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Empowerment of Santri through Health Cadre Training and Peer Counseling Programs to Address Academic Stress in Islamic Boarding Schools

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ABSTRACT

Academic stress is a significant issue frequently experienced by students (santri) in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) due to high academic demands, busy schedules, and limited access to mental health support, all of which negatively impact their learning motivation, as well as physical and mental health. This community service program aimed to enhance students' understanding of academic stress, empower them as mental health cadres, develop a peer counseling system, and equip them with stress management skills. The program was conducted at Pondok Pesantren Burhanul Hidayah Sidoarjo, involving 14 Santri Husada cadres through two main stages: education on academic stress and training in peer counseling. Education was delivered through seminars, discussions, and distribution of printed and digital materials, while training included lectures, group discussions, role simulations, and practical peer counseling sessions. Evaluation was carried out using pre- and post-tests, as well as observation of counseling skills. The results showed an improvement in students' knowledge, with the average score increasing from 90 to 94 after intervention, along with the establishment of peer counseling groups that provided internal support. Furthermore, students became more skilled in applying basic stress management techniques such as relaxation and time management. These findings indicate that education and peer counseling training are effective in enhancing students' capacity to cope with academic pressure. In conclusion, empowering students through peer counseling represents a sustainable strategy for strengthening mental health support in Islamic boarding schools, and wider, routine implementation is recommended to improve students' resilience in facing academic challenges.

INTRODUCTION

Pondok Pesantren Burhanul Hidayah was established in early 1997 in Jenggöt Village, Krembung, Sidoarjo, under the guidance of Romo KH. Sunhaji AS, S.Pd, M.Pd. By 2024, the pesantren accommodates approximately 700 students, with around 380 residing within the pesantren. The pesantren also has 10 Santri Husada (health cadres) who are students. Additionally, meals are provided twice daily for both male and female students. With its structure and activities, Pondok Pesantren Burhanul Hidayah is committed to delivering quality Islamic religious education while also prioritizing the welfare of its residents and the cleanliness of the environment.

Observations conducted at Pondok Pesantren Burhanul Hidayah reveal several concerning issues faced by the pesantren, including poor personal hygiene, inadequate environmental sanitation, low adherence to Clean and Healthy Living Behavior (PHBS), improper food processing and nutrition, inefficient waste management, overcrowding in dormitory rooms, substandard room conditions, and water

underutilization of the pesantren health post (poskestren). Common illnesses include gastritis, influenza, and scabies. There have also been outbreaks of food poisoning and the use of untreated drinking water.

In addition to physical health challenges, limited access to psychological support and counseling is a significant problem in many pesantrens. Many pesantrens lack adequate mental health support systems, leaving students without a space or facility to express their feelings or receive help in managing their stress. Without proper support, students often feel isolated, which exacerbates their difficulties. Moreover, the shortage of trained human resources in mental health within pesantren environments is another major obstacle. Few students have been trained as mental health cadres who can provide peer support to fellow students facing academic stress. Without trained cadres, pesantrens lack liaison roles to offer initial assistance to peers in need.

To address these issues, solutions involving the empowerment of students themselves are necessary. Empowerment can be implemented through education about academic stress, training mental health cadres, and developing peer counseling programs involving students as peer counselors. These programs are expected to enhance students' understanding of academic stress, strengthen their stress management skills, and foster a pesantren environment that is more attentive to mental health. Consequently, students will be better equipped to face academic challenges in a healthy and productive manner.

Previous research led by the principal investigator in 2024, titled Analysis of Risk Factors for Nutritional Problems and Stress among Santri at Pondok Pesantren Burhanul Hidayah Sidoarjo, found that the majority of stress experienced by santri was academic stress, and many santri experiencing academic stress had abnormal nutritional status. This finding emphasizes the connection between psychological conditions and physical health status among santri. Therefore, this community service initiative will follow up on these findings by forming peer groups as a counseling effort among santri, aiming to effectively manage and prevent academic stress within the pesantren environment.

METHOD

Pondok Pesantren Burhanul Hidayah, established in 1997 in Jenggot Village, Krembung, Sidoarjo, accommodates about 700 students in 2024, with 380 residing on-site and 10 serving as health cadres (Santri Husada). Observations revealed challenges such as poor personal hygiene, inadequate sanitation, overcrowded dormitories, suboptimal waste and nutrition management, and common illnesses including gastritis, influenza, and scabies. Additionally, the pesantren health post (poskestren) was underutilized, and food poisoning outbreaks occurred due to untreated water and food handling issues.

The program focused on empowering santri through education on academic stress, training mental health cadres, establishing peer counseling groups, and providing stress management techniques such as relaxation and time management. Community involvement was maintained throughout planning and

implementation, with shared resources and mentorship roles. Monitoring and evaluation, through surveys and interviews, ensured the program's effectiveness and sustainability by assessing its impact on santri's stress management and guiding ongoing improvements.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

There were two sessions of community service activities conducted at Pondok Pesantren Burhanul Hidayah, and the program demonstrated positive results. The activities were organized in the form of counseling and educational training on stress issues and peer counseling. The first activity, which focused on educating santri about stress, took place on June 20, 2025.



Figure 1. Education about academic stress

The target participants were male and female santri of Pondok Pesantren Burhanul Hidayah, including 14 santri who serve as health cadres (Santri Husada). Before the educational session, the community service team administered a pre-test to the pesantren residents, followed by presentation and question-and-answer discussions. Afterward, a post-test was conducted to measure the santri's understanding of nutritional and stress issues. The results of the pre-test and post-test from participants who received the education are presented in the graph below.

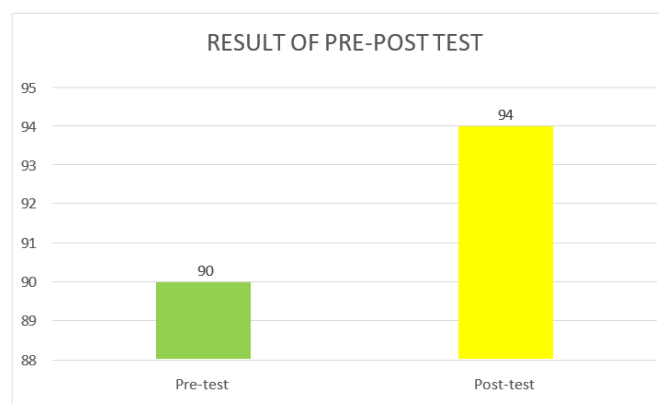


Chart 1. Results of the pre-posttest of education on academic stress

The increase in santri knowledge about academic stress following the educational intervention reflects the positive impact of the community service program. Before the education, the average knowledge score was 90, indicating good understanding but with room for improvement. After the intervention, the score rose to 94, demonstrating the effectiveness of the educational methods used. Educational research suggests that effective stress management strategies can help students cope with increasing academic demands in both face-to-face and online learning environments (Yolami et al., 2022). Similarly, previous studies on youth educational programs in RW 06 Limo-Depok showed significant improvements in awareness and strategies to manage academic stress (Tobing et al., 2023). Academic stress management also aligns with mental health programs targeting university students, where education plays a crucial role in reducing student stress levels (Barseli et al., 2017). Furthermore, other research has confirmed that introducing coping strategies and knowledge about stress management can significantly improve students' mental health (Akmal S Kumalasari, 2021). These findings highlight that well-designed educational interventions not only increase knowledge but also positively change students' mindsets and habits in facing academic stress. Thus, the education activity indicates that a systematic approach to managing academic stress is essential, as evidenced by improved knowledge scores after the intervention. Overall, the evaluation of increased average knowledge scores confirms that the education program successfully enhanced santri understanding, reinforcing the argument that community-level education has great potential to improve mental health and support students in handling increasingly complex academic demands.

The second activity focused on education and training in peer group counseling for the santri and was conducted on July 26, 2025. This session, the second phase of the community service program by the implementing team, concentrated on providing education and training regarding peer counseling within the pesantren environment.



Figure 2. Peer counseling training activities

The program aimed to develop santri capacity to better handle academic challenges through peer support. During the activity, santri received material on the importance of peer counseling and basic techniques for helping peers cope with academic stress. Beyond formal instruction, participants actively engaged in group discussions, shared experiences, and performed role-play simulations as counselors and counselees. This interactive and participatory approach created a more engaging learning atmosphere relevant to the santri's daily needs. The intended benefit of this education and training was to foster a supportive and open learning environment. Santri were encouraged to recognize their issues, openly share, and develop skills to provide psychological support to friends in need. Therefore, this community service program not only offered short-term solutions but also instilled values of courage, empathy, and independence among the santri.

CONCLUSION

The community service program at Pondok Pesantren Burhanul Hidayah successfully improved santri knowledge and capacity to manage academic stress through targeted education and peer counseling training. The significant increase in knowledge scores after the educational intervention demonstrated the effectiveness of structured stress awareness programs. Additionally, the peer counseling training fostered a supportive environment by equipping santri with practical skills to provide emotional support to their peers, enhancing empathy and independence. These results highlight the value of combining education with peer support as a sustainable approach to mental health in pesantren settings. To further strengthen the impact, it is recommended that the program be continued and expanded to include ongoing training, regular mental health monitoring, and integration with broader community and professional health services to ensure comprehensive support for santri well-being.

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