

## From Gratitude to Mental Health: Action Research Gratitude Journaling

**Hazimatul Layyinah\*, Zarina Akbar, Ratna Dyah Suryaratri**

Universitas Negeri Jakarta, Indonesia

Email: layyinahhazima@gmail.com\*

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### KEYWORDS

Academic Stress; Action Research; Gratitude Journaling; Islamic Boarding School.

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### ABSTRACT

Academic stress is one of the psychological challenges commonly faced by boarding school students due to high academic demands and limited social interaction. This study aimed to examine the effectiveness of gratitude journaling in reducing academic stress among eleventh-grade students at Al Nahdlatul Islam Boarding School, Depok. Using the Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) action research model, the study was conducted through three cycles consisting of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting stages. Data were collected using the Academic Stress Scale (QASSE), observation, gratitude journals, and semi-structured interviews. Quantitative data were analyzed using paired-sample t-tests, while qualitative data were analyzed thematically. The results showed a significant reduction in academic stress in Cycle I ( $p < 0.05$ ; Cohen's  $d = 1.214$ , large effect) and Cycle III ( $p = 0.037$ ; Cohen's  $d = 0.649$ , moderate effect). Qualitative findings revealed improvements in students' emotional awareness, reflection, and gratitude expression. These results indicate that gratitude journaling can serve as an effective psychoeducational strategy for reducing academic stress and promoting emotional well-being in boarding school students.

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## INTRODUCTION

Education is a lifelong process, starting from birth until the end of life. From birth onward, the educational process manifests through various activities, ranging from literacy to numeracy, and plays a crucial role in shaping societal development across generations. Education takes various forms, such as formal schooling, non-formal education, and community-based education. One distinctive educational model in Indonesia is *pesantren* education.

*Pesantren* education, or Islamic boarding school education, is a process that directs individuals toward life activities oriented to God, encompassing both personal and social dimensions (Ikromi & Hidayat, 2024). Academic stress poses a significant challenge for individuals, particularly those in *pesantren* environments (Ikromi et al., 2019).

Students in Islamic boarding schools face various pressures, including high academic demands, Qur'an memorization requirements, and time management constraints (Al Ayyubi & Qudsyi, 2024). External factors such as social support, spiritual well-being, and psychological conditions also influence academic stress levels (Khoirudin et al., 2023). Effective time management and appropriate coping strategies can mitigate academic stress (Chandra, 2021).

One promising approach to managing academic stress is daily gratitude practices. Writing a gratitude journal daily serves as a form of self-reflection that helps students focus on positive

aspects of their lives. Extensively studied in positive psychology, this strategy reduces stress levels and enhances psychological well-being. Therefore, this study applies and evaluates the effectiveness of daily gratitude journaling in reducing academic stress among 2nd-grade MA students.

Academic stress is a psychological strain commonly experienced by MA students due to heavy academic loads and school demands. If unmanaged, it can harm mental health and academic performance. According to the coping theory by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), stress arises when individuals appraise a situation as a threat exceeding their coping resources, prompting responses via coping mechanisms. One effective emotion-focused coping method is gratitude journaling.

Gratitude journaling involves daily recording of things one is thankful for, shifting focus from stressors to positive life aspects and thereby alleviating academic stress. By fostering gratitude, students better manage negative emotions such as stress, anxiety, fatigue, and frustration. It cultivates adaptive attitudes toward learning challenges. Thus, grounded in theory and observed problems, action research via gratitude journaling offers an effective strategy to reduce academic stress in MA students.

The primary theoretical foundation for gratitude journaling to alleviate academic stress in MA/high school students is the coping theory by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), known as the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping. In academic settings, schoolwork burdens, grade/exam pressures, and parental expectations can trigger psychological distress, termed academic stress. Gratitude journaling functions as an emotion-focused coping strategy to regulate emotions against stressors. Through action research implementing this strategy, students record grateful moments, redirect attention to positive aspects, diminish negative emotions, and reappraise stressful situations, ultimately reducing academic stress.

Gratitude journaling effectively addresses perceived or academic stress while promoting adaptive, resilient mindsets (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). This aligns with Putri et al. (2021), who found that gratitude reduces stress and depression while boosting positive emotions like life satisfaction, social connections, and positive environments. Matondang (2025) notes that gratitude journaling interventions, as a positive psychology approach, reduce perceived stress by focusing on positives and enhancing overall mental health.

Research by Alim et al. (2025), Froh et al. (2008), Lim et al. (2022), Sahar et al. (2022), Wahyuni et al. (2022), Tiwari and Cherukuri (2025), Armenta et al. (2022), and Fekete and Deichert (2022) consistently shows that gratitude journaling reduces academic stress. Vadaq and Widyatno (2023) demonstrated significant academic stress reduction in school-age children via this intervention. Regular gratitude journaling acts as a protective factor against academic stress (Webb et al., 2025). Bono et al. (2023) found that high school students expressing gratitude to peers and teachers experienced reduced academic stress.

Another study by Froh, Kashdan, Ozimkowski, and Miller (2009) highlights that gratitude journaling not only boosts gratitude and positive emotions but also enhances perceived social support. For instance, expressing gratitude strengthens warmer, more supportive relationships. Simple school-based gratitude interventions greatly benefit less happy students by reinforcing positive emotions and healthy social ties.

Academic stress is a prevalent issue observed in Class XI MA students at Al Nahdalah Islamic Boarding School Depok. Initial observations and informal interviews with students and teachers revealed pressures from assignments, exams, and balancing academics with other activities, leading to reduced concentration, motivation, and emotional states like anxiety, depression, and fatigue. This issue requires immediate intervention, as unchecked stress impairs academic performance and mental well-being.

Thus, continuous improvement via effective strategies like gratitude journaling—recording experiences, emotions, gratitude, and reflections five times weekly—is essential to reduce academic stress. Through action research at Al Nahdalah Islamic Boarding School Depok, this technique offers a practical, sustainable solution for students to manage academic stress positively in their school environment.

## METHOD

This study aimed to determine the effectiveness of the gratitude journaling strategy as a positive psychology intervention in reducing academic stress among Islamic boarding school students. The research employed an action research approach. According to Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), action research is a self-reflective and collective process conducted by participants in social contexts to enhance productivity, rationality, justice in addressing social or educational issues.

It emphasizes a reflective cycle of planning, action, observation, and reflection. The stages implemented in this action research were: 1) problem diagnosis; 2) action planning; 3) action implementation and observation; 4) evaluation; and 5) reflection. These stages formed a cyclical process. In subsequent cycles, the planning stage was revised by reducing teacher-directed statements to students. Classroom action research cycles are iterative; research concludes when sufficient progress is achieved.

The research procedures comprised Cycle I, Cycle II, and Cycle III. Cycle I included planning, implementation, observation, and reflection stages. During planning, activities involved preparing the intervention plan, designing brief materials on gratitude journaling, creating journaling sheets, adapting pre- and post-test instruments from the Questionnaire of Academic Stress Scale (Questionnaire of Stress Academic Scale, QASSE), and developing observation guides. In implementation, a pre-test using QASSE measured initial stress levels, followed by introductory material on gratitude and journaling; students then completed gratitude journaling for five days, ending with a QASSE post-test.

In Cycle II, planning was modified from Cycle I by adding a "flashback session of the last 24 hours" before journaling to help students recall grateful moments from the previous day. Observation guidelines, interviews, and QASSE pre- and post-test instruments were prepared. Implementation began with a QASSE pre-test for Cycle II baseline stress levels, followed by the "last 24-hour flashback" session (recalling details), daily gratitude journaling for five days, and a QASSE post-test on day five to assess changes.

Unlike Cycles I and II, which spanned five days, Cycle III lasted one day with distinct interventions. Planning involved preparing a "flashback of the last week" instrument, materials for writing "thank you letters" to grateful individuals from the past week, and a rundown schedule. Implementation featured a "gratitude" icebreaker to foster positive emotions, a pre-

test, a "1-week flashback" reflection, writing letters to appreciated individuals, small-group sharing (four groups), classmate affirmations via written gratitudes, and a closing post-test.

The researcher used the Questionnaire of Academic Stress Scale (QASSE) developed by Garcia-Ros et al. (2018). This instrument measures academic stress in secondary school students across dimensions: academic overload and school performance, interaction with classmates, family pressure, and future perspectives. It comprises 30 items: 10 on academic overload and school performance, 10 on classmate interactions, 4 on family pressure, and 6 on future perspectives.

The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the QASSE was 0.89, indicating high reliability. The researcher adapted the instrument through translation, followed by expert judgment (EJ) from two psychology lecturers, synthesis, and finalization of items.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The subjects in this study were students of class XI Madrasah Aliyah (MA) at Al-Nahdlatul Islamiyah Boarding School Depok with a total of 13 students. The three cycles carried out had different results between the pre test and post test in each cycle.

### 1. Cycle I

**Table 1. Results of the T-Test Cycle I**

Paired Samples T-Test						
Measure 1	Measure 2	t	df	p	Cohen's d	SE Cohen'sd
Pretest	Post Test st	4,379	12	<.001	1,214	0.457

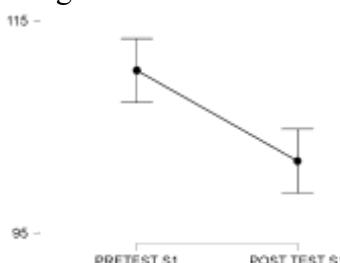
Note. Student's t-test

The *t-test* results showed a statistically significant decrease in academic stress  $p = <0.001$  or less than 0.005, meaning there was a difference between *pre-test* and *post-test scores*, Cohen's  $d = 1.214$ , which showed a very large effect, was clearly visible. This means that the intervention or treatment provided, namely in the form of *gratitude journaling strategies*, has an effect on reducing students' academic stress.

**Table 2. Mean Pre Test and Post Test Cycle I**

Descriptives					
	N	Mean	SD	SE	Coefficient of Variation
PRETES S1	13	110,308	5.544	1.537	0.050
POST TES S1	13	101,769	5.703	1.582	0.050

The mean shows that in the *pre-test* it produces 110,308 and in the *post test* it produces 101,769 which means that the average academic stress of students has decreased.



**Fig 1. Pre Test and Post Test Diagram Cycle I**

The results of the evaluation of the first cycle obtained several obstacles: 1) Some students initially have difficulty writing in depth. 2) There is a tendency to write in general and less exploratory at the beginning of the activity. Provisional results obtained in cycle I: 1) Action research in cycle I has been shown to be statistically effective in reducing academic stress. 2) *Gratitude journaling* helps students manage academic stress in a healthier way.

So the improvement plan for cycle II is to add a "*last 24-hour flashback*" session before journaling so that students can more easily remember and write down things they are grateful for in detail, increase the facilitation of group discussions so that students can be more open in sharing their journaling experiences, conduct one-on-one interviews with students, and conduct more in-depth observations.

## 2. Cycle II

**Table 3. Cycle II T-Test Results**

Paired Samples T-Test						
Measure 1	Measure 2	t	df	p	Cohen'sd	SE Cohen'sd
PRETES S2	POST TEST S2	0.722	12	0.484	0.200	0.490

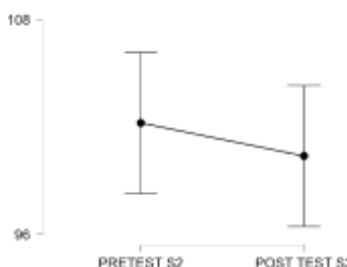
Note. Student's t-test

T-Test score ( $p = 0.484$ ) indicating that there was no significant change. Cohen's value  $d = 0.200$  (small effect) suggests that the effect of journaling interventions on stress reduction is in the very small effect category. Aspects of academic stress, including academic overload & school performance, interaction with classmates, family pressure, and future perspectives showed that there was no significant difference between pre-test and post-test scores or showed no significant change.

**Table 4. Mean Pre Test and Post Test Cycle II**

Descriptive	N	Mean	SD	SE	Coefficient of Variation
PRETES S2	13	102.231	6.112	1.695	0.060
POST TEST S2	13	100.385	4.388	1.217	0.044

If you look at the mean value between the pre-test 102,231 and the posttest 100,385, it indicates that there is still a decrease, but it is very small. If you look at cycle 1, the mean value between the posttest in cycle 1 and the pre-test in cycle 2 decreased. This could happen because there has been a previous intervention that allows if the student's academic stress is already small in the pre-test, it will produce a small difference in the post test.



**Fig 2. Pre Test and Post Test Cycle II Diagram**

It is likely to occur because there are only 13 respondents, the results of cycle 1 are large, due to outside factors that are not controlled, such as exams, KTI, and others. Provisional results obtained in cycle II: 1) The results of this intervention showed stronger effectiveness qualitatively than quantitatively. 2) Students feel the benefits of gratitude journaling to reduce academic stress. So that the improvement plan for cycle II is: 1) Add a "1 week flashback" session before journaling, so that students can more easily remember and write down the things they are grateful for in detail. 2) Writing a thank-you letter to someone they have been grateful for during this week can be to a friend, teacher, parent, sibling, or anyone who has made a positive impact. 3) Sharing session. Some students are welcome to read their letters in front of a class or small group and close with the sentence: "How do you feel after hearing your friends' letters?". 4) Affirming classmates. Each student was given HVS paper and asked to describe the palm of the left hand, as well as write down the name. Later the HVS paper will shift to the right of the student. The facilitator will give instructions to express his gratitude for having a friend like the person who owns the paper. 5) Cycle III has been completed and closed with the sentence "Gratitude is not only about thanking you, but also about recognizing the goodness that is present, and allowing ourselves to be touched by it" Cycle 3 is not like cycles 1 and 2 which take 5 days each, because the findings found in cycle 2 are saturation that results in insignificant quantitative results, so cycle 3 is only carried out one day.

### 3. Cycle III

**Table 7. Cycle III T-Test Results**

Paired Samples T-Test							
Measure 1	Measure 2	t	df	p	Cohen'sd	SE Cohen'sd	
PRETEST S3	-	POST TEST S3	2.340	12	0.037	0.649	0.411

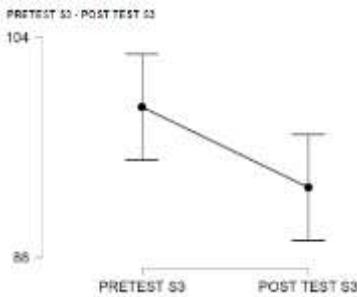
Note. Student t-test.

T-Test score ( $p = 0.037$ ) indicating that there was a significant difference. Cohen's value  $d = 0.649$  (moderate effect) indicates that the effect of the intervention on stress reduction is in the category of moderate effects.

**Table 8. Mean Pre Test and Post Test Cycle III**

Descriptives		N	Mean	SD	SE	Coefficient of Variation
PRETES S3	13	98.923	5.766	1.599		0.058
POST TEST S3	13	93.077	7.477	2.074		0.080

If you look at the mean value between the pre-test 98,923 and the posttest 93,077 which indicates that there is a decrease between the pre-test and the post-test.



**Fig 3. Cycle III Pre Test and Post Test Diagram**

Final refinement conclusion: 1) Cycle III is a comprehensive, complete, and meaningful form of intervention, because it not only develops individual awareness of gratitude, but also encourages interpersonal expressions of gratitude, as well as strengthens social relationships between students in the school environment. 2) Quantitatively, the results continued to decline between cycle 1, cycle 2, and cycle 3. Although not too significant, when compared to the mean score between the pre-post test in cycle 1, the pre-post test in cycle 2, and the pre-post test in cycle 3, there was a good decrease in scores. 3) This class action research was carried out in three cycles with the aim of reducing students' academic stress through gratitude journaling strategies. Each cycle is designed as a refinement of the previous one based on the results of reflection and evaluation.

The results of quantitative analysis in this study were carried out through a comparison of pre-test and post-test scores using the QASSE academic stress instrument to measure students' academic stress levels. The results of cycle I showed a statistically significant reduction in academic stress with a value of  $p = < 0.001$  which means that the niali  $p < 0.05$  and a large effect (Cohen's  $d = 1.214$ ), which suggests that the gratitude journaling intervention can reduce academic stress. However, the results of cycle II, despite the improvement in the quality of students' reflection in journal writing, the post-test results showed no significant difference ( $p = 0.484$ ) and a small effect (Cohen's  $d = 0.200$ ). Furthermore, the results of cycle III showed a statistically significant reduction in academic stress with a value of  $p = < 0.037$  which means that the niali  $p < 0.05$  and a large effect (Cohen's  $d = 0.649$ ), which shows that intervention in cycle 3 can reduce academic stress.

From the qualitative side, there has been a significant change in the way students reflect and express gratitude. If in the first cycle students tend to write gratitude in general and less deeply, then in the second cycle students write gratitude to be more reflective and personal. In cycle III, students are not only able to recognize things to be grateful for, but also express them to others in a sincere and meaningful way. Student responses in group discussions have also increased from cycle to cycle, characterized by openness in sharing experiences. This suggests that gratitude journaling interventions have an impact on reducing academic stress.

During the three cycles of gratitude journaling interventions, there was a clear improvement in terms of grades, behaviors, attitudes, and processes experienced by students. In terms of grades, in the first cycle there was a statistically significant reduction in academic stress, which shows that effective journaling strategies can reduce academic stress in the early stages. Although in cycle II there was no significant difference in scores quantitatively, the changes in students' behavior and attitudes were very prominent qualitatively. Students who

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initially tend to write in general and passively begin to show gratitude in real terms, becoming more reflective.

Furthermore, in cycle III there was a significant reduction in academic stress from the pre-test. What is written, measured qualitatively, also shows good results related to gratitude. In terms of process, journaling activities that were originally only individual developed into activities that involve interpersonal interaction, such as writing letters to others and giving affirmations to classmates. This process encourages students to not only recognize positive feelings within themselves, but also to appreciate and appreciate the role of others in their lives. These changes reflect that the intervention can lower perceived stress or academic stress.

The evidence of the success of the action: 1) Students stated that the gratitude journaling strategy made them more aware of the little things they should be grateful for. 2) Based on observations, it shows that students write with calm, happy, and more focused expressions. 3) In cycle III, affirmation between friends fosters a sense of appreciation, improves social relationships, and strengthens a supportive environment. 4) Students write letters of gratitude for others, many students are able to express their gratitude to those around them in a deep and sincere way, something they previously found difficult to do.

The results of gratitude journaling interventions proven to reduce academic stress in MA students can be explained through the stress coping theory of Lazarus & Folkman (1984). In this context, gratitude journaling serves as a form of emotion-focused coping, which is when students write down the things they are grateful for, they indirectly reappraisal difficult situations and see the positive side of their experience. These findings are in line with research by Emmons & McCullough (2003) which states that regular gratitude practices can reduce academic stress. Thus, the findings of this study not only strengthen the relevance of the theory of coping, but also show that gratitude-based interventions are able to cope with academic pressure or academic stress.

If viewed as a whole, both quantitative and qualitative, there will always be changes in the expected direction. In cycle 1, a significant score was obtained quantitatively on reducing academic stress. However, qualitatively, journaling written by students is still very common and not yet reflective. In cycle 2, quantitatively a value that is not significant in difference is obtained. However, qualitatively, the journaling written by students is very personal, reflective, and shows significant gratitude from cycle 1. In cycle 3, quantitatively there was a significant value although not as large as in cycle 1 but it has shown a decrease in the level of academic stress. Qualitatively, it also shows personal and reflective gratitude so that at the time of the interview students mention gratitude.

The findings of this study have a number of important implications for professional practice in the field of education and school psychology. First, gratitude journaling interventions have been proven to be a simple, easy, yet effective psychoeducational strategy in helping students manage academic stress. Therefore, homeroom teachers, teachers and boarding school assistants can integrate this practice regularly in their programs. In addition, schools or educational institutions can design curriculum policies that integrate journaling activities and gratitude reflection as part of the character learning approach and strengthening students' social-emotional competencies.

For broader policy development, these results indicate that student academic stress management programs can be carried out preventively through a positive approach. This shows the importance of integrating positive psychology strategies, such as gratitude journaling, into education policies to build students' mental resilience in a sustainable manner.

As for further research, it is recommended that gratitude journaling interventions be carried out over a longer period, with a larger and more diverse sample, and consider the use of additional measures such as subjective well-being scales, emotion regulation, and learning engagement. Follow-up research can also test the effectiveness of these interventions in a digital format or with more interactive approaches, such as visual or audiovisual-based journaling, to reach a more varied student preference.

## CONCLUSION

The three-cycle gratitude journaling intervention effectively reduced academic stress among MA students at an Islamic boarding school, fulfilling the study's aim to evaluate this positive psychology strategy. Cycle I yielded statistically significant stress reductions, Cycle II showed no quantitative change but qualitative improvements in reflective journaling and authentic gratitude expression, and Cycle III produced significant pre- to post-test declines alongside strong qualitative gratitude indicators. Overall, the approach progressively lowered stress, fostered positive behaviors, and enhanced classroom supportiveness, positioning it as a valuable psycho-educational tool for student well-being. For future research, longitudinal studies could explore sustained effects over a full academic year, incorporating control groups and diverse *pesantren* settings to assess generalizability and integration with Qur'anic memorization routines.

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