

Building Self-care Competencies for Stress Management in Nursing Students

Jenny Fields, DNP, RN, BC
Katherine Moore, DNP, RN
Structured Abstract

LOCAL PROBLEM

The health and wellness of college students continues to be a growing concern. In 2018, the American College Health Association found 59% of college students report feeling high levels of stress in the past 12 months. According to the 2018 Health Minds Survey conducted at Tulsa Community College (TCC), 42.37% of students report they experienced emotional or mental difficulty more than three days in a four-week period and 44.35% have little interest in doing things several days of the week. Nursing students report high levels of stress during their nursing education as they experience stress in both the academic and clinical practice settings. Nursing students report patient care, uncertainty in new practice settings, emotional toll of caring for ill patients, and fear of making clinical errors as factors which lead to increased stress. Increased perception of stress during nursing school and as a new graduate may contribute to the shortage of nurses entering the profession.

PROJECT PURPOSE

The purpose of this project is to create a self-care program to enable students to better manage their stress and ultimately help others build their self-care competencies.

METHODOLOGY

Dorothea Orem's Self-care Nursing Theory was the theoretical framework which guided this project. A six-week program was implemented to reduce the student's stress by increasing their self-care competencies. The curriculum was developed to increase the students understanding of the concepts of self-care, mindfulness, and stress management techniques. Session one consisted of collecting survey data and the introduction of the concept of self-care and its relationship to stress management. The self-care techniques taught during session one was physical activity (PA) and its relation to physical and mental well-being. Session two focused on the concept of mindfulness and how it relates to stress management, the technique taught was deep breathing. Session three's mindfulness technique was journaling. Session four was a debriefing session and check-in to reinforces pervious strategies. Session five was planned as follow-up meeting to discuss what students had learned and found useful. Due to Covid-19 the final session was moved to a virtual format and took place two weeks later than planned. The final session reinforced the importance of utilizing the concepts and techniques taught and questions regarding program evaluation.

The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) developed by Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein in 1983 is a 10-item perceived stress scale that measures stress over the past month. A 10-item Self-care Competency Survey and Top 5 Stressor Inventory was also developed. The students were asked to complete each of these tools in the first and last

session to allow for comparison of data. The students also completed a session check-in sheet during sessions two through five.

RESULTS

The program attendance varied between 12 and 32. Initial data found 22 of the 32 students report a PSS of moderate stress (scores 0-13 = low stress, 14-26 = moderate stress, and 27-40 = high stress). The Top 5 Stressor Inventory found several common themes of stressors among students including work/life balance, financial, health, and family. The students attending session one were engaged and eager to participate, and recruited more students to attend the second session (32 participants). They were able to articulate how they utilized or why they did not utilize the techniques taught. During the debriefing discussion students voiced the use of breathing techniques to be the most helpful due to the immediate calming effect. The participants expressed less success with the addition of physical activity into their daily lives and several discussed the lack of interest in journaling. This data was also verified by their weekly check-in sheets which asked them to report the amount of physical activity each week and what types of self-care they did and how often. Students reported that “the breathing really helped me calm down from a stress/anxiety episode, and “I continued to use breathing exercises thru my head-to-toe check-off and pharmacology exam.” One student reported “I was able to calm down enough to focus on my head-to-toe check-off and I performed very well.” The check-in sheets showed that the students were implementing the techniques taught and that they could see the benefits as it related to overall performance in nursing school and mental health.

Due to Covid-19 session five was delayed by two weeks and moved to a virtual format, the post program surveys were also moved to an electronic format which lead to a decrease in participation. Overall, there was an increase in the Self-care Competency Scores between pre and post surveys. On the competency “I integrate self-care strategies into my daily life” the scores went from 62.5% to 85.7% and “I can describe strategies to empower patients and families to engage in self-care activities” went from 71.3% to 91.4%.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The initial PSS ratings were lower for TCC nursing students than found in the literature, indicating that nursing students may have some a better feel for the need for stress management. Nursing students at TCC reported moderate levels of stress at the beginning of the program and were highly engaged during the in-person sessions indicating the need to implement this program again to gain additional data. Future studies may prove the need to incorporate stress management and self-care into the nursing curriculum at TCC.

Keywords: self-care, mindfulness, nursing students, stress

Team Leader: Dr. Ellen Buckner

Team Member(s): Dr. Angela Sivadon