

# Moral and Spiritual Meaning-Making in Substance Use Recovery: An Interpretive Qualitative Study of *Da'wah* Counseling

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## Abstract

Substance use rehabilitation is commonly approached through biomedical and psychosocial frameworks, with comparatively limited attention to how moral and spiritual meanings are constructed within recovery processes. In contexts where religious belief systems are embedded in everyday life, recovery may involve not only behavioral change but also the reinterpretation of self, responsibility, and life purpose. This study explores how individuals undergoing rehabilitation interpret and make sense of their recovery experiences through a *da'wah* counseling approach. An interpretive qualitative study was conducted at the National Narcotics Agency (BNN) in Lampung, Indonesia. Data were generated through in-depth interviews involving counselors and clients undergoing rehabilitation. Analysis focused on interpreting how participants understood and negotiated their experiences, using an iterative process of coding, comparison, and thematic interpretation. Findings indicate that *da'wah* counseling was experienced by participants as a process of moral and spiritual meaning-making rather than solely as religious instruction. Through guided reflection and value-oriented dialogue, clients reinterpreted their past behaviors, reframed recovery as a form of moral responsibility, and reconstructed a sense of self aligned with religious and social values. Practices such as remembrance (*dzikir*), repentance (*taubah*), and trust in God (*tawakkul*) were not only performed but imbued with personal meaning, serving as resources for managing emotional distress and sustaining behavioral change. Participants described recovery as a process of becoming more self-aware, emotionally regulated, and oriented toward purposeful living. These findings do not claim effectiveness but offer interpretive insight into how recovery is shaped through moral and spiritual meaning-making within a specific cultural and institutional context. The study contributes to culturally responsive counseling by illustrating how religious concepts can function as interpretive resources through which individuals understand and sustain change.

## INTRODUCTION

Substance use rehabilitation is commonly addressed through biomedical and psychosocial frameworks that focus on detoxification, behavioral change, and social reintegration (Ramos et al., 2026; Theodorakis et al., 2024). While these approaches are essential, they often give limited attention to how individuals interpret their experiences of addiction and recovery, particularly in relation to moral and spiritual dimensions. This limitation is especially relevant in contexts where religious belief systems are embedded in everyday life and play a central role in shaping identity, responsibility, and behavioral regulation (King, 2019). Emerging discussions in rehabilitation and counseling research suggest that recovery is not only a process of behavioral modification but also one of meaning reconstruction (Clark-Taylor, 2022). Individuals undergoing rehabilitation may reinterpret their past actions, re-evaluate their sense of self, and renegotiate their moral and social identities.

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However, empirical research examining how such meaning-making processes unfold within faith-integrated counseling contexts remains limited.

Within Islamic traditions, *da'wah* is commonly understood not only as religious communication but also as a process of guiding individuals toward moral awareness and personal transformation (Ozalp, 2022). In practice, *da'wah* may extend beyond preaching to include dialogical engagement, reflection, and guidance that address both psychological and spiritual dimensions of human experience. Despite this broader conceptualization, existing research on *da'wah* has largely focused on its normative and theological aspects, with comparatively little attention to how it is experienced and interpreted within applied counseling settings. Similarly, Islamic counseling has been described as a structured helping process grounded in religious values, aiming to support psychological well-being alongside spiritual development (Faizal et al., 2025; Muslikah et al., 2026). While prior studies have highlighted its potential relevance in addressing behavioral and emotional difficulties, there remains limited empirical insight into how individuals undergoing rehabilitation interpret and engage with such approaches in practice. In particular, little is known about how moral and spiritual concepts, such as repentance, patience, and trust in God, are understood by clients and integrated into their recovery experiences.

In Indonesia, the National Narcotics Agency (BNN, 2015) has incorporated integrated counseling practices, including those informed by religious and spiritual values within its rehabilitation programs. However, existing accounts tend to emphasize program structures or intended outcomes, rather than examining how participants themselves make sense of these practices (Citra et al., 2023; Kusuma & Rayhaniah, 2022; Noer et al., 2019). As a result, the processes through which moral and spiritual meanings are constructed, negotiated, and internalized during rehabilitation remain underexplored.

Addressing this gap requires an interpretive approach that foregrounds participants' perspectives and experiences. Rather than evaluating the effectiveness of a particular intervention, such an approach enables a deeper understanding of how individuals interpret recovery, how they assign meaning to moral and spiritual concepts, and how these meanings shape their sense of self and behavioral change. Accordingly, this study explores how individuals undergoing substance use rehabilitation interpret and make sense of their recovery experiences within a *da'wah* counseling context. By focusing on participants' accounts, the study aims to provide insight into how moral and spiritual meaning-making operates within rehabilitation processes in a specific cultural and institutional setting. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing discussions on culturally responsive counseling by illustrating how religious concepts may function as interpretive resources through which individuals understand and sustain change.

## METHODS

### Design

This study adopted an interpretive qualitative approach to explore how individuals undergoing substance use rehabilitation make sense of their recovery experiences within a *da'wah* counseling context. An interpretive design was selected to examine how meanings are constructed, negotiated, and internalized by participants, particularly in relation to moral and spiritual dimensions of recovery. This approach is appropriate for understanding complex lived experiences where behavior, identity, and belief systems are closely intertwined.

The study was conducted at the National Narcotics Agency (BNN) in Lampung, Indonesia, between October and November 2024. The setting provides a rehabilitation context in which counseling practices are integrated with religious guidance, offering a relevant environment for exploring how participants interpret recovery through moral and spiritual frameworks.

## Participants

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling to ensure relevance to the research focus on rehabilitation experiences and counseling processes. The sample comprised three counselors from BNN and six clients undergoing outpatient rehabilitation. Clients were eligible if they (1) had voluntarily reported narcotics use to BNN and (2) had participated in a rehabilitation program. The sample size was appropriate for this qualitative case study because the study aimed to generate in-depth, contextually grounded understanding of counseling processes and rehabilitation experiences rather than broad generalization (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). The inclusion of both counselors and clients provided sufficiently rich and relevant perspectives to identify recurring patterns related to meaning-making, emotional regulation, and recovery within the bounded context of BNN rehabilitation. See Table 1.

Table 1. Participant characteristics

| Participant Name | Role      | Sex  | Age | Substance Use Duration (Year) | Substance Type | Rehab Duration (Months) |
|------------------|-----------|------|-----|-------------------------------|----------------|-------------------------|
| SUD              | Counselor | Male | 40  |                               |                |                         |
| SMA              | Counselor | Male | 41  |                               |                |                         |
| RHI              | Counselor | Male | 43  |                               |                |                         |
| ABA              | Client    | Male | 47  | 2                             | Cannabis       | 6                       |
| MAR              | Client    | Male | 43  | 2                             | Cannabis       | 4                       |
| ZRA              | Client    | Male | 39  | 3                             | Cannabis       | 12                      |
| RON              | Client    | Male | 47  | 2                             | Ecstasy        | 3                       |
| AJR              | Client    | Male | 37  | 2                             | Cannabis       | 6                       |
| FAT              | Client    | Male | 37  | 1                             | Cannabis       | 6                       |

## Data Collection

Semi-structured interview guides were used to elicit participants' interpretations of their experiences. Questions focused on how participants understood concepts such as repentance, patience, and trust in God in relation to recovery (e.g., *How do you understand the idea of repentance (taubah) in your own experience during recovery?*). Follow-up probes were used to explore how these meanings were connected to emotional experiences, behavioral changes, and perceptions of self (e.g., *When you rely on God, what kinds of feelings do you experience?*). All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim prior to analysis.

## Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using an interpretive thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2021a). Analysis involved iterative engagement with transcripts through processes of coding, comparison, and theme development. Initial coding identified segments of data reflecting participants' interpretations of recovery experiences, particularly in relation to moral and spiritual dimensions. Codes were then compared across participants and grouped into broader themes representing shared patterns of meaning. Throughout the analysis, attention was given to processes of reinterpretation, identity reconstruction, and emotional regulation. Religious concepts were not treated as predefined analytical categories; instead, the analysis examined how participants themselves understood and mobilized these concepts in making sense of their experiences. Themes were developed through ongoing movement between individual accounts and the broader dataset to ensure coherence and depth.

## Reflexivity

Several strategies were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of the study. Data triangulation across interviews, observations, and documents supported the credibility of

interpretations. Prolonged engagement with the data allowed for deeper familiarity with participants' perspectives and the research context. An audit trail was maintained to document analytical decisions and the development of themes. Reflexivity was an integral part of the research process. The researcher remained attentive to how their own perspectives and assumptions, particularly in relation to religious and cultural meanings, may have influenced data interpretation. Efforts were made to ground interpretations in participants' accounts while acknowledging the interpretive role of the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2021a).

## RESULTS

The analysis focused on how participants interpreted and made sense of their recovery experiences within a da'wah counseling context. Four themes were developed, reflecting processes of moral and spiritual meaning-making that shaped participants' understanding of addiction, recovery, and self.

### Theme 1: Reframing Addiction as Moral Awareness and Responsibility

Participants described a shift in how they understood their past substance use, moving from viewing it as a personal failure or uncontrollable habit toward interpreting it as a moral and spiritual issue requiring reflection and change. This reframing was not imposed directly through instruction but emerged gradually through counseling interactions that encouraged reflection and self-awareness.

Counselors emphasized the importance of first understanding clients' experiences before introducing religious perspectives. As one counselor explained:

*"We do not begin by discussing religion in a normative way. The first step is to listen to the client's experiences. As trust develops, concepts such as repentance and accountability to God emerge naturally through the counseling process, helping clients reinterpret their behaviour." (SUD, Counselor, 2024)*

Through this process, participants began to reinterpret their past behaviors in relation to broader moral frameworks, including responsibility toward themselves, their families, and God. One participant expressed this shift by linking substance use to moral consequences:

*"Now I see that using drugs is not only harmful to myself physically, but also something I am accountable for before God. I have started to understand it as part of repentance, and that makes me want to change." (ABA, Client, 2024)*

These reframing enabled participants to view recovery not merely as behavioral compliance but as a process of taking moral responsibility for their lives. The reinterpretation of addiction as a meaningful moral issue appeared to strengthen their motivation to change.

### Theme 2: Spiritual Practices as Resources for Emotional Regulation

Participants described how religious practices such as remembrance (*dzikir*), prayer (*do'a*), and trust in God (*tawakkul*) were experienced as practical resources for managing emotional distress and resisting relapse. These practices were not understood as abstract obligations but as personally meaningful strategies that supported self-regulation.

Counseling interactions played a role in shaping how these practices were understood and applied. Rather than prescribing religious behavior, counselors encouraged clients to connect spiritual practices with their emotional experiences. As one client reflected:

*"I often remember the counselor's advice when temptation arises, and it helps me stay stronger and hold myself back." (MAR, Client, 2024)*

Participants described moments of temptation or emotional difficulty as situations in which spiritual practices became particularly meaningful. The sense of being "observed by God" was interpreted as a source of internal control:

*"Now I am better able to control myself and think before I act, because I feel that I am being observed by Allah. That awareness makes me more careful in my actions." (MAR, Client, 2024)*

Through these interpretations, spiritual practices were integrated into everyday coping processes, allowing participants to manage anxiety, cravings, and emotional instability. This suggests that religious concepts functioned as lived resources that supported emotional regulation within recovery.

### **Theme 3: Reconstructing the Self Through Reflective Dialogue**

Participants' accounts indicated that recovery involved a process of reconstructing their sense of self through guided reflection. Counseling interactions were described as spaces where individuals could revisit past experiences, evaluate their consequences, and develop new understandings of themselves.

Counselors emphasized reflective dialogue rather than directive instruction, allowing clients to arrive at their own realizations. As one counselor explained:

*"The counselor did not immediately give advice, but instead guided me to think slowly about my mistakes and my responsibilities, so I could understand them myself." (SMA, Counselor, 2024)*

Clients described this process as gradual and non-coercive, characterized by being guided to think rather than being told what to do:

*"The counselor did not immediately give advice but guided me to think slowly about my mistakes and responsibilities. Through that process, I began to see myself differently." (ABA, Client, 2024)*

Through reflection, participants began to reconstruct their identities, moving from viewing themselves as "addicts" toward seeing themselves as individuals capable of change, responsibility, and purposeful action. This process was closely linked to increased self-awareness and emotional openness during counseling sessions. As one counselor noted:

*"The earliest changes are usually visible in the client's psychological condition, they begin to feel calmer and more open during counseling sessions." (RHI, Counselor, 2024)*

This reconstruction of the self appeared central to participants' recovery, as it enabled them to reorient their behavior in alignment with new moral and personal meanings.

### **Theme 4: Recovery as a Moral and Spiritual Journey**

Participants did not describe recovery solely as abstaining from substance use but as a broader process of personal transformation. Recovery was interpreted as a journey involving moral growth, spiritual awareness, and the pursuit of a more meaningful life.

Counseling interactions contributed to this interpretation by linking recovery with values such as responsibility, faith, and future orientation. One counselor highlighted this shift in perspective:

*“Our counseling approach is directed toward helping clients rediscover the meaning of their lives, not just stopping drug use. We want them to understand why they need to change and what kind of life they want to build moving forward.” (RHI, Counselor, 2024)*

Participants described developing new goals related to family, work, and religious life, indicating a reorientation toward the future:

*“After I leave here, I want to live a normal life, have a lawful job, and stay away from my old environment so I don’t fall back again.” (ZRA, Client, 2024)*

This transformation was also reflected in increased engagement in counseling and related activities, suggesting a growing sense of ownership over the recovery process:

*“Now I never skip counseling sessions, because I feel that this is something I need for myself, not something I am forced to do.” (RON, Client, 2024)*

Through these experiences, recovery was understood not as a finite outcome but as an ongoing moral and spiritual process that required continuous reflection, commitment, and self-regulation.

### **Theme 5: Constraints on Meaning-Making and Recovery**

While participants described meaningful changes, several factors were identified as constraining the continuity of recovery processes. These constraints were not only practical but also affected how participants were able to sustain the meanings they had developed.

Irregular participation in counseling sessions disrupted the continuity of reflection and engagement, limiting the development of deeper understanding. As one counselor noted:

*“There are clients who are supposed to attend six sessions, but after four sessions they stop coming. When that happens, the counseling process is interrupted, and it becomes difficult for them to continue reflecting and developing their understanding.” (SUD, Counselor, 2024)*

Family relationships also played a significant role. Lack of trust or support from family members weakened participants’ emotional stability and challenged their efforts to maintain new perspectives:

*“Sometimes my family no longer trusts me, and that makes my motivation go down. It becomes harder for me to stay committed to change.” (JAR, Client, 2024)*

Social stigma further complicated recovery, particularly for individuals with prior legal involvement. Negative labeling from the community affected participants’ confidence and sense of belonging:

*“The community is often not ready to accept former drug offenders, and that kind of labeling can affect how clients see themselves and their confidence to move forward.” (FAT, Client, 2024)*

These constraints highlight that recovery is not solely an individual process but is shaped by broader social and relational contexts. Interruptions in support systems and social acceptance may limit the sustainability of moral and spiritual meaning-making developed during rehabilitation.

## DISCUSSION

This study provides an interpretive account of how individuals undergoing substance use rehabilitation make sense of recovery within a da'wah counseling context. Rather than positioning da'wah counseling as a set of techniques or an intervention to be evaluated, the findings highlight how recovery is experienced as a process of moral and spiritual meaning-making. Across participants' accounts, recovery was constructed through reinterpretations of past behavior, the integration of spiritual practices into everyday coping, and the gradual reconstruction of self and purpose.

A central insight of this study is that recovery was not understood solely in behavioral or clinical terms but as a process of moral reinterpretation. Participants reframed substance use from a personal habit or external problem into a morally significant experience involving responsibility toward self, family, and God. This shift suggests that recovery involves not only behavioral regulation but also a reconfiguration of moral identity. This finding aligns with more recent perspectives in counseling and rehabilitation research that emphasize meaning-making and identity transformation as central to sustained change (Best et al., 2016). Individuals do not simply adopt new behaviors; they reinterpret their past and present experiences in ways that support new identities and commitments (Bathish et al., 2017). In this study, moral concepts such as repentance (*taubah*) were not merely taught but were actively interpreted by participants as frameworks for understanding change, indicating that moral language can function as a resource for identity reconstruction, consistent with contemporary narrative and identity-based models of recovery (Bathish et al., 2017).

The findings further demonstrate that spiritual practices were experienced as embedded, practical resources for managing emotional distress and maintaining behavioral control. Practices such as remembrance (*dzikir*) and trust in God (*tawakkul*) were interpreted as means of regulating internal states, particularly during moments of temptation or vulnerability. This extends existing understandings of coping in rehabilitation contexts by showing that spirituality in recovery can function not only as a symbolic or ritual dimension, but also as a meaningful and actionable resource within recovery processes (Hahn, 2025). Participants' accounts are also consistent with recent evidence showing that spirituality is associated with recovery-related protection and may contribute to prevention and recovery trajectories when it is personally meaningful and voluntarily engaged (Huang et al., 2021). In addition, recent evidence has shown that spiritual experiences form part of the coping repertoire used by people in recovery to manage stress and temptation (Beraldo et al., 2019). Participants' descriptions in the present study further suggest that these practices gained their effectiveness through personal meaning rather than external enforcement, indicating that spiritual practices functioned as internally mediated resources that supported emotional stability and continuity in recovery.

Another important contribution of this study is the identification of reflective dialogue as a key mechanism through which meaning-making occurs. Counseling interactions were described as spaces where individuals could revisit their past, articulate their experiences, and gradually reconstruct their sense of self. Rather than being directed toward predefined conclusions, participants were guided to develop their own interpretations. This process reflects a broader counseling principle that change is more sustainable when individuals actively participate in constructing their own understanding of their experiences (Badr & Acitelli, 2017). In this study, the integration of moral and spiritual concepts within reflective dialogue enabled participants to reposition themselves as agents capable of change. The reconstruction of self

was therefore not imposed but emerged through interpretive engagement with personal and moral narratives, consistent with narrative and identity-based approaches to recovery (Best et al., 2016).

Participants' accounts also suggest that recovery was understood as an ongoing process rather than a fixed outcome. Recovery was framed as a continuous effort to align behavior with moral and spiritual values, supported by evolving goals related to family, work, and religious life. This perspective highlights the importance of future orientation in sustaining change. By interpreting recovery as part of a broader moral and spiritual trajectory, participants were able to situate their experiences within a longer-term framework of personal development. This orientation may contribute to sustained engagement in recovery by linking present actions to meaningful future possibilities, as highlighted in contemporary recovery models emphasizing process-based and future-oriented change (Hennessy, 2017).

While participants described meaningful transformations, the findings also indicate that recovery is shaped by contextual and relational conditions. Disruptions in counseling participation, limited family support, and experiences of social stigma were identified as factors that constrained the continuity of recovery processes. These constraints highlight that meaning-making does not occur in isolation but is influenced by the social environment. When supportive relationships and structures are absent, the meanings constructed during rehabilitation may be more difficult to sustain. This finding underscores the importance of considering recovery as a socially embedded process, where individual change is closely connected to relational and structural contexts (Best et al., 2016; Bathish et al., 2017).

### Implications

The findings have implications for the development of culturally responsive counseling approaches. Rather than treating religious concepts as supplementary components, this study suggests that moral and spiritual frameworks can function as central interpretive resources through which individuals understand and sustain change. Counseling practices that engage with these frameworks in a dialogical and context-sensitive manner may support deeper forms of engagement and self-reflection. Importantly, the findings do not suggest that da'wah counseling is universally effective. Instead, they highlight how such approaches may operate within specific cultural and institutional contexts, where religious meanings are already embedded in everyday life. This perspective emphasizes the need for contextually grounded approaches that recognize the role of local belief systems in shaping recovery processes.

### Limitations and Future Directions

This study has several limitations. First, it was conducted within a single institutional setting and involved male participants only, which may limit the transferability of findings to other contexts and genders. Second, the sample size was relatively small and focused on individuals who were already engaged in rehabilitation, potentially excluding perspectives of those who disengaged from the process. Third, the study relied on participants' self-reported experiences, which reflect subjective interpretations rather than observable behavioral outcomes.

Future research could extend this work by examining similar processes in different cultural or institutional settings, as well as by exploring how moral and spiritual meaning-making evolves over time. Longitudinal approaches may provide further insight into how such meanings are sustained or transformed beyond the rehabilitation context. Finally, involve a balance gender distribution of the participants may gives more nuanced insights how participants experience moral and spiritual meaning-making during their substance use recovery.

## CONCLUSION

This study shows that substance use recovery within a da'wah counseling context was experienced not only as behavioral change but as a process of moral and spiritual meaning-making. Participants described recovery as involving the reinterpretation of past behaviors, the reconstruction of self, and the use of religious concepts such as repentance, remembrance, and trust in God as meaningful resources for emotional regulation and sustained change. Rather than claiming effectiveness, the study offers context-specific insight into how recovery may be shaped through culturally embedded moral and spiritual frameworks, highlighting the value of counseling approaches that engage seriously with the lived meanings through which individuals understand and sustain change.

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## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

The author was solely responsible for the conception and design of the study, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of findings, and the writing and revision of the manuscript.

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