

Cultivating Compassion and Self Care for Nursing Students

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Background & Significance: It is well documented that unmanaged stress can lead to negative outcomes for nurses and patients including increased risk for medical errors, job burnout, turnover rates, and significantly higher rates of suicide in nurses compared to the general public. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these stressors by placing additional burden on nursing students and nurses (American Nurses Foundation, 2022; Cuccia et al., 2022; Drybye et al. 2017; Firth, 2019). Additionally, the core competencies for professional nursing were revised to require integration of wellness and resiliency into nursing curricula (The American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2023). Therefore, it is imperative that nursing programs prepare their graduates to optimize their wellbeing and manage stress before they enter the workforce.

Clinical Question: What impact does a hands-on, experiential course to optimize nursing student mental health and wellbeing have on nursing student perceived stress and resiliency?

Evidence: A literature search in CINAHL utilizing key words: Nursing students, stress, anxiety, mindfulness, and burnout yielded over 200 results, with 12 full-text articles reviewed. Research indicates that mindfulness education mitigates burnout and compassion fatigue for nurses as well as emphasizes the importance of implementing such programs into undergraduate nursing curricula.

Intervention Implementation: Drs. Martin and Nagle created the nursing course, *Compassionate Care for Nurses* to provide students with tools to optimize their mental health. The course was offered to all undergraduate nursing students during the fall 2022 and spring 2023 semesters with 18 students enrolling during the fall and 22 students enrolling during the spring semester. The course was delivered in a hybrid format and students explored how stress affects mental health and well-being. Students participated in a variety of evidence-based, integrative strategies that included meditation, mindfulness, yoga, tai chi, forest bathing, culinary medicine, and more. This project was deemed “not research” through the IRB.

Evaluation: Electronic pre and posttest surveys measuring perceived stress, resiliency, and satisfaction with the course were administered at the start and end of the fall and spring semesters. Paired t- tests were used for analysis with one or two-tail significance levels ($p < .05$) reported.

Results: Both cohorts of students began the course with moderate stress and low resiliency levels. At the end of the fall semester, students demonstrated statistically significant decreases in stress levels ($p=.037$) and increased resiliency levels ($p=.031$). At the end of the spring semester, while not statistically significant, students demonstrated decreased stress levels, and increased resiliency levels. 100% of students would recommend the course to others.

Significance/Conclusion: This project demonstrated the positive impact a nursing specific wellness course can have on nursing student stress and resilience. Given the challenges nurses face today, an experiential wellness course geared towards optimizing mental health and wellbeing provides nursing students with strategies to prevent and address burnout before entering the workforce.