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Sufi-Empower: Psychological First Aid to Prevent Mental Health Deterioration in Sandwich Generation Students

Mitha Alviani, M. Aryachi Tajul C, Jamila Rosidah

Universitas Islam Tribakti Lirboyo Kediri

mithaalviani05@gmail.com, tajoelkids@gmail.com, jamilarosyidah09@gmail.com

Corresponding Autor: Mitha Alviani

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Abstract: The phenomenon of the “Sandwich Generation” in Indonesia has become a significant issue due to rapid population growth. This generation, the majority of whom are aged 20-29, faces the double burden of family and professional responsibilities, which can potentially lead to stress and burnout. This condition has a significant impact on students who also work, resulting in physical and mental fatigue and mental health degradation. To overcome this problem, a solution in the form of Psychological First Aid (PFA) complemented by a religious approach is needed. The “Sufi-Empower” program is proposed as a form of PFA based on Islamic psychotherapy, using Sufi techniques to strengthen mental health through activities such as muhasabah, qiro'atil qur'an, and mujahadah. This program aims to provide ongoing mental support, reduce stress, and improve the meaning of life for sandwich generation students. Its implementation involves universities, with the main activity being “Rihlah Camp,” which integrates the PFA approach with Islamic values. Through this program, it is hoped that sandwich generation students can live more optimistically and productively, and avoid the risk of mental health degradation.

Keywords: Sandwich Generation, Mental Health Degradation, PFA, Sufi-Empower, Rihlah Camp

INTRODUCTION

Rapid population growth has given rise to several social problems, one of which is the phenomenon of the “Sandwich Generation.” According to Hernandez, the sandwich generation are those who are healthy enough to work and are caught between family and professional responsibilities, where they have to bear the costs of living and plan for their future, such as education, health, career, housing, transportation, and marriage (Kathryn S. Salmon, 2016).

The phenomenon of the sandwich generation in Indonesia is very widespread. According to data from kemenkopmk.go.id, the productive generation, which accounts for 70.72% of the total population in Indonesia, supports four other generations that are not productive. Another finding is the result of a survey conducted by Jakpat in 2020, which shows that 48% of Indonesians are part of the sandwich generation, with 48% of that data being aged 20-29 years (Khalil & Santoso, 2022).

Individuals who are part of the sandwich generation need to be mentally and physically strong, as they are at greater risk of experiencing stress (Piontak, 2016). Based on the results of

research by Andi Tenri Yeyeng and Nur Izzah, physical and mental fatigue are the main impacts on students of the sandwich generation. This physical and mental fatigue can trigger burnout, emotional exhaustion, and ongoing stress. The heavy burden of supporting their families, family problems, fatigue from work, and student responsibilities are burdens that must be borne by the sandwich generation. Moreover, sandwich generation students who are in the process of completing their studies or in the final stages of their studies will be busy writing their thesis alongside their work, and in fact, students who work while writing their thesis will experience emotional distress (Putri & Budiani, 2012).

Not only final-year students, but early and mid-level sandwich generation students will also experience difficulty concentrating due to physical fatigue from work combined with accumulated academic tasks. Therefore, these sandwich generation students are highly vulnerable to mental health deterioration if they fail to cope with the problems they face, which can lead to suicide attempts (suicide attempt).

METHOD

This study employs a literature review method with a descriptive-analytical approach to examine the concept of Sufi-Empower as a form of Psychological First Aid (PFA) aimed at preventing mental health deterioration among sandwich-generation students. The review involved collecting, selecting, and analyzing scholarly articles, books, and research reports relevant to the themes of PFA, Islamic spirituality (particularly Sufism), and the psychological dynamics of the sandwich generation. Literature was retrieved from reputable databases such as Google Scholar, PubMed, and ScienceDirect using keywords: “psychological first aid,” “Sufism and mental health,” “sandwich generation students,” and “spiritual-based coping.” The inclusion criteria comprised publications between 2015–2025, written in English or Indonesian, and demonstrating conceptual or empirical relevance to spiritually based psychological interventions. The literature review method was chosen because it is suitable for identifying theoretical gaps and integrating empirical findings within the field of mental health and spirituality (Snyder, 2019).

Furthermore, all selected literature was analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key patterns and concepts related to the effectiveness of PFA and Sufi values in mental empowerment. The analysis followed three primary stages: (1) data reduction to filter relevant findings, (2) data display through synthesis tables and conceptual maps, and (3) conclusion drawing to formulate the conceptual model of Sufi-Empower PFA. This approach enabled the construction of a strong theoretical framework that integrates positive psychology and Islamic spirituality within the context of students facing dual-role stress. Thematic analysis is recommended in qualitative research to understand the deeper meanings of complex psychological phenomena (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Thus, this method not only maps existing research findings but also provides opportunities for developing a Sufi-based intervention that is contextual and applicable in higher education settings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Given the various problems above, a solution is needed to address the issues and impacts on the sandwich generation of students, which has not received much attention from Indonesian society. Therefore, a program is needed in the form of psychological first aid (PFA) to prevent the degradation of mental health in the sandwich generation, especially among students who have dual roles. Psychological first aid or PFA is a series of actions taken to help strengthen the mental state of someone experiencing a mental crisis (WHO, 2009). PFA is carried out to help individuals

develop functional coping mechanisms in the short and long term as a result of the stress they are experiencing (National Child Traumatic Stress Network and National Center for PTSD, 2006). According to Sphere (2011) and IASC (2007), Psychological First Aid (PFA) is described as a humane and supportive response to fellow human beings who are suffering or in need of support.

However, a psychological approach alone is not sufficient to provide lasting reinforcement for individuals of the sandwich generation. The psychological approach must be accompanied by a religious touch so that individuals' understanding and interpretation of problems is not only related to worldly matters but also to the hereafter. Through this touch of Islamic values, the quality of the individuals formed will be more complete. A psychological program with Islamic values that can be implemented as a preventive measure to prevent mental health degradation is Sufi-Empower.

Sufi-Empower is a form of Psychological First Aid (PFA) based on Islamic psychotherapy using Sufi techniques and has a dimension that touches on God. The Sufi aspect contained therein offers an effective method for resolving inner problems. Abu Yazid Al Busthami emphasized that Sufism is freeing oneself from madzmumah (bad) behavior, beautifying oneself with mahmudah (good) characteristics, and drawing closer to Allah SWT (Mohd Haidar, 2018). This activity has implications for theistic understanding, which is a belief in the existence of God, the creator of the universe, where the substance lies in the practice of a servant's devotion to the creator of the universe through various activities such as *mubasabah bi nafsi*, *qiro'atil qur'an*, *mujahadah*, and so on.

This activity is a new program that has never existed before, so it can be an innovative program that can help working students to have good mental health and be better prepared to face life's challenges. The program is very suitable to be implemented in Indonesia because it is in line with the majority of the Indonesian population who are Muslim. Sufi-Empower is a program designed to solve problems faced by working students who are prone to mental degradation. This program adheres to the three principles of the World Health Organization (WHO) in providing Psychological First Aid (PFA), namely:

1. Look, which means understanding who the sandwich generation is and what the root causes of the problems faced by the sandwich generation are.
2. Listen, which means taking the time to listen to the complaints and hopes of the sandwich generation.
3. Link, which means connecting individual problems with ways to overcome them and providing individuals with the information they need to solve their problems.

The "Sufi-Empower" program focuses on students from the sandwich generation, and is integrated with the university bureaucracy so that it can encourage students to participate in its activities. The university accommodates the program through the rectorate as a takhassus/special activity unit, which is then implemented by the Student Executive Board (BEM). The "Sufi-Empower" program has an activity called "Rihlah Camp," which focuses on camping, beginning with a rihlah with the vision of stress release. The "Rihlah Camp" activity includes Look, Listen, and Link (3L), which are the basis of Psychological First Aid (PFA), in which there is interaction between the participants and the facilitators.

The opening visit of this activity was carried out to several places such as the heroes' graves, the graves of the auliya', or local historical sites that can open up the horizon for stress release. After the rihlah was completed, the Camp began in a place with a calm atmosphere so that the psychotherapy process could be carried out properly. The camp focuses on Sufi-Empower, incorporating several Islamic psychotherapy methods such as *mubasabah bi nafsi*, *mujahadah*, and

qiro'atul qur'an, which integrate the program with Sufi aspects packaged in a millennial style in line with the current generation, which is now in the Gen-Z era. The camp itself has been designed as a form of relaxation for students of the sandwich generation to release all their burdens without abandoning their responsibilities.

CONCLUSION

After participating in the “Sufi-Empower” program, it is hoped that students of the sandwich generation can become more optimistic in their daily lives with more positive thoughts and emotions. This will help them avoid stress and depression. This program also aims to provide meaning to their life goals, values that are important to them, and how they can give meaning to their educational and life journeys. In addition, this program is also expected to help sandwich generation students develop strong work ethics in facing academic and professional challenges.

The “Sufi-Empower” program requires special attention in its mechanisms, from planning and classification to implementation. Therefore, the “Sufi-Empower” program is most appropriate to be implemented in Islamic religious universities, both private and public, where the largest number of Islamic students are enrolled. This program can be a solution to the problem of mental health degradation in the sandwich generation, so that they do not lose their golden age and are able to reduce stress so that they can avoid mental health degradation. Therefore, support from universities and Islamic psychotherapy activists is needed so that this program can be implemented.

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