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Exploring the Life of College Students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

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Abstract

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Keywords: Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), adult ADHD, college student, counseling, Islamic therapy This study aims to analyze the experiences of adult Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) sufferers among students in Higher Education Malaysia in living their daily lives. The method used is qualitative with a descriptive approach. The research subjects consisted of two people, namely students of the Malaysian Institute of Higher Education. This research was conducted with data collection techniques through interviews, observations, and literature studies. Data analysis was carried out with the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The results showed that Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) in adults, especially university students, causes symptoms such as hyperactivity, anxiety, and cognitive confusion that interfere with academic and social activities. However, sufferers can manage these symptoms through selfadjustment, professional therapy and spiritual approaches, which contribute to improved emotional stability and productivity in daily life. This study confirms the importance of holistic support to help adults with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) lead more organized and meaningful lives.

INTRODUCTION

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a disorder characterized by inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsive behavior (Adler & Chua, 2002). Impulsive hyperactivity includes excessive activity, restlessness, inability to sit quietly, disrupting the activities of other individuals, and inability to wait reasonably, all of which exceed the normal age or developmental stage of the individual (Santoso, 2024). ADHD usually begins to be detected in children under the age of 12, and in many cases, the symptoms are still evident in adolescence, and about one-third to one-half of sufferers continue to experience it into adulthood (Murniati et al., 2024). Although ADHD is often associated with children, it can persist into adulthood and have a serious impact on social, academic and occupational functioning. ADHD in adults is a phenomenon that is gaining increasing attention in mental health studies.

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One of the significant impacts of ADHD in adults is the instability in building social relationships and interpersonal communication. For some sufferers, the process of interaction becomes very difficult. Some are slow to process conversations, while others tend to interrupt when others are talking. However, these signs are rarely taken seriously as they are often mistaken for introverted personalities. Difficulties in interacting can undermine the confidence of individuals with ADHD and will plague them if left unchecked (Cohen et al., 2019).

This phenomenon becomes more complex when the ADHD sufferer is a student in higher education. Concentration and material absorption become a major challenge, especially when competing under academic pressure. ADHD can interfere with a person's level of understanding, especially for those who are studying at the university level (Barkley, 2015). In addition, untreated ADHD symptoms can have long-term effects, such as unstable emotions, neglected work, and disorganized lifestyles. In these circumstances, support from family and friends is needed. Trust and motivation from loved ones play an important role in rebuilding the confidence of ADHD adults (Woon & Zakaria, 2019).

The urgency of this research is also emphasized by the epigenetic approach which suggests that there is no single cause of ADHD (Yusop et al., 2024). Experts conclude that ADHD arises from a complex interaction between innate (genetic) and environmental factors experienced throughout an individual's life. Lovett & Harrison, (2021) also mentioned that ADHD in adults causes a real and disturbing disorder, but it is difficult to assess accurately so there is a high risk of being overdiagnosed without caution. Therefore, managing adult ADHD requires an understanding of the biological, psychological, and social aspects of the patient.

Globally, the prevalence of ADHD in adults is significant. According to (Santoso, 2024), about 2-3% of adults have ADHD, with 25% of patients still showing symptoms in adolescence and 50% successfully controlled through medication, but the disorder tends to persist into adulthood and affect social and academic activities. A study by Team Siloam, (2022) also shows that about 2.8% of adults in the world have ADHD. However, other studies suggest that about 6.7% of adults in the world, which is more than 360 million people, have ADHD that was not diagnosed as children. This clearly shows that ADHD among adults is a significant issue and can have a major impact on their lives. Therefore, it is important that we recognize the signs and seek appropriate support (Indah, 2024).

Research by Breda et al., (2021) shows empirical evidence of the neurodevelopmental nature of ADHD, with 78% of individuals diagnosed by the age of 22 having chronic and persistent symptoms. Interestingly, the study also revealed cases of ADHD that only appeared or increased after puberty, especially in women and individuals with higher IQ levels. ADHD symptoms such as hyperactivity, impulsivity, and difficulty focusing cannot be taken lightly, either by the sufferer or the surrounding environment. While some of the typical mindsets of ADHD can bring positive sides, the negative impacts are still real and significant. Therefore, it is important for sufferers to learn how to manage their symptoms, either through medication or behavioral therapy, so that they can optimally develop their potential (Prasetyo, 2009). However, until now most adults with ADHD have not received adequate treatment. Even after diagnosis, many still lead unstructured lives, and many turn to drugs or alcohol as an escape. Other problems that often accompany ADHD include difficulties in social relationships, barriers to employment, and

an increased risk of involvement in criminal behavior. In addition, sufferers are also prone to mental health disorders such as depression, anxiety, and decreased overall employability (Mu'iz & Jusoh, 2024).

Much previous research has focused on the common diagnosis and children's perspectives on ADHD. However, very few studies have specifically investigated how adult college students with ADHD navigate social and academic life. In fact, this group faces high psychological stress and is particularly vulnerable to greater impairment. Some previous studies, such as Santoso, (2024) showed that adult individuals with ADHD often experience difficulties in completing work to the fullest, which risks dismissal, but this can be helped through cognitive-behavioral therapy and activity planning strategies. In addition, according to Adinda et al., (2023), spiritual approaches such as mujahadah an-nafs have been shown to reduce the intensity of hyperfocus and improve the quality of worship. On the other hand, Attoe & Climie, (2023) asserted that delay or failure in early diagnosis of ADHD can adversely affect the self-esteem and well-being of adult women. Therefore, this research is here to fill the void by diving deeply into the daily lives of adult students with ADHD.

The purpose of this study was to gain a comprehensive understanding of the daily life dynamics of adult college students with ADHD. The strength of this study is its in-depth focus on the experiences of students with ADHD. This research is also expected to help develop more humanized and contextualized intervention approaches from academic, psychological, and social perspectives. In addition, the results can assist educators, counselors, and families in providing more effective support to college students with ADHD.

METHODS

This research uses a qualitative approach with the type of case study, which aims to understand in depth about ADHD in adults, especially in the lives of students in college. This approach was chosen because it is able to provide a comprehensive understanding of the social reality and personal experiences experienced by the research subjects. Data in this study were obtained from two types of sources, namely primary data and secondary data. Primary data was collected through in-depth interviews with relevant informants, while secondary data was obtained from literature review, which included scientific books, articles, and journals related to the topic of ADHD in adults.

The data collection technique was conducted using an unstructured interview technique, using a question guide based on the research focus. The technique of selecting informants was done purposively, namely by setting certain criteria that are relevant to the issues studied. The informants in this study consisted of two students with ADHD who were studying at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), as well as a psychiatric specialist who served at the Tengku Mizan Armed Forces Hospital (HAT MIZAN). All interviews were conducted via telephone due to location limitations that did not allow direct meetings between researchers and informants.

Data analysis was done manually starting from recording, grouping themes, and coding directly from the interview transcripts. The analysis technique used in this research is the Miles and Huberman model, which includes three main stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction was done by selecting relevant information and filtering the raw data to make it more focused. Data presentation was done in Exploring the Life of College Students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

the form of descriptive narratives and thematic category tables to assist in organizing the information. Furthermore, conclusion drawing was done by looking for patterns, relationships between themes, and deep meaning from the data that had been collected. This process was completed with data verification through triangulation and rechecking the consistency of the information obtained (Amnda et al., 2020; Engkizar et al., 2021; Kasmar et al., 2019).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This research focuses on analyzing the lives of adult ADHD sufferers among Malaysian university students, especially in living their daily lives. To support the validity of the data, the researcher conducted pre-research through online interviews with several informants who have received a diagnosis of adult ADHD. This process aims to dig deeper into the background of the diagnosis, the challenges faced, and the self-adjustment strategies they do. Based on the results of the interviews and thematic clustering, several main themes and indicators were obtained as follows.

Themes	Indicators		
The condition of an adult	Hyperactivity		
with ADHD	Restlessness (irriability)		
	Confiusion		
	Decreased consciousness	(clouding	of
	confiusion)		
Handling indicator	Adjust to the environment		
	Getting counseling guidance		
	Using Islamic therapy		

Table 1. Themes and indicators

The findings from the table above, make it easy to know how the ways and measures used by adult ADHD sufferers to manage their lives amidst the academic and social demands of being a student. They seek to adopt appropriate strategies through professional guidance and spiritual approaches.

According to informant 1, he began to realize the symptoms of ADHD in himself during the Perintah Kawalan Pergerakan (PKP) period in Malaysia, when the COVID-19 pandemic required people to undergo social isolation. As the following interview excerpt.

I describe life during that time as uncertain, and sometimes I became very forgetful (informant 1)

This period of isolation aggravated a condition that he had long felt, but had not been formally diagnosed. His sensitivity to ADHD symptoms in himself was also reinforced by family history, as his father and grandfather had also experienced similar conditions. This is as stated in the following interview.

In my family, my father has ADHD, and my late grandfather also had ADHD... so it was no surprise when I was first diagnosed with ADHD (informant 1)

After receiving an official diagnosis, informant 1 began to make various adjustments in his life. One of his main strategies was to keep himself busy through exploring new activities, which he found very helpful in channeling his high curiosity drive, which is also a common characteristic of individuals with ADHD. He realized that he gets bored quickly if he is not doing something that stimulates his mind, so he decided to "redirect" this drive in a more productive direction.

I started to occupy myself with activities that I had never tried before... my growing curiosity was satisfied (informant 1)

Informant 1 is a university student, he often finds it difficult to follow classes that are too theoretical and long. He is easily distracted during passive learning due to his unstable focus. To overcome this, he tries to create a flexible but individually structured routine. The informant said that she sometimes has difficulty understanding group dynamics or reading certain social situations when interacting with others. He may be too vocal, speak too fast, or not realize that he is disturbing others. However, after learning about his ADHD condition, he began to learn to accept others when speaking. In addition, the informant relies on the spiritual aspect to calm his mind. He has a habit of starting every activity by reciting *basmalah*, which for him provides calmness and better focus.

Sometimes I am calmer than usual (informant 1)

In terms of therapy, the informant follows the Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) program regularly on the doctor's recommendation. This therapy teaches him how to organize his thoughts and manage his emotions gradually, which has a very positive impact on his daily life.

Alhamdulillah, everything is now under control so that I can complete my undergraduate studies (informant 1)

The informant is now more confident and able to control his ADHD symptoms well, although there are still problems. This experience shows that family support, professional therapy, and appropriate coping techniques are essential for adults with ADHD, especially in times of uncertainty like the pandemic.

Informant 2 is a student from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). He was diagnosed with adult ADHD in May 2022. However, he was previously diagnosed with major depressive disorder (MDD) due to experiencing severe depressive symptoms during his education at Institut Pendidikan Guru (IPG).

I was initially diagnosed with MDD due to episodes of major depression during my studies at IPG from 2019 to 2021 (informant 2)

Informant 2 shared that his depression was actually the result of prolonged emotional exhaustion caused by unrecognized ADHD since childhood. The rigid and uniform academic environment at IPG exacerbated his condition. The rigid learning system, tight schedule, and high expectations for academic performance put a lot of pressure on him.

That place is not for me, I feel trapped (informant 2)

Informant 2 also explained that he often feels socially inept. One of the effects of his ADHD is difficulty reading social cues and a tendency to be gullible. To fit in, the informant developed a mechanism of "masking," which is hiding his true behavior in order to appear to conform to social norms.

I was very introverted during my studies and it suffocated me (informant 2)

This condition led to very high social anxiety, making her prefer to isolate herself if she could not appear "normal." After deciding to quit IPG and focus on recovery, the informant then continued her education at SMEs which she found much more welcoming to her condition.

It was a different experience and I felt I was in the right place at UKM. I can explore a lot of things and the classes are flexible (informant 2)

In terms of therapy, the informant underwent several counseling sessions and tried various approaches. Although he was advised to undergo CBT, he later preferred somatic therapy because he felt it was more suitable in channeling stored emotional tension and physical trauma.

According to the experiences of informant 1 and informant 2, adult ADHD involves many emotional, social and spiritual issues in addition to focus or hyperactivity problems. Both informants pointed out that with the

right diagnosis, appropriate therapy, and support from those around them, people with adult ADHD can lead more stable, productive, and meaningful lives.

ADHD is a condition or persistent symptoms associated with situations such as inability to focus or hyperactivity and impulsivity. This condition interferes with the functioning or developmental process of the brain. These symptoms are usually divided into two main conditions, namely lack of focus and hyperactive and impulsive behavior. These disorders usually occur consistently over a period of more than six months. This group is also known to have lower health quality scores compared to the neurotypical group (Putra, 2022).

Learning problems include various forms of disabilities that cause students to experience difficulties in achieving normal development. While there is debate in Western education about whether ADHD falls into the category of learning disabled students, many studies suggest that ADHD students also experience significant difficulties in academic contexts (Zakaria et al., 2023). Therefore, they require specialized curricula and teaching approaches that suit their individual needs and disabilities (Azlan et al., 2024).

One highly recommended therapeutic technique is coaching. Coaching involves identifying someone the ADHD sufferer can rely on for support. The coach, who can be a therapist or a friend, is someone who can regularly take a few minutes to help the person with ADHD stay focused on the goal. The coach provides the structure needed to plan events provides upcoming activities and gives lots of praise when tasks are achieved (Zakaria et al., 2023).

Hyperactivity in adult ADHD will be subtle, appearing in the form of restlessness and difficulty relaxing or calming down. Difficulty in maintaining concentration in completing tasks seems to become more apparent as responsibilities, appointments, social obligations, and deadlines are often forgotten. Impulsivity often appears in the form of disrespectful behavior that offends others (Mairita et al., 2019; Wahidah, 2018). Individuals with ADHD need the support of others around them to live a good life. Being a good listener to them can help significantly change their perspective on life. Challenges such as difficulty building self-confidence remain, even after the individual has achieved various achievements in life (Avrilly et al., 2024).

In addressing the challenges faced by ADHD sufferers among IPT Malaysia students in living their daily lives, several solutions and treatment strategies can be applied, such as: i) Cognitive behavioral therapy can help ADHD sufferers identify unproductive behavioral patterns and develop strategies to manage ADHD symptoms, such as improving time management skills and improving focus. ii) A medication approach can also be a solution, where medications such as stimulants or non-stimulants can help reduce ADHD symptoms such as inattention and hyperactivity. iii) Pay attention to stress management, by adopting relaxation techniques such as meditation, yoga, or deep breathing to reduce additional stress and improve the mental well-being of people with ADHD. iv) A multidisciplinary approach is also needed, which involves collaboration between psychologists, psychiatrists, and counselors to provide comprehensive support. v) Education and support from family, friends, or support groups are also important in helping people with ADHD feel supported and gain a better understanding of their condition (Rivas-Vazquez et al., 2023; Storetvedt et al., 2024).

The ability to focus and concentrate is essential in everyday life. Even in a crowded or distracting environment, a person with ADHD who has been trained can develop deep concentration to achieve their goals. In addition,

therapy from an Islamic perspective also contributes significantly to the recovery of ADHD symptoms. Islamic psychotherapy rejects Sigmund Freud's negative view of religion as an illusion or neurosis, and instead views religion as a source of moral and spiritual healing. Spiritual activities such as prayer contain therapeutic elements that include exercise (physical movement), meditation (solemnity), autosuggestion (intention and prayer), and community support (saf in congregational prayer) (Rivas-Vazquez et al., 2023). Research by Ahmad Al-Qadhi shows that the recitation of the holy Quran is physiologically and psychologically able to significantly reduce nervous tension. Murattal, or recorded recitations of the Quran, can also be used as a therapeutic method that provides mental and emotional calm. In addition, findings from Adinda et al., (2023) regarding the concept of Mujahadah An-Nafs are also relevant in the context of ADHD. This concept encourages the practice of spiritual self-control, which not only helps to reduce the intensity of hyperfocus, the tendency to become overly immersed in one particular activity, but also simultaneously improves the quality of worship of the sufferer.

The field findings in this study reinforce the theories and approaches that have been put forward. The experiences of two informants provide a vivid picture of the complexity of the lives of adult ADHD students at IPT Malaysia. They face symptoms such as hyperactivity, confusion and mental fatigue, which if not recognized early can develop into other psychological problems such as depression. Nevertheless, the informants showed good adaptive capacity in dealing with these conditions. Their coping strategies range from physical and creative activities, establishing personal routines, to spiritual strengthening and participation in professional therapies such as CBT and somatic therapy. We found that this combination of medical, psychological and spiritual approaches yielded more effective results than using only one method. A holistic and supportive approach allows individuals with ADHD to remain productive and empowered in the face of academic and social pressures.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the study, it can be concluded that Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) in adults, especially among Malaysian university students, is a real condition that has a significant impact on daily life. Symptoms such as hyperactivity, restlessness and cognitive confusion often make it difficult for them to adjust to the rhythm of university courses and the social environment. However, some sufferers are able to manage their symptoms through adjustment strategies, professional therapy and spiritual approaches. This shows the importance of proper support, greater understanding and holistic interventions in helping them lead more stable and productive lives. As a recommendation, higher education institutions need to raise awareness of adult ADHD and provide welcoming and supportive counseling services for sufferers to receive more inclusive and effective psychological, social and academic support.

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