

Optimizing Nursing Student Well-Being: A Longitudinal Study

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Background & Significance: Stress, anxiety, and depression among nursing students and nurses are on the rise contributing to burn out and suicide. COVID -19 has added complexity to this challenge with studies showing a negative impact on younger nurses in particular. Stress management trainings have been shown to positively impact healthcare practitioners by decreasing stress, anxiety, and improving wellbeing. College seems an opportune time to teach resiliency strategies to future nurses before they enter the workforce.

Clinical Question: What long term impact does the Benson Henry Institute (BHI) Stress Management and Resiliency Training (SMART) program have on nursing student perceived stress, mindful awareness, anxiety, depression, resiliency, and mindful practices compared with nursing students who do not take the SMART program?

Evidence: A literature search in CINAHL utilizing key words: Nursing students, stress, anxiety, mindfulness, burnout, and depression yielded over 300 results, with 33 full-text articles synthesized. The BHI SMART training program has been shown to decrease stress and anxiety and improve the mental health of healthcare practitioners but had not been tested with nursing students (Dossett et al., 2021; Mehta et al., 2016; Nathan et al., 2021).

Intervention Implementation: The SMART training was offered to all senior-level baccalaureate nursing students with 14 students opting for the SMART training group and 18 students choosing to be in the control group. The SMART group participated in 8 weekly 1.5 hour SMART sessions over Zoom during the fall, 2020 semester led by a certified SMART practitioner. This project was deemed “not research” through the IRB.

Evaluation: Electronic pre and posttest surveys measuring perceived stress, mindful awareness, anxiety, depression, resiliency, mindful practice, and satisfaction with the training were administered to SMART and control participants at the start and end of the 8-week training period, and again one year later after the nursing students graduated and entered the workforce. Paired t-tests were used for analysis with one or two-tail significance levels ($p < .05$) reported.

Results: SMART participants began the study with significantly higher stress levels compared to controls. After participating in SMART, they demonstrated statistically decreased stress, anxiety, and depression symptoms around the training, with improvements stable one year later. Conversely, control participants exhibited significantly increased stress and decreased mindful awareness around the 8-week training with significantly increased depression observed one year later. SMART participants loved the training and would highly recommend it to others. In retrospect, the majority of the control group regretted not taking the training when it was offered to them while in school.

Significance/Conclusion: This study demonstrated the positive, sustainable impact a relatively short stress management course can have on nursing student stress, anxiety, and depression symptoms. Given the challenges nurses face, and the additional impact COVID-19 has on younger nurses, it is a critical time to support the well-being of our nursing students and future nurses. Inclusion of explicit stress management trainings during nursing school appears to support students not only during training but with continued benefits as they enter the workforce.