

Exploring undergraduate nursing students' preferences in psychiatric nursing simulation modalities

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Commentary

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than one in five American adults live with a mental illness [1]. Due to the associated stigma and fear of discrimination, people who are impacted by mental health refuse to discuss or confront this disease. While mental health impacts all aspects of American lives, more funds, professional support, training and education are needed to tackle mental health challenges [2]. More than 200 types of mental illness have been identified, and understanding causes, providing effective treatment, improving cultural sensitivity and appropriately managing care can help reduce the negative burden on society [3]. Therefore, healthcare professionals and academic institutions should put a greater emphasis on targeting specific mental illnesses such as anxiety, depression and delirium in their training programs.

Healthcare providers play a pivotal role in helping patients navigate their mental health journey. Nurses are the largest number of healthcare providers in a hospital setting, and they must ensure these patients adhere to their medical regime. Using various training modalities for mental health training among undergraduate nursing students is paramount. However, understanding students' preference in psychiatric mental health training modalities is important to tailoring a program to meet the student's needs while ensuring that the overarching course objectives are met. In Weidlich *et al.*, 2023 article [4], students preferred simulation for mental health training using a standardized patient versus a high-fidelity mannequin due to the realism of the scenario. Because the greatest signs of mental health are demonstrated behaviorally and standardized patients can easily portray various signs and symptoms related to common mental health disorders, therefore, students preferred humans as patients. While pharmacologic therapy is the first line of treatment for most mental health issues, it only treats a portion of the disease. This type of therapy should be coupled with behavioral training to provide the most effective regime that will give an overall positive outcome. Since simulation is commonly used in nursing programs to help students hone basic nursing skills, this type of teaching can also assist students in developing behavioral skills using therapeutic communication, critical thinking and clinical decision-making techniques. New teaching technologies using high-fidelity simulators, virtual reality and artificial intelligence may pose additional challenges when addressing old concepts in psychiatric healthcare. However, professors trained in both mental health and simulation can develop training tools to bridge this gap using a variety of simulation modalities.

Simulation technology may prove to be underutilized or unfavorable in mental health because these technologies have a limited or unnatural display of emotional characteristics. Optimizing simulation technology in psychiatric nursing training can significantly enhance the learning experience for

students and improve patient care outcomes. Strategies that include integration of simulation technology using artificial intelligence, virtual and augmented reality, scalable scenarios, and continuous research can help create a more effective and comprehensive training program for psychiatric nursing students. Student nurses training in mental health often come from diverse psychological and educational backgrounds, which influence their learning experiences and readiness for clinical practice. Though many students experience stress, anxiety, and fear when entering mental health clinical settings, some of these stressors can be mitigated by maximizing their education experience and providing emotional support. Studies on this topic, such as Ok *et al.*, [5], demonstrate that standardized patient simulation (SPS) experiences reduced anxiety levels and increases the communication skills of nursing students compared to a control group who did not receive SPS. The authors concluded that simulation of psychiatric nursing students before the clinical practice reduces anxiety levels and increases communication skills. However, not all universities have access to simulations.

Enhancing the training experience for student nurses in mental health requires a mix of psychological support, innovative teaching methods, and practical exposure. Additionally, incorporating student preferences for various training modalities can provide educators with a favorable mental health approach which includes concepts that are more likely to be used beyond graduation. Mental health programs must build emotional preparedness which provides resilience and stress management techniques and prepares students for the emotional challenges of mental health nursing. Some techniques may include journaling or guided reflection, interactive case studies, role playing, team-based learning and mentorship to name a few. While hospitals are reducing mental health clinical sites and the government reduces funds for mental health research, education organizations must increase student exposure to real-life situations and community outreach programs to understand mental health care at a grassroots level.

The American Association of Colleges of Nursing new essentials recommend that nurses are competent in performing many basic nursing skills at both the graduate and undergraduate level upon course/program completion [6]. This recommendation requires academic institutions to optimize education and training programs to meet societal needs. Therefore, mental health professors should implement training enhancements in psychiatric nursing education which can lead to several positive outcomes for students, patients, and the mental health community. These augmentations may improve confidence and competence, empathy and cultural sensitivity, better decision making and critical thinking, stronger team collaboration and increased student well-being [7]. Through education and practical exposure, students are likely to develop a more positive attitude toward mental health, reducing stigma and advocating for patients' rights. Better-trained nurses will provide higher-quality care, leading to improved patient experiences and outcomes in mental health settings. Researchers from the original study plan to identify mental health tools, new technologies and techniques to measure and improve mental health competencies in undergraduate student nurses.

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