

**ABU ZAYD AL-BALKHI'S PERSPECTIVE ON DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY IN  
'MASALIH AL-ABDAN WA AL-ANFUS'**

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**ABSTRACT**

Abu Zayd Al-Balkhi was a Muslim polymath who made significant contributions to the field of psychology, particularly in his views on depression and anxiety. This research aimed to understand al-Balkhi's perspective on depression and anxiety in the context of Islam during his time and to contribute to the understanding of mental health that aligns with Islamic values. The study employed a literature research method to analyze his main work, "Masalih Al-Abdan Wa Al-Anfus", and investigated Al-Balkhi's opinions on depression and anxiety. Researchers also classified different types of depression and the understanding of anxiety as proposed by Al-Balkhi. The research findings revealed that Al-Balkhi was one of the early pioneers in understanding mental disorders by categorizing psychological symptoms within a more modern framework. Furthermore, the study highlighted his views on the connection between physical and mental health and emphasized the significance of maintaining a balance between the two.

**Keywords:** Depression, Anxiety, Masalih Al-Abdan Wa Al-Anfus, Sustenance of The Body and The Soul, Abu Zayd Al-Balkhi

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**INTRODUCTION**

So far, understanding of mental conditions is often taken from the understandings of experts from the Western world. It is as if the contribution of Muslim scientists to the world of mental health is slowly starting to be forgotten. In fact, as a Muslim, of course there are quite significant differences between views or perceptions of several aspects of life and those of the West, one of which is in the context of mental conditions such as depression and anxiety.

Highlighting the Western contribution to the development of psychological science: western psychological scientists also produced findings regarding what depression and anxiety are through their perspectives. Through this perspective, we all learn that depression is a mood disorder that causes a person to feel constantly sad and lose interest in many things (Chand & Arif, 2023).

Depression is a common and serious clinical illness that has a negative impact on a person's feelings, thoughts, and behavior, and can result in emotional and physical problems, as well as reduce a person's ability to function well at work and at home (Berenbaum, 2021). Depression is also a condition that drains energy and makes sufferers feel dark and negative, even if there are many positive reasons to feel happy (Bulut, 2021).

Western psychological scientists have also found that depression can be caused by several factors working together, including genetic factors, chemical imbalances in the brain, stress and trauma, poor diet, hormonal changes, use of certain substances, physical health conditions, as well as seasonal changes (Wu et al., 2022). In addition, social and cultural factors also play a role in the development of depression, such as stress in marital relationships, conflict within the

extended family, and changes in life circumstances (Wang, 2022). There is also evidence to suggest that depression can be a secondary effect of complications and progression of other brain disorders (Salerian, 2015). Although the exact causes of depression are not yet fully understood, it is clear that depression is not only caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain (Govindarajulu et al., 2021). Psychological and social factors also play a significant role in the formation and experience of depression (Schultz & Hunter, 2016).

Apart from that, it is also explained that people who experience depression often have symptoms or characteristics similar to anxiety disorders as well, and conversely, people who suffer from anxiety disorders can often experience depression as part of their condition as well (Tiller, 2013). Anxiety disorder is a mental health condition in which a person experiences excessive fear, irrational thoughts, and difficulty controlling these feelings, which can have a negative impact on daily functioning, and is one of the most common mental disorders in all age groups (Hendricks, 2017).

Through the perspective of Western psychological scientists, we also learn that anxiety disorders can be caused by various factors, one of which is an inappropriate and excessive fear response, even though there is no real threat that justifies it (Jeantin et al., 2023). Genetic and environmental factors can also play a role in the formation or development of anxiety disorders (Prihodova et al., 2023). In addition, certain personality traits, such as high levels of neuroticism (the tendency to feel negative and anxious emotions) and low levels of conscientiousness (lack of a sense of responsibility and discipline), have been associated with a higher risk of experiencing anxiety disorders (Fritzsche, 2019). Other potential causes of anxiety disorders include traumatic

experiences, prolonged chronic stress, and imbalances in brain chemistry (Jayathilaka, 2016).

However, do definitions and findings from the Western world alone contribute to the development of psychological science? Unfortunately, in the history of Western psychology, historians often focus their attention on developments in ancient Greece, then jump to the Renaissance and the European Age of Enlightenment, skipping the Middle Ages and the contribution of the Islamic world as if no other civilization had ever existed (Badri, 2013). This seems to ignore that civilizations other than the West have also made significant contributions to the development of psychological science.

A 9th century Muslim polymath who came from the country of Khorasan, also made an essential contribution to psychological science. This figure is Abu Zayd Al-Balkhi, who has made contributions in various scientific fields during his time. Al-Balkhi then put his thoughts into a book which he called *Masalih Al-Abdan Wa Al-Anfus*.

Al-Balkhi's contribution to the field of mental health can be considered very complete because in one work, he systematically discusses two different themes, namely health and mental health. In addition, he is considered one of the first pioneers in the field of mental health, which at that time was not widely known that psychiatry and mental health were branches of medical science (Musfichin, 2019). In other words, his contribution to understanding and studying mental health is recognized as one of the first steps in the development of psychiatry and mental health as an integral part of medical science.

According to Al-Balkhi, both body and soul can be in a healthy or sick condition. These concepts are referred to as balance and imbalance. Imbalances in the body can produce symptoms such as fever, headaches, and body aches. Meanwhile, an imbalance in

the soul can produce feelings such as anger, anxiety, sadness, and other symptoms related to the psyche (Ariadi, 2013). This statement highlights the importance of maintaining a balance between physical (body) and mental (soul) health, and how an imbalance in any of these aspects can affect a person's overall well-being.

Abu Zayd Al-Balkhi reflects the spirit of a highly developed explorer and displays sovereignty, engagement, and creative intelligence. He is also considered an excellent teacher, who is able to well convey a wide range of content by classifying its components into major and minor categories. In this very complex system, he presents thematic concepts that not only serve as a theoretical textbook for transferring knowledge, but also as a practical guide for its application in everyday life (Ozkan-Rashed, 2021).

This research aimed to understand Al-Balkhi's views on depression and anxiety, which can then provide insight into how these concepts were viewed through the Islamic perspective of his time. Apart from that, this research also aimed to contribute to the development of thinking about mental health that is in accordance with Islamic values. Through this, it is hoped that opportunities will be created to explore how Islam views mental health and how Al-Balkhi's thoughts in his work "Masalih Al-Abdan Wa Al-Anfus" can be applied in a contemporary mental health context that is relevant to Muslims. In other words, this research seeks to relate the understanding of the concepts of depression and anxiety to an Islamic context, along with an exploration of the thinking of a leading Muslim scientist in this field.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

This research is a type of literature research that focused on analyzing written sources to obtain qualitative data. This research focused on understanding the

concepts of depression and anxiety in the views of Abu Zayd Al-Balkhi through his work "Masalih Al-Abdan Wa Al-Anfus". The data sources used in this research also included various literature such as documents, books, journal articles, and all relevant information especially related to Al-Balkhi's views on depression and anxiety.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Who is Abu Zayd Al-Balkhi?**

Abu Zayd Al-Balkhi (235-322 H / 849-934 AD), also known as Ahmab Ibn Sahl, was a Muslim scientist who had extraordinary abilities in various fields of science. His abilities included geography, medicine, theology, politics, philosophy, poetry, literature, Arabic grammar, astrology, astronomy, mathematics, biography, ethics, sociology and various other fields. According to Muhammad Ibn Ishaq al-Nadim's records, Al-Balkhi has produced more than 55 works covering various scientific disciplines. This information was found in the book "Mu'jam al-Udaba" compiled by Yaqut Al-Hamawi (Musfichin, 2019; Al-Hamawi, 1993).

Meanwhile, in a book written by Mahmud Misri, it is stated that Abu Zayd Al-Balkhi has written around 64 books. This note was also quoted by Abu Hayyan and Al-Fahru Al-Razi. However, even though he has produced many works, only two books are still available and accessible today. The two books are "Suwar Al-Aqalim" which discusses the topic of geography and "Masalih Al-Abdan Wa Al-Anfus" which focuses on the field of psychology (Musfichin, 2019; Al-Balhi, 2005).

Al-Balkhi was born in Syamistyan, which is now part of Afghanistan, and had a father who was a kindergarten teacher. As a teenager, he went to Baghdad for eight years to study sharia. In Baghdad, he met Abu Yusuf Ya'qub ibn Ishaq Al-Kindi and later studied with him. This was the beginning of Al-

Balkhi's intellectual journey in the development of his subsequent scientific studies (Musfichin, 2019; Al-Balhi, 2005).

Al-Hamawi noted that Abu Muhammad Al-Hasan ibn Al-Waziri, one of Al-Balkhi's students, provided a description of Al-Balkhi's physique and personality. He is described as a thin man of medium height, dark brown skin with prominent eyes. On his face were smallpox scars (Badri 2013).

Al-Balkhi is generally quiet and tends to be contemplative, displaying a shy and introverted personality. If translated into modern language, this description shows that Al-Balkhi was an introverted but very intelligent scientist. In addition, it seems that he preferred being alone and contemplating rather than interacting socially with friends, or attending parties such as eating together, listening to music, or enjoying Arabic poetry which was common during the Abbasi period (Badri 2013).

Al-Balkhi was most likely the first expert to clearly differentiate between mental and psychological disorders, as well as between types of disorders such as psychosis and neurosis. In addition, he was also the first to classify emotional disorders in a very modern way and categorize them in one general classification system (Badri, 2013). This underscores his important contribution to the development of understanding of mental and emotional disorders, creating the basis for the modern understanding of mental health.

Apart from that, Al-Balkhi was the first figure in the Muslim intellectual world to introduce the science of psychology in an Islamic context by presenting the science of rock, which in the modern context is known as neuroscience. He is also famous as the figure who first discovered cognitive (based on factual empirical knowledge) and medical (based on the field of medicine) concepts, as well as being a pioneer in distinguishing between neurological diseases (nervous

disorders). He was also a pioneer of cognitive therapy and explained in detail how cognitive and spiritual therapy can be used logically to treat various types of disorders (Arroisi & Himaya, 2023).

### **Exploring the problem of Al-Abdan Wa Al-Anfus**

*Masalih Al-Abdan Wa Al-Anfus* is a book written by Abu Zayd Al-Balkhi and is one of the first books to discuss psychosomatic illnesses with a focus on the relationship between mind and body. This statement indicates that Al-Balkhi is aware of the importance of balance between mental health (soul/nafs) and physical health (body), and that an imbalance in any of these aspects can affect an individual's overall well-being (Sarhan, 2018)

Written in Arabic, his book entitled *Masalih Al-Abdan Wa Al-Anfus* is translated as "Nurturance of Body and Soul". In Arabic, the word "Abdan" is the plural form of the word "Badn", which means body. The word "Anfus" is the plural form of the word "Nafs" and means soul (Awaad & Ali, 2016). So, the title refers to the maintenance and care of the body and soul in the context of well-being and health.

This book consists of two parts. The first part, called "Masalih Al-Abdan", focuses on maintaining physical or bodily health. Meanwhile, the second part, which is called "Masalih Al-Anfus", specifically focuses on maintaining mental or mental health (Awaad & Ali, 2016).

In the second part of the first chapter in the book "Masalih Al-Abdan Wa Al-Anfus", Al-Balkhi begins his discussion by formulating the hypothesis that because humans consist of body and soul, both can experience states of health or illness, as well as strength and weakness. Just as the body can be affected by disease and experience a decline in the quality of health, the same thing also

applies to the soul (Istikhari, 2021). In other words, Al-Balkhi introduced the concept that both the human body and soul can experience disturbances or imbalances that can affect individual well-being.

This second part consists of eight chapters: the first chapter discusses the importance of promoting soul care. The second chapter examines efforts to maintain mental health in a sustainable manner. The third chapter discusses how to restore mental health if its condition is disturbed. The fourth chapter classifies and explains psychological symptoms (disorders) and calculates them. The fifth chapter discusses strategies for controlling and eliminating anger and anger. The sixth chapter discusses techniques for alleviating fear and panic. The seventh chapter discusses how to manage sadness and depression. Finally, the eighth chapter discusses methods for avoiding obsession in negative thoughts and hearts (Badri, 2013). Al-Balkhi then grouped mental symptoms into four groups, namely, sadness and anxiety (al-huzn wal jaz'), obsession (waswas), anger (gadab), and fear and phobias (al-khauf wa al-faz') (Azizah & Fauzan, 2021).

In this work, Al-Balkhi calls on medical practitioners to not only pay attention to the physical aspects of health and treatment, but also pay attention to the interaction between body and mind. Al-Balkhi's statement about humans consisting of body and soul formed the basis for the psychophysiological approach to well-being in Medieval Islam. Many medical works of Muslim scholars and philosophers build on this concept, emphasizing the need to maintain balance and strength of both body and spirit in the same way to achieve the balance and stamina necessary to protect oneself from disease and maintain health (Awaad et al., 2018).

He also wrote that a healthy individual should always keep healthy thoughts and feelings in his mind in preparation for

unexpected emotional outbursts, much the same way we store medicines and first aid bandages for unexpected physical emergencies. He stated that good health requires a balance between the mind and the body, and an imbalance between the two can lead to disease. Al-Balkhi also introduced the concept of mutual barriers (al-ilaj bi al-did), which was later reintroduced by Joseph Wolpe in 1969 (Haque, 2004; Sarhan, 2018).

### **Al-Balkhi's perspective on depression**

In his book, *Masalih Al-Abdan Wa Al-Anfus*, Al-Balkhi investigates various aspects of mental and emotional health. One of the main focuses is understanding depression and how it can affect individuals.

Al-Balkhi explains depression as a state of very deep anxiety, where anxiety can be considered the peak or most severe stage of sadness. Anxiety itself is likened to a burning flame, while sadness is likened to the embers that remain after the flame has subsided. Depression is a very tiring factor for the body and can make the soul's desires and motivation dim or disappear (Bulut et al., 2021).

Al-Balkhi also explained several symptoms found in someone who is experiencing depression. He explained that depressive symptoms have a significant impact in unsettling the body, reducing the body's energy or activity, and reducing its desire for pleasurable desires. Deep sadness and suffering that prevent the individual from showing happiness, or enjoying pleasure or shahwat (food and sex). Individuals suffering from depression also appear in very frightening forms, committing uncontrolled actions to express the impatience and annoyance they feel. In addition, the faces of individuals suffering from depression also reflect darkness, pessimism, and hopelessness (Zafar et al., 2020).

Depression was known and discussed by Greek scientists and writers long before Al-

Balkhi's time. However, what is interesting is that Al-Balkhi seems to be the first author to distinguish between depression caused by environmental factors or certain circumstances, and depression caused by the results of internal biochemical factors, or what is referred to as organic depression in the contemporary context (Mobayed, 2017).

Al-Balkhi classified depression into three types, the first is *huzn* or normal everyday sadness, which is currently known as normal depression which can be experienced by everyone in certain situations. Second is endogenous depression, which originates from within the body or is caused by internal factors. Third is reactive depression, which originates from external or situational factors outside the body (Haque, 2004; Musfichin, 2019).

*Huzn* or sadness experienced by everyone everywhere (because “the world is a place where one cannot live without problems and shortcomings), is a type of depression referred to in the most modern classification of psychiatric symptoms, the DSM-IV, as “normal depression” which generally experienced by everyone at certain times (Badri, 2013). In other words, normal depression is a type of depression that all people experience at some point in their lives, due to challenges or difficulties in everyday life.

Endogenous depression is what Al-Balkhi called depression that originates from within the body. This classification has been of great help to modern psychiatrists and clinical psychologists because in reality, some forms of depression are caused by internal metabolic and biochemical abnormalities and have no obvious environmental cause. Even when life events that trigger depression are discovered, they cannot fully explain the severity of depressive reactions, which may include psychotic symptoms such as delusions and hallucinations. Therefore, endogenous depression was previously known as psychotic

depression and is currently known as major depression (Badri, 2013).

Meanwhile, reactive depression is a type of depression that is clearly caused by environmental factors involving unhealthy thoughts and feelings related to real or anticipated loss, or stressful life events. Reactive depression, or what was previously known as neurotic depression, does not experience psychotic symptoms such as delusions or hallucinations, and they also maintain a connection with reality. Typically, their depression symptoms are milder and may respond to cognitive therapy treatment. If antidepressant medication is prescribed, it should be used in conjunction with cognitive therapy to maximize the results (Badri, 2013).

Al-Balkhi in his book also explains the difference between endogenous depression and reactive depression simply, as he wrote in *Masalih Al-Abdan Wa Al-Anfus*:

“*Huzn*, namely depression or sadness, is of two types. One of them has a clear cause, such as losing something that is very meaningful to the person experiencing depression. Other types have no clear reason. It is a sudden and persistent feeling of deep sadness (*ghummah*) that prevents the individual from engaging in physical activity or showing happiness, as well as from enjoying pleasures (*shahwah*) such as food and sex. Patients do not know the exact reason why they feel inactive and depressed. This type of depression for no apparent reason is caused by physical symptoms such as blood disorders and other changes in the body. Treatment is with a physical medical approach which aims to cleanse the blood (Al-Balkhi, 1984; Badri, 2013).

### **Al-Balkhi's perspective on anxiety**

According to Al-Balkhi's view, anxiety (Al-Gham) is the root of various psychological disorders experienced by a person. This is in

accordance with modern psychological theory which also indicates that anxiety can be a source of other psychological disorders. Take for an example, when someone feels angry, it often starts with feelings of anxiety or pressure about a situation which ultimately triggers anger (Lathifah, 2021). Thus, Al-Balkhi considered anxiety as an underlying factor in various psychological disorders.

Al-Balkhi makes a clear distinction between anxiety and what he calls terror. When he describes the symptoms associated with terror, he is actually describing a panic attack, and he emphasizes that this is different from anxiety. According to Al-Balkhi, anxiety can come from three different sources, namely internal factors (biological), situational factors (psychological), and historical factors or personal experiences (social). In other words, anxiety can have its origins in various aspects of a person's life, including biological, psychological and social dimensions (Yusuf, 2018).

Al-Balkhi's explanation of panic attack disorder and its pathophysiology is also impressive and similar to the modern understanding of this condition. Al-Balkhi wrote that terror develops from the fear that haunts a person if he thinks or imagines something frightening, or if he actually sees or experiences it. Meanwhile, in a state of severe anxiety, a person's skin color will turn yellow because blood flows from the surface of the body to the internal organs. Hands and feet will shake uncontrollably, and the person may lose the ability to think properly to the point of failing to find a solution to save him from the frightening situation (Homayun & Rosemary, 2019). In his book, Al-Balkhi also argues that anxiety is caused by an imbalance in the brain which should be overcome through the use of certain substances or substances (Bindamnan, 2023).

Al-Balkhi explained that each individual has a different level of resilience in

dealing with anxiety. Some people have great inner strength and can deal with problems in a variety of ways, while others are more prone to stress and may have difficulty dealing with problems even in simple ways. There are also differences in the extent to which a person can deal with emotional stress and problems without experiencing significant impairment in their well-being. Some people may be able to overcome major disasters without being affected, while others may be traumatized by even minor situations and lose the ability to cope with the tension or problems they face (Badri, 2013).

Al-Balkhi suggests several approaches to treating someone with anxiety and fear. One way is to use positive self-talk, which is similar to the concept of autonomy in modern psychology. Apart from that, he also emphasized the importance of talking about problems with trusted friends. Although he acknowledges the possibility of demonic influence in obsessive thoughts, his advice focuses on solutions that can be implemented in everyday life. It is important to note that a cognitive approach remains important, even if anxiety, depression, or other obsessive conditions are believed to be caused by demonic intervention (Gafiyatullina, 2019).

## CONCLUSION

Abu Zayd Al-Balkhi was a Muslim scientist who has made major contributions to the understanding of mental and emotional health. He classified depression into three types, namely *huzn* (everyday sadness), endogenous depression (depression that originates from within the body), and reactive depression (depression caused by environmental factors). Al-Balkhi also explained that anxiety (*Al-gham*) is the root of psychological disorders caused by brain imbalance, the use of certain substances or substances can overcome anxiety, and the level of endurance of individuals is different in

dealing with anxiety. Apart from that, Al-Balkhi also proposed that the concept of good mental health involves a balance between mind and body. The findings have relevance and important value in the understanding of mental health today.

The researcher advises readers and future researchers to explore more deeply about Abu Zayd Al-Balkhi's views and contributions to his understanding of mental health, especially depression and anxiety. Future researchers can test the validity and effectiveness of Al-Balkhi's views in mental health treatment and integrate these insights with modern mental health research. By doing this, it is hoped that it can trigger the development of better knowledge and practice in the field of mental health based on the scientific legacy of this classical Muslim scientist.

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