



Al-Ghazālī's Psycho-Spiritual Counselling Theory: Guidance and Counselling from the Perspective of Islamic Philosophers

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Article Information:

Received: January 2025

Revised: March 2025

Accepted: March 2025

Published: April 2025

Keywords:

Counselling, Psycho-Spiritual, Al-Ghazālī

Abstract

This study presents a systematic analysis of Al-Ghazālī's psycho-spiritual counselling theory, intending to integrate its principles into contemporary counselling discourse. Employing a qualitative library research design, the study utilised content analysis to examine primary and secondary sources. The findings demonstrate that Al-Ghazālī's framework centres on the purification and reformation of the human psyche, conceptualised through the interconnected faculties of *al-nafs* (the self), *al-qalb* (the heart), *al-ruh* (the spirit), and *al-'aql* (the intellect). The counselling process is structured into five distinct stages: (1) establishing a therapeutic alliance; (2) self-recognition and problem identification; (3) application of *tazkiyah al-nafs* via *mujahadah al-nafs* (emptying vices, *takhalli*); (4) application of *tazkiyah al-nafs* through *riyadah al-nafs* (filling with virtues, *tahalli*); and (5) assessment. This study concludes that Al-Ghazālī's model offers a structured, spiritually-grounded intervention for alleviating individual psychological distress, providing a credible framework for application in psycho-spiritual counselling practice.

How to Cite this Article

Wahid, A., Karneli, Y., Solfema, S., & Qorib, F. (2025). Al-Ghazali's Psycho-Spiritual Counselling Theory: Guidance and Counselling from the Perspective of Islamic Philosophers. *Al-Musyrief: Jurnal Bimbingan Dan Konseling Islam*, 8(1), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.38073/almusyrief.v8i1.2325>

INTRODUCTION

The integration of diverse knowledge systems increasingly characterizes the global advancement of guidance and counselling science. Presently, Western psychological theories predominantly inform counselling practices internationally. This reliance is evident in Malaysia, where counselling has been primarily grounded in Western theories and approaches for the past 6 decades. A similar dependency exists in Indonesia, where both school-based and community counselling practices are primarily grounded in Western frameworks.

Western therapeutic models predominantly influence the global development of counselling science. To diversify this epistemological foundation, this study introduces a counselling framework derived from Islamic philosophy, offering a distinct reference point for spiritually oriented practice. In Indonesia, current Islamic counselling practices are seldom derived from purely indigenous theories; instead, practitioners often integrate Western approaches with Islamic values. To address this gap, the psycho-spiritual counselling approach of Al-Ghazālī, grounded in the Qur'an and Hadith, is presented as a foundational Islamic counselling theory.

Al-Ghazālī's psycho-spiritual counselling theory posits spirituality as a foundational element of the therapeutic process, according to Hamjah (2018). This emphasis is supported by contemporary research showing a strong correlation between spirituality and positive mental health outcomes. The significance of this dimension is further underscored by its recognition across diverse theoretical orientations. For instance, observed that a majority of his clients ultimately sought spiritual and religious meaning when confronting profound life problems. Similarly, research in an Islamic context demonstrates that integrating spiritual values with cognitive and behavioural techniques can yield unexpectedly positive client outcomes. Empirical evidence confirms that clients frequently prioritise spiritual discourse; one study found that 79% of clients identified religious and spiritual values as a primary topic in counselling sessions. Consequently, the intentional integration of spirituality is widely perceived by both counsellors and clients as a critical factor in facilitating therapeutic success.

A growing body of empirical research supports the efficacy of psycho-spiritual counselling frameworks derived from the works of Al-Ghazālī. For instance, found that an Al-Ghazali-based approach significantly enhances individual spirituality. Similarly, demonstrated that a structured counselling module based on this framework improves mental health and spiritual intelligence, thereby fostering positive behavioural changes. Further supporting these findings, it has been reported to be effective in cultivating positive cognition, guiding individuals to perceive life challenges as containing inherent wisdom, thereby promoting calmness. Extending these applications indicates that Al-Ghazālī's *tazkiyatun nafs* (purification of the self) model can be effectively implemented to reduce premarital sexual behaviour among adolescents.

While recent studies affirm the efficacy of approaches derived from Al-Ghazālī's work in enhancing clients' spirituality and mental health, a comprehensive theoretical exploration of his psycho-spiritual framework within modern counselling practice

remains absent. This study aims to address this gap by conducting an in-depth analysis of Al-Ghazālī's psycho-spiritual counselling theory. The primary objective is to systematise its core principles regarding the spiritual nature of the human being and the stages of the psycho-spiritual counselling process. Ultimately, this research seeks to provide a credible theoretical foundation and practical guideline for counsellors, particularly those working with Muslim clients, to inform the implementation of culturally and spiritually congruent counselling.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative design and followed a library research methodology. Data were collected through documentation, including relevant books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and scholarly notes on the core concepts and implementation procedures of psycho-spiritual counselling from Al-Ghazālī's perspective. The data analysis procedure consisted of content analysis, which required identifying, comparing, and synthesising relevant discussions to extract themes pertinent to the study's focus.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Biography of Al-Ghazālī

Recognised as a preeminent scholar in Islamic philosophy, Sufism, and jurisprudence, Abu Hamid bin Muhammad bin Ahmad Al-Ghazālī remains a pivotal figure in psycho-spiritual discourse. His intellectual legacy extends beyond the Islamic world, having significantly influenced key Western thinkers. This transhistorical and cross-cultural impact underscores the enduring relevance of his work. Born in 450 AH/1058 CE in Tus, Khorasan (in modern-day Iran), Abu Hamid Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazālī developed a comprehensive body of work that integrates spiritual introspection with philosophical rigour.

Al-Ghazālī is a seminal figure in spiritual discourse, whose work underscores the centrality of spirituality to human well-being. He contended that spiritual deficiency is a primary catalyst for moral decline, leading individuals to pursue worldly attachments at the expense of the afterlife. Al-Ghazālī's theoretical and practical contributions are deeply rooted in this spiritual foundation. His own engagement with spirituality began in childhood under the tutelage of a Sufi family friend and was later formalised through study with his teacher, Yusuf Al-Nassaj, in Jurjan. This lifelong immersion in Sufism profoundly shaped his approach, establishing a framework where spiritual principles are integral to psychological and moral development.

Spiritual Perspective of Al-Ghazālī

Al-Ghazālī's psycho-spiritual framework comprises four foundational elements: Al-Nafs (the self), Al-Qalb (the heart), Al-Ruh (the spirit), and Al-'Aql (the intellect). Within this model, the qalb, ruh, and nafs primarily govern an individual's inner nature, whereas the 'aql influences the outer, manifest nature. Al-Ghazālī posits the qalb as the most critical element, asserting its primacy in determining human behaviour. The

following section provides a detailed examination of these four components and their interrelations.

Delineates two primary meanings of *Al-Nafs*. The first interprets *Al-Nafs* as the base self, encompassing human impulses such as anger and desire. Within Sufi discourse, this dimension is often emphasised as the origin of reprehensible behaviour. The second meaning conceptualises *Al-Nafs* as the human essence or soul, a substance possessing diverse potentialities. Consequently, the first definition denotes a blameworthy inclination, while the second represents a praiseworthy essence capable of transcendent awareness of Allah and His attributes. Further categorizes the human soul into a hierarchical triad. The highest stage, *Al-Nafs Al-Muthmainnah* (the Tranquil Soul), embodies a state of profound peace and contentment, often associated with piety. Below this is *Al-Nafs Al-Lawwamah* (the Self-Reproaching Soul), characterised by an inner conflict between good and evil and a consequent lack of perfection. The lowest stage is *Al-Nafs Al-Ammarah* (the Soul that Commands Evil), which readily submits to base desires and satanic promptings.

Al-Ghazālī conceptualises *Al-Qalb* in terms of dualistic dimensions: the physical and the spiritual. In its physical form, *Al-Qalb* constitutes the biological heart, an elliptical organ situated within the chest. Its spiritual dimension, however, represents a subtle, metaphysical essence (*lathifah*) that is both divine (*rabbaniyah*) and spiritual (*ruhaniyah*) in nature. This spiritual heart is understood as the core of human consciousness, responsible for seeking knowledge, discerning divine commandments, and pursuing moral and spiritual perfection, with the ultimate objective of worshipping Allah. Consequently, *Al-Qalb* serves as the locus of faith, piety, and sincerity, yet it is also vulnerable to negative states such as disbelief and hypocrisy. The moral condition of *Al-Qalb* is paramount, as it dictates the actions of the entire human body; a virtuous heart channels goodness throughout the physical self, while a corrupted one yields the opposite effect.

Al-Ghazālī defines *Al-Ruh* (the spirit) as possessing two distinct aspects. The first is a physiological entity responsible for animating the body; it is the source of movement within the blood vessels, enabling biological functions such as respiration, sensation, and locomotion. The second aspect is a subtle, metaphysical substance intrinsic to human consciousness, endowed with the capacity for cognition and spiritual knowledge (S. Hamjah, 2018). According to this view, the essence of *Al-Ruh* transcends complete human comprehension, representing a transcendent reality that the intellect cannot fully articulate.

Al-Ghazālī views '*Aql* (the intellect) as the fundamental faculty that distinguishes humans from animals, enabling systematic and rational thought (Jamiah et al., 2017). His framework delineates four distinct but interrelated meanings of '*Aql*. First, it is an innate light within the human heart that motivates the pursuit of knowledge. Second, it constitutes an inherent understanding that enables discrimination between the possible and the impossible. Third, it represents the wisdom and maturity cultivated through lived experience. Finally, '*Aql* is identified as the strength to restrain base desires and to guide

moral action. Figure 1 provides a detailed schematic of these four elements within Al-Ghazālī's spiritual perspective.

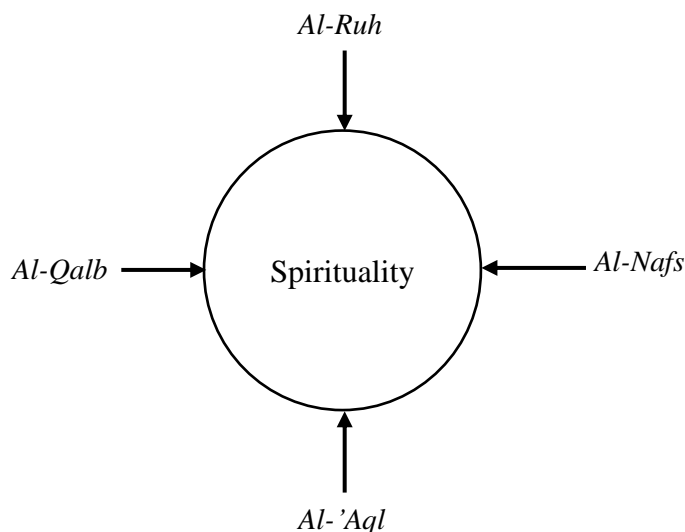


Figure 1. Spiritual Elements of Al-Ghazālī's Perspective

Al-Ghazālī's psycho-spiritual framework posits that the human essence comprises four fundamental elements: *Al-Nafs* (the self), *Al-Qalb* (the heart), *Al-Ruh* (the spirit), and *Al-'Aql* (the intellect). His consistent emphasis on this tetrad across his body of work demonstrates its centrality to his understanding of the human condition.

Al-Ghazālī's Perspective on Psycho-Spiritual Counselling Theory

While Al-Ghazālī does not provide a direct definition of counselling, his works extensively examine the concept through the term *al-irsyad*. According to his framework, spiritual counselling constitutes a method of guidance, instruction, and direction toward virtuous goals in accordance with Islamic law (Ezdanie & Tajudin, 2019; Fikri, 2024; S. Hamjah, 2018). This approach focuses on the core spiritual faculties of the human being—*Al-Nafs* (the self), *Al-Qalb* (the heart), *Al-Ruh* (the spirit), and *Al-'Aql* (the intellect). The counselling process integrates the principles of *ma'rifah an-nafs* (self-knowledge) and *tazkiyah al-nafs* (self-purification), aiming not merely to resolve immediate life problems but to foster holistic well-being and happiness in both this world and the hereafter (S. Hamjah, 2018). Ultimately, this perspective posits that true human fulfilment is achieved through a return to God (Ezdanie & Tajudin, 2019).

The psycho-spiritual counselling framework derived from Al-Ghazālī's teachings comprises a sequential process. It begins with self-recognition (*ma'rifah al-nafs*), progresses through the struggle of the soul (*mujahadah nafs*), and culminates in purification (*tazkiyah al-nafs*). The ultimate objective of this tripartite model is to facilitate the client's attainment of holistic well-being and ultimate happiness, encompassing both worldly and spiritual realms (*sa'ādah*), as defined in the Islamic tradition (S. Hamjah, 2018).

The practical application of Al-Ghazālī's psycho-spiritual counselling theory requires a structured process. As outlined by S. Hamjah (2022), this implementation

comprises five distinct stages: (a) establishing a therapeutic alliance; (b) self-recognition and identification of the problem's causes; (c) applying the *tazkiyah al-nafs* approach through the principle of *mujahadah al-nafs* (self-purification or *takhalli*); (d) applying the *tazkiyah al-nafs* approach through the principle of *riyadah al-nafs* (self-discipline or *tahalli*); and (e) evaluation and the attainment of well-being (*sa'adah*). Figure 2 illustrates this procedural framework.

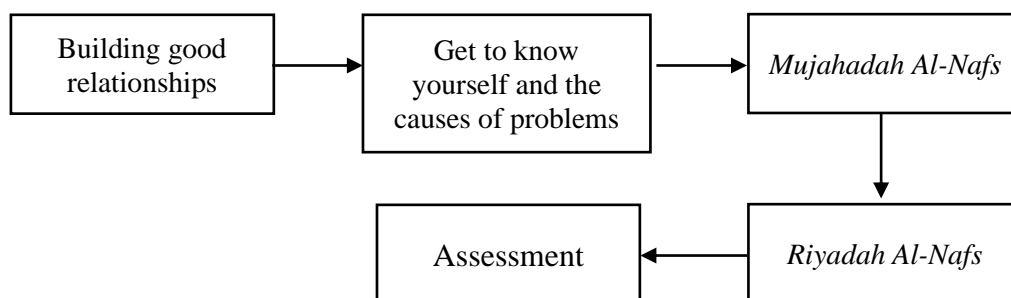


Figure 2. Flowchart of Al-Ghazālī's Psycho-spiritual Counselling Process

The initial stage of psycho-spiritual counselling involves establishing a strong therapeutic alliance (Hamjah, 2022). A positive counsellor-client relationship is a critical foundation for the entire process, as its absence can impede successful outcomes (Taufik & Yeni Karneli, 2017). This alliance fosters client trust and facilitates a secure environment for disclosure (S. Hamjah, 2018). To build this rapport, the counsellor must demonstrate genuine curiosity and a caring disposition. The primary objective is to understand the client's personal history and character. Essential counsellor attributes at this stage include sincerity, patience, empathy, and humility, along with the ability to maintain confidentiality and to listen actively (S. Hamjah, 2018). Within an Islamic psycho-spiritual framework, these behaviours are further intended to cultivate a sense of brotherhood and mutual love among Muslims.

The second stage involves client self-recognition to identify the reasons for their presenting issues. Clients must first acknowledge their personal strengths (*syarf al-nafs*) and weaknesses (*'uyub al-nafs*) to comprehend the roots of their problems, a necessary precursor to resolution. As Massuhartono & Mukaromah (2019) posit, self-knowledge is foundational to understanding others. In this stage, the counsellor facilitates an exploration of the client's concerns, specifically analysing how these issues relate to the client's intrinsic capacities and deficits. Highlighting a client's strengths may foster self-efficacy in overcoming challenges, while recognising weaknesses provides a critical opportunity for learning and preventing the repetition of maladaptive patterns. Counsellor analysis of client narratives is essential to pinpoint causal factors. This process aligns with Al-Ghazālī's framework for self-rectification, which includes: a) identifying the signs of spiritual disease (*qalb*); b) discerning the pathways through which negative influences enter the heart; c) acknowledging personal deficiencies; and d) recognising the heart's inherent instability.

The third stage of the intervention involves the application of *tazkiyah al-*

nafs (purification of the self), operationalised through the practice of *mujahadah al-nafs* (struggling against the self) or *al-takhalli* (emptying). From Al-Ghazālī's perspective, *tazkiyah al-nafs* is the process of cleansing the human soul from reprehensible traits (Arifin & Hamjah, 2017; N. B. Ismail & Hamjah, 2017). This process consists of two integral components: first, purifying the self of all *mazmumah* (vices) through *mujahadah al-nafs*, and second, cultivating virtuous qualities through *riyadah al-nafs* (self-discipline) or *al-tahalli* (adornment) (S. Hamjah, 2022). Al-Ghazālī identifies *mujahadah al-nafs* as a primary treatment for spiritual heart diseases (*amradh al-qalb*), as its objective is to empty the soul of pathological traits before filling it through devotion to Allah (SWT). Within the therapeutic context, the counsellor facilitates this by identifying the client's core issue, framing it as a spiritual pathology, and proposing *mujahadah al-nafs* as a structured solution.

The fourth stage involves applying the *tazkiyah al-nafs* approach through the principle of *riyadah al-nafs* (*al-tahalli*). At this level, the counsellor guides the client to fill the void left by purged negative traits with positive ones (S. Hamjah, 2022). This process integrates three core components of Islamic teachings: strengthening faith (*aqidah*), intensifying worship, and cultivating praiseworthy traits (*al-akhlaq al-mahmudah*). A soul imbued with these qualities may then serve as an impetus for virtuous behaviour, ultimately facilitating a life of inner peace (S. Hamjah, 2018).

The fifth and final stage of Al-Ghazālī's psycho-spiritual counselling model involves assessment and the attainment of *al-sa'adah* (happiness). This phase requires the counsellor to evaluate whether the intervention has successfully addressed the client's spiritual concerns (S. Hamjah, 2018). The evaluation focuses on two primary outcomes: the client's successful mitigation of their presenting problems and their progression toward happiness through the cultivation and application of Islamic knowledge (S. Hamjah, 2022). Furthermore, the counsellor appraises the methodological steps taken to facilitate this outcome. A comprehensive review of all preceding stages is essential, including rapport building, self-awareness, and problem identification, as well as the application of *tazkiyah al-nafs* through *mujahadah al-nafs* (*takhalli*) and *riyadah al-nafs* (*tahalli*). Should this evaluation reveal any deficiencies, further counselling may be indicated to ensure the therapeutic objectives are fully met.

Al-Ghazālī's psycho-spiritual framework centres on the *tazkiyah al-nafs* method, a process of soul purification achieved through *mujahadah al-nafs* (self-striving) and *riyadah al-nafs* (self-discipline). This model offers a structured approach for addressing a range of human existential and psychological challenges. For contemporary practice, Muslim counsellors can integrate this theory to facilitate client resilience and problem-solving. Effective implementation requires adapting therapeutic methods and media to align with client needs, thereby enhancing service efficacy (Wahid & Neviyarni, 2024).

CONCLUSION

Al-Ghazālī's psycho-spiritual counselling model offers an alternative therapeutic framework for alleviating client issues by integrating Islamic spirituality into the therapeutic process. This approach is grounded in four fundamental spiritual components of human nature, as delineated by Al-Ghazālī: *Al-Nafs* (the self), *Al-Qalb* (the heart), *Al-Ruh* (the spirit), and *Al-'Aql* (the intellect). The model posits that authentic well-being and happiness are achieved through the cultivation and reorientation of these components toward goodness and a divine connection with God (Allah SWT). The practical application of this model comprises five distinct stages: (1) establishing a therapeutic alliance; (2) self-recognition and problem identification; (3) implementing *tazkiyah al-nafs* (purification of the self) through the principle of *mujahadah al-nafs* (*takhalli*, or emptying vices); (4) implementing *tazkiyah al-nafs* through the principle of *riyadah al-nafs* (*tahalli*, or adorning with virtues); and (5) assessment. These findings suggest that Al-Ghazālī's model holds significant potential for counsellors, particularly within Muslim communities, as a structured, culturally grounded intervention.

The application of Al-Ghazālī's psycho-spiritual model within a modern, pluralistic context presents significant limitations. Its efficacy is primarily confined to clients who already subscribe to Islamic theistic principles, thereby restricting its utility for secular individuals or those from diverse faith traditions (Author, Year). A further challenge involves empirical validation, as the model's reliance on concepts such as *tazkiyah al-nafs* (purification of the self) and divine connection complicates assessment through conventional quantitative methodologies. The subjective and transcendent nature of these spiritual transformations eludes measurement by standard psychological scales, potentially impeding the model's integration into evidence-based therapeutic practice. Consequently, practitioners must exercise careful discernment, applying the model ethically and only when it aligns with a client's pre-existing value system, to avoid imposing an unsuitable religious framework.

To address these limitations and integrate the model into contemporary practice, future research should pursue several critical avenues. First, developing and validating culturally sensitive assessment tools is essential to quantify the nuanced spiritual and psychological changes the model facilitates. Second, longitudinal studies are needed to establish empirical evidence for the model's long-term efficacy in addressing specific client concerns, such as anxiety, depression, and existential crisis. Furthermore, comparative effectiveness research—contrasting this model with established secular therapies like Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) for Muslim populations—would clarify its unique contributions and potential for integration. Finally, investigating the development of principle-based adaptations could enhance the model's applicability. Such versions would retain the model's core ethical and philosophical foundations while using more universal language, thereby broadening its utility across religiously diverse clinical settings.

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