

The Effectiveness Of Writing The Letter Of Gratitude Technique In Reducing The Stress Level Of Islamic Boarding School Student

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Abstract

Stress can cause various problems that disrupt the life of students and their educational process at the boarding school. This study aims to see the effectiveness of writing a letter of gratitude in reducing stress levels of the students at the Darul Arqam Gombara Islamic Boarding School Makassar. This study is an experimental research used pretest-posttest control group design. The subjects in this study found 14 people (8 people in the experimental group and 6 people in the control group) who were students who indicated experiencing stress. The measuring instrument used in this study is the stress level scale compiled by the researcher, with a reliability value of 0.785. Analysis of the data used is nonparametric analysis with the Mann Whitney U-test method. The results of this study indicate that the intervention of writing a letter of gratitude is effective in reducing stress levels in students. These results can be seen from the significant difference after being given treatment in the experimental group and the control group with a p-value = 0.029 ($p < 0.05$) with a mean of 8.81 for the experimental group and a mean of 4.1 for the control group. As the conclusion, the technique of writing gratitude letters is effective in reducing the stress level of students, so it can be used by students who have high stress levels.

Keywords: Boarding School Student, Stress Level, Writing Gratitude

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Introduction

Individuals in their lives will find various kind of problems that might become a stressor. Stressors can have two different impacts, divided to positive impacts (eustress) and negative impacts (distress). Stressors will have a positive impact, if it able to improve individual performance. Conversely, if stress is not addressed properly it will have a negative impact on individuals in adapting and adjusting to their environment, so that individuals will experience distress. The individual's ability to deal with stressors well will become eustress and make individuals develop, this including students who are taking the learning process at school, especially in Islamic boarding schools (Kaswan, 2017).

Government Regulation of the Republic of Indonesia Number 55 of 2007 concerning Religious Education explains that Islamic boarding schools are a community-based Islamic education institutions that provide an integrated manner with other types of education. Students who study in Islamic boarding schools are referred to as *Santri*. Islamic boarding schools use a curriculum that is not much different from schools in general with the addition of a religious curriculum and activities as well as solid rules in the boarding school environment. So, students are not only required to adapt to all the rules that apply in Islamic boarding schools, but they are also required to be able to adapt to new environments and places, new socio-cultural

conditions, and including new people they meet.

All demands in boarding school lives can provide distress such as threats to the welfare and integrity of individuals (Prawitasari, 2011). This distress causes problems for the students. Saputri and Nashori (2015) state that the problems that are often experienced by students, namely not feeling at home in boarding schools, often complaining of illness, fighting among students, and feeling burdened by rote targets, are indications of stress for students. Students who experience symptoms of stress show unfavorable behaviors such as irritability, often feel sick, have difficulty concentrating, and cry easily.

Oltmanns and Emery (2012) revealed that stress is a challenging event and requires physiological, cognitive, or behavioral adjustments. Stress is a difficult life event regardless of the individual's reaction to it and is an event that makes the individual threatened and burdened. Siswanto (2007) revealed that stress is often understood negatively, whereas stress in optimal levels will make individuals productive. The stress that causes a negative influence is too low stress; so that it will cause boredom, low motivation, frequent truancy, and lethargy, and too high stress; will cause symptoms of insomnia, irritability, often make mistakes, and feel indecisive.

Based on the results of the initial data, researchers used the DASS scale (Depression, Anxiety, Stress Scale) belonging to Crawford and Henry (2003) which was distributed to 102 new students at the Darul Arqam Islamic Boarding School Makassar, it is known that as many as 45 students indicated experiencing stress. 62.2% of students have adjustment problems; 48.9% of students have problems with social support; 53.3% of students have environmental problems. These findings indicate that new students experience stress in Islamic boarding schools. Students who are indicated to be stressed usually do not obey the

school rules, do not focus when studying, and are often aloof and silent.

Symptoms of stress can be characterized from several biological, cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal symptoms in the individual. Biological symptoms that occur include headaches, back problems, sleep disturbances, constipation, diarrhea, and excessive sweating. Cognitive symptoms that occur include disturbed memory, impaired attention and concentration, difficulties in decision making, less productive, decreased sense of humor, and feeling distracted. Emotional symptoms experienced such as irritability, excessive anxiety, restlessness, always worrying, decreased self-esteem, feeling sad, and experiencing depression. Meanwhile, the interpersonal symptoms experienced, namely the disruption of the individual's daily life, tend to be negative, such as silent to other, likes to find other fault, closes themselves excessively, loses trust in others, often cancels appointments, and often defends themselves (Hardjana, 1994).

Individuals who have the status of santri are in the adolescent age group so that they are expected to be able to survive all forms of stressors that may occurs in life, because adolescence is a transitional period that is very vulnerable to stress. During adolescence, individuals experience periods of storms and stresses that make adolescents unstable from time to time (Hurlock, 2002). The way an individual chooses to deal with stress plays an important role in determining an individual's psychological and physical health (Nevid, 2017). Individuals who are able to cope well with stressors will make the individual develop. However, individuals have a limited ability to deal with stress so that if the stressor faced exceeds the individual's ability, it will cause stress.

Stress can be managed in various ways, such as rational emotive therapy, meditation,

relaxation, and practicing religious teachings. One of the practices of religious teachings is gratitude that able to overcome stress in a positive and constructive way (Yusuf, 2004). This is in accordance with research from Abdillah (2014) at the Assalam Islamic Boarding School by taking 81 senior high school students as subjects, showing that there is a relationship between gratitude and stress. Moosath and Jayaseelan (2016) stated that gratitude can reduce stress and increase individual happiness as a form of positive emotion. Isik and Erguner-Tekinalp (2017) state that gratitude interventions can help increase positive emotions. Ahmed (2016) states that gratitude which is a form of positive thoughts to God Almighty for an individual's life can regulate stress.

In addition, Emmons and Stern (2013) research shows that gratitude is one of the factors that can overcome stress, increase resilience in the face of trauma due to stress, recover from illness faster, and be physically healthy. In fact, the process of gratitude is a thought process that will affect an individual's behavior and mood. The gratitude process that goes well will have a positive impact on the individual. Individuals who think about positive things from negative events that occur can block stress from arising. Individuals who experience stress at work can try to think of things that are fun at work and will help prevent stress from arising. Cahyono (2014) states that grateful individuals will see the conditions they experience from a positive perspective, so that individuals are motivated to improve their performance as a form of gratitude.

Goerling (2016) reveals that the form of expressing gratitude can be in the form of writing both a gratitude journal and a gratitude letter that can provide benefits for individuals. Emmons and McCullough's research developed by Toepfer and Walker (2009) makes the expression of gratitude in the form

of a letter of gratitude and its benefits in increasing happiness. Dewanto and Retnowati (2015) summarize several studies on gratitude letters, namely individuals who write gratitude letters have positive feelings and increase individual gratitude. According to the literature on the research of Toepfer, Cichy, and Peters (2012) stated that writing gratitude letters is part of expressive writing.

Expressive writing can have a positive impact on individuals both physically and psychologically. Pennebaker and Beall (1986) stated that expressive writing is the expression of feelings, thoughts, and experiences in writing words. The results of research from Lyubomirsky, Sousa, and Dickerhoof (2006) found that writing and telling stories about individual experiences for a day can increase individual positive emotions for four weeks after the study was conducted. Based on these results, it can be concluded that expressive writing has a positive impact on individuals. This study focuses on the intervention of expressing gratitude through writing, namely by writing a letter of gratitude. Besides that, the reason why the researcher chose the intervention of writing a letter of gratitude was that this intervention used a simple, easy-to-apply media, and a religious boarding school environment.

Based on the description above, the researchers are interested in conducting research on the effectiveness of the gratitude letter technique in reducing stress levels in students at the Darul Arqam Gombara Islamic Boarding School. It is hoped that the letter of gratitude can be one of the solutions to reduce stress levels in all circles, especially among *santri* (students).

Research Methods

This research is an experimental study with a research design in the form of a pretest-posttest control group design. The gratitude letter writing activity was carried out for 5

consecutive days (22-26 April 2019) with a maximum duration of 25 minutes. The process of implementing gratitude letter writing in this study is as follows: 1) The researcher first gives a scale of gratitude and stress measurement to the research subjects; 2) Research subjects who filled out the gratitude scale were given an approval sheet to participate in the study and then divided into two groups; 3) The researcher gave instructions to the experimental group that the material that must be written in the letter is to express all forms of gratitude felt by the subject.

The instructions used in the gratitude letter were adapted from Sodah's research (2016), namely: *"Write a letter containing your gratitude/thank you to people who have contributed or have done good to you that you may never have conveyed your thanks (to Allah Almighty, parents, relatives/cousins/uncles, ustadz/coachs/dorm administrators/residents of Islamic boarding schools, and friends at the school). Write down the things that the person has done so that their presence is worthy of gratitude and has a positive impact on you. Also write down what you want to say or do for them as a form of your thanks. The letter that you make can be more than one letter, depending on the number of people who are very influential for you. While writing a letter of gratitude, you don't have to worry about the spelling and language used. You have 25 minutes, keep writing your letter until the time runs out."*

The independent variable (X) is the intervention of writing gratitude letters and the dependent variable (Y) is the level of stress on the students. The subjects in this study were obtained using a random sampling technique, based on certain criteria, namely the students of the Darul Arqam Gombara Islamic boarding school, Makassar, aged junior high school/*Tsanawiyah*, ± 12-15 years which indicated high levels of stress. Goldman

(Ratnawati, 2016) states that the understanding of religion in developing children and adolescents is found at the Piaget stage of development, namely operational formal religious thought. At first the planned subjects amounted to 45 people, but due to problems with permission from the subject teacher, only 14 subjects were able to take part in the study, with an average age of 12 years. The research subjects were divided into two groups, namely the control group and the experimental group, each of which consisted of 7 research subjects.

The data collection method in this study using a stress level scale with a total of 8 items. The stress level scale used in this study is the stress level scale compiled by the researcher based on the stress symptoms described by Yusuf (1994) and Sutapa (2007) in the form of physical, psychological, and behavioral symptoms. The stress level scale has been validated by expert judgment and factorial validity. The reliability of the stress level scale is 0.766 alpha cronbach with a reliable category. The researcher used a stress scale that was prepared by the researcher with the consideration that other standard stress scales were not appropriate when applied to the Islamic Boarding School context.

As for some examples of stress scale items used, such as: I want to run away from the boarding school because I feel uncomfortable, I spend time alone while at the boarding school, my heart beats fast when I go back to the boarding school, and I am nervous when I return to the boarding school.

The research data were analyzed using statistical analysis; the Mann Whitney U-test. This analysis is used to test the effectiveness of the intervention of writing a letter of gratitude on the stress level of students.

Results and Discussion

The results of data collection on stress levels using a scale are shown through the pre-post mean between the experimental group and

the control group which can be seen in Figure 1.

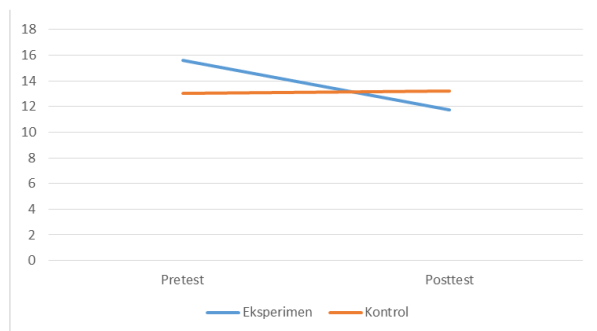


Figure 1. Differences in Mean Pre-Post Stress Levels in the Experimental Group and the Control Group

Figure 1 shows the difference between the pretest and posttest scores in the experimental group and the control group. The mean value of the experimental group's pretest was 15.62 and the experimental group's posttest decreased to 11.75. While the mean pretest for the control group is 13.00 and the posttest for the control group is 13.20. This shows that there is a decrease in stress level scores in the experimental group and no decrease in stress level scores in the control group.

The results of the Mann Whitney U-test analysis showed a value of 5.500 with Asymp. Signs. $0.029 < 0.05$ so it can be concluded that there is a difference in stress levels between the experimental group and the control group. This means that the intervention of writing gratitude letters is effective in reducing stress levels in students.

At the time of the pretest, it was found that the subject had a high stress level of 1 person (17.2%), a moderate stress level of 13 people (92.8%). All subjects in this study had a tendency to experience stress while in the boarding school. Siswanto (2007) states that stress occurs due to stressors and how to overcome them. The stress experienced by the students is a form of events in an individual's life. Nevid (2017) states that one of the factors that can be a stressor for individuals is life events, because these life events require

individuals to make adjustments. Saputri and Nashori (2015) state that the stressors of students can be in the form of not "feeling at home" living in the boarding school, often complaining of illness, fighting among students, and feeling burdened by rote targets.

At the time of posttest, the experimental group showed that the subject had a high stress level of 1 person (12.5%), a moderate stress level of 3 people (37.5%), and a low stress level of 4 people (50%). Meanwhile, the control group showed that the subject had a moderate stress level of 4 people (80%) and a low stress level of 1 person (20%). These data indicate that after the intervention of writing a letter of gratitude, subjects in the experimental group experienced changes and those in the control group tended to not experience changes.

The finding above is supported by the results of hypothesis testing using the Mann Whitney U-test sign value. $p=0.029$ ($p < 0.05$) which means that there is a difference in the level of stress on students who are given the intervention of writing a letter of gratitude with students who are not given the intervention of writing a letter of gratitude. These results indicate that the intervention of writing a letter of gratitude can reduce the stress level of students.

These results are in accordance with what was stated by Yusuf (2004) that one form of positive and constructive stress management is the practice of religious teachings. Gratitude is a form of practicing religious teachings. Emmons and Stern (2013) state that gratitude is a factor that can be help in managing stress and even gratitude is able to recover individuals from illness more quickly and become physically healthy. Goerling (2016) reveals that by expressing gratitude through journals or letters of gratitude will provide benefits for individuals who do so.

The results of this study are in accordance with several studies that have been

carried out that writing a letter of gratitude can have a positive influence on individuals. Research conducted by Toepfer and Walker (2009) shows that writing gratitude letters can have a positive influence on individuals, including increasing happiness. Another study conducted by Toepfer, Cichy, and Peters (2012) showed that individuals who wrote gratitude letters were significantly happier, had lower levels of depression, and felt satisfied in life and their environment. In addition, another study conducted by Sodah (2016) stated that subjects who wrote a letter of gratitude at the end of the study showed an increase in happiness. These results indicate that the intervention of writing a letter of gratitude can reduce stress levels in the Darul Arqam Gombara Islamic boarding school students in Makassar.

Researchers have limitations in carrying out the research, namely the research implementation is often delayed from the agreed time because the subject arrives late. There are research subjects who no longer follow the research process for no reason. The time to write a letter tends to be long for some research subjects. The research subjects were only male students.

Conclusion

The intervention of writing a gratitude letter is effective in reducing stress levels for students at the Darul Arqam Gombara Islamic Boarding School Makassar.

The suggestions from this study are for further researchers to explore the concepts of gratitude that are in accordance with the values of gratitude that exist in Indonesia. In addition, it is recommended to conduct in-depth research using a qualitative and experimental approach so that a more comprehensive psychological dynamics can be obtained in explaining the effectiveness of the intervention of writing gratitude letters on reducing the stress level of students.

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