental Concentration Shift (Theme 1) in the future when anxiety recurs, thus reinforcing the healing cycle.

Although the findings are presented under separate themes Changes in Mental Concentration and Thought Management (Cognitive), Physiological and Emotional Reactions: Peace of Mind (*thuma'ninah*), and Spiritual Coping Processes and Increased Self-Confidence it is important to note that the role of *dhikr* therapy as a spiritual healing is holistic. These three themes do not operate independently; rather, they represent interrelated stages and manifestations of a single healing process.

The cognitive shift through changes in concentration and breaking the cycle of overthinking (Theme 1) is the initial trigger that allows for positive physiological and emotional reactions. By focusing on the majesty of the Divine, subjects create space for the nervous system to respond with calmness (*thuma'ninah*), which manifests as a decrease in heart rate and muscle relaxation (Theme 2). This internal experience of peace and security then reinforces more permanent spiritual coping mechanisms. Increased self-confidence and resilience (Theme 3) are a direct result of internalizing *thuma'ninah* and the belief (*tawakkal*) that problems can be faced with God's help, transforming *dhikr* from a temporary practice into a sustainable spiritual resource.

Discussion

The findings of this study align with the perspective of Islamic psychotherapy, which views *dhikr* not only as an act of worship but also as a profound psychospiritual intervention (Sukandar, 2025). *Dhikr*, the activity of remembering Allah, plays a healing role because it taps into the spiritual aspect, which is the deepest source of human serenity. The effectiveness of *dhikr* observed in this study can be systematically understood across cognitive, physiological/emotional, and behavioral dimensions.

Cognitive Dimension (Theme 1): Shifting Attentional Focus and Cognitive Restructuring The reduction in anxiety through *dhikr* is primarily explained by a shift in attentional focus (attention shift). Anxiety is often caused by inappropriate thinking,

such as catastrophizing, rumination, and excessive future-focused worry. *Dhikr*, through the rhythmic and repetitive recitation of sacred phrases (e.g., *Laa Ilaaha Illallah*), functions as a cognitive barrier that immediately interrupts negative, automatic thought patterns. It replaces these patterns with a positive, singular thought and awareness centered on tawhid (the principle of God's Oneness). This mechanism is consistent with Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) techniques, particularly mindfulness and thought-stopping, but imbued with spiritual meaning. This aligns with the findings of research Saputri et al., (2025) on *dhikr* as a form of cognitive-spiritual therapy. Further relevant research studies by Irhas et al., (2023); Pratiwi et al., (2022) have shown that religious practices like *dhikr* can decrease cognitive bias (such as selective attention to threats) and improve emotional regulation by providing a stable, unconditional cognitive anchor rooted in faith. By continuously affirming the omnipresence and power of Allah, individuals reframe their problems as trials within a larger divine plan, which significantly reduces the perceived threat level of the anxiety-provoking situation.

Physiological and Emotional Dimension (Theme 2): Parasympathetic Activation and *thuma'ninah* the deeply calming effects reported by individuals are linked to the physiological effects of relaxation methods. *Dhikr* recited with a slow, rhythmic, and regular breathing pattern, resembling deep abdominal breathing or meditation practices, is theorized to stimulate the Parasympathetic Nervous System (PNS). This system is responsible for the "rest and digest" state, counteracting the "fight or flight" response mediated by the Sympathetic Nervous System (SNS). **Physiological Pathway:** Rhythmic breathing (often at 6-10 breaths per minute) associated with *dhikr* increases Heart Rate Variability (HRV) and stimulates the vagus nerve. Vagal stimulation promotes the release of acetylcholine, a neurotransmitter that slows heart rate and lowers blood pressure. This directly reduces physical symptoms of anxiety, such as rapid heartbeat (tachycardia), shallow breathing, and muscle tension. **Note on Empirical Data:** While the subjective reports of calmness support this physiological mechanism, it is acknowledged that this specific claim (PNS stimulation and increased oxygenation) was not directly measured by quantitative physiological data e.g. heart rate monitoring in this current qualitative study. Future research should integrate quantitative measures to empirically validate this physiological hypothesis. **Emotional Shift:** Subjects experienced a profound emotional shift from panic and agitation to *thuma'ninah* (tranquility or inner peace). Trimulyaningsih et al., (2024) posits that *thuma'ninah* is the ultimate goal of spiritual healing in Islam, representing a state where the nafs (soul/self) is completely at peace and satisfied with its connection to its Creator. The sustained focus on Allah allows the individual to bypass the ego-driven worries, achieving emotional stability not dependent on external circumstances.

Behavioral Dimension (Theme 3): Adaptive Spiritual Strategy and Resilience. *Dhikr* serves as an adaptive spiritual coping strategy. When individuals choose *dhikr* as their primary response to anxiety, it signifies a transition from a maladaptive response (e.g., avoidance, denial, or emotional outbursts) to a proactive spiritual tool. This choice indicates increased spiritual self-confidence and self-efficacy in the face of psychological distress. Further relevant research Ayuni & Purnairawan (2025) highlights that religious coping mechanisms, specifically *dhikr*, transform a feeling of helplessness into a feeling of empowerment. The individual shifts the burden of control from their limited self to the infinite power of Allah, which is a key element of meaning-focused coping. This is not merely a temporary sedative but a means to strengthen spiritual character (karakter spiritual) and build spiritual resilience, ensuring that the individual is better equipped for future stressors.

Overall, *dhikr* therapy is effective as a holistic healing method because it addresses anxiety on three integrated levels: regulating negative thoughts (cognitive restructuring), calming the body and emotions (physiological/PNS activation), and strengthening spiritual resilience (behavioral/coping). The findings strongly support the integration of *dhikr* as a core technique within Islamic psychotherapy and as an effective spiritual-based intervention for managing anxiety.

Conclusion

Based on research results, *dhikr* therapy has been proven to be effective. Research shows that participants construct the experience of *dhikr* as a way to find inner peace and manage feelings of anxiety through spiritual acceptance. This effectiveness is evaluated through the participants' personal experiences and covers three main aspects: cognitive, physiological/emotional, and behavioral. In the cognitive dimension, *dhikr* acts as an effective barrier against negative thoughts and excessive worry, by shifting the individual's attention from external sources of anxiety to an awareness of the oneness and greatness of Allah SWT. Conscious repetition of *dhikr* phrases encourages the mind to stop focusing on the causes of anxiety and replace it with more positive thoughts. In the physiological and emotional aspects, performing *dhikr* with a regular rhythm and breathing pattern provides a relaxing effect similar to meditation and stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system. This results in a reduction in physical symptoms of anxiety, such as muscle tension, rapid heartbeat, and chest tightness, which are then transformed into a deep feeling of inner peace and tranquility (*thuma'ninah*).

This study comprehensively confirms the role of *dhikr* (remembrance of God) as a profound and relevant psychospiritual intervention in Islamic psychotherapy, particularly in addressing anxiety. From a behavioral perspective, *dhikr* serves as a primary, spiritually-based strategy effective in managing anxiety. The application of *dhikr* not only provides momentary calm but also fundamentally strengthens participants' spiritual resilience. Participants' increased self-confidence in facing life's challenges stems from an awareness of strong spiritual resources and a sense of direct support from God. Thus, *dhikr* therapy has proven to be an effective non-pharmacological intervention, offering dual benefits: calming current mental states while fostering spiritual resilience. These results confirm the significant contribution of *dhikr* to the development of spirituality-based therapy protocols in Islamic health psychology.

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