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# Reincarnation-Balinese local wisdom as supportive therapy in the elderly with depression: a case study



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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Reincarnation (reborn after death), is a Hindu belief in Bali where it is proven by 'ngaluwang' ritual. In this ritual, every person who has a newborn baby will ask the help of 'orang pintar' to find out whose *atman* (spirit) has manifested in the baby. By returning to the world, there is no more sadness or feeling of loss in the elderly who suffers from the death of a spouse or other family member. This case study aims to know the reincarnation as supportive therapy for the elderly with depression.

**Case Description:** A qualitative case study with in-depth interviews has been conducted by 2 (two) elderly people with a history of depressive disorders from the community. The first case came from a retired woman 72 years old and other case was derived from a female-

farmer 80 years old. Face-to-face interview assessment has been evaluated to the cases and narrative synthesis about the findings has been written by qualitative approach. From the case study, the elderly experienced improvement in depressive symptoms, where feelings of loss, sadness, loneliness, guilt and hopelessness disappeared after the return of dead family members' spirits into the world. The reincarnation of a loved one makes sadness and loss cease to exist, so symptoms of depression are healed.

**Conclusion:** Reincarnation, which is believed to be a particular culture or religion, is a part of local wisdom that can provide healing of depression symptoms in the elderly.

**Keywords:** Reincarnation, depression, elderly

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## INTRODUCTION

Reincarnation (reborn after death), is a Hindu belief in Bali. Reincarnation in the philosophical system of Hindu Society Reincarnation, according to Hinduism, namely the *Panca Shrada Creed*.<sup>1,2</sup> The theory for reincarnation is also called *Punarbawa*, which is being reborn into the world for several times based on karma, and in relation with the human body is drawn as a chain cycle of being born, living, and die as a process.<sup>3</sup> A reincarnation is a spiritual event experienced by every human who lives in this world before reaching *moksha* or perfection.<sup>4</sup>

A reincarnation is a unique event which attracts the thinking of scientists, including experts in the field of psychology as well as famous figures.<sup>4,5</sup> Among them Carl G. Jung, the psychologist who used the concept of eternal self who experienced many births as a tool in its efforts to understand the most profound secrets about his self and consciousness. Erik Erikson, the American psychoanalyst, was sure that reincarnation entered into the system core of every human belief.<sup>4,5</sup> Based on that fact, in the subconsciousness, there is no one with a healthy mind who can imagine their existence without guessing that they are always alive and that they will live after this. Also, Mahatma Gandhi, he said that he couldn't imagine the forever hatred among human, because he believed in the theory

that we were born again and were still be able to live with the hope that if not in this lifetime, maybe in another life then will be able to embrace all human in the arm of friendship.<sup>6,7</sup>

To find the existence of reincarnation, Balinese Hindu family will perform the ritual of '*numas baos*' (asking or connecting with spirits through supernatural figures). In this ritual, every person who has a newborn baby will ask the help of 'smart people' to find out whose *atman* or spirit has manifested in the baby.<sup>7,8</sup> Usually, the one who will reincarnate is a family member who had died within the big family. Reincarnation will make the children as if they were the family members who had died and then were reborn (comes back) into the family. Also, there are several characteristics of the dead family members being inherited to the newborn.<sup>7,8</sup>

One of the positive impacts of the belief in reincarnation contains a demand so that people are able to understand their existence in living life together with the elements that shape their characters. Based on that understanding, there will be balanced and harmonious relationship between himself and other human beings, the environment, and with the creator of life in accordance to the concept of "*Tri Hita Karana*". Another positive impact is the emotion felt due to the return of the person who has died. The feeling of sadness and grief being buried for a long

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time are often unable to be recognized especially in elderly who have lost a spouse or children unexpectedly. Those emotions are noticeably reduced with the belief in the reincarnation of loved one.<sup>7,8</sup>

On the other hand, the features of depression in the elderly are not typical where depressed mood rarely appears.<sup>9</sup> The keys symptoms are anxiety, somatic complaints, and guilty feeling. Lethargy, pessimistic, having no appetite, insomnia, difficulty to concentrate are often recognized but usually misinterpreted as common symptoms in the elderly. The suicidal idea (feeling useless, desire to die) is also not taken seriously when it should be explored further. Commonly, the elderly with depression who have the desire to die will refuse to eat and treatment (passive suicide).<sup>9</sup> Why is depression in the elderly often go undetected and rarely treated? Because the elderly often hide it, depressive symptoms are considered normal in the elderly, and often co-exists with other diseases. The symptoms of depression are often regarded as the result of physical illness that has been going on for a long time (chronic). The society thought that depression is a weakness of personality/faith and the elderly are considered as wise human. Unspecific depression features in the elderly complained as various physical complaints, incurable illness, and feeling tired. These make the management of depression in elderly becomes underdiagnosed.<sup>10</sup>

Various psychosocial events such as the death of a close family member (a spouse or a child) act as a severe stressor that causes depression. But, sadness as a result of the loss/death is often considered as a natural grieving process. This also causes depression in elderly becomes unrecognized. With the belief of reincarnation in Balinese Hindu family, it gives a positive effect on mood in depressed elderly after losing one of the closest family members. Based on the mentioned above, this case study aims to know the impact of reincarnation as supportive therapy in the elderly with depression.

## CASE DESCRIPTION:

A qualitative case study with in-depth interviews approaches with 2 (two) elderly people with a history of depression disorders was conducted at Sanglah General Hospital, Bali, Indonesia. Two relevant cases were included in this study after meeting the inclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria were patients with severe depression following past events, normal laboratory evaluation, have been taken anti-depression medication, and already signed the informed consent form.

The face-to-face interview has been used to gather the past, present, and family history regarding the symptoms by arranging several appropriate

questions. A qualitative assessment has also been carried out through the interview process by assessing the face, mood, and answer of respondents. Narrative sentences are used to elaborate on the findings and determine the outcome of Reincarnation-Balinese local wisdom as supportive therapy in the elderly with depression.

### Case 1

A woman, 72 years old, retired, experienced severe depression after her first son died in an accident at the age of 28. She was extremely sad because the accident was unexpected. Daily activities were profoundly impaired. She felt weak, and there is no willingness to go out of the house, even only to visit relatives. Various physical complaints that she felt were not cured also though she is a doctor.

Several laboratory, radiological examinations, and other investigations showed normal results. As a Balinese, the client also saw the shaman or paranormal to detect the presence of 'other force' in *niskala* as the cause of her illness, but everything was said to be fine. Despite the sadness, tiredness, feeling of emptiness, no hope, weight loss, and loss of appetite that came every day for five years, the client had never thought to see a psychiatrist as she saw her sadness as normal and it's a reflection of the feeling of losing her beloved child.

After her second son got married, she has three grandchildren, where the third grandchild was the reincarnation of her first son who had died. Within a month after discovering the reincarnation of her deceased eldest son, her passion grew, her sadness was gone, her appetite improved, and daily activities were back to normal. There is a happy feeling that 'the lost boy' is now present in the middle of the family.

### Case 2

A woman, 80 years old, a farmer who is depressed because her husband died when she was not there. Her husband died when the client lived apart while staying with one of her children in another city. Patient's child didn't immediately notify about the death of the husband in fear that patient would get shocked and also due to the very long distance between the islands that did not allow the client to return to Bali immediately. Patient's child only notified after 3 months of the husband's death. She felt guilty about not being able to take good care of her husband.

The sadness got heavier because she felt lonely when her children went to work. She looked thin, weak, shutting herself in the room. She even had behavioural changes such as being temperamental, suspicious, and had experienced bed wetting and delirium. After underwent treatment for physical illness and her physical condition had improved, the

patient still felt tired, had no passion, and became more silent. When her great-grandchildren, who were the reincarnation of her deceased husband was born, the depression slowly recovered. She took care of her great-grandchild happily, even doing the laundry and changing diapers as if she was devoting herself to her husband who had returned to her.

## DISCUSSION

From the case study above, the elderly experienced improvement in depressive symptoms after feelings of loss, sadness, loneliness, guilt and hopelessness. The symptoms are disappeared with the return of deceased members who were the source of their depression.<sup>11</sup> The reincarnation of the loved one makes sadness and feeling of loss, which are the symptoms of depression become healed.<sup>11</sup> With reincarnation, a family member that has died can be present again in the world in the family, so that the sadness, grief, and even depression that occurs can disappear.<sup>6-9</sup> By returning to the world, there is no more sadness or feeling of loss for the elderly who suffer from the death of a spouse or other family member. Although the symptoms of depression are previously underdiagnosed, with their belief in the reincarnation within Hindu religion in Bali, it turns out indirectly to help to reduce and even cure the existing symptoms of depression in the elderly, perhaps even in other patients.

With the return of someone who is 'missing' from the family, the source of the stressor is removed, so the feelings/ mood become relaxed and relieved. This will most likely affect the balance of biogenic amines, regulation of stress hormones, circadian rhythm, metabolic balance, and even the structure of the hippocampus in the body.<sup>12</sup> All of this still needs to be proven in laboratory and other clinical trials. The belief in reincarnation can also change the cognitive of depression patients so that they do not have to mourn the death of loved ones because one day they will be born again into the world.<sup>13</sup> Although there are limitations in this case study, it can be a consideration as material for further research with other research methods as well as a bigger number of samples.

## CONCLUSION

Reincarnation, which is believed to be a particular culture or religion is one part of the local wisdom that can provide healing of depression symptoms in the elderly.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There is no competing interest regarding the manuscript

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## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Ni Ketut Sri Diniari is responsible for the study from the conceptual framework,

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