

Fostering Mental Health and Well-Being among Hajj Pilgrims: A Narrative Review

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ABSTRACT

Indonesia is one of the countries with the largest muslim population in the world, with a Hajj pilgrim quota of approximately 221,000 people for the 2022-2025 period. Hajj worship require not only physical strength but also good mental health and well-being. Adjusting to a new environment and culture can trigger anxiety, stress, homesickness, and even psychosomatic symptoms, which will affect the mental health of Hajj pilgrims. This study aims to develop strategies that can improve the mental health and well-being of Hajj pilgrims. This study is a narrative review of related literature describing the mental health and well-being of Hajj pilgrims. This paper summarizes available evidence from various literatures on factors influencing the mental health of Hajj pilgrims. Based on the analysis of various literatures, a strategic framework can be developed, including psychological training on mental readiness, stress management, and counseling, as well as effective interventions to improve the mental health and well-being of Hajj pilgrims.

Keywords: anxiety, hajj, mental heath, well being



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Introduction

Indonesia is one of the countries with the largest Muslim population in the world. In Islamic teachings, one of the pillars of Islam is performing the Hajj pilgrimage for those who are physically and financially capable. The Hajj is a routine annual pilgrimage performed by Muslims in the city of Mecca every Dzulhijah. Each year, the Hajj becomes a mass gathering with a total of 2-3 million pilgrims from various countries. Indonesia's Hajj quota is quite large, around 241,000 people in 2024 and 221,000 in 2025. The average duration for Indonesian pilgrims to perform Hajj is around 40 days including the travel time, with main worship activities around 5-6 days. The implementation of the Hajj pilgrimage is regulated by Law Number 13 of 2008 concerning the Organization of the Hajj Pilgrimage. Law Number 13 of 2008 concerning the

Implementation of the Hajj Pilgrimage regulates a series of activities related to the management of the Hajj pilgrimage, including guidance, services, and protection for Indonesian pilgrims. The purpose of the Hajj Pilgrimage is to provide the best possible guidance, services, and protection for pilgrims so that they can perform their pilgrimage in accordance with Islamic teachings.

Performing the Hajj pilgrimage will involve various activities that require physical and mental endurance. Good physical and mental health is essential for Hajj pilgrims to be able to perform the pilgrimage optimally. Mental health is a crucial component in achieving good overall health. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental health is a state of well-being experienced by individuals who perceive their ability to cope with life's stress, work productively, and function in society. Mental health plays an equally important role as physical health, and therefore deserves attention just as much as physical health. The WHO defines health as "a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (WHO, 2017). Good mental health enables people to realize their potential, cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively, and contribute to their communities. According to the National Institutes of Health (NIH), mental health encompasses emotional, psychological, and social well-being. Mental health plays a crucial role in determining how individuals cope with stress and anxiety, build social relationships, and make healthy decisions. This paper is a narrative review that describes about mental health and well being of Hajj pilgrims based on previous study. This study aims to develop strategies that can improve the mental health and well-being of Hajj pilgrims.

Overview Of Mental Health Issues On Hajj Pilgrims

The Hajj pilgrimage is held routinely every year in Dzulhijah. The Hajj in Indonesia is regulated by Law Number 13 of 2008 concerning the Implementation of the Hajj Pilgrimage. Many preparations and guidance are carried out for Hajj pilgrims before the pilgrimage. One of the preparations carried out before performing the Hajj pilgrimage is that pilgrims undergo a series of physical health examinations. Preparations and preventive measures include vaccinations against certain viruses and the consumption of various health supplements (Visser et al. 2011). The majority of pilgrims focus only on physical health preparation and do not consider mental health. The Hajj pilgrimage is a spiritual journey that should benefit the pilgrims' souls and minds, so many assume that there will be no problems with mental health during the Hajj pilgrimage.

Mental health is an entity influenced by several factors, both internal and external. Internal factors that influence mental health include biological and psychological factors, while external factors include sociocultural factors. Individuals with good mental health will also have good well-being. Well-being is a concept that refers to the state of an individual who has a healthy mental state. Ryan & Deci (2014) suggest that the concept of well being refers to optimal psychological experiences and functioning.

Sociocultural factors are one of the external factors that influence mental health. Pilgrims performing the Hajj in Mecca will be faced with a new social and cultural environment and situations that can induce disorientation, anxiety, homesickness, culture shock, and stress, especially for pilgrims who are not mentally prepared. The new environment and the pressure to adapt quickly can trigger feelings of anxiety and stress in pilgrims. Anxiety is a normal reaction

when faced with a threatening situation, but anxiety becomes abnormal if it occurs excessively, even in situations that are not threatening.

In the implementation of the Hajj pilgrimage, mental health is often considered not as important as physical health, even though there are several factors that have contributed to making the Hajj a mentally exhausting and stressful experience, these factors include unfamiliar environments, extreme weather, physical exhaustion, overcrowding, sleep deprivation, heat, physical exertion, limited dietary intake, and being on a foreign land that is far away from home (Masood et al. 2011). These factors can be stressors that will affect the mental health and well-being of Hajj pilgrims (Masood et al. 2011).

The Hajj pilgrimage in Mecca requires pilgrims to adapt physically to the surrounding environment. Indonesia is a country with relatively high rainfall, naturally presents temperature and weather differences compared to the physical environment in Mecca, which tends to be hotter and drier due to its desert climate. These environmental differences can impact both the physical and mental health of pilgrims. Mental and physical health are closely related. A study by Meyer et al. (2011) found that fatigue and dehydration are associated with increased psychological distress during the Hajj. Pilgrims who experience physical discomfort such as heat and fatigue will cause frustration, stress, anxiety, and helplessness, which ultimately also induce the physical symptoms such as dizziness and insomnia. Study conducted by Sulaiman et al. (2019) found that the majority of elderly pilgrims experience high levels of stress and psychological discomfort due to the high demands on physical activity during worship, as well as the physical environment that differs from their hometowns.

Based on previous research, it was discovered that pilgrims who experience mental health issues during the Hajj pilgrimage are not only due to the difficulty or details of the rituals during the Hajj, but also because they may have pre-existing mental health issues. Pilgrims at risk of experiencing mental health issues are older pilgrims and first-time pilgrims. Previous studies also showed that pilgrims at risk of mental health issues are those who from rural backgrounds and those with limited exposure to urban life (Masood et al. 2011).

The critical time that can affect Hajj pilgrims to develop mental health issue is the first few weeks of their arrival in Mecca and the core of the Hajj worship period. That period is an adaptive period during which pilgrims may develop stress due to fear or getting lost in a foreign country, homesickness, overcrowding and language barrier. Common mental illnesses seen in Hajj include stress, insomnia, mood disorder and even psychosis for Hajj pilgrims with pre-existing mental illness (Masood et al. 2011).

Research conducted by Wardana et al. (2024) found that one of the problems faced by Hajj pilgrims is psychological problem. Hajj pilgrims often experience stress and anxiety, as well as disorientation in unfamiliar and new environments. Previous research has shown that one of the symptoms of mental health disorders that often appear in Hajj pilgrims is stress and anxiety. Anxiety can occur simultaneously with several physical and psychological responses. Anxiety responses can be accompanied by physical symptoms such as sweaty hands, a rapid heartbeat, shivering, shortness of breath, and muscle tension. Individuals experiencing anxiety tend to panic and fear that something unpleasant or frightening will happen. This can impact individual behavior, which can lead to less productivity, withdrawal from the environment, poor emotional control, difficulty concentrating, and even sleep disturbances.

The Indonesian Ministry of Health defines stress as a person's physical and mental reaction to changes in the environment that require adjustment. Stress is a condition that disrupts an individual's mental and physical well-being, resulting from their interaction with their environment and perceived as a threat to their well-being. Stress is only truly felt when their sense of balance is disturbed, a condition where the individual perceives the pressure from the stressor as exceeding their coping capacity.

Method

This research used the narrative literature review method. The narrative review method is one method for conducting qualitative literature reviews. This method aims to compile a review or summary of the results of previous research on a specific topic. This method is commonly used to examine or analyze previous research and then compile and summarize it into an updated version. The results of previous research were accessed from Google scholar, PubMed, Academia, and Research gate.

Narrative Review of Mental Health and Well Being of Hajj Pilgrims

Mental health is an integral part of achieving overall well being. Several studies have been conducted to understand the mental health issues experienced by Hajj pilgrims during their pilgrimage. Research by Ozen et al. (2009) involved 130,000 Turkish Hajj pilgrims in 2008. Results showed that 294 Turkish pilgrims (0.2%) used psychiatric services during their pilgrimage. Of the 294 subjects, 38.4% experienced anxiety disorders, 22.1% experienced mood disorders, and 11.2% experienced sleep disorders. The most common symptoms reported were discomfort (70%), poor sleep (55%), anorexia (35%), whining (30%), and fatigue (28%). Sixty percent of the pilgrims who used psychiatric services had a history of mental health disorders. 40% of them are male, 77% have low education and 71% have never been abroad.

The Hajj pilgrimage involves large-scale crowds from all over the world. Crowds of strangers can have negative psychological effects on pilgrims who lack adaptive skills and have no prior experience in crowded situations. Mass gathering of pilgrims from all around the world also carry language barrier issue. Feelings of anxiety and stress can arise if pilgrims feel overwhelmed by the crowd. A 2012 study of 1,194 pilgrims showed that pilgrims felt safer when there were people they knew or their community in the crowd.

Sultana and Rahman (2014) conducted research on Indonesian Hajj pilgrims in 2013, showing that they generally experienced anxiety, fatigue, and stress due to both mental and physical pressure during the preparation and implementation of the Hajj. Indonesian Hajj pilgrims, accustomed to living with their families, experienced disorientation in a foreign country, which can trigger anxiety and homesickness.

Khan et al. (2016) conducted a study involving 136,000 Indian Hajj pilgrims in 2016 as subjects. Based on the study results, it was found that 182 Indian pilgrims experienced psychological problems. The study found that 93.2% of them had never experienced mental symptoms before, and only 6.8% of pilgrims had a past history of mental illness. The results obtained showed that the most common mental illnesses were stress-related issues (45.7%), psychosis (9.8%), insomnia (7.3%), and mood disorders (5.6%). The most common symptoms recorded were apprehension (45%), sleep (55%), anxiety (41%), and fear of being lost (27%).

Research conducted by Jalaludin et al. (2018) found that cultural factors significantly influence the psychological experiences of Hajj pilgrims. The study results showed that community and family ties significantly influence Hajj pilgrims' coping mechanisms and how they manage the stress that occurs during the Hajj. Indonesia is a country with a strong culture of togetherness and family. Research on Indonesian Hajj pilgrims showed that those who departed in groups or with family experienced lower levels of anxiety and higher levels of emotional support. This study demonstrates how social support and social relationships help Hajj pilgrims cope with stress and anxiety.

Research conducted by McGhee (2023) found that stress and anxiety experienced by Hajj pilgrims are influenced by concerns regarding travel logistics, the complexity of Hajj rituals, and the desire to perform the Hajj perfectly. Hajj pilgrims also experience disorientation in a foreign country, stress and homesickness when facing an unfamiliar environment, language barriers, and the intensity of activities during the Hajj worship.

Discussion

Enhancing Mental Health and Well Being of Hajj Pilgrims

The high number of mental health issues among Hajj pilgrims demonstrates that mental health is a crucial aspect that must be addressed just as much as physical health. Razak et al. (2022) state that Hajj pilgrims must possess psychological skills in addition to physical health and financial capacity to perform the Hajj. Some psychological issues during the Hajj journey include excessive fear, anxiety on the plane, poor adaptation to new environments, panic attacks, and an inability to control oneself. This indicates a low level of mental readiness among Hajj pilgrims.

One way to reduce mental health issues during the Hajj is through mental readiness training, which is a fundamental component of training. Mental readiness can help pilgrims maintain optimal performance even under pressure, manage psychological challenges and stress, and help them regulate their emotions, as well as build self-confidence.

Research conducted by Darmawan (2019) found that Hajj pilgrims experiencing emotional distress can trigger anxiety and mental health disorders. Anxiety is a manifestation of various psychological experiences, including emotional processes and inner conflict. Wardana et al. (2024) found that one of the psychological challenges experienced by Hajj pilgrims is the ability to regulate emotions. When faced with problems in the field, they tend to exhibit extreme emotional responses. Hajj pilgrims tend to have difficulty regulating their emotions, handling stress, and adapting to changes in both the physical and social environment.

The results of this study indicate that Hajj pilgrims' ability to control their emotions plays a crucial role in managing stress and anxiety. Pilgrims' ability to control their emotions can be improved through various psychological training programs, including mental readiness and stress management. Psychological training can help pilgrims improve their cognitive abilities in understanding, processing information, and solving problems. Psychological training can help pilgrims develop stronger mental resilience to handle obstacles during the pilgrimage (Nafis, 2021). Psychological training can also help pilgrims regulate their emotions, becoming more composure and calm, less prone to panic when facing unexpected situations.

Stress is a natural occurrence when individuals experience pressure. This stress can have negative effects if individuals perceive the pressure they are facing as exceeding their capabilities,

triggering distress that can disrupt mental health. When Hajj pilgrims experience stress, they experience physiological and emotional changes that can impact their performance in worship. When the brain detects something perceived as dangerous or threatening, it sends signals to secrete stress hormones into the bloodstream. This triggers physical symptoms such as increased heart rate, breathing rate, sweating, and increased blood pressure.

In addition to those physiological changes, individuals also experience a range of emotional changes, including feelings of confusion, disorientation, frustration, anxiety, or a sense of being overwhelmed. Common situations that can induce stress in Hajj pilgrims include completing highly physically demanding tasks, exposure to new people, living in a new environment, feeling rushed, exposure to changing weather conditions, and having to follow new routines. Coping strategies are essential for individuals to manage stress and maintain optimal performance in worship. Psychological stress management training can help individuals find appropriate coping strategies to deal with stressors that may arise during the Hajj. In stress management training, pilgrims can learn about stress, problem-solving skills, coping and relaxation techniques, and develop attitudes toward stressors.

Another effort to improve the mental health and well being of Hajj pilgrims is to maximize counseling programs. These services should be available and provided by Hajj implementing agencies, starting with pilgrims preparing for departure and continuing throughout the pilgrimage. Benefits of counseling include improving mental and emotional well being, fostering the development of social and communication skills, and helping individuals understand themselves more deeply, enabling them to manage their emotions and make decisions when faced with challenges.

Conclusion

During the Hajj pilgrimage, mental health plays a crucial role, just as important as physical health. Several previous studies have found that stress and anxiety are common mental health disorders among Hajj pilgrims. Several factors contribute to mental health issues, including unfamiliar environments, extreme weather, physical exhaustion, overcrowding, sleep deprivation, heat, physical exertion, limited dietary intake, and being in a foreign land far from home. The most common symptoms include poor sleep quality, anorexia, and fatigue. To improve the mental health and well-being of Hajj pilgrims, researchers have compiled the following recommendations.

1. Mental readiness psychological training

This training needs to be carried out before the pilgrims depart for the Hajj pilgrimage as an effort to prepare the pilgrims mentally to continue to perform maximum worship performance even under pressure, help overcome psychological obstacles, regulate emotions and build self-confidence.

2. Stress management training

This training needs to be carried out before the pilgrims depart for the Hajj pilgrimage as an effort to help the pilgrims manage stress and have good coping strategies when facing stressors while performing the Hajj pilgrimage.

3. Counseling services

These services should be provided by Hajj organizing institutions, both during preparations before pilgrims depart and during the pilgrimage. Counseling services play a crucial role as support services to assist pilgrims experiencing mental health issues.

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