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### Managing Academic Anxiety and Cultivating Self-Kindness to Enhance Emotional Well-Being among Students at Nurul Qur'an Tahfidz Boarding School, MAN 1 Kudus

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#### Abstrak

This study explores the management of academic anxiety and the application of self-compassion to enhance the emotional well-being of students at Nurul Qur'an Tahfidz Boarding School, MAN 1 Kudus. Students in the tahfidz and academic programs often experience anxiety related to Qur'an memorization and examinations that require mastery within a limited timeframe. Using a qualitative approach through interviews and observations, this study investigates students' experiences in managing anxiety through self-compassion practices, prayer, dzikr, and social support from peers and mentors. The findings reveal that self-compassion, which includes self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness, plays a crucial role in reducing academic anxiety. Students who practice self-compassion are more able to accept failure as part of the learning process, remain calm, and stay focused during memorization and exams. Spiritual practices and social support also strengthen emotional well-being by fostering inner peace and solidarity. This study concludes that the integration of self-compassion, spiritual practices, and social support forms an effective strategy for managing academic anxiety and improving emotional well-being among students in Islamic boarding schools.

Keywords: Islamic boarding school, Qur'an memorization, self-compassion, emotional well-being, academic anxiety

#### Introduction

Adolescence is a crucial period in human development characterized by various physical, emotional, and psychological changes (Zaky, 2016, p. 115). During this phase, individuals begin to search for their identity and face numerous life challenges (Crocetti et al., 2025, p. 167). One major challenge commonly encountered by adolescents is

stress, both from personal and external factors (Luh et al., 2024, p. 11). Adolescent stress is often related to the pressure of meeting personal and others' expectations, as well as adapting to rapid life changes (Bau et al., 2022, p. 11). At this stage, adolescents are particularly vulnerable to stress that may affect their mental and emotional well-being (Muktar, 2025, p. 58).

Students, as part of the adolescent population, are among those most affected by stress (Addini et al., 2022, p. 108). In educational settings, student stress can stem from internal and external factors. Internal factors include pressure to achieve academic excellence, while external factors often involve parental expectations, peer comparisons, and social challenges (Mawakhira Yusuf & Ma'wa Yusuf, 2020, p. 357). Additionally, students frequently face workloads, exams, and memorization tasks that heighten their anxiety levels (Qisthi et al., 2024, p. 34).

Academic stress among adolescents is primarily caused by academic pressure to meet high standards (Hazlinda & Salim, 2023, p. 267). Social transitions—such as peer interactions, adapting to new environments, and the desire for social acceptance—further intensify emotional strain (Aqillah Salsabilah & Laily, 2025, p. 198). High parental expectations regarding academic and non-academic achievements often exacerbate students' anxiety (Nurdini & Neti Hernawati, 2023, p. 214). Moreover, concerns about the future, including career choices and social roles, impose unavoidable psychological burdens (Dwilianto et al., 2024, p. 8817). Collectively, these factors contribute to elevated stress levels that threaten adolescents' mental and emotional health.

Academic anxiety among adolescents, particularly students, has long been recognized as a complex and multifaceted issue (Stromájer et al., 2023, p. 1549). Adolescents undergoing psychological and identity transitions are highly susceptible to internal and external pressures that affect their mental health (Pfeifer & Berkman, 2018, p. 160). One of the main challenges they face is anxiety over academic achievement, encompassing not only exams and assignments but also heightened social expectations from parents and teachers (Jiang et al., 2022). Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), as faith-based educational institutions, introduce an additional dimension of academic stress, as students are required not only to excel academically but also to memorize the Qur'an within a limited timeframe—a process that can be mentally demanding (Hazlinda & Salim, 2023). These dual demands intensify emotional pressure, as students must balance both academic success and Qur'anic memorization.

Academic anxiety often disrupts students' concentration and performance, especially when expectations come from multiple sources, including self and others

(Rahmawati et al., 2017, p. 4). For many students, such anxiety stems from fear of failure and feelings of inadequacy when expectations are unmet (Apriawal et al., 2025, p. 12890). This phenomenon is exacerbated by social and cultural pressures that often demand seemingly unattainable academic success (Prasetyaningtyas et al., 2022, p. 108). Academic anxiety not only impairs academic performance but also deteriorates mental health, potentially leading to hopelessness or depression (Putra et al., 2023, p. 692).

In addition, managing academic anxiety requires a more holistic approach than relying solely on academic techniques. (Kurnia et al., 2024, p. 7007). One promising intervention is the application of the concept of self-compassion, which teaches individuals to be kind to themselves, accept imperfections, and deal with failure in a compassionate way (Febrianti & Boediman, 2024). Self-compassion not only reduces academic anxiety but also enhances students' emotional well-being (Sujadi, 2022). Students who apply self-compassion—such as self-empathy and non-judgment toward failure—tend to have better psychological well-being (Legi & Legi, 2025). Thus, self-compassion enables them to overcome excessive anxiety related to academic achievement and to reinterpret failure as a constructive part of learning that does not threaten self-worth.

However, self-compassion alone is insufficient. Spiritual practices also play an equally vital role in managing academic anxiety, especially within pesantren contexts (Amalia et al., 2025, p. 109). Spiritual activities such as prayer, dzikir, and congregational worship not only strengthen spiritual connection with God but also help reduce anxiety and stress (Khotimah & Nurjannah, 2024, p. 63). For many students, prayer and dzikir provide inner peace, helping them remain focused and calm during exams. Such spirituality offers both tranquility and deeper meaning to their struggles, viewing challenges as opportunities for spiritual growth and closeness to God (Nisa et al., 2024, p. 80).

In addition to internal factors like self-compassion and spirituality, social support among peers also plays a significant role in reducing academic anxiety (Amalia et al., 2025). Emotional support from peers helps students feel stronger in coping with academic stress (Aqillah Salsabilah & Laily, 2025). In pesantren, where intense social interactions occur, students who share experiences, motivate one another, and remind each other to pray before exams or memorization sessions create a familial environment that fosters emotional well-being (Triyuliasari et al., 2025). This social support not only includes motivation or help with memorization but also provides space for students to express fears and seek collective solutions, forming emotional solidarity that reduces isolation and rebuilds self-confidence (Bau et al., 2022).

Despite extensive studies on academic anxiety, self-compassion, and social support, there remains a clear gap in integrating students' lived experiences in managing their anxiety. Research combining academic anxiety, self-compassion, spirituality, and social support holistically within the *pesantren* context is still limited. Previous studies often overlook the subjective experiences and personal meanings that students attach to their struggles with academic anxiety. Moreover, few studies explore how these factors dynamically interact to help students manage stress during the process of learning and Qur'an memorization.

This study aims to fill that gap by exploring how the management of academic anxiety and the practice of self-compassion can enhance students' emotional well-being at Pondok Tahfidz Nurul Qur'an, Madrasah Aliyah Negeri 1 Kudus (PTNQ MAN 1 Kudus). PTNQ MAN 1 Kudus integrates formal education with Qur'an memorization programs. Students are required to follow the general curriculum while memorizing the Qur'an within structured timeframes, forming an educational model that unites religious and academic learning. The institution also provides religious activities such as congregational prayers, collective supplication, and religious studies to support the management of academic anxiety and maintain students' emotional well-being. The strong peer interaction within the boarding environment creates a supportive and familial atmosphere that helps students manage stress and challenges in memorizing the Qur'an while staying focused on their academic achievement at MAN 1 Kudus. This study is expected to provide deeper insights into the significance of social support and spiritual practice in managing academic anxiety and promoting emotional well-being among *pesantren* students.

### *Method*

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to explore in depth the management of academic anxiety and the application of self-compassion in enhancing the emotional well-being of students at Pondok Tahfidz Nurul Qur'an MAN 1 Kudus. The descriptive qualitative approach aims to provide a detailed, rich, and systematic description of a phenomenon as experienced by participants in their natural context (Sandelowski, 2000; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach was chosen because it enables the researcher to understand students' personal experiences concerning academic anxiety and the implementation of self-kindness when facing academic and spiritual challenges.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews and non-participant observation. Interviews were conducted with students enrolled in the Qur'an tahfidz

program as well as with teachers or ustadz involved in instruction. The interviews with students aimed to elicit their personal experiences regarding academic anxiety, memorization management, and the practice of self-compassion in coping with academic and spiritual pressures. Individual interviews used open-ended questions that encouraged personal reflection, covering participants' views on how they manage anxiety and stress and how self-compassion helps them cope with failures or difficulties in Qur'an memorization and academic examinations.

Interviews were also held with teachers or ustadz to obtain their perspectives on the management of academic anxiety in the pesantren and on the daily application of self-compassion among students. In addition, interviews with caregivers sought to explore the spiritual support provided to students in overcoming anxiety and how religious values—including prayer and dzikr—are integrated into learning activities to assist students in managing academic anxiety.

Interview and observation data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Each interview transcript was carefully read to identify patterns and themes related to academic anxiety, self-compassion, social support, and emotional well-being. The analysis process began with coding the data, classifying statements from students and caregivers into relevant categories. Subsequently, the main themes that emerged were examined to reveal relationships among self-compassion, anxiety management, and students' emotional well-being. The results of this analysis were used to provide an in-depth understanding of how self-compassion is practiced in the daily lives of students at Pondok Tahfidz Nurul Qur'an and how it contributes to the management of academic anxiety and their emotional well-being.

## **Results and Discussion**

### *Academic Anxiety of Students*

In this study, academic anxiety experienced by students at *Pondok Tahfidz Nurul Qur'an MAN 1 Kudus* emerged as an important factor influencing their emotional well-being. The interview results revealed that academic anxiety often appeared before both academic exams and Qur'an memorization tests. Most students reported feeling anxious as exams approached, whether academic or memorization-based. " When facing exams or memorization tests, I do feel a little anxious, especially as the exam day gets closer. I usually feel inner tension, but I try not to let the anxiety take control of me" (Albarky, 2025).

This sense of anxiety reflects the inner tension students experience when confronted with important exams, both academic and Qur'an memorization (Rusyaida, 2024, p. 83). Such tension seems to be influenced by high expectations from both themselves and others, particularly regarding Qur'an memorization, which is a crucial component of *pesantren* education (Qisthi et al., 2024). In this context, academic anxiety arises not only from uncertainty about exam results but also from self-doubt about meeting the memorization targets set by the institution.

Students who experience this form of anxiety often feel pressured when approaching memorization tests, as memorization is a fundamental part of their identity as *santri*. They fear forgetting verses or failing to recite them perfectly. "I worry if I forget any verse or can't memorize it perfectly" (Atha, 2025). This anxiety is intensified by limited time for memorization, creating uncertainty and heightened stress.

### *Academic Anxiety in Academic and Qur'an Memorization Exams*

The anxiety experienced by students during academic exams differs significantly from that during Qur'an memorization tests. In academic exams, students' anxiety is more related to their ability to complete questions correctly and achieve satisfactory scores., "Anxiety during academic exams is more about whether I can answer the questions correctly and get good results" (Atha, 2025). This anxiety is driven by the fear that they may not be able to meet expected academic standards, such as doing assignments correctly or achieving good grades (Prasetyaningtyas et al., 2022, p. 110).

Conversely, anxiety in Qur'an memorization tests focuses more on the memorization process itself—the ability to recall and recite verses fluently. One of the students explained, "For Qur'an memorization exams, my anxiety is more about whether I can recite smoothly and remember what I've studied" (Akram, 2025). This shows that anxiety related to memorization is more intense and personal because it involves concentration, persistence, and spiritual discipline (Lilis Kurniawati et al., 2024, p. 47).

Unlike academic exams, which assess cognitive mastery, memorization exams involve both cognitive and spiritual dimensions. Students often perceive failure in memorization not merely as an academic setback but as a spiritual shortcoming. One of the students added, "Usually, when memorizing, I worry about forgetting verses or not memorizing them perfectly" (Albarky, 2025).

### *Santri The Practice of Self-Compassion among Students*

Self-compassion is a psychological concept first introduced by Kristin Neff (Neff, 2012), defined as treating oneself with kindness during times of failure or difficulty. It comprises three components: self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness (Neff & Beretvas, 2013). Self-kindness refers to the ability to be kind to oneself in the face of adversity, shared humanity recognizes that failure and suffering are part of the universal human experience, while mindfulness means being able to view negative feelings or suffering in a balanced way without dwelling on those emotions. (Yarnell & Neff, 2013).

In the context of Islamic boarding school education, particularly at the Nurul Qur'an Tahfidz Islamic Boarding School of MAN 1 Kudus, the concept of self-compassion holds significant relevance. The educational environment in Islamic boarding schools often involves high levels of pressure, both in terms of academic performance and Qur'an memorization, which may lead to academic stress and anxiety among students. (Amalia et al., 2025). In addition to academic demands, students also face emotional and spiritual burdens as they are required to memorize the Qur'an within a relatively short period of time (Azmi & Casmini, 2022). This condition may increase their anxiety and feelings of inadequacy, which in turn can pose a risk to their emotional well-being.

Self-compassion offers a highly relevant approach in this context, as it helps students accept themselves even when they encounter failure or difficulties in memorization or academic examinations (Neff et al., 2005). By adopting an attitude of self-kindness, students can learn not to be overly harsh on themselves—a tendency that often arises when they feel they have failed or have not met high expectations, whether those expectations come from themselves or from others, such as dormitory supervisors or parents. "I always try not to be too hard on myself when I face failure or difficulties in studying or memorizing. I try to remind myself that I have done my best" (Albarky, 2025). This statement illustrates how self-compassion can facilitate students in accepting their failures without perceiving them as a reflection of diminished self-worth.

The relevance of self-compassion in Islamic boarding school education is also connected to how the sense of common humanity can alleviate the feelings of isolation often experienced by students (Amalia et al., 2025). In many boarding schools, students feel pressured to achieve high standards in both Qur'an memorization and academic performance. Through the understanding of common humanity, students are reminded that everyone experiences difficulties and failures, and that learning is a natural,

imperfect process. “I try to remind myself that I have done my best, and failure is part of the process” (Atha, 2025). This attitude demonstrates how self-compassion helps students view challenges as part of their spiritual and academic journey rather than as obstacles that hinder their progress.

Moreover, mindfulness also plays a crucial role in helping students manage the anxiety that arises during the memorization process and academic examinations (Yulianti & Wahyuni, 2023). Some students reported that they take time to reflect, pray, and rest as ways to remain calm and focused. This indicates that mindfulness enables students to become more aware of their thoughts and emotions without being overwhelmed by them, allowing them to manage anxiety more effectively.

### *Self-Compassion as a Stress Management Mechanism in the Memorization Process*

In the context of Islamic boarding school education, particularly at the *Nurul Qur'an Tahfidz Islamic Boarding School of MAN 1 Kudus*, the process of Qur'an memorization is a highly challenging task for students. In addition to the requirement of mastering memorization within a relatively short period of time, students often feel pressured by strict memorization targets and evaluative tests that determine their progress. The stress resulting from these memorization demands frequently leads to academic anxiety, which can negatively impact students' emotional well-being. However, self-compassion has been shown to be an effective tool in managing the stress that arises during the memorization process.

Findings from interviews indicate that self-compassion plays a significant role in helping students accept the difficulties they encounter in memorization and in reducing stress caused by performance pressure. “I try to remind myself that I have done my best, and that failure is part of the process” (Akram, 2025). his statement illustrates how the application of self-compassion enables students to forgive themselves when facing challenges in memorizing or when their performance does not meet institutional expectations (Febrianti & Boediman, 2024). Consequently, they become less self-critical-an attitude that often intensifies anxiety and stress.

Beyond self-kindness, the principle of common humanity is also applied in managing stress related to memorization. Students who practice self-compassion understand that they are not alone in experiencing difficulties or failures in memorization. “I try to remind myself that I have done my best, and that failure is part of the process” (Atha, 2025). By viewing failure as a natural part of the learning journey,

students are able to reduce feelings of hopelessness that often accompany setbacks. The principle of common humanity allows them to feel more valued and connected to their peers who face similar challenges (Falah, 2016).

One essential aspect of self-compassion in managing memorization-related stress is mindfulness. During the interviews, students expressed that they often take time to reflect or pray to calm their minds after feeling pressured by memorization tasks. “I often take a moment to rest—either by walking for a while or simply sitting and reflecting” (Albarky, 2025). This mindfulness practice helps students avoid being trapped in excessive anxiety that could hinder their memorization process (Khotimah & Nurjannah, 2024). They become more aware of their emotions and are better able to manage stress without being overwhelmed by negative feelings.

Furthermore, prayer and *tahajjud* (night prayer) play a major role in stress management during the memorization process. These spiritual practices provide the inner peace necessary for students to remain focused on their Qur’an memorization (Qurratina & Muhid, 2025). “I pray for calmness and strength. I also feel more at peace after performing prayer or *dhikr*” (Akram, 2025). Prayer and supplication serve as a means of surrendering to Allah, helping students relieve anxiety and feel empowered to overcome the challenges they face (Fadillah et al., 2025).

In this context, self-compassion functions as a highly effective stress management mechanism, allowing students to remain calm and focused despite the pressure to complete memorization within limited time constraints. Self-compassion provides students with the emotional space to accept themselves more fully, which helps them stay composed and resilient even when confronted with academic demands (Febrianti & Boediman, 2024).

### *The Impact of Self-Compassion on Students’ Emotional Well-Being*

The main finding of this study indicates that the practice of self-compassion has a highly positive impact on the emotional well-being of students at Nurul Qur’an Tahfidz Islamic Boarding School of MAN 1 Kudus. Based on interviews and observations, students who adopted self-compassion when facing academic and Qur’an memorization challenges tended to experience higher levels of emotional well-being compared to those who did not apply this principle.

Self-compassion functions as an effective stress management mechanism (Germer & Neff, 2019). When students encounter failure or difficulties in memorization or academic examinations, they are less likely to be trapped in deep disappointment or

frustration. Instead, they are able to view failure as a natural part of the learning process. “When my exam or memorization results do not meet expectations, I feel disappointed, but I try to accept it as part of the learning process” (Akram, 2025). This statement illustrates that through self-compassion, students can reduce excessive negative emotions and avoid being overwhelmed by feelings of failure that may harm their emotional well-being.

Self-compassion also helps students remain calm and focused despite experiencing academic anxiety and pressure in memorization (Neff et al., 2005). “I try to remind myself that I have done my best, and that failure is part of the process” (Albarky, 2025). By accepting failure as part of their personal journey, students are better able to manage emerging stress without allowing it to diminish their positive emotions or self-confidence.

Furthermore, self-compassion teaches students to be more patient and kind toward themselves, especially when facing challenges in memorization or academic assessments (Amalia et al., 2025). This attitude helps reduce anxiety that could interfere with their emotional well-being. “I always try not to be too hard on myself when I face failure or difficulties in studying or memorizing. I try to remind myself that I have done my best” (Atha, 2025). By accepting themselves, students feel more at peace and are better able to face challenges without being bound by negative emotions.

Prayer and spiritual practices also strengthen the positive impact of self-compassion on students’ emotional well-being (Legi & Legi, 2025). When students feel anxious or pressured, they often turn to prayer as a means of seeking inner peace and self-forgiveness. “I pray for calmness and strength. I also feel more peaceful after performing prayer or dhikr” (Albarky, 2025). Such practices provide a sense of tranquility that serves as emotional relief in facing academic anxiety and stress. These spiritual experiences add a deeper dimension to self-compassion, allowing students to feel more empowered to cope with stress and anxiety (Khotimah & Nurjannah, 2024).

Moreover, interview findings also revealed that students who practice self-compassion are more likely to communicate their concerns or emotions with peers or teachers. This reinforces their emotional well-being, as they do not feel isolated or alone in dealing with pressures (Qurratina & Muhid, 2025). “I also talk to my friends or teachers to gain moral support and advice so that I can recover” (Akram, 2025). By engaging in open communication, students feel supported and calmer, which contributes to a sense of security and enhances their overall emotional well-being.

## *Integrating Self-Compassion with Spiritual Practices in the Islamic Boarding School Context*

At the *Nurul Qur'an Tahfidz Islamic Boarding School of MAN 1 Kudus*, self-compassion is deeply integrated with spiritual practices, creating a holistic approach to managing academic anxiety and maintaining students' emotional well-being. Students do not rely solely on self-compassion as a psychological tool to reduce stress; rather, they connect it with essential spiritual practices that shape their daily lives, such as prayer (*shalat*), remembrance of God (*dhikr*), and communal worship (Fadillah et al., 2025).

Self-compassion, which involves the components of self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness, is highly relevant in the pesantren educational context, where students face significant challenges in memorizing the Qur'an within limited time frames while maintaining high academic standards (Amalia et al., 2025). This practice helps students accept themselves more fully when encountering difficulties or failures in memorization, giving them the emotional space to improve without feeling pressured or isolated. "I try to remind myself that I have done my best, and that failure is part of the process" (Atha, 2025). This statement reflects how self-compassion reduces feelings of hopelessness or frustration that often arise after failure, whether in academic examinations or Qur'an memorization.

The application of self-compassion is further strengthened through the integration of spiritual practices in students' daily routines. Prayer serves as a primary instrument of self-compassion, as students seek tranquility and strength to overcome their anxiety (Syahrudin & Bayhaqy, 2025). "I pray for calmness and strength. I also feel more peaceful after performing prayer or dhikr" (Albarky, 2025). These spiritual practices foster a sense of inner peace, which is vital for sustaining emotional well-being. Through prayer and *dhikr*, students also develop a stronger connection with Allah, giving them the assurance that they are not alone in their struggles (Febrianti & Boediman, 2024).

The integration between self-compassion and spiritual practice creates a comprehensive approach to managing academic anxiety at the *Nurul Qur'an Tahfidz Islamic Boarding School*. Students not only learn to be more patient and compassionate toward themselves but also find inner peace through their spiritual connection with Allah. This process enables them to reduce anxiety, cultivate calmness, and remain focused on their goals without being burdened by negative emotions or social comparison. Self-compassion, reinforced by spiritual practice, not only helps students

manage their anxiety but also provides them with a sense of safety and confidence in navigating the demanding educational process.

## **Conclusion**

This study demonstrates that the management of academic anxiety through the application of self-compassion has a significant impact on enhancing the emotional well-being of students at the Nurul Qur'an Tahfidz Islamic Boarding School, MAN 1 Kudus. Academic anxiety, which often arises in the context of Qur'an memorization tests and academic examinations, can be effectively managed through an approach that integrates self-compassion, spiritual practices, and social support.

The practice of self-compassion, encompassing the dimensions of self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness, has been shown to help students accept failures, reduce psychological pressure, and foster resilience after encountering academic challenges. Students who apply self-compassion principles tend to remain calm, patient with themselves, and better understand that failure is a natural part of the learning process.

The integration of self-compassion with spiritual practices such as prayer (doa), remembrance of God (dzikir), and night prayer (shalat malam) plays a vital role in reinforcing inner peace and emotional balance. These spiritual dimensions help students maintain a sense of connection with Allah, which in turn enhances their ability to manage stress and academic anxiety in a more adaptive and meaningful way.

Furthermore, social support among students significantly contributes to managing academic anxiety. Through shared prayers, mutual encouragement, and open discussions, students create a supportive and empathetic environment that reduces feelings of isolation and strengthens confidence and emotional stability when facing academic pressures.

Overall, this study provides valuable insights into how self-compassion, when integrated with spiritual practices and social support, contributes to students' emotional well-being. This holistic approach highlights the importance of Islamic boarding school education that not only emphasizes academic achievement but also nurtures mental health and emotional well-being as integral components of a quality Islamic education.

Future studies are recommended to conduct more comprehensive and quantitative research to measure the impact of self-compassion on students' emotional well-being using standardized instruments. Further research may also develop self-compassion-based intervention programs within the Islamic boarding school context

and examine their effectiveness in reducing academic anxiety while improving academic performance and emotional well-being. In addition, exploring external factors such as family support, social environment, and the cultural context of Islamic boarding schools would provide a more comprehensive and contextual understanding of sustainable strategies for managing academic anxiety and promoting emotional well-being in religious education settings.

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