

Teaching Nursing Students How to Mitigate Stress

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Abstract

Background: For student's stress and burnout has significantly increased in the following manners: (a) poorer health at graduation and 1 year post graduation, (b) lower mastery of nurse-specific tasks, (c) and lower use of evidence-based practice. Stress of the nursing student closely mirrors that of other students, with added components such as (a) workload, (b) clinical placement, (c) development of clinical skills, and (d) perceived lack of practical skills. Many studies have addressed student stress but haven't focused on measures to deter stress.

Method: A convenience sample of 35 junior-level nursing students in a generic baccalaureate theoretical framework' and a pre/post survey was administered.

Results: Mindfulness and self-care modules were beneficial in increasing self-care efforts and decreasing stress from 5 to 30% points, in a short period of time.

Conclusion: The project was designed and succeeded in reducing stress in nursing students by directing and energizing them to keep their well-being a priority.

Key Words: Stress, Stressors, Nursing Students, Mindfulness, Self-Care

Introduction

Stress is vital for survival in proper amounts; stress can encourage individuals to perform to the best of their abilities (Vander Riet et. al., 2015). Often times when stress exceeds the individual's threshold, detrimental effects upon both physical and mental health are seen. Common stress reactions include tension, irritability, inability to concentrate and physical symptoms like headache or fast heartbeat.

Nursing students have been reported to have high levels of stress, however, there is a lack of meaningful interventions to positively impact those levels. Students experience increased levels of stress during their education [1]. While, the pressures and uncertainties nursing students experience are shared with all academic students, nursing students experience stress from other components. These components include: (a) workload, (b) clinical placement, (c) development of clinical skills, and (d) perceived lack of practical skills.

The project explored the effectiveness of providing nursing students with self-care tools to decrease stress and increase self-care. A convenience sample of 35 junior baccalaureate nursing students participated in the project. The modules were presented in seminar format with interactive components that were designed to give the nursing students a foundation for personal self-care as they journey through a demanding stressful career path.

Background

Nursing student stress is real and was under documented until recent times. There is a growing body of evidence on stress among nurses and nursing students and its effects on wellbeing. Labrague, based on the Perceived Stress Survey concluded that nursing students often experience depression, anxiety, stress, and decreased mindfulness [2]. Sources of stress experienced by nursing students closely mirrors those of other students. However, other stressors in nursing students include workload, clinical placement, development of clinical skills, and perceived lack of practical skills. Additional, components of stress that are experienced by student nurses expressed by Williams (2014) are associated with clinical sources such as, a new environment, fear of making a mistake, and unfamiliarity with professional nursing skills [3]. Unfortunately, appropriate interventions and survival tools to assist students with mitigating stress are deficient [3].

The advantage of having these survival tools according to Gibbons (2010) is that these tools plants seeds of awareness regarding the importance of self-care and its relevance to being a health care professional [4]. Such health promotion efforts require that students not only be educated about relevant information and skills to support positive patient outcomes, but also that they be encouraged to value being healthy individuals. The aim is for students to start using the tools while in school to keep their stress levels manageable. Once in practice, the students will already have the necessary knowledge and tools needed to provide holistic self-care. This change in the educational process can only result in a win for the nurse, patient, and profession. The results suggest

that providing nursing students with tools to mitigate stress and promote self-care can result in a healthier nursing population [3].

Literature Review

The evidence shows that nursing students are not prepared to care for themselves. While students are pursuing their nursing education, there is a window of opportunity to plant seeds of awareness regarding the importance of self-care. Stress and anxiety have been identified as significant issues experienced by student nurses during their education [5]. Horneffer (2006) noted that emphasis should be placed on stress management and its relevance to being a health care professional as a part of nursing education [6]. From a global perspective, undergraduate nurse education has changed significantly in the last decade with more emphasis being placed on student learning in the clinical environment. The purpose of nursing education is to provide the necessary theoretical knowledge and clinical experience to facilitate and prepare undergraduate nursing students to develop into the professional role of the nurse [5].

The focus of the educational process for nursing students is on the patient and patient's family. Students who are provided with knowledge to recognize the perception of threat may help reduce the physiological response of the body. Changing the way one responds to perceived stressors may reduce perceived levels of stress. Reducing perceived levels of stress may then also improve perceptions of providing higher quality of care to patients [7]. Broadening the educational process to include student nurses receiving tools to ward off or reduce the threat of stress at a minimum will be helpful in creating and maintaining healthy nurses.

According to Dempster, Gibbons, and Moutray, the advantage of having these stress tools is that they plant seeds of awareness regarding the importance of self-care and its relevance to being a health care professional [8]. Such health promotion efforts require that students not only be educated about pertinent information and skills but also be encouraged to value being healthy individuals. Once in practice the student will already have the necessary knowledge and tools desirable to care for themselves. The goal is for students to start using the tools while in school to keep their stress levels manageable. This change in the educational process can only result in a win for the student, nurse, patient, and profession.

Williams (2014), a study to reduce stress in nursing students, results demonstrated that the introduction of stress relieving intervention lowered student stress levels and increased perception of quality of care [3]. The study also expresses that faculty may not be aware of accurate stress levels of students and that they are prepared to address students that are failing academically but may not be aware of sources of stress that students may have.

Nursing students experience high levels of stress. In response to prolonged stress, burnout can occur however, hardiness, as expressed by provides resistance to stress and can protect students against burnout. Burnout is the gradual process by which a person, detaches from work and other meaningful relationships, that could have been facilitated by stress [9, 10]. According to Ilhan, Durukan, Taner, Maral, and Bumi (2008), burnout could be related to heavy workload or inability of employee to deal with stress

[11]. The findings of Miron and Orcutt (2014) in their study on Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) revealed that brief discrete elements of MBSR are effective at relieving anxiety and stress.

Mindfulness and Holistic Self-Care Principles

Approaches to stress management such as, mindfulness and holistic self-care principles have demonstrated positive effects for those who use them. The resulting positive effects have been documented for patients with chronic illnesses, healthcare providers, and nursing students. This project focused on the student nurse and used both mindfulness, and holistic self-care principles. Margaret Newman (1994), focused on health as expanding consciousness was paired with the principles of mindfulness and holistic self-care to develop the self-care modules [12]. Her framework put emphasis on the unitary completeness of all persons. Mindfulness and Newman's framework go well together because they both stress the importance of individuals being more aware of themselves.

Mindfulness is the ability to pay attention in the present moment without judgment, to be aware of both internal sensations, thoughts and feelings and the external environment surrounding the individual compassionately, allowing them to respond by conscious choice rather than reaction [13]. Mindfulness meditation is a method that may improve coping skills to enhance cognitive functioning, reduce stress, and improve mood in nursing students. Learning mindfulness meditation strategies can increase one's mindfulness in everyday life to improve health and functioning. aware of themselves.

Method

After Internal Review Board permission was obtained, the seminar Mind Body and Soul was scheduled to present to a convenience sample of 35 junior nursing baccalaureate students. A needs assessment and pre-survey were given to students for baseline data collection on the student's ability to mitigate stress. The surveys were anonymous as no participant information was solicited. The needs assessment had five items that addressed stress in the student's lives. The pre-survey had five items that spoke to the student's activities that would help to decrease stress. The students were engaged in a day 6-hour seminar and completed the post survey that mirrored the pre-survey 8 weeks later. Percentages of the responses were calculated and revealed a small improvement that was relevant for the timeline as denoted on Figures 1 and 2 on how the student's mitigated stress.

Results

The participants attended a seminar entitled Mind Body and Soul where concepts of mindfulness and self-care principles were employed. The seminar was a combination of all six sessions. The sessions were designed to take place at the beginning of each nursing school semester. The title Mind Body and Soul was chosen as it represents the focus of the sessions, to address concerns of the participants from a holistic approach. The modules were designed to be very interactive and assist the student in making decisions that would add value to their lives. The results are presented using descriptive analysis.

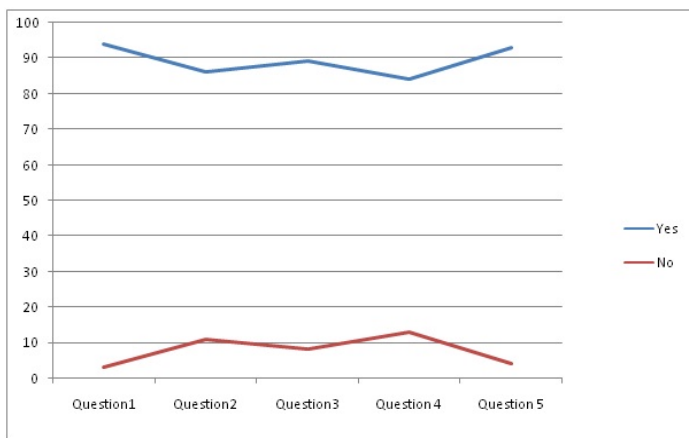
Figure I is a display of the needs assessment results. Of those 35 respondents, 97% selected school as their greatest source of stress. The needs assessment addressed, whether there had been any

recent increase in stress levels and whether the increase was due to school. Both were answered with “yes”, 86% and 89% of the time, respectively. Eighty four percent of the students felt as though they were always studying and never accomplishing anything. Ninety three percent find their minds consumed with thoughts of school even when they were supposed to be relaxing with their families.

The pre-survey served to compile data on stress management techniques that the students are currently using. Which was completed once the students completed the needs assessment. Upon completion of the pre-survey the students were engaged in the Mind Body and Soul seminar. The seminar equipped the students with strategies to mitigate stress in each domain of the topic. This project sought to explore the effects of stress management modules on the nursing student’s ability to mitigate stress. Since students rated school as the greatest source of stress in their lives 97% of the time, it is imperative that some type of intervention be inserted into their academic progress. Not only did they rate school as the greatest source of stress but also it was given as the reason for an increase in their stress levels evidenced by the response that school was constantly on their minds.

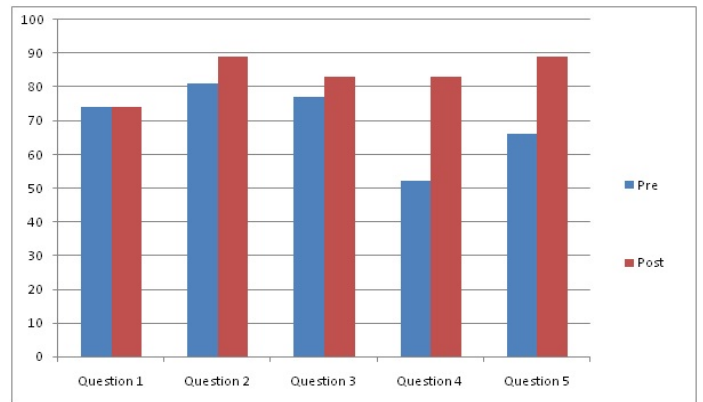
Figure 1: Needs Assessment prior to seminar

1. Is school the major cause of stress in your life?
2. Would you say that your stress level has increased recently?
3. Would you attribute your increased stress level to school?
4. Do you feel as though you’re always studying and yet getting nothing done?
5. Do you find that your mind is still consumed with schoolwork thoughts even when you’re supposed to be relaxing or spending quiet time with the family?



The lack of self-care as denoted in the pre/post surveys can lead to negative consequences. An example, would be lack of sleep, which was also validated on the pre/post survey results. The Mind Body Soul seminar was purposed to have a positive impact on the student’s well-being. The overall responses demonstrated a decrease in student’s choice of never and seldom in 3 out of 5 questions. The percentage changes were positive over a short period of time. If this program is implemented at the beginning of nursing classes there may be notable changes, resulting in a healthier nurse population achieved from using a holistic approach. Figure 2 shows the positive responses regarding self-care from seminar participants.

Figure 2: Pre/Post Seminar Surveys - 35 Responses.



The questions are as follows and the responses for each could be never, seldom, sometimes, often and always. The percentages in the figure 2 represent the positive responses.

1. I take at least one hour a day to pamper myself or do something relaxing.
2. I am careful about what I eat and eat a balanced meal.
3. I do listen to my body’s signals and recognize when I am becoming tired, rundown, and vulnerable to illness.
4. I do sleep well and get at least 7 hours of sleep a night.
5. I do share how I am feeling with at least one friend or partner.

Conclusion

Nursing student stress is real and if left untreated can have a negative impact on the nursing profession. Education for stress reduction may seem like an oxymoron because education is work, not relaxation. However, workshops or in-service training, as well as written material, remind us to incorporate or reincorporate these principals into our daily lives and give us new self-care ideas.

The Mind Body Soul seminar was purposed to have a positive impact on the student’s well-being. It demonstrated in a short period of time how mindfulness and holistic self-care principles can make a difference in how students address stress. If this program is implemented at the beginning of nursing classes there may be notable changes, resulting in a healthier nurse population achieved from using a holistic approach.

As nurse educators, it is our responsibility to develop well-educated nurses that are accountable for maintaining their own self-care. In recent years, there have been programs that are designed for nurses to address their self care; however, if any schools have implemented self-care approaches for the students within their curriculum they are scarce [2]. The benefit of self-care sessions over individual instructor interventions is that they do not affect grades because they are not connected to a class and are offered at the same time each semester with each seminar building off the other.

Keeping in mind the well-being of student nurses and how they manage their stress levels can ultimately affect their performances as nurses, and thus impact the quality of health care provided. It seems that now is the perfect time for nursing programs to add self-care modules to their curriculum. Educators of nursing students, can make positive differences in this ever-increasing phenomenon [14, 15].

Implications for Research and Nursing Education

Based on the literature review, there is little research on student stress related to student or nursing burnout and how this stress affects patient outcomes. Most of the research found was completed outside of the United States. Research is needed in these areas. In addition, further research is needed to verify the results of this project.

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