
The Concept of Psychological Well-Being for the Elderly: The Perspective of Abu Hamid Muhammad Al-Ghazali

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ABSTRACT

Modern psychological well-being (PWB) paradigms, such as the Ryff, PERMA, and flourishing models, emphasize psychosocial functions. Still, they do not provide an adequate spiritual-eschatological foundation for older adults who face loneliness, loss of meaning, and death anxiety. This article aims to formulate a conceptual model of Sufi psychological well-being for the elderly of interpreting al-Ghazali's concept of *sa'ādah* and mapping the correspondence between the dimensions of modern PWB and the four pillars of *ma'rifat* (*al-nafs*, *Allāh*, *al-'Ālam*, *al-Ākhirah*). This study uses a qualitative method with a psychohistorical hermeneutic approach through analysis of primary texts (*Iḥyā 'Ulūm al-Dīn* and *Kīmiyā' al-Sa'ādah*) and modern secondary literature. The analysis process includes concept codification, identification of Sufi themes, and mapping of these themes to PWB dimensions. The results of the study show the equivalence between the PWB dimensions and Sufi concepts such as *ridā-tawakkul*, *ikhlāṣ-mujāhadah*, and *takhallū-tahallū-tajallū*, which culminate in an eschatological orientation. These findings produce a transcendental well-being framework based on *tazkiyat al-nafs*, which can be used as a basis for developing spiritual interventions for the elderly through the practices of *dhikr-breathing*, *muhāsabah*, *tadabbur ālam*, and the formation of *spiritual support communities*.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Psychological well-being is one of the key aspects that determine the quality of human life. Psychological well-being refers to a mental state that indicates a person's inner balance and health (Ryff, 1989). Ryff identifies six key aspects of psychological well-being: self-acceptance, positive relationships with others, independence, mastery of one's environment, a sense of purpose in life, and continuous self-development. In the stage of old age, the presence of psychological well-being becomes increasingly crucial, as the elderly generally face physical and cognitive limitations, changes in social roles, and complex psychological challenges (Leung, Molassiotis, and Carino, 2021; Singh and Maurya, 2022; Yang *et al.*, 2023; Jalali, 2024; Wang *et al.*, 2025). Moreover, reduced mobility and the prevalence of chronic illnesses further heighten the vulnerability of older adults in carrying out daily activities. In such circumstances, psychological well-being is not merely related to mental stability but also encompasses the ability to accept oneself, maintain positive relationships with others, and find meaning in every phase of life experienced.

Elderly individuals with chronic illnesses tend to experience death anxiety, which negatively affects their psychological well-being and the process of healthy Aging (Bharti and Bharti, 2024). The awareness that death is both an inevitable and meaningful part of life's journey is often accompanied by anxiety—whether related to the process of dying, separation from loved ones, or uncertainty about life after death (Yousefi Afrashteh *et al.*, 2024). This condition makes older adults vulnerable to deep existential distress, which can diminish their quality of life. Therefore, they require sufficient psychological well-being to help them accept these conditions in a more adaptive and meaningful way.

Various factors contribute to shaping the psychological well-being of older adults. Family support, health status, resilience, socioeconomic conditions, and living environment play significant roles (Desiningrum, 2015). Older adults with strong social networks and access to healthcare services generally exhibit higher levels of well-being compared to those who are socially isolated (Desiningrum, 2015). Furthermore, studies have shown that self-acceptance, meaning in life, and positive relationships are correlated with lower levels of death anxiety among the elderly (Zhang *et al.*, 2019). High levels of spiritual well-being and a strong system of meaning also consistently demonstrate a negative relationship with death anxiety (Zhang *et al.*, 2019). Healthy psychosocial conditions (including a sense of meaning in life, psychological well-being, self-care, and social capital) have been shown to reduce the risk of depression and anxiety among the elderly, with loneliness serving as a key mediating factor that mitigates these negative effects. In line with these findings, a study by Ergin *et al.* in Turkey confirmed a negative correlation between psychological well-being and loneliness, which ultimately reduces death anxiety among older adults (Ergin *et al.*, 2023).

This phenomenon underscores that psychological well-being is a universal human need, including for the elderly. The multidimensional challenges faced in later life create unique forms of psychological well-being distinct from those experienced during productive adulthood. It is therefore unsurprising that numerous studies have made it a central focus of inquiry, both among younger and older populations. For younger adults, psychological well-being is generally associated with achievement, productivity, life satisfaction, and social relationships (Heizomi *et al.*, 2015). However, as individuals age, this orientation shifts. In later life, psychological well-

being becomes more closely linked to acceptance (Saimona, Alkaf and Indrayani, 2024), inner peace (Anwar et al., 2024), and connection with the transcendental dimension (Jadidi et al., 2022; Anggraini, 2024). In other words, the need to find meaning in life and to deepen one's spiritual relationships becomes increasingly dominant in sustaining psychological well-being as one grows older.

Older adults tend to place meaning in life and transcendence at the center of well-being. Spirituality, whether in the form of religious practices or philosophical reflection, becomes a psychological resource that helps older adults accept their limitations and organize their relationship with transcendent reality. Spirituality is an adaptive mechanism that strengthens psychological resilience. Older adults with higher levels of religious coping were found to have lower levels of death anxiety, particularly among women (Rababa, 2021). Older adults are better able to accept the aging process with an open heart, reducing anxiety about death and maintaining quality of life despite limitations. This condition confirms that the psychological well-being of older adults cannot be equated with that of other groups. Fulfilling the welfare needs of the elderly requires an approach that emphasizes the dimensions of transcendence and the search for meaning in life. At this stage, happiness is not measured solely by material things or sensory pleasures, but by spiritual depth and inner peace that can reduce anxiety about death.

The fundamental difference between the psychological well-being of the elderly and the young lies not only in the biological phase, but also in the existential orientation of humans. From a Sufi perspective, humans consist of two elements, namely the physical body (material substance) and the inner being (immaterial substance), namely the soul or spirit (Imam Al-Ghazali, no date). The physical dimension declines with age, while the spiritual dimension has the potential to achieve spiritual maturity. It is at this point that the psychological well-being of the elderly takes on a new meaning. It is not merely a healthy mental condition, but rather the orientation of the soul towards transcendence. Al-Ghazali emphasizes that true happiness (*sa'ādah*) is not found in sensual pleasures, but in the purification of the soul and closeness to Allah. Thus, achieving psychological well-being in the elderly requires harmony between vulnerable physical elements and increasingly mature psychological and spiritual strength, so that inner peace and readiness to face death can be achieved as the pinnacle of happiness.

Studies on the psychological well-being of the elderly have largely relied on modern psychological paradigms that emphasize cognitive, emotional, and relational balance, yet have not deeply addressed the spiritual-transcendental dimension as the ultimate source of meaning and direction of existence. This gap highlights the need to re-examine the conceptual foundation of well-being, particularly through the legacy of classical Sufi thought, which views happiness not merely as an affective state but as the perfection of the soul in its orientation toward God. Through *Iḥyā 'Ulūm al-Dīn* and *Kīmiyā al-Sa'ādah*, al-Ghazali formulates an eschatological model of well-being that integrates both external (physical) and internal (spiritual) awareness, oriented toward true happiness (*sa'ādah*), and structured upon the four pillars of *ma'rifah*: knowledge of the self (*al-nafs*), of God (*Allāh*), of the universe (*al-Ālam*), and of the hereafter (*al-Ākhirah*).

The absence of a psychological well-being (PWB) model for older adults grounded in eschatological orientation and the pillars of *ma'rifah* reveals an epistemic gap within contemporary conceptions of well-being. This study proposes an integrative framework that bridges modern well-being theories—such as Ryff's PWB, PERMA, and the flourishing

concept—with al-Ghazali's four pillars of *sa'ādah*, in order to map the conceptual correspondences and psycho-spiritual mechanisms between the two paradigms.

To address these questions, this study examines how al-Ghazali's concept of *sa'ādah* reformulates the model of psychological well-being (PWB) in the context of later life. How can the correspondence between the dimensions of modern PWB and the pillars of *sa'ādah* be identified? And what are the implications of their psycho-spiritual mechanisms? Through this approach, the research aims to formulate a conceptual mapping and a Sufi-based spiritual intervention model oriented toward the restoration and maintenance of psychological well-being among older adults.

Recent studies show that well-being is not singular, but consists of several overlapping domains. Subjectively, Diener et al. emphasize that advances in subjective well-being (SWB) research, which includes satisfaction, positive affect, and low negative affect, are now supported by cross-cultural evidence, longitudinal methodologies, and strong public health implications, such as the relationship between SWB and health and longevity (Diener, Oishi, and Tay, 2018).

Meanwhile, Seligman reaffirmed the PERMA model (positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, accomplishment) as the “building blocks” of well-being, responding to criticism that PERMA is not a new type of well-being, but rather a framework of elements that constitute it. This model is relevant for older adults because it places relationships, meaning, and age-appropriate accomplishments as pillars that can be intervened upon (Seligman, 2018).

On the other hand, the hedonistic-eudaimonic debate has intensified in the last decade. Meta-analytic findings and experimental studies show that both orientations provide different benefits over time (hedonia leads to short-term benefits; eudaimonia is more enduring), and a combination of the two often results in the highest levels of well-being. In the context of older adults, whose need for meaning in life increases, the eudaimonic orientation (life purpose, actualization of values, closeness to transcendent aspects) appears to be more consistent in predicting psychological well-being (Giuntoli *et al.*, 2021).

In the realm of positive mental health, Keyes' dual-continuum and flourishing framework continues to be confirmed through cross-national psychometric testing of the MHC-SF (Mental Health Continuum-Short Form) and daily studies proving that well-being and psychopathological symptoms move on two related but distinct continua. This means that in older adults, the absence of disorders does not automatically mean the presence of flourishing. They still need support to improve their emotional, psychological, and social well-being (Mason-Stephens *et al.*, 2025).

J. López *et al.* have attempted to explain the factors that influence the well-being of older adults (López *et al.*, 2020). In their research, they show how variables such as health perception, family functioning, resilience, gratitude, and acceptance are significantly related to personal Growth and life purpose. However, the article presented by J. López and his colleagues still places acceptance and gratitude solely within a practical psychological framework, namely as a form of coping strategy for difficult conditions. This article does not discuss how acceptance, gratitude, and life goals can be understood from a spiritual perspective, particularly as proposed by Imam al-Ghazali, namely that acceptance is a manifestation of *riḍa* (contentment) with Allah's decree, gratitude is a transcendental awareness of Allah's blessings, and life goals are not only worldly but culminate in the attainment of *sa'ādah* (happiness) through *ma'rifatullah* (knowledge of Allah).

From this modern spectrum, there appears to be fertile ground for dialogue with al-Ghazali's Sufi perspective. The dimension of meaning/purpose (Ryff; PERMA) resonates with

the concepts of *ghayah* (purpose) and *sa'ādah* as true happiness; acceptance and gratitude, which in modern psychology are positioned as coping strategies, are articulated by al-Ghazali as *riḍa* and *syukr*, which reorient oneself towards God. Thus, this study uses contemporary theories (SWB, PERMA, eudaimonia, flourishing) as an empirical foundation, while also offering a transcendental deepening of al-Ghazali's legacy to holistically understand the psychological well-being of the elderly.

2. METHODS

This study uses a qualitative literature review approach with a psychohistorical hermeneutic method, which focuses on interpreting the meaning of Sufi texts by considering their historical and psychological contexts (A. Talib, 2018; Sya'bani, 2019; Gillo, 2021). This approach was chosen because it can reveal the inner dynamics of the works of Imam al-Ghazali and explore their relevance to modern Psychological Well-Being (PWB) theory (Ryff, 2013). The research design is descriptive-analytical, oriented towards the exploration of conceptual meaning rather than empirical findings.

The data sources consist of al-Ghazali's primary works, such as *Iḥyā 'Ulūm al-Dīn* and *Kīmiyā' al-Sa'ādah*, as well as secondary sources in the form of books, dissertations, and reputable journal articles discussing spirituality, Sufism, and psychological well-being. The search was conducted in Scopus, Elsevier, and DOAJ, using the keywords Al-Ghazali, *sa'ādah*, spirituality, psychological well-being, and hermeneutic analysis, with a publication range of the last 10 years and sources in Arabic, English, and Indonesian (Aycan, 2024). The inclusion criteria were limited to conceptually relevant works, while non-academic or popular sources were excluded.

The data analysis was carried out in three stages. First, concept codification, which involved identifying key terms in the primary texts, such as *qalb*, *nafs*, and *sa'ādah*. Second, *theme formulation*, namely grouping these meanings into inner well-being themes such as purification of the soul and spiritual happiness. Third, *conceptual correspondence mapping*, which entailed linking these themes with the dimensions of psychological well-being developed by Ryff to uncover the spiritual coherence between Sufi tradition and modern theory. The interpretative process was conducted collaboratively across the fields of Sufism and Islamic psychology to ensure interpretive consistency and minimize researcher bias.

The validity and reliability of the analysis were maintained through an audit trail (recording all stages of tracing, classification, and analysis), *source triangulation* (comparing Arabic texts, translations, and classical commentaries), and *researcher reflexivity* regarding epistemological positioning (Creswell, 2024). Although this research is literature-based, ethical considerations were upheld by respecting copyright, text edition credibility, and academic integrity in translation and interpretation. Thus, the psycho-historical hermeneutic method enables a deeper, contextual, and reflective reading of al-Ghazali's thought on happiness and psychological well-being.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Psychological Well-Being: Perspectives from Psychology and Sufism

In Islam, welfare is described in both material and spiritual terms. The concept of "welfare" is often associated with the term *sa'ādah* (true happiness), which has a broader meaning than mere feelings of joy or satisfaction. *Sa'ādah* reflects a peaceful state of mind, a spiritual

relationship with Allah, and a life that is in harmony with divine values. In the Qur'an, this concept of well-being is closely associated with a peaceful heart (*qalbun salim*) and a good life (*hayātan tayyibah*) (Sofia and Sari, 2018).

In *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn and Kīmiyā' al-Sa'ādah*, al-Ghazali refers to *sa'ādah* as the goal of human life (Imam Al-Ghazali, no date). *Sa'ādah* is the most prosperous state of mind, encompassing psychological, spiritual, and existential aspects. In Sufism, *sa'ādah* is used to describe an “optimal” state of the soul, calm, balanced, meaningful, and happy, because it is close to Allah. Meanwhile, in modern psychology, psychological well-being refers to an optimal psychological condition, including self-acceptance, life purpose, and personal Growth (Ryff, 2013).

The meaning of psychological well-being is the concept of *sa'ādah* in al-Ghazali's Sufi perspective. Within the framework of Islamic epistemology, this term is the most comprehensive way to describe spiritual well-being. According to al-Ghazali, *sa'ādah* is an emotional state of happiness and an inner state that has achieved tranquility, purification of the soul, and divine recognition. *Sa'ādah* encompasses psychological, spiritual, and eschatological dimensions that far exceed the meaning of “happiness” in modern usage. In the Sufi framework, true spiritual well-being cannot be separated from a transcendental orientation. Therefore, what modern psychology refers to as psychological well-being has long been formulated in Sufism with the term *sa'ādah*. Thus, al-Ghazali's mention of *sa'ādah* refers to true happiness (*al-sa'ādah al-haqīqiyah*), which is a state of spiritual (psychological) well-being that culminates in closeness to Allah and guarantees salvation in this world and the hereafter (Imam Al-Ghazali, 2001).

When al-Ghazali uses the term *sa'ādah*, he is actually referring to psychological well-being in a more comprehensive sense, namely inner well-being rooted in the elimination of ego, purification of the soul, and connection with Allah. Perfection of well-being can only be achieved when a person can organize and balance three basic potentials within themselves, namely *quwwah al-ghadlab* (emotional strength and anger), *quwwah al-shahwah* (lust and desire), and *quwwah al-'ilm* (intellectual capacity and knowledge) (Miskawih, 1985). When managed moderately, these three elements create harmony within the soul, which is the main foundation for achieving complete well-being.

However, according to al-Ghazali, managing one's potential is not enough. Achieving well-being also requires *riyādah* (spiritual training) and *mujāhadah* (earnest efforts to purify the soul), both of which are based on the prophetic methodology. This prophetic method refers to the example set by the Prophet Muhammad, which is the guiding path to ultimate well-being (*sa'ādah*). This is based on the view that *sa'ādah* is fully revealed only in the afterlife, when Allah removes the *ghītā* (covering veil), granting humans a clear view of the reality of truth. This description is confirmed in the words of Allah in Q.S. Qāf verse 22, which explains how masunisa will be able to see with sharp vision after the veil is lifted. This is why, in Sufi terminology, *sa'ādah* goes beyond mere worldly “happiness” to encompass complete peace of mind, which can only be achieved through four pillars: *ma'rifat al-nafs*, *ma'rifat Allah*, *ma'rifat al-'ālam*, and *ma'rifat al-ākhirat* (Imam Al-Ghazali, 2001).

First, *Ma'rifat al-nafs* (Awareness of the true nature of the self). Awareness of the self (*ma'rifat al-nafs*) is the key first step (the opening) in the spiritual journey towards *ma'rītāt* to Allah Swt (Imam Al-Ghazali, 2001). Self-awareness is the gateway to closeness to *hadlrah al-ilāhiyah* (divine presence), which, in Sufism, is considered the pinnacle of happiness (well-being). Nothing is closer to a person than themselves, so how can someone understand the essence of

others if they do not understand their own essence? The first step in knowing oneself is to recognize that humans have two dimensions of existence: the physical and the spiritual. The physical dimension is called the body, while the spiritual dimension is called the heart or soul (*rūh*). The heart here is not a physical organ in the form of a lump of flesh, but a spiritual element that acts as the control center for all human activities. Knowledge of the existence and characteristics of the heart is what opens the way to knowing Allah SWT. Although humans can realize the limitations of their own nature, Islamic law limits further exploration of the essence of the spirit. This is as stated in QS. Al-Isrā' (17; [85]), "And they ask you about the spirit. Say: The spirit is part of the affair of my Lord, and you have not been given knowledge except a little."

Second, *Ma'rifat Allāh* (knowledge and awareness of Allah) is the highest peak in the spiritual journey of humans (Imam Al-Ghazali, 2001). This achievement is attained through the process of purification of the soul (*tazkiyah al-nafs*), which is pursued through spiritual training (*riyādah*) and sincerity in fighting desires (*mujāhadah*). Ultimately, this leads a person to the stage of *musyāhadah*, which is witnessing in the hereafter that does not stop at worldly life, but continues to develop until reaching the pleasure of *ma'rifat Allah* in the hereafter. The pleasure of knowing Allah is eternal happiness, which actually increases after death. This is in accordance with Allah's words in QS. Qaf (50: [35]), "For them is what they desire with Us; and with Us is more (greater pleasure)." It is also emphasized in QS. Yunus (20: [26]), "For those who do good, there is the best reward (*husnā*) and more besides."

Knowledge of Allah is the pinnacle of unmatched knowledge; whoever achieves it will experience true happiness (well-being) that no worldly pleasures can replace. True happiness comes from closeness to Allah. The human soul is naturally created to accept divine truth, which is the path to spiritual perfection. One way to attain *ma'rifat Allāh* is by contemplating the universe. Allah's creation truly reflects His love for His creatures, and through contemplation of His creation, humans are invited to learn about His attributes (Imam Al-Ghazali, 2001).

Furthermore, human characteristics are a reflection of the characteristics of Allah, and the existence of the spirit within humans becomes a bridge to understanding the divine existence. The human spirit (*rūh*) is not limited by the dimensions of space and time, because it originates from the sublime divine dimension. When humans contemplate the nature of their spirit, they will come to understand the nature of Allah SWT. Through this contemplation, humans can grasp how Allah's power works through internal systems to regulate their bodies and souls. Therefore, knowing the essence of Allah is also knowing His order and wisdom through self-creation in the universe.

Third, *Ma'rifat dunyā wa haqīqatuhā* (knowing the nature of the world) is basically how humans use their physical senses to gain knowledge about the creation of Allah Swt (Imam Al-Ghazali, 2001). The world is seen as a temporary place of residence that is transient, not the ultimate goal of life. In Sufism, the world was not created absolutely, but as a means to draw closer to Allah SWT. The world has a deceptive appeal (*ghurur*), so that those who love it too much will be trapped in negligence (*gaflah*). Therefore, one way to gain knowledge of the world is to realize its limitations, transience, and the danger it poses if placed in the human heart.

Understanding the world requires a balance between its utilization and control. The world is not rejected entirely, but positioned according to its function, namely as a field of charity for the hereafter. As explained in QS. al-Hadīd [57]: 20, Allah SWT says: "Know that the life of this world is only a game and a diversion, adornment and mutual boasting among you, and rivalry in

wealth and children..." This verse shows that the world is nothing more than a test that requires spiritual awareness so that humans are not deceived by worldly glamour. People who understand the true nature of the world will view life proportionally, not be enslaved by material desires, and not make the world the measure of happiness.

By understanding the reality of the world through *ma'rifat*, a person will avoid excessive attachment to temporary worldly pleasures and be able to focus their life on eternal life in the hereafter. This is a form of spiritual intelligence that can guide humans to live in harmony with the purpose of their creation, namely to serve and rule of Allah's servants and caliphs on earth. The world is a place of trial that will determine the degree of true happiness for humans in the hereafter (Imam Al-Ghazali, 2001). Therefore, knowledge of the world is not sufficient through sensory experience alone; it requires deep reflection and the revelation of the true meaning behind Allah's creation.

Fourth, *Ma'rifat akhirat wa haqīqatuhā* (knowing the essence of the hereafter and its true reality) (Imam Al-Ghazali, 2001). Awareness of the hereafter is a central aspect of Islamic spirituality. The hereafter is the true goal of the human existential journey. *Ma'rifat* of the hereafter leads humans to understand that worldly life is only a temporary test, while the hereafter is eternal and full of consequences for one's deeds in the world. This knowledge encourages humans to live meaningfully, weighing every action by ukhrawi values and prioritizing righteous deeds and sincerity in worship. In the view of the Sufis, *ma'rifat* of the hereafter also gives rise to a balanced sense of longing (*syawq*) and fear (*khauf*): longing for an encounter with Allah, and fear of being separated from Him. This awareness guides a salik to be more serious in pursuing the path of self-purification (*tazkiyat al-nafs*), staying away from worldly negligence, and strengthening their belief in Allah's promises of heaven, hell, and the Day of Judgment. These four pillars form the main foundation in the process of *tazkiyat al-nafs*, which directs the salik towards spiritual enlightenment and well-being without depending on worldly pleasures and originating from closeness to Allah, self-awareness, understanding of reality, and hope for eternal life in the hereafter.

In al-Ghazālī's view, well-being (*sa'ādah*) can be understood through the principle of *al-munāsabah* (suitability or harmony), which is when the members of the body work in harmony with their natural characteristics (Imam Al-Ghazali, 2001). For example, the eyes are used for seeing, the tongue for tasting, and the ears for hearing. Physical well-being will be achieved when all these organs function properly, and their needs are balanced. This means that every part of the human body will achieve its true pleasure when it is used in accordance with its purpose of creation. The same applies to the inner aspect. Inner well-being arises when the soul is in harmony (*al-munāsabah*) with the *ruh*. The *ruh* will achieve well-being when it receives spiritual nourishment, such as through *zikr*, *righteous deeds*, *mujahadah*, and various other forms of obedience. These activities then give the spirit a sense of true pleasure and well-being.

This illustrates that the highest level of well-being (*sa'ādah*) does not come from the fulfillment of physical needs alone, but from spiritual (*ruh*) functions that run according to human nature. Hearts that are created to know and be close to God will feel peaceful and happy if they succeed in carrying out their spiritual function, namely, *taqarrub* (closeness) to Allah. Al-Ghazali's view is essentially similar in substance to the thinking of Ibn Miskawayh. However, the two use different terms, such as '*ālam sulfā* and '*ālam ulyā*', in explaining the classification or dimensions of well-being (Miskawih, 1985).

Well-being derived from both physical and spiritual aspects has certain levels. First, a lower level of well-being can be easily overcome or overshadowed by a higher level of well-being. For example, physical well-being, when a person enjoys their favorite food, such as chicken noodles, can bring happiness, but that happiness can quickly be replaced when they get a dish that they like even more. This pattern applies not only to the physical dimension, but also to spiritual well-being. Second, physical well-being can essentially be subjugated by spiritual well-being. For example, a visitor may feel happy simply because they are welcomed with hospitality and sincerity by the host, even if they do not receive any special food. This shows that spiritual well-being has a greater influence than physical well-being.

The third level is the peak of well-being (*tamām al-sa'ādah*), which is achieved when a person experiences the process of *fana'* and *baqa'*. At this stage, he enters a state of divine consciousness (*hadrah ilāhiyyah*) and can reach *'ālam malakūt*, because each level of consciousness is connected to its own realm of existence. This highest level of well-being can only be achieved through spiritual discipline in the Sufi tradition. Sufis often describe this form of true well-being with terms such as *ma'rifat*, *hadrah ilāhiyyah*, *tifl al-ma'ānī*, and other similar expressions (Imam Al-Ghazali, 2001).

Thus, psychological well-being lies in the perfection of the spiritual dimension, achieved through closeness to God and the purification of the soul. Therefore, the study of psychological well-being in the elderly based on Al-Ghazali's thinking is relevant, not only as a conceptual framework for understanding well-being from a spiritual perspective, but also as a practical foundation for developing assistance strategies that holistically meet the psychological needs of the elderly.

A number of contemporary studies also argue that, according to al-Ghazali, *sa'ādah* is a specific form of holistic and transcendental psychological well-being. Both concepts promise peace and spiritual well-being. The difference lies only in their approach. Psychological well-being is more rational-cognitive, while *sa'ādah* is more spiritual-transcendental (Midi, 2021). Several factors, such as social support, spirituality, gratitude, and self-acceptance, influence happiness (Komarudin *et al.*, 2022).

3.2 Correspondence between Psychological Well-being Dimensions and the Pillars of *Sa'ādah*

Psychological well-being in a contemporary perspective encompasses six main dimensions, including: self-acceptance, personal Growth, life purpose, autonomy, positive relationships, and environmental mastery. Meanwhile, in al-Ghazali's Sufi framework, happiness (*sa'ādah*) can be achieved only through the process of *tazkiyat al-nafs*, knowledge (*aql*, *nafs*, *rūh*, and *qalb*), and connection with Allah, based on four pillars: knowing oneself, Allah, the universe, and the hereafter. The two are not separate realms, but have the potential to complement each other. The following is a correspondence between several dimensions of psychological well-being and the pillars of al-Ghazali's *sa'ādah*:

3.2.1. Self-Acceptance through *ridā* and *tawakkul*

The dimension of self-acceptance in psychological well-being theory refers to the ability to accept past experiences, both positive and negative. In Sufism, this is parallel to *ridā* (accepting God's decree with an open heart) and *tawakkul* (surrendering to Him after making an effort) (Al-Ghazali, 1998). Sufi self-acceptance emphasizes the awareness that all events are part of divine destiny, thus giving rise to inner peace that is not shaken by the fluctuations of the world.

3.2.2. Autonomy through *ikhlāṣ* and *mujāhadah*

The dimension of autonomy in modern psychology is understood as the freedom to make decisions, independence in thinking, and resistance to external pressures. In al-Ghazali's perspective, inner independence is achieved through *ikhlāṣ*—cleansing intentions of egoistic interests—and *mujāhadah*, which is the struggle against lust (Al-Ghazali, 1998). A person is considered truly autonomous not when they are free from social norms, but when they are free from the slavery of desires, so that an orientation towards Allah drives their every action. Sufi autonomy is thus spiritual freedom, a condition in which humans are no longer ruled by desires, but by the light of truth.

3.2.3. Personal Growth through *takhallī-tahallī-tajallī*

In psychology, personal Growth emphasizes an individual's ability to continue to develop, be open to experiences, and expand their capacity. In Sufism, this process has a close analogy with three spiritual stages: *takhallī* (emptying oneself of despicable traits), *tahallī* (adornment of oneself with praiseworthy traits), and *tajallī* (the revelation of divine light in the heart). Al-Ghazali asserts that true Growth is not merely the acquisition of new experiences, but rather *ma'rifat al-nafs* (self-knowledge) that leads to *ma'rifat Allah* (knowledge of God). Thus, personal Growth in the Sufi perspective is not merely horizontal-psychological, but vertical-transcendental, that is, towards the realization of the essence of human existence (Waliyuddin, 2022).

3.2.4. Life Purpose with Eschatological Orientation

One important dimension of psychological well-being is having a clear purpose in life. In al-Ghazali's opinion, the existential purpose of humans lies in eschatological orientation: making the world a path to the hereafter and eternal happiness (*sa'ādah al-ukhrawiyyah*) (Imam Al-Ghazali, 2001). This purpose does not stop at material achievements or social success, but is directed towards *liqa' Allah* (meeting with Allah). Thus, the purpose of life, according to the Sufi perspective, gives meaning that transcends the worldly dimension, serving as a strong foundation for facing the fragility of old age.

3.2.5. Positive Relationships with Others through *ukhūwah* and *maḥabbah*

In psychology, positive relationships are characterized by empathy, intimacy, and mutual support. From a Sufi perspective, these relationships are transcended in the concepts of *ukhūwah* (spiritual brotherhood) and *maḥabbah* (love). Al-Ghazali emphasizes that love for others is rooted in love for Allah; loving creatures means respecting the reflection of the Creator. Thus, social relationships not only serve as psychological support, but also as a path to *ihsan*, which is worshipping Allah as if seeing Him.

3.2.6. Mastery of the Environment through *hikmah* and *zuhd*

Within the framework of psychological well-being (PWB), *environmental mastery* refers to an individual's ability to regulate, evaluate, and adapt to the demands of their surroundings. Al-Ghazālī, however, offers a more profound interpretation of this concept. For him, mastering one's environment does not mean exercising dominance over the world or controlling external conditions; rather, it involves placing the world in its proper position within the hierarchy of human values. This is where the concepts of *zuhd* and *hikmah* become central. Through *zuhd*, individuals learn to release themselves from excessive attachment to material possessions so that the world does not become the source of identity or ultimate worth. Meanwhile, *hikmah* serves as a guiding principle that enables a person to perceive reality

clearly, manage life proportionately, and maintain spiritual orientation amid worldly engagements. Thus, in al-Ghazālī's perspective, environmental mastery means transforming worldly life into a means for spiritual ascent, rather than treating it as an end in itself (Al-Ghazali, 1998).

The conceptual resonance between PWB and al-Ghazālī's notion of *sa'ādah* reveals that both frameworks emphasize the realization of one's deeper potentials. However, they rest upon fundamentally different ontological foundations. Humanistic psychology positions the individual at the center of Growth, with self-fulfillment and personal autonomy as the primary developmental goals. In contrast, al-Ghazālī's Sufi thought situates God as the ultimate teleological center, making self-purification (*tazkiyat al-nafs*) and the attainment of *ma'rifatullāh* the highest forms of well-being. This difference does not create opposition between the two systems but rather opens a space for integration—providing a more comprehensive understanding of human well-being that encompasses both psychological and spiritual-transcendental dimensions.

When applied to the context of older adults, this Sufi orientation carries significant existential implications. In the later stages of life, older individuals often experience declining social roles, diminishing physical capacities, and an increased awareness of mortality. In such circumstances, the practices of remembrance (*dhikr*), contemplation (*tafakkur*), and surrender (*tawakkul*) serve not only as sources of inner calm but also as pathways to *ma'rifat*—a deep awareness that the essence of the self is spiritual and continues beyond worldly existence. This transcendent awareness effectively reduces death anxiety, alleviates loneliness, and fosters a more mature sense of acceptance. Thus, the integration of PWB and *sa'ādah* demonstrates that the well-being of older adults cannot be fulfilled solely by emotional or social support; rather, it requires spiritual guidance capable of leading them toward true and enduring happiness (*sa'ādah*, the state of profound spiritual well-being).

Table 1. Correspondence between PWB Dimensions and Sufistic Concepts and Behavioral/Affective Indicators in Older Adults

PWB Dimensions	Sufistic Concepts	Affective & Behavioral Indicators in Elderly	Examples of Practice/Exercises
<i>Self-Acceptance</i>	<i>Riḍā</i> and <i>Tawakkul</i>	Acceptance of physical condition and fate; calmness in limitations	<i>Dhikr-breathing</i> (zikir-napas) and contemplation of blessings
<i>Autonomy</i>	<i>Ikhlāṣ</i> and <i>Mujāhadah</i>	Spiritual independence; not influenced by egoistic impulses	Muraqabah practice and emotional control
<i>Personal Growth</i>	<i>Takhallī-Tahallī-Tajallī</i>	Moral transformation; spiritual elevation (<i>maqām</i>)	<i>Reflection and habit of remembrance</i>
<i>life Purpose</i>	Eschatological Orientation	Realizing that life is a journey towards God	<i>Contemplating (tadabbur) verses about death and mortality</i>
<i>Positive Relationships</i>	<i>Ukhūwah</i> and <i>Mahabbah</i>	Spiritual intimacy and love for others	Gathering and praying together
<i>Environmental Mastery</i>	<i>Hikmah</i> and <i>Zuhd</i>	The ability to live simply	Management of <i>riyādah</i> and <i>mujāhada</i> and contemplation (<i>berkhawat</i>)

3.3 The Relevance of al-Ghazali's Thought to the Psychological Well-being of the Elderly

Within the framework of discussions on the psychological well-being of the elderly, the Sufi thought of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali provides a significant conceptual foundation. His views not only highlight well-being as a stable emotional condition, but also as the result of purification of the soul (*tazkiyat al-nafs*) and recognition of the essence of the self (*ma'rifat al-nafs*). Through this approach, spiritual well-being is not understood purely in psychological terms, but rather as a process of transcendence that leads individuals closer to Allah Swt (Imam Al-Ghazali, 2017).

According to al-Ghazali, the key to knowing Allah lies in the process of *ma'rifat al-nafs* (self-knowledge). This is in line with the words of Allah SWT: "We will show them Our signs in all corners and within themselves, until it becomes clear to them that (the Qur'an) is the truth" (Q.S. Fushshilat: 53). The Prophet Muhammad also emphasized the same principle through his saying: "Whoever knows himself, knows his Lord." Thus, the spiritual journey of humans begins with an awareness of their deepest essence, not merely an understanding of their physical aspects. A person who only understands himself as a physical entity has not yet achieved true recognition, because the essence of man lies in the spiritual dimension, which is the center of all inner movements (Imam Al-Ghazali, 2001).

In al-Ghazali's view, the human self is a microcosm that contains four main tendencies: the *bahimiyyah* (animalistic) nature that drives the fulfillment of lust; the *sabu'iyyah* (savagery) nature that gives rise to anger and aggression; the *syaithaniyyah* nature that fosters deceit and cunning; and the *malakiyyah* nature that leads to purity, tranquility, and divine contemplation. The spirit (*rūh*) is the core of human existence, while the body is only a temporary instrument borrowed to support the spiritual journey. True happiness (*sa'ādah*) can only be achieved when humans are able to subdue their animalistic, savage, and satanic impulses, so that what prevails is the angelic potential that reflects the divine light within (Imam Al-Ghazali, 2001).

By recognizing the origin of the soul (*rūh*) and the purpose of self-creation, humans are guided to walk the path toward witnessing the majesty and beauty of God (*musyahadah al-jalāl wa al-jamāl*). Allah SWT did not create worldly attributes to enslave humans, but so that humans could conquer them and use them as a means to spiritual perfection. When a person succeeds in placing all their carnal desires under the control of reason (*aql*) and spirit (*rūh*), they reach the *maqām* of true happiness (those who are close to Allah) (Imam Al-Ghazali, 2001).

In the context of psychological well-being in old age, the concept of *ma'rifat al-nafs*, proposed by al-Ghazali, holds that a balance between the physical and spiritual dimensions is the basis for inner peace. Awareness of one's true self fosters acceptance of declining physical conditions, directs the soul towards tranquility, and strengthens one's orientation towards God. Thus, psychological well-being in old age can be understood as a stable and peaceful state of mind that arises from self-knowledge, purification of the heart, and a continuous spiritual connection with Allah Swt.

3.4 Integration of Sufi Spirituality and Humanistic Psychology in the Dynamics of Aging

The concept of *Sa'ādah* formulated by al-Ghazali serves as a Sufi framework that places spiritual well-being in a more transcendental dimension than modern psychological theories. While in the framework of positive psychology, psychological well-being is understood through the aspects of self-acceptance, positive relationships, personal Growth, autonomy, meaning of life, and achievement (Carol D. Ryff, 1989; Frankl, 2003; Seligman, 2018), in al-Ghazali's view, all of these aspects are directed towards true happiness that comes from Allah and is oriented

towards the hereafter. Thus, psychological well-being according to al-Ghazali does not stop at intrapsychic and social achievements, but continues to the eschatological dimension, as explained in the following conceptual map:

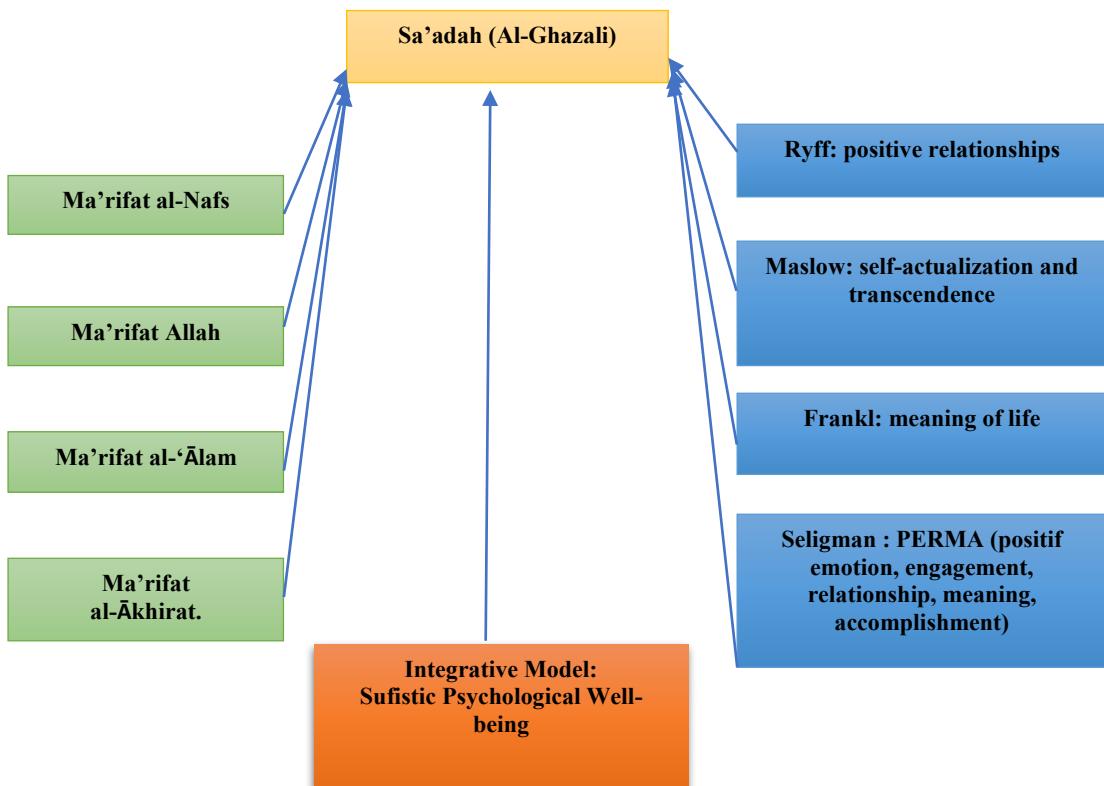


Figure 1. Integrative Model: Sufistic Psychological Well-being

The conceptual map shows that *sa'ādah* is the center of integration between Sufi theory and modern psychology. The pillars of *sa'ādah*, namely knowing oneself, knowing Allah, understanding the universe, and realizing the reality of the hereafter, resonate with modern theories of well-being. For example, self-awareness and desire control are in line with the concepts of autonomy and self-regulation in psychology; the meaning of life in the context of worship and the purpose of the afterlife correlates with Frankl's logotherapy; social relationships built on the basis of *ukhūwah* and akhlak are in line with the positive relationships emphasized by Ryff; while the dimensions of transcendence and gratitude are parallel to the value of spiritual well-being, which is now widely recognized as an important determinant of psychological well-being.

However, a fundamental distinction remains. Modern psychology situates meaning or Growth within existential and humanistic boundaries. In contrast, al-Ghazali places it within a theological horizon, where true happiness is not merely understood as freedom from suffering but as the attainment of transcendence through closeness to Allah. Thus, this integration does not simply bridge two disciplines but presents a holistic model affirming that the psychological well-being of the elderly cannot be separated from spirituality and eschatological orientation.

This integrative model shows that al-Ghazali's Sufi thought provides the metaphysical foundation and ultimate purpose, while modern psychology offers an empirical and methodological framework through measurable indicators to understand well-being. This view is

rooted in the epistemology of *tasawwuf*, which asserts that human knowledge arises from interaction with metaphysical reality, where angels serve as sources of divine illumination and devils as whisperers of delusion. Therefore, purity of heart (*tazkiyah al-qalb*) and piety (*taqwā*) are prerequisites for the validity of spiritual experience (Muhaya, 2018).

True well-being, then, cannot be fully grasped through psychological indicators alone but must also ensure that one's spiritual experiences are illuminated by *nūr Ilāhī* (divine light). The synergy between the two perspectives expands the understanding of well-being beyond emotional balance and social functioning into the pursuit of *sa'ādah*, which unites the physical, spiritual, and eschatological dimensions of human existence.

To clarify the conceptual relationship, the following section explains the mechanisms of which the four pillars of *ma'rifah* reduce death anxiety and loneliness among the elderly.

1. Ma'rifat al-Nafs (Self-Knowledge)

This pillar represents the initial stage of understanding one's essence as a spiritual being (*rūhāniyah*) that originates from and ultimately returns to Allah. Its mechanisms include:

- a. Through *muhāsabah* (introspection) and *riyādah al-nafs* (spiritual discipline), the elderly realize that the aging body is not the center of identity but merely a temporary vessel for the *rūh* (soul).
- b. This awareness reduces anxiety about physical death, as death is understood not as the end of existence but as the soul's transition to eternal life.
- c. Psychologically, *ma'rifat al-nafs* fosters self-acceptance and reduces feelings of loss associated with the decline of physical abilities.

2. Ma'rifat Allāh (Knowledge of God)

This stage cultivates *tawhīd* consciousness and spiritual intimacy with Allah through *dhikr*, prayer, and contemplation, with the following mechanisms:

- a. Elderly individuals who attain spiritual closeness to Allah (*uns billāh*) experience inner peace and a profound sense of protection.
- b. This transcendental relationship replaces social loneliness with the constant presence of the Divine (*hudūr*), thereby alleviating existential isolation.
- c. Fear of death diminishes as death is perceived as a long-awaited encounter (*liqā' Allāh*), not as separation from life.

3. Ma'rifat al-'Ālam (Knowledge of the World)

This stage transforms one's perception of the world and material existence through the following mechanisms:

- a. The world is no longer viewed as an ultimate goal but as a field of righteous deeds and a mirror reflecting divine majesty.
- b. The virtues of *zuhd* (detachment) and *hikmah* (wisdom) enable the elderly to release attachment to worldly pleasures and social possessions.
- c. This spiritual orientation stabilizes emotions and mitigates feelings of emptiness that may arise from the loss of social roles in old age.

4. Ma'rifat al-Ākhirah (Knowledge of the Hereafter)

This stage deepens one's conviction in the continuity of the soul's existence after death through the following mechanisms:

- a. By contemplating death and the afterlife, the elderly internalize an eschatological outlook that nurtures hope rather than fear.
- b. This eschatological awareness redefines the meaning of worldly life as a preparation for eternal happiness.
- c. Psychologically, this reduces death anxiety as death is viewed as the gateway to eternal union with Allah.

This integration generates a form of spiritual equilibrium that alleviates two major psychological symptoms among the elderly, death anxiety (through transcendental meaning and self-acceptance) and existential loneliness (through deepened connection with God and creation).

From a Sufi psychological perspective, the integration of these four pillars gives rise to what can be termed spiritual continuity awareness, a profound conviction that human existence does not end with death but transforms into a higher dimension of divine proximity. This awareness serves as a psychological buffer against both death anxiety and loneliness, as individuals no longer anchor the meaning of their existence solely in social or physical presence but in an enduring spiritual experience.

Thus, *ma'rifah* not only occupies the highest position in the epistemological hierarchy of Sufism but also functions as a therapeutic mechanism relevant to the psychology of Aging. Empirically, these findings open the possibility of developing Sufi-based interventions grounded in *ma'rifah* awareness practices, such as *dhikr-breathing*, existential *muḥāsabah* (self-reflection on life's meaning), nature contemplation (*tadabbur al-'alam*), and eschatological reflection. Such interventions hold potential as complementary approaches to reducing death anxiety and loneliness among religious elderly populations.

As a follow-up to these conceptual findings, a simple form of Sufi practice that is easy to apply in the daily lives of older adults is needed. Therefore, the following table summarizes the basic zikr procedures that can be used as a guide for intervention.

Table 2. Prosedur Dhikr-Breathing Rūhiyah (Pedak, 2025)

Session	Focus and Objective	Duration	Activity Description
Phase 1 Preparing yourself	Build awareness and intend to remember God in order to connect yourself with your true Origin, namely Allah, the Creator.	7–13 minutes	<ol style="list-style-type: none">a. Create an environment that supports concentration (1-2 minutes).b. Affirm your sincere intention and be aware of your origins (2-4 minutes).c. Choose a body position that promotes stability (1-2 minutes).d. Clear your mind (3-5 minutes).
Phase 2 Core procedure of spiritual breathing and remembrance	Realize that this breath is the energy of life that continuously connects you to a greater reality, an invisible thread of light. Understand that "Nafs (self) and breath have the same root word." This breath remembrance is a way to purify and harmonize the breath with its pure origin, the spirit.	15 – 30 minutes	<ol style="list-style-type: none">a. Aware of the breath as the connection between <i>rūh</i> and <i>nafs</i> (3-5 minutes for initial adjustment, then continue throughout this breath).b. Shift the center of awareness to the <i>Qalb</i> (spiritual heart) (1-2 minutes).c. Contemplate "Inna liLahi" on the inhale (continue throughout the core of the practice).d. Contemplate "wa inna ilahi raji'uun" on the exhale (continue throughout the core of the practice).
Phase 3: Deepening	This is the process where your <i>nafs</i> will be aligned with its original <i>Rūh</i> .	5-10 minutes	<ol style="list-style-type: none">a. Purifying the <i>nafs</i> with original awareness (ongoing during practice, observed for 3-

Session	Focus and Objective	Duration	Activity Description
spiritual remembrance	This phase is the process by which this zikr “cleanses” the qalb, removing the “ordinary matter” that detaches the rūh from its essence and producing awareness of the essence that lives in the secret space of the qalb.		<p>5 minutes at the end of phase 2 before transition).</p> <p>b. Building a stable presence (hudur) (ongoing effect during practice).</p> <p>c. Internalizing Divine truth (ongoing feeling during practice).</p>
Phase 4 Ending the zikir session	<p>Be grateful for this awareness and pray that it will always be with you.</p> <p>This phase will make each of your acts of worship (prayer is the pillar of religion, and silence during prayer is more important, and so on) more meaningful, as they are realized through a deep awareness of your true self.</p>	3-5 minutes	<p>a. Remain in resonance of awareness (2-3 minutes).</p> <p>b. Include rūh zikir in every step of life (1-2 minutes for transition, then continue throughout the day).</p>

The *rūhīyah dhikr-breathing* procedure provides a solid foundation for the spiritual journey of the elderly. By practicing it consistently and mindfully, one strengthens the connection with the True Source, purifies the self, and prepares the heart for the unveiling of deeper truths in subsequent stages. The breath serves as the vessel for dhikr; therefore, by becoming aware of one's breathing, one becomes ready to experience the subtleties and delights of dhikr (Pedak, 2025).

CONCLUSION

Based on the results and discussion, this study concludes that the psychological well-being of the elderly from al-Ghazali's perspective centers on *sa'ādah* (true happiness), which is attained through *ma'rifat al-nafs*, *ma'rifat Allah*, *ma'rifat al-dunyā wa haqīqatuhā*, and *ma'rifat al-ākhirah wa haqīqatuhā*. These pillars can be mapped in parallel with modern psychological well-being dimensions, such as self-acceptance, positive relationships, life meaning, and personal Growth. This integration highlights that a Sufi understanding can enrich psychological frameworks by providing a deeper Islamic spiritual foundation.

In practice, the findings open the door to developing Sufi-based intervention modules for the elderly, including structured programs such as dhikr-based breathing exercises to cultivate inner peace, spiritual awareness, and overall psychological well-being. The limitations of this study lie in its conceptual nature, as it has not yet been empirically tested. The selection of literature may also introduce bias, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Consequently, a more comprehensive methodological approach is needed in future research.

As directions for further study, it is necessary to develop and validate a Sufi-based Psychological Well-Being (PWB) instrument for the elderly, integrating indicators of psychological well-being with Sufi spiritual dimensions. Additionally, quasi-experimental studies could be conducted to test the effectiveness of Sufi interventions in reducing death anxiety and loneliness among the elderly. Comparative cross-cultural and interfaith studies may also enrich the understanding of the universality and particularities of elderly spiritual dynamics in different contexts.

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