

Exploring the Meaning of Spirituality in Islamic Guidance and Counseling for Enhancing Students' Subjective Well-Being: A Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the meaning of spirituality within the process of Islamic guidance and counseling in enhancing students' subjective well-being. Employing a qualitative approach with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), this research involved ten students from Sunan Drajat University who had participated in Islamic counseling activities. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews and analyzed systematically following IPA procedures. The findings reveal four superordinate themes: (1) spirituality as a source of inner peace, (2) relationship with Allah as the foundation of well-being, (3) Islamic counseling as a reflective and transformative space, and (4) spirituality as a pathway to meaningful life satisfaction. These findings indicate that spirituality plays a central role in shaping students' subjective well-being through emotional regulation, transcendental connection, and meaning-making processes. This study contributes to the development of Islamic guidance and counseling by providing a deeper understanding of students' lived experiences, moving beyond dominant quantitative approaches. It highlights the importance of integrating spirituality into counseling practices to promote holistic well-being among students. The findings offer both theoretical and practical implications for developing spiritually integrated counseling models in Islamic higher education contexts.

Introduction

Mental health among university students has become an increasingly critical issue in both global and national higher education contexts. Students are exposed to various psychological pressures, including academic demands, social adaptation, and uncertainty about future careers, which may lead to stress, anxiety, and depression.

Recent studies in Indonesia indicate that the prevalence of mental health problems among university students is relatively high, particularly in terms of stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms (Surilena dkk., 2025; Andriani dkk., 2025). A large-scale survey conducted across several universities in Indonesia also found that a significant proportion of students experience moderate to severe psychological distress, highlighting the urgency of addressing student mental health in higher education settings (Ekawati dkk., 2025).

These challenges not only affect academic performance but also influence overall psychological well-being. In this regard, subjective well-being (SWB) is widely recognized as a key indicator of individuals' quality of life, encompassing both cognitive evaluations of life satisfaction and affective experiences of positive and negative emotions (Diener, 1984).

Subjective well-being plays a crucial role as a protective factor against psychological distress. Individuals with higher levels of SWB tend to demonstrate better coping strategies, healthier interpersonal relationships, and stronger resilience when facing life challenges. Previous studies have consistently shown that well-being is closely associated with adaptive functioning and mental health stability among students (Abdel-Khalek, 2010). In the context of higher education, SWB is strongly linked to academic success, motivation, and adaptability. Therefore, enhancing students' subjective well-being has become an essential focus in the development of guidance and counseling services, particularly within Islamic educational settings.

From an Islamic perspective, spirituality represents a fundamental dimension of human existence, encompassing the relationship between individuals and Allah (*hablumminallah*) as well as the internalization of divine values in daily life. Spirituality is not limited to ritual practices but extends to the development of meaning, purpose, and moral orientation that shape individual behavior. This holistic perspective views human beings as integrated entities consisting of physical, psychological, social, and spiritual dimensions.

A growing body of research has demonstrated a strong positive relationship between spirituality, religiosity, and subjective well-being among Muslim populations (Tiliouine dkk., 2009; Abdel-Khalek, 2010). Individuals with higher levels of spirituality tend to experience greater inner peace, stronger life meaning, and more effective coping mechanisms when dealing with stress. Empirical evidence by Hasanah & Haris (2023) revealed that spirituality has a very strong influence on the subjective well-being of tahfidz students, contributing up to 81.3% of the variance in well-being outcomes. This finding highlights those spiritual experiences, such as feeling the presence of God and engaging in religious practices, play a crucial role in enhancing psychological well-being.

Furthermore, spirituality also interacts with other psychological factors such as resilience and social support. Bukhori dkk., (2022) found that religiosity contributes to subjective well-being both directly and indirectly through resilience among Muslim

university students. In the context of Muslim students, spiritual practices such as prayer (*shalat*), remembrance (*dhikr*), and trust in God (*tawakkul*) serve as essential coping mechanisms that foster emotional balance and life satisfaction. Consequently, within Islamic guidance and counseling, spirituality becomes a central foundation in facilitating holistic well-being.

Despite extensive research on spirituality and subjective well-being, most existing studies have predominantly employed quantitative approaches focusing on measuring correlations or causal relationships between variables. Studies such as Hasanah & Haris (2023) provide strong empirical evidence regarding the influence of spirituality on well-being; however, these approaches are limited in capturing the depth and complexity of individuals' lived experiences. Quantitative findings often emphasize generalization while overlooking the subjective meanings that individuals attach to their spiritual lives.

In contrast, qualitative research exploring spirituality and well-being from an experiential perspective remains relatively limited. Some recent qualitative studies have attempted to explore spiritual well-being in educational contexts (Al-Thani, 2025), yet they are still scarce, particularly within Islamic higher education settings. Moreover, existing studies tend to examine spirituality and subjective well-being as separate constructs, without sufficiently addressing how spirituality is experienced and constructed within the process of Islamic guidance and counseling.

Additionally, research in the field of Islamic guidance and counseling has often focused on conceptual frameworks or intervention effectiveness, rather than exploring individuals' subjective experiences within the counseling process itself. This indicates a significant gap in understanding how spirituality operates as a lived and meaningful experience in counseling interactions. Therefore, there is a pressing need for qualitative research, particularly using a phenomenological approach, to explore the meaning of spirituality within the process of Islamic guidance and counseling in enhancing students' subjective well-being.

Based on the background and research gaps, this study aims to explore the meaning of spirituality within the process of Islamic guidance and counseling in enhancing students' subjective well-being. This research employs a phenomenological approach to capture students' lived experiences in understanding and internalizing spirituality as part of the counseling process.

The study focuses on students at Sunan Drajat University, an Islamic higher education institution characterized by the integration of academic and pesantren-based values. This context provides a unique setting where spiritual and educational dimensions are closely intertwined. Specifically, this research seeks to identify how students interpret spirituality in their lives, how these meanings emerge within the process of Islamic counseling, and how such experiences contribute to the enhancement of their subjective well-being. The findings are expected to provide both theoretical contributions to the development of Islamic guidance and counseling and practical implications for designing more holistic, spiritually integrated counseling services in higher education contexts.

Method

Research Design. This study employed a qualitative research design using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach. IPA is specifically designed to explore how individuals make sense of their lived experiences, particularly in relation to significant personal and social phenomena (Smith et.al., 2008). This approach is appropriate for the present study as it aims to understand the meaning of spirituality within the process of Islamic guidance and counseling from the perspective of students.

IPA is grounded in three main philosophical underpinnings: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography. Phenomenology focuses on individuals' lived experiences, hermeneutics emphasizes interpretation, and ideography highlights the in-depth analysis of individual cases (Smith dkk., 2008; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Therefore, IPA allows researchers not only to describe participants' experiences but also to interpret the meanings behind those experiences within their specific contexts.

Participants and Sampling. The participants in this study were students of Sunan Drajat University who had experienced Islamic guidance and counseling activities or were actively engaged in spiritual practices within the campus environment. A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants who met specific criteria relevant to the research objectives (Creswell, 2018).

The inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) Active university students at Sunan Drajat University. (2) Having participated in Islamic counseling or spiritual development programs. (3) Willing to share personal experiences related to spirituality and well-being. In IPA studies, sample sizes are typically small to allow for in-depth exploration. Therefore, this study involved approximately 10 participants, which is considered sufficient to achieve rich, detailed, and meaningful data (Smith et.al., 2008).

Data Collection. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, which are widely regarded as the primary data collection method in IPA research (Smith dkk., 2008). This method allows participants to freely express their experiences while still providing a flexible structure for the researcher to explore key themes.

The interview process involved: (1) Developing an interview guide based on research objectives. (2) Conducting one-on-one interviews (45-60 minutes per participant). (3) Audio recording with participants' consent. (4) Transcribing interviews verbatim for analysis

The interview questions focused on: (1) Participants' understanding of spirituality. (2) Their experiences in Islamic guidance and counseling. (3) The role of spirituality in coping with life challenges. (4) Perceived changes in subjective well-being. This approach enables the researcher to capture rich, nuanced narratives that reflect participants' lived experiences.

Data Analysis. Data were analyzed using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) procedure as outlined by Smith et.al., (2008). The analysis followed several systematic steps: (1) Reading and re-reading: Immersing in the data to gain a holistic understanding. (2) Initial noting: Making exploratory comments on semantic and conceptual content. (3) Developing emergent themes: Identifying key meanings

within the data. (4) Searching for connections across themes: Clustering related themes. (5) Moving to the next case: Repeating the process for each participant. (6) Looking for patterns across cases: Identifying shared and divergent themes. This iterative and interpretative process allows for a deep understanding of how participants construct meaning from their experiences.

Trustworthiness (Validity and Reliability). To ensure the rigor and credibility of the findings, this study employed several strategies for establishing trustworthiness, following the criteria proposed by Lincoln & Guba (2013): (1). Credibility. Credibility was ensured through: (a) Member checking: Participants were asked to verify the accuracy of the interpreted data. (b) Prolonged engagement: Sufficient time spent during interviews to build trust and obtain rich data. (2). Transferability. Thick description was provided to allow readers to determine the applicability of findings to other contexts (Creswell, 2009). (3). Dependability. An audit trail was maintained, documenting all research procedures, decisions, and analytical steps to ensure consistency and transparency. (4). Confirmability. To minimize researcher bias: (a) Reflexivity was applied, (b) Data interpretations were grounded in participants' actual statements. (c) Triangulation was used by comparing interview data with relevant literature (Nowell dkk., 2017). These strategies enhance the validity and reliability of qualitative findings and ensure that the results are trustworthy and academically rigorous.

Table 1.

The Distribution of Study Participants

Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	4	40%
Female	6	60%
Total	10	100%
Age		
18-20 years	3	30%
21-23 years	5	50%
24-26 years	2	20%
Total	10	100%

Table 1 presents the demographic distribution of the study participants. Many participants were female (60%), while male participants accounted for 40%. In terms of age, most participants were between 21 and 23 years old (50%), indicating that the sample primarily consisted of students in their early adulthood stage.

Results

Overview of Findings

This study explored students' lived experiences regarding the meaning of spirituality within the process of Islamic guidance and counseling and its contribution to subjective well-being. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), four superordinate themes were identified: (1) spirituality as a source of inner peace, (2) relationship with

Allah as the foundation of well-being, (3) Islamic counseling as a reflective and transformative space, and (4) spirituality as a pathway to meaningful life satisfaction. These interconnected themes illustrate how spirituality is not merely practiced but deeply experienced, interpreted, and integrated into students' psychological well-being.

Theme 1: Spirituality as a Source of Inner Peace

Participants consistently described spirituality as a primary source of inner calmness and emotional regulation, particularly in dealing with academic stress and personal challenges. Spiritual practices were not only seen as religious obligations but as coping mechanisms that foster psychological stability.

One participant explained: "When I feel overwhelmed with assignments and deadlines, I return to prayer and dhikr. It calms my mind and makes me feel more in control." (P3, female, 21)

Another participant noted: "Even when my problems are not solved, spiritual activities make me feel peaceful. It's like my heart becomes lighter." (P1, male, 22)

Additionally: "Before, I used to panic easily. But after I became more consistent in worship, I feel more stable emotionally." (P7, female, 20)

These findings suggest that spirituality functions as an internal coping resource that reshapes emotional responses to stress. Rather than eliminating external problems, spirituality helps students reinterpret stressful situations in a more adaptive and manageable way.

Theme 2: Relationship with Allah as the Foundation of Well-Being

Participants emphasized that their subjective well-being is deeply rooted in their relationship with Allah. This relationship was described as a source of strength, acceptance, and existential security.

As one participant stated: "I believe everything happens by Allah's plan. When I surrender, I feel less anxious and more accepting." (P5, male, 23)

Another participant expressed: "My happiness is not just about achievements. It depends on how close I feel to Allah." (P2, female, 21)

Supporting this: "When I feel distant from Allah, I feel empty. But when I return to Him, I feel complete again." (P8, female, 22)

This theme indicates that well-being is constructed not only through external success but through a transcendental relationship that provides meaning and emotional security. This relationship appears to serve as a psychological anchor, reinforcing stability and reducing existential anxiety.

Theme 3: Islamic Counseling as a Reflective and Transformative Space

Participants described Islamic guidance and counseling as a space that facilitates reflection, meaning-making, and personal transformation. The counseling process enabled them to reinterpret their life problems through spiritual perspectives.

One participant shared: "In counseling, I was guided to see my problems as tests from Allah. It changed how I understand my struggles." (P4, male, 22)

Another explained: "The counselor didn't just give solutions but helped me reflect on my relationship with Allah. That was very meaningful for me." (P6, female, 21)

Additionally: "Counseling made me realize that my problems are part of my spiritual journey." (P9, male, 24)

These findings indicate that Islamic counseling functions beyond problem-solving, serving as a transformative process that integrates cognitive, emotional, and spiritual dimensions. It facilitates a shift from problem-focused thinking to meaning-oriented understanding, which contributes significantly to psychological well-being.

Theme 4: Spirituality as a Pathway to Meaningful Life Satisfaction

Participants reported that spirituality plays a crucial role in constructing life meaning, which directly contributes to their sense of satisfaction and happiness. Spirituality helps them reframe life goals beyond material success.

One participant noted: "I feel happier when I realize that life is not only about achievements, but also about worship and purpose." (P2, female, 21)

Another participant stated: "Spirituality teaches me to be grateful. Even small things feel meaningful, and that makes me more satisfied." (P3, female, 21)

Supporting this: "Before, I always compared myself with others. Now, I focus more on my purpose, and I feel more content." (P10, male, 23)

These findings suggest that spirituality enhances both the cognitive and affective dimensions of subjective well-being by fostering gratitude, purpose, and acceptance. It allows students to construct a more meaningful and balanced perception of life.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that spirituality operates as a multidimensional construct influencing subjective well-being through emotional regulation, transcendental connection, reflective counseling processes, and meaning making. These dimensions are interconnected, indicating that spirituality is not merely an individual belief system, but an active and dynamic process embedded within students' lived experiences.

Importantly, Islamic guidance and counseling strengthens these processes by providing a structured space for reflection and spiritual internalization. This suggests that the integration of spirituality within counseling practices is essential for fostering holistic well-being among students in Islamic higher education contexts.

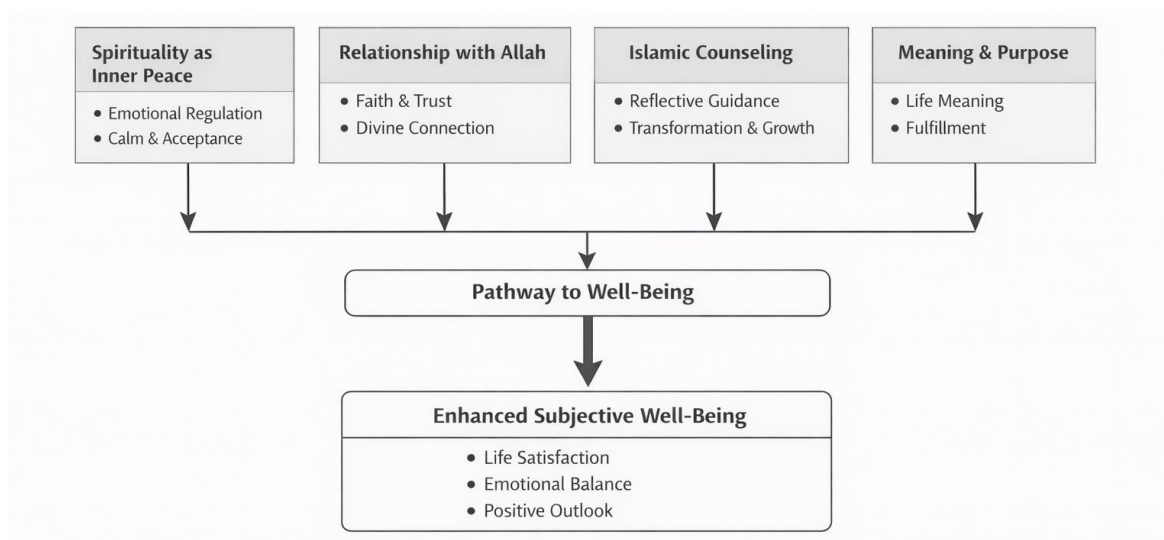


Figure 1. The Role of Spirituality in Enhancing Students' Subjective Well-Being

Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between the four emergent themes identified in this study. Spirituality is experienced as a multidimensional process, encompassing inner peace, relationship with Allah, Islamic counseling, and meaning making, which collectively contribute to students' subjective well-being. The model highlights how these interconnected elements form a pathway toward enhanced emotional balance and life satisfaction.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that spirituality functions as a crucial internal mechanism for emotional regulation among students. Participants described how spiritual practices such as prayer, dhikr, and reflection provided a sense of calm and psychological stability, particularly in response to academic stress. This aligns with contemporary research indicating that spirituality plays a significant role in reducing psychological distress and enhancing emotional resilience among university students (Mazzuki et.al., 2024; Cetinkaya & Billings, 2023).

Recent empirical studies further confirm that spiritual coping strategies are strongly associated with lower levels of anxiety and improved mental health outcomes (Nadifa et.al., 2024; Mushtaq et.al., 2025). In Islamic contexts, these practices are not merely ritualistic but function as cognitive-emotional regulators that reshape individuals' responses to stress. This supports the notion that spirituality contributes to adaptive coping by transforming negative emotional states into acceptance and inner peace.

Importantly, this study extends the quantitative findings of Hasanah & Haris, (2023), which established a strong statistical relationship between spirituality and subjective well-being. While prior research confirms that spirituality influences well-being, the present findings reveal how spirituality operates experientially as a mechanism for emotional regulation within students' lived realities.

Another key finding highlights that students' subjective well-being is deeply rooted in their relationship with Allah. Participants emphasized that feelings of peace, acceptance, and fulfillment emerge from spiritual closeness and reliance on divine will.

This finding is consistent with recent studies demonstrating that spiritual well-being significantly predicts life satisfaction and psychological stability among Muslim students (Taufik et.al., 2025; Yahaya et.al., 2012).

Moreover, research shows that spirituality functions as a mediating factor between mental health and well-being outcomes, reinforcing its central role in psychological functioning (Ahamed, 2025). The concept of *tawakkal* (trust in God) and *ridha* (acceptance) appears to play a significant role in reducing existential anxiety and enhancing emotional balance.

These finding challenges purely secular models of well-being that emphasize material achievement and autonomy. Instead, it supports a more holistic and transcendental model in which well-being is constructed through spiritual meaning and divine connection. Similar findings have been reported in cross-cultural studies, where religiosity and spirituality serve as foundational elements of well-being in non-Western contexts (Kim et.al., 2025).

The findings also reveal that Islamic guidance and counseling serves as a reflective and transformative space where students reconstruct the meaning of their experiences. Participants reported that counseling helped them reinterpret their problems as part of a spiritual journey rather than merely psychological burdens.

This is consistent with recent studies highlighting the effectiveness of Islamic counseling in enhancing students' well-being through spiritual integration (Sudirman et.al., 2024). Islamic counseling differs from conventional approaches by incorporating spiritual values, moral guidance, and transcendental awareness into the therapeutic process (Syafii et.al., 2025).

Furthermore, qualitative research has shown that spirituality-based interventions facilitate deeper self-awareness and meaning reconstruction, which are essential for long-term well-being (Al-Thani, 2025). The present study reinforces these findings by demonstrating that counseling is not only a problem-solving mechanism but also a transformative process that reshapes individuals' perspectives and life interpretations.

This contributes to the growing body of literature emphasizing that effective counseling in Islamic contexts must address both psychological and spiritual dimensions simultaneously (Faidah et.al., 2024).

Another important finding is that spirituality contributes to subjective well-being through meaning-making processes. Participants reported increased life satisfaction as they developed a deeper sense of purpose, gratitude, and acceptance.

Recent studies support this finding, showing that spirituality is strongly associated with life meaning, gratitude, and overall well-being (Tamami et.al., 2025; Sufya & Abas, 2024). Spirituality enables individuals to reinterpret life experiences in a meaningful way, thereby enhancing both cognitive and affective components of well-being.

Additionally, research indicates that spiritual well-being mediates the relationship between social support and quality of life, highlighting its integrative role in psychological functioning (Taufik et.al., 2025). This suggests that spirituality not only influences internal perceptions but also shapes how individuals interact with their social environment.

The present study extends these findings by demonstrating that meaning making is not a purely cognitive process but is deeply embedded in spiritual experience. This highlights the importance of integrating spirituality into well-being frameworks, particularly in Islamic educational contexts.

This study offers several significant contributions to the literature. First, it addresses the methodological gap by employing a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of students. While previous studies (Hasanah & Haris, 2023) have predominantly used quantitative methods, this study provides deeper insight into the subjective meanings and processes underlying spirituality and well-being. Second, this research contributes to the development of Islamic guidance and counseling by highlighting its role as a transformative and meaning-centered process. Unlike traditional approaches that focus on behavioral outcomes, this study emphasizes the importance of spiritual experience and interpretation. Third, the study provides contextual contributions by focusing on students in an Islamic higher education environment. This is particularly important given the growing recognition that well-being is culturally and spiritually embedded (Pulungan et.al., 2025).

Finally, the findings have practical implications for developing holistic counseling models that integrate spirituality as a core component. This supports the need for spiritually oriented mental health services in higher education, particularly in Muslim-majority contexts.

Conclusion

This study concludes that spirituality plays a fundamental role in enhancing students' subjective well-being within the context of Islamic guidance and counseling. Through a phenomenological approach, the findings demonstrate that spirituality is not merely a religious practice but a lived experience that shapes emotional regulation, meaning-making, and life satisfaction. The results indicate that students' well-being is deeply rooted in their relationship with Allah, which provides a sense of peace, acceptance, and psychological stability. Islamic guidance and counseling further strengthens this process by serving as a reflective and transformative space where students reinterpret their life challenges through spiritual perspectives. This study contributes to the literature by offering an in-depth understanding of how spirituality is experienced in the counseling process, addressing the limitations of previous quantitative studies. It also emphasizes the importance of incorporating spirituality into counseling practices to achieve holistic well-being. Practically, the findings suggest that higher education institutions, particularly Islamic universities, should integrate spiritually oriented approaches into counseling services. Future research is recommended to explore diverse populations and employ longitudinal designs to better understand the long-term impact of spirituality on students' well-being.

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