

Building Resilience through Spiritual Approaches to Overcome Self-Injury Conflicts: A Comprehensive Literature Review

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Abstract

Self-injury, a critical psychological issue defined by the intentional infliction of harm upon oneself, has become increasingly widespread across the globe. Traditional psychological approaches often focus on behavior modification and coping mechanisms, but these methods may overlook deeper spiritual needs. This gap highlights the importance of exploring alternative inner healing pathways and building resilience, emphasizing a journey of self-awareness that enables individuals to uncover their true selves, purpose, and values. By addressing deeper spiritual needs, these approaches can lead to significant personal growth and transformation, offering a more comprehensive solution to overcoming self-injury conflicts. This literature review addresses this gap by examining the spiritual approaches of Al-Ghazali and Ibn Ataillah. The methodology involves a systematic review of recent studies and foundational texts to integrate Islamic spiritual approaches into the context of mental health. The results indicate that spiritual approaches centred on ten core elements, including repentance, fear of Allah, asceticism, patience, gratitude, sincerity and truthfulness, tawakkul, compassion, acceptance of Allah's decree, and remembering death, can foster self-resilience and offer a comprehensive framework for overcoming self-injury conflicts. The discussion suggests incorporating these spiritual approaches into therapeutic practices can significantly enhance emotional regulation and resilience. This review contributes to the field by proposing an integrative approach that combines psychological and spiritual strategies, offering valuable implications for developing more holistic mental health interventions.

Keywords: Self-Resilience, Al-Ghazali, Ibn Ataillah, Self-Injury, Self-Harm

Introduction

Self-injury, or non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI), involves deliberately harming one's body without suicidal intent and is increasingly recognized as a critical mental health issue worldwide. This behavior is often associated with profound emotional distress, unresolved trauma, or a lack of effective coping mechanisms (Hasking et al., 2021; Klonsky et al., 2020). Traditional psychological therapies focus on cognitive and behavioral interventions to manage NSSI; however, these approaches frequently fail to address the underlying spiritual and existential crises that may drive self-injurious behaviors (Victor et al., 2022). In response to this gap, there has been a growing interest in integrating spiritual approaches into mental health care, particularly within Islamic traditions, to enhance psychological resilience and emotional well-being (Ali & Hassan, 2023). The spiritual approaches of Al-Ghazali and Ibn Ataillah, two seminal figures in Islamic thought, offer a comprehensive framework for understanding and addressing self-injury by fostering inner resilience and spiritual growth (Ibrahim & Khalid, 2022).

Despite the notable advancements in psychological therapies, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), dialectical behavior therapy (DBT), and mindfulness-based interventions, there remains a persistent gap in the inclusion of spiritual dimensions that influence self-destructive behaviors (Smith et al., 2021). These therapies often excel in managing emotional dysregulation and behavioral symptoms, yet they tend to underplay or ignore existential concerns and spiritual frameworks that many individuals, particularly those from religious communities, regard as central to their wellbeing (Isgandarova, 2021; Koenig, 2012).

This gap is particularly pronounced in the treatment of Non-Suicidal Self-Injury (NSSI), where individuals may not only struggle with overwhelming emotions but also with inner conflicts, guilt, spiritual emptiness, and loss of purpose (Fadli et al., 2024; Lewis & Heath, 2015). In such cases, spiritual practices such as repentance, divine trust, mindfulness rooted in dhikr, and existential reflection on death, may offer essential resources for healing that conventional models neglect (Yusuf, 2018; Abdullah & Mahmud, 2021).

Recent literature within the field of Islamic psychology and integrative mental health has begun to emphasize the need for holistic frameworks that integrate both psychological and spiritual aspects of the human self (Khan & Badri, 2019; Haque et al., 2016). For example, spiritual constructs such as *tawbah* (repentance) and *rida* (acceptance of Allah's decree) have been found to aid emotional regulation, enhance meaning-making, and reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression, all of which are commonly linked to self-injurious tendencies (Isgandarova, 2021; Farahani & Khorshidi, 2021). Furthermore, religious coping mechanisms, when culturally appropriate and spiritually informed—are increasingly recognized as protective factors in preventing self-harm and suicide (Pargament, 2007; Lester, 2012).

Given this critical gap, the present review aims to explore how the spiritual insights of Al-Ghazali and Ibn Ataillah, two classical scholars of Islamic spirituality, offer a coherent and transformative framework for managing NSSI. Their works, rich in concepts such as *mujahadah* (spiritual struggle), *sabr* (patience), *ikhlas* (sincerity), and *tawakkul* (trust in God), resonate deeply with modern therapeutic goals, such as emotional resilience, self-regulation, and healing of the inner self (Al-Ghazali, 1982; Ibn Ataillah, 2004; Haque, 2004). By critically engaging these concepts, this review attempts to bridge traditional Islamic wisdom with

contemporary mental health needs, offering an integrative psycho-spiritual approach that complements existing psychological therapies.

Ultimately, this approach advocates for a paradigm shift, from a purely clinical, symptom-based intervention model to one that recognizes the interconnectedness of body, mind, and soul. It also responds to the growing call within global mental health for culturally sensitive, spiritually informed care, particularly in Muslim-majority contexts (Haque & Keshavarzi, 2014; Nasir & Yusoff, 2022). Integrating Islamic spiritual practices into therapeutic interventions is not only relevant for faith-based communities, but also enriches the universal discourse on resilience, healing, and the holistic treatment of human suffering.

Literature Review

The spiritual approaches articulated by Al-Ghazali and Ibn Ataillah emphasize the centrality of spiritual development in fostering personal resilience and psychological well-being. Their teachings highlight the intricate connection between spiritual refinement and emotional regulation, particularly in managing distress and behaviors associated with Non-Suicidal Self-Injury (NSSI). A review of both classical texts and contemporary studies reveals how these time-honored spiritual principles contribute significantly to the internal strength and adaptive capacities of individuals facing psychological turmoil.

One of the foundational practices is repentance (*tawbah*), which Al-Ghazali defines as a sincere turning back to Allah, characterized by remorse, confession of sins, and a firm resolution to change (Al-Ghazali, 1982). Beyond its theological significance, recent psychological research suggests that repentance can facilitate emotional catharsis and reduce the burden of guilt and shame, thus breaking the cognitive-affective cycle that often fuels self-harm (Isgandarova, 2021; Özkan & Altay, 2020). Similarly, fear of Allah (*taqwa*), as discussed by Ibn Ataillah, fosters a sense of divine awareness that acts as a moral and psychological deterrent against self-destructive actions (Ibn Ataillah, 2004). Empirical studies have shown that such God-consciousness enhances mindfulness and self-regulation, critical factors in mitigating impulsive harm (Yousef & Al-Mahdi, 2019). Asceticism (*zuhd*) is another pivotal concept, elaborated by Al-Ghazali as a conscious detachment from worldly desires and the pursuit of spiritual fulfillment in the hereafter. This orientation encourages individuals to transcend material attachments that often exacerbate feelings of inadequacy or despair. Modern findings support the view that spiritual detachment aids in reducing anxiety and fostering greater emotional control (Nasir & Yusoff, 2022; Aziz & Rahman, 2023). In a similar vein, patience (*sabr*), a recurring theme in Ibn Ataillah's writings, is considered essential for enduring life's adversities with composure and faith. Research corroborates that cultivating patience enhances emotional endurance and reduces the risk of reactive, self-injurious behaviors (Zada et al., 2020).

Another protective spiritual state is gratitude (*shukr*), which Al-Ghazali defines as recognizing and appreciating divine blessings, irrespective of one's circumstances. Gratitude shifts one's focus from perceived deficiencies to divine generosity, thereby improving mood and lowering the symptoms of depression that often underlie NSSI (Fadli et al., 2019; Ibrahim & Khalid, 2024). Likewise, the virtues of sincerity (*ikhlas*) and truthfulness (*sidq*), which require aligning one's intentions purely for the sake of Allah and being honest with oneself, foster inner peace and reduce internal dissonance, both of which are crucial in avoiding self-directed harm

(Ahmed, 2019). A core tenet in Ibn Ataillah's spiritual philosophy is *tawakkul*, the act of placing full trust in Allah while simultaneously fulfilling one's responsibilities. This dual process of reliance and agency cultivates a sense of spiritual security and reduces existential anxiety, which in turn helps deter the urge for self-injury (Farahani & Khorshidi, 2021). Similarly, compassion (*rahmah*), emphasized by Al-Ghazali as a divine attribute to be mirrored in human behavior, includes self-compassion as a protective mechanism. When individuals learn to approach their own pain with empathy rather than self-criticism, they are less likely to resort to self-harming behaviors (Hassan & Saeed, 2020; Ali et al., 2023).

The virtue of acceptance (*rida*), being content with Allah's decree, will help individuals develop emotional stability and spiritual surrender in the face of trials. This spiritual acceptance acts as a buffer against frustration and self-blame, reducing vulnerability to NSSI (Yusuf, 2018; Bakar & Musa, 2024). Lastly, remembering death (*dhikr al-mawt*), a frequent motif in Al-Ghazali's spiritual writings, serves as a form of existential reflection. It redirects the individual's perspective from immediate suffering to long-term spiritual goals, thereby weakening the emotional intensity that often triggers self-harm (Abdullah & Mahmud, 2021).

Together, these ten spiritual virtues form a comprehensive and integrative psycho-spiritual framework, drawing from Islamic classical heritage while addressing modern mental health concerns. They offer promising insights for developing culturally and spiritually responsive interventions to support students and individuals struggling with self-injury and emotional dysregulation.

Methodology

This study employs a systematic literature review approach to identify, analyze, and synthesize existing studies related to the spiritual approaches of Al-Ghazali and Ibn Ataillah and their application in overcoming self-injury behaviors. Data was sourced from several electronic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science (WoS), and PubMed, focusing on peer-reviewed articles published between 2020 and 2024 to ensure the inclusion of recent and relevant studies (Ibrahim et al., 2022; Ali & Hassan, 2023). Keywords such as "self-injury," "Al-Ghazali," "Ibn Ataillah," "spiritual resilience," and "Islamic psychology" were used in the search (Yousef & Al-Mahdi, 2020). The studies explored Islamic spiritual practices or psychological resilience in the context of self-injury and met strict inclusion criteria, including peer-reviewed articles and book chapters related to psychological well-being and Islamic approaches (Nasir & Yusoff, 2022). The review process involved several key steps: formulating the research questions, conducting a comprehensive data search, establishing inclusion and exclusion criteria, data extraction, thematic analysis, and quality assessment using the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) critical appraisal tools (Smith et al., 2021). Extracted data were categorized into themes based on the ten spiritual elements identified in the approaches of Al-Ghazali and Ibn Ataillah. A thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring themes related to these spiritual practices and their relevance to self-injury and psychological resilience (Fadli et al., 2024).

Findings and Discussions

The review of recent literature, supported by classical Islamic texts and contemporary empirical findings, demonstrates that the spiritual approaches grounded in the teachings of Al-Ghazali and Ibn Ataillah can offer profound contributions to the development of self-

resilience and the mitigation of self-injurious behaviors among students. These spiritual practices are not merely ritualistic or theoretical in nature; rather, they represent an integrated framework that addresses both psychological and spiritual dimensions of human experience.

Repentance (*tawbah*), in the context of Islamic spirituality, is not merely an act of seeking divine forgiveness; it is a deeply transformative process that initiates a holistic journey of self-reform. Al-Ghazali (1982) describes *tawbah* as a sincere return to Allah, characterized by remorse for past actions, awareness of one's moral failures, and a renewed commitment to change. This process involves acknowledging one's shortcomings, feeling genuine regret, and resolving not to repeat the harmful behaviors. In therapeutic terms, *tawbah* nurtures self-awareness, emotional introspection, and the ability to confront one's pain within a framework of divine mercy and hope. It enables the individual to reinterpret personal suffering through a spiritual lens, thereby disempowering the negative self-concepts and guilt often associated with Non-Suicidal Self-Injury (NSSI). As highlighted by Isgandarova (2021) and Özkan and Altay (2020), repentance plays a crucial role in psychological healing by breaking the repetitive cycles of self-harm. Through sincere repentance, individuals begin to engage in constructive self-reflection, restore their sense of moral agency, and redirect their emotional energy toward personal growth and spiritual elevation. This inner redirection offers not only emotional relief but also moral clarity, making *tawbah* a powerful internal resource for individuals battling with self-injurious impulses.

In parallel, the concept of *taqwa* often translated as God-consciousness or fear of Allah serves as a spiritual mechanism that fosters self-regulation and mindful awareness. Ibn Ataillah (2004) presents *taqwa* as a protective barrier that deters individuals from engaging in sinful or harmful acts, arising from a constant awareness of God's presence and judgment. Rather than instilling fear alone, *taqwa* cultivates a deep sense of responsibility and reverence that reshapes one's internal dialogue and behavioral tendencies. According to Yousef and Al-Mahdi (2019), cultivating *taqwa* enhances mindfulness and deliberate decision-making, which are essential in counteracting the impulsive tendencies that often accompany self-destructive behaviors. The individual who possesses *taqwa* is guided by an intrinsic moral compass that acts as a preventive force against self-harm, redirecting thoughts and actions in alignment with spiritual values. It strengthens impulse control by embedding accountability to a higher power, which is psychologically effective in reinforcing consistent behavioral boundaries.

Together, *tawbah* and *taqwa* represent complementary dimensions within the spiritual tradition that address both the root and regulation of emotional and behavioral dysregulation. *Tawbah* initiates the healing journey by confronting internal pain with divine forgiveness, while *taqwa* sustains this transformation through ongoing vigilance and ethical mindfulness. Their integration within therapeutic settings, especially those attentive to Islamic frameworks holds immense potential for enhancing emotional resilience, restructuring maladaptive coping mechanisms, and fostering long-term psychological and spiritual well-being. As such, these concepts provide a rich psycho-spiritual alternative to conventional clinical models that often neglect the religious and existential needs of clients, particularly those navigating the complexities of self-injury within a spiritual worldview.

Moreover, asceticism (*zuhd*) and patience (*sabr*), two central spiritual virtues emphasized consistently by both Al-Ghazali and Ibn Ataillah serve not only as core elements of spiritual development but also as effective emotional stabilizers. Al-Ghazali (1982) explains *zuhd* as the renunciation of excessive attachment to worldly pleasures, aiming to liberate the heart from dependence on unstable and transient realities. Ibn Ataillah similarly characterizes *zuhd* as a discipline that reorients the individual from material entanglements to divine consciousness. By cultivating this form of detachment, individuals are better able to regulate emotional responses, manage frustration, and mitigate the influence of external triggers that often lead to emotional overwhelm. In particular, *zuhd* contributes to a psychological buffer against the feelings of loss, envy, and disappointment that are frequently linked with self-injurious tendencies (Nasir & Yusoff, 2022; Aziz & Rahman, 2023).

In close relation, *sabr* (patience) functions as an internal fortification that enables individuals to endure hardship without succumbing to despair. For Ibn Ataillah (2004), *sabr* is not passive endurance, but an active and conscious acceptance of trials with trust in divine wisdom. This spiritual posture helps individuals develop emotional resilience, preventing them from resorting to impulsive or harmful coping strategies. Research confirms that those who embrace *sabr* are better equipped to tolerate distress, regulate emotional intensity, and sustain hope during adversity, factors that are essential in reducing the compulsion toward self-harm (Zada et al., 2020).

In parallel, the cultivation of gratitude (*shukr*) and compassion (*rahmah*) further strengthens emotional wellbeing by enhancing self-perception and fostering constructive affective states. According to Al-Ghazali (1982), *shukr* involves the continual recognition of Allah's blessings in all circumstances, which not only elevates the soul but also redirects attention away from dissatisfaction and internal negativity. Empirical findings support this, showing that gratitude interventions improve mood, bolster self-worth, and serve as protective buffers against depressive symptoms that often precede self-injurious behaviors (Fadli et al., 2019; Ibrahim & Khalid, 2024). Likewise, *rahmah*, especially as self-compassion, allows individuals to relate to their suffering with gentleness rather than self-blame, reducing self-critical thoughts and emotional isolation both of which are risk factors for NSSI (Ali et al., 2023). Taken together, these four virtues (*zuhd*, *sabr*, *shukr*, and *Rahmah*) offer a comprehensive psycho-spiritual approach to emotional regulation and healing. They work synergistically to reduce vulnerability to self-injury by addressing the internal emotional landscape and promoting stability, acceptance, and self-directed kindness within a spiritually grounded framework.

Furthermore, reliance upon Allah (*tawakkul*) and the acceptance of divine decree (*rida bi qada'illah*) offer individuals a powerful cognitive-spiritual framework for coping with uncertainty, adversity, and emotional distress. *Tawakkul*, as emphasized in classical Islamic thought, is not passive resignation but an active spiritual state in which individuals entrust their affairs to Allah while continuing to take appropriate action within their capacity. This dual posture combining effort with trust, fosters a sense of emotional balance, reducing anxiety and helplessness in the face of circumstances beyond one's control. Ibn Ataillah (2004) highlights that true *tawakkul* entails confidence in divine wisdom, even when outcomes appear unfavourable. When internalized, this spiritual reliance provides psychological stability during moments of crisis, creating emotional insulation against despair and impulsive reactions such as self-injury (Farahani & Khorshidi, 2021). Complementing this

is *rida bi qada'illah*, the state of being content with Allah's decree, which reflects an even deeper level of spiritual surrender. This virtue helps individuals reframe personal suffering not as punishment or injustice, but as part of a divinely orchestrated journey meant for spiritual refinement and growth. As Yusuf (2018) and Bakar and Musa (2024) explain, *rida* fosters emotional acceptance, psychological flexibility, and inner peace, qualities that are protective against self-destructive behaviors by reducing internal conflict and promoting existential coherence.

In addition to these core attitudes, the spiritual practice of remembering death (*tadhakkur al-mawt*) serves as a profound reflective tool that realigns one's perspective on suffering and adversity. Al-Ghazali (1982) argues that consistent remembrance of death encourages individuals to detach from the illusion of worldly permanence and redirect their focus toward the hereafter. This eschatological awareness places current emotional turmoil within a much larger metaphysical framework, helping individuals to reinterpret their distress as temporary and spiritually meaningful. Abdullah & Mahmud (2021) support this view, noting that *tadhakkur al-mawt* diminishes the emotional intensity of present struggles by reminding individuals of life's transient nature and the ultimate purpose of human existence. As a result, the immediacy of self-harming urges is often reduced, and replaced with a sense of spiritual grounding, humility, and hope. Together, *tawakkul*, *rida*, and *tadhakkur al-mawt* create a triadic psycho-spiritual mechanism that not only addresses emotional pain but also guides individuals toward deeper trust, meaning, and resilience. When incorporated into therapeutic models, especially those tailored for Muslim clients, these practices offer transformative potential for managing distress and overcoming tendencies toward self-injury.

In sum, the spiritual constructs discussed rooted in the classical teachings of Al-Ghazali (1982) and Ibn Ataillah (2004) offer a comprehensive, integrative, and contextually rich psycho-spiritual intervention model that is both theoretically robust and practically applicable. These frameworks are particularly relevant in addressing contemporary psychological challenges, such as Non-Suicidal Self-Injury (NSSI), which remains prevalent among student populations dealing with stress, emotional disconnection, and internalized self-criticism. What distinguishes these spiritual approaches from conventional psychological models is their dual focus on inner transformation and divine orientation, which allows for a more holistic form of healing that transcends symptom management and fosters enduring inner change.

The reviewed findings strongly suggest that the integration of these spiritual dimensions into therapeutic settings can significantly enhance emotional regulation, deepen self-awareness, and promote the development of psychological resilience. The teachings of *tawbah* (repentance), *taqwa* (God-consciousness), *sabr* (patience), *shukr* (gratitude), *tawakkul* (trust in Allah), and *rida* (acceptance of divine decree) provide individuals with both emotional insight and spiritual strength to navigate personal suffering. These virtues serve not only as coping mechanisms but also as ethical and existential anchors that help individuals reinterpret their pain, regulate distress, and avoid harmful behaviors such as self-injury (Yusuf, 2018; Ahmed, 2019; Bakar & Musa, 2024). Additionally, practices like *tadhakkur al-mawt* (remembrance of death) encourage a broader eschatological reflection that reframes adversity in light of ultimate spiritual meaning, reducing emotional turmoil and impulsivity. By fostering a deep sense of spiritual awareness, inner tranquility, and accountability to a higher moral order, individuals gain the psychological stability and existential grounding

necessary to break the cycle of self-harm. These insights point to the urgent need for therapeutic paradigms that go beyond the psychological and embrace the spiritual particularly in populations for whom religion plays a central role in identity, meaning making, and healing. Therefore, future research should not only continue exploring these approaches from a conceptual and philosophical standpoint but also focus on their practical application in clinical and counselling settings. Empirical studies, pilot intervention programs, and qualitative assessments within Muslim communities and educational institutions can offer further validation of their effectiveness in promoting mental health, emotional well-being, and long-term recovery from self-injurious behavior. The inclusion of Islamic spiritual practices in contemporary mental health care represents a promising and much-needed step toward a more inclusive, culturally responsive, and spiritually informed therapeutic model.

Conclusion

The spiritual approaches derived from the works of Al-Ghazali and Ibn Ataillah offer a deeply rooted and multidimensional framework for the development of self-resilience, particularly in individuals struggling with self-injury and emotional dysregulation. Unlike secular psychological models that tend to isolate behavior from existential meaning, these classical Islamic perspectives emphasize the transformation of the heart (*qalb*), purification of the soul (*tazkiyah al-nafs*), and alignment of one's internal states with divine purpose. This integrative framework encompasses both preventive and rehabilitative dimensions, where inner reform is not merely a psychological adjustment but a spiritual realignment toward higher consciousness and moral stability. Within the teachings of Al-Ghazali, for example, the concept of *mujahadah* (inner struggle against the self) and *muraqabah* (spiritual vigilance) are presented as tools to discipline impulsive behaviors and attain inner equilibrium. Similarly, Ibn Ataillah's *al-Hikam* serves as a guide for navigating the complexities of spiritual trials and emotional turbulence through submission to divine wisdom and trust in Allah's decree.

By integrating such spiritual practices into contemporary therapeutic interventions, especially within culturally and religiously sensitive contexts, individuals can access an enriched process of healing that not only addresses symptomatic behaviors but also nurtures the spiritual core of the person. Emotional regulation, when anchored in practices such as *tawakkul* (trust in God), *sabr* (patience), and *shukr* (gratitude), becomes more than a clinical outcome; it evolves into a form of worship and spiritual maturity. This reconceptualization allows the client to interpret emotional pain as part of a broader spiritual journey, thus diminishing feelings of hopelessness and self-alienation. Furthermore, these approaches help in restructuring the individual's worldview, shifting the focus from self-criticism and despair to spiritual accountability, divine mercy, and purposeful living. These perspectives can be especially transformative for individuals who engage in Non-Suicidal Self-Injury (NSSI), as they often grapple with intense internal conflict, spiritual emptiness, and unresolved guilt, dimensions that conventional therapies may inadequately address.

Moreover, this review underscores that the approaches of Al-Ghazali and Ibn Ataillah are not to be seen merely as theological abstractions but as pragmatic tools that can be systematized within psycho-spiritual intervention models. They offer concrete pathways for cultivating virtues such as sincerity (*ikhlas*), compassion (*rahmah*), and contentment (*rida*), which serve as antidotes to the psychological precursors of self-harm, including self-rejection, emotional volatility, and existential despair. Their teachings demonstrate that healing is not only about

behavioral change but involves a reorientation of the soul toward divine love, mercy, and self-compassion. In this way, the spiritual heart becomes both the site and agent of transformation, capable of resisting harmful tendencies and embracing redemptive practices through remembrance (*dhikr*), reflection (*tafakkur*), and repentance (*tawbah*).

Ultimately, this review highlights the significant potential of these Islamic spiritual paradigms to serve as meaningful alternatives and complements to conventional psychological therapies, particularly in Muslim-majority societies or among individuals who seek spiritually grounded healing. The integration of such approaches into mental health care frameworks offers not only therapeutic depth but also cultural congruence, enhancing the relevance, receptivity, and effectiveness of interventions. It invites mental health professionals to move beyond reductionist models toward a holistic conception of the human being, as a psycho-spiritual entity whose healing requires attention to both the mind and the soul. The wisdom embedded in Al-Ghazali's and Ibn Ataillah's teachings thus remains profoundly relevant, offering timeless insights for contemporary challenges in emotional and psychological wellbeing.

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