

Original Research

Anxiety Disorders: Exploring the Battles of Nursing Students Beyond the White Cap

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ABSTRACT

Anxiety disorders are a significant mental health challenge affecting individuals across demographics, including student nurses who face stress and anxiety due to the demands of nursing school and clinical practice. Understanding the prevalence, impact, and interventions for anxiety disorders in this demographic is crucial for promoting the well-being of future healthcare professionals. This study aimed to explore nursing students' experiences with anxiety disorders in clinical settings using qualitative descriptive phenomenological methods. The researchers attempted to answer the question: "What are the experiences of a student nurse diagnosed with anxiety disorders during their clinical internship?". Five nursing students from Manila and Cavite with anxiety disorders and clinical experience participated in online interviews via Google Meet. Google Forms and Facebook were used to recruit participants meeting the set criteria. A semi-structured research tool approved by experts was used for interviews, and Colaizzi's seven-step methodology was employed for data analysis. Four primary themes emerged: Physical, Socioemotional, Mental Function, and Coping, reflecting the significant impact of clinical exposure on student nurses. The study proposes "NurseUplift: Embracing Balance, Banishing Anxiety," an 8-week program to address anxiety challenges among nursing students. The program aims to enhance students' personal growth, academic excellence, and professional competence through imparting practical techniques and fostering a supportive environment. Further research is recommended on the effects of different anxiety disorders and psychological issues on student nurses' clinical experiences. It is also advised that more research be done on the clinical experiences of the following cohort of nursing students.

Keywords: Anxiety, Panic Disorder, General Anxiety Disorder, Nurse Uplift Program, Clinical Learning Experiences.

INTRODUCTION

Anxiety disorders rank ninth globally for causing disability due to their prevalence and impact. Around 3.6% of the world's population (264 million people) faced anxiety disorders in 2017, marking a

15% increase since 2005. These disorders had a significant effect on females and affected 301 million people by 2019. In the Philippines, anxiety disorders affected about 3 million people in 2017 (3.1% of the population), resulting in a loss of 284,591 healthy

years. The COVID-19 pandemic led to a 25% increase in global anxiety and depression.

Nursing students face challenges during clinical training due to the stressful and unpredictable nature of clinical environments. The demanding nursing training contributes to heightened anxiety levels. Anxiety hampers effective learning for nursing students, especially those with generalized anxiety disorder and panic disorder. This study aimed to explore the experiences of nursing students with anxiety disorders during clinical internships, shedding light on their challenges and coping strategies.

METHODS

Research Design

The research adopted a qualitative methodology, specifically utilizing a descriptive phenomenological approach rooted in a phenomenological paradigm, particularly Husserl's descriptive transcendental phenomenology. This approach aimed to deeply explore the lived experiences of nursing students diagnosed with anxiety disorders within clinical settings, emphasizing a subjective understanding beyond conventional white cap scenarios. The inductive research approach was employed, allowing theory generation in the absence of extensive prior literature.

Study Site and Subjects

The study was conducted in Metro Manila and Cavite, Philippines, known for their high concentration of nursing schools. The focus was on nursing students who had completed pinning and capping ceremonies, actively engaged in clinical rotations, and were diagnosed with anxiety disorders.

Key informants were selected based on specific criteria, ensuring relevance to the research problem.

Data Measures

Data measures included a triangulation analysis approach, combining semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and journal review. Semi-structured interviews comprised ten open-ended questions, exploring experiences and coping mechanisms of nursing students with anxiety disorders during clinical internships. Colaizzi's seven-step process was employed for data analysis, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

Data Collection Procedure and Ethical Consideration

A non-probability purposive sampling technique was used, with participation being voluntary. Informed consent was obtained, emphasizing privacy, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw. The study adhered to ethical guidelines, ensuring transparency, honesty, and the protection of participants' well-being. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and journal review, maintaining confidentiality and respecting participants' privacy.

Data Analysis

Colaizzi's seven-step process guided the data analysis, starting with data familiarization and concluding with validation of the core statement with participants. This qualitative method facilitated the exploration of coping mechanisms and challenges faced by nursing students with anxiety disorders during clinical internships, aiming for a comprehensive understanding beyond the traditional white cap setting.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Four themes based on key informant responses. The first theme focuses on physical experiences related to anxiety disorders, encompassing responses that depict how anxiety symptoms manifest physically. Key informants' statements highlighting the physical changes observed during anxiety attacks were included. The second theme pertains to the socioemotional domain, highlighting the impact of anxiety disorder diagnoses on student nurses' socialization and emotions. The challenges in interactions and communication due to anxiety were addressed, along with feelings about others' opinions on their condition. The third theme is mental function, which focuses on the impacts of anxiety disorders to the cognitive skills of the student nurses. This theme identified various domains of the key informants' mental capabilities that have been influenced by the said disorder. The fourth and final theme revolves around coping strategies in response to anxiety attacks. This theme encompasses the various exercises and actions employed by key informants to alleviate their anxiety. This theme was developed to encapsulate verbal accounts from student nurses about how they manage the anxiety they experience.

This qualitative investigation delved into the experiences of student nurses who grappled with anxiety disorders during their clinical internships. The study involved five participants, aged 20-21, who were engaged in clinical duties. Following a meticulous analysis of the participants' responses, the researchers extracted four main themes and twenty-five sub-themes from the interview transcripts. The findings underscored the diverse challenges encountered by the participants, which reverberated across multiple facets of their lives, including their clinical internships, as they navigated

their roles as nursing students with anxiety disorders. In spite of these hurdles, the participants exhibited a resolute commitment to patient care and the nursing profession, alongside demonstrating strategies to manage their anxieties and continue fulfilling their caregiving responsibilities.

The impact of anxiety further materialized in various physical manifestations, which hindered their ability to undertake daily activities, including clinical responsibilities, evoking a range of emotions. Anxiety's specific physical symptoms varied depending on the type of anxiety, yet collectively, it exerted a considerable toll on the physical and daily well-being of nursing students. Participants highlighted symptoms such as palpitations, acid reflux, breathing difficulties, muscle tension, cold extremities, trembling, rapid heartbeats, and disrupted sleep patterns. In some instances, anxiety culminated in secondary conditions. Palpitations, trembling, acid reflux, and cold hands were noted to accompany anxiety attacks. Breathing difficulties emerged as an acute symptom. Sleep disturbances, with direct implications for daily functioning and concentration, were also articulated.

An intriguing theme also emerged from this study pertaining to the Socio-Emotional aspect. Most participants voiced challenges related to socializing and communication as a primary concern. Root causes for these challenges varied, yet for student nurses, anxiety and diminished self-assurance were identified as central factors. During clinical duties, the struggle to express themselves fully and establish rapport with patients was compounded by their prevailing anxiety. Stereotypes further exacerbated this predicament. Student nurses noted that media portrayal shaped perceptions of anxiety, rendering effective communication an uphill task, particularly

with individuals who lacked an understanding of mental health disorders. Consequently, respondents reported diminished interaction with their immediate environment. This emotional strain also extended to cognitive functioning, affecting the clarity of their thoughts. The heightened apprehension associated with clinical tasks, whether involving patients or demonstrations, was a recurrent sentiment. Anxiety disorder magnified their fear of committing errors, amplifying the intensity of their worry. This sense of unease was comparable to the findings of Gumber et al. (2020), where individuals more susceptible to rumination experienced frequent anxiety or panic attacks. Notably, social interactions served as triggers for anxiety attacks among student nurses grappling with this condition.

Another pertinent theme that emerged was the impact on the mental function of student nurses. Anxiety manifested as a substantial barrier to learning within the clinical context. The incapacity to execute tasks efficiently, coupled with the detrimental consequences during clinical attempts, underpinned the challenge. In this study, the students with anxiety disorder shared their experiences, showing how these conditions deeply affected how their minds worked. They talked about how their thinking changed, ranging from being extra aware to feeling like their thoughts were unclear. It was like their minds slowly weakened, that it made them similar to how anxiety was eating away at their mental health. These significant shifts in thinking also came with strong emotions that felt heavy affecting thoughts, memory, and emotions. Just like their bodies were affected, their minds also suffered, revealing a deep struggle that matched their outward signs of illness.

Following additional investigation, the researchers discovered another recurring theme: the coping

mechanisms of the key informants in response to anxiety disorders. Since everyone has a unique set of coping mechanisms, responses may vary from person to person. However, the researchers identified patterns in the key informant's responses, leading to the development of this theme. The coping mechanisms used by the key informants to manage their anxiety were identified in this study. First and foremost is the use of relaxation techniques, such as concentrated and deep breathing exercises. Many people employ these breathing exercises to relax or calm down (Norelli SK, Long A, Krepps JM 2021). The key informants say that this technique is one of the coping mechanisms that works well at lowering their anxiety levels and overthinking. Also mentioned by the key informants as a useful method of reducing anxiety was distraction and mind setting. People who want to deal with the stressful conditions in their lives frequently use or practice shifting their focus to something that is healthier for their general mental health and physical well-being.

CONCLUSION

Theoretical Contributions

The study unveiled four themes derived from in-depth interviews with nursing students: the physical manifestations of anxiety disorders, coping strategies, socioemotional aspects, and mental function. Conclusively, clinically diagnosed anxiety disorders significantly impacted nursing students' clinical internships. Challenges in physical, emotional, and social dimensions during internships were evident, marked by symptoms such as loss of consciousness, trembling, and cold hands. Negative emotions such as fear, embarrassment, and worry were prevalent. Social interaction with patients was impaired, exacerbated by perceived stigmatization. However, the support of understanding friends and

family ameliorated these challenges. Moreover, anxiety-induced vulnerability distinctly influenced their mental function. Decision-making, self-doubt, concentration, and managing stress presented difficulties, affecting care delivery. Coping mechanisms including relaxation techniques and positive outlooks played a crucial role in managing anxiety and persisting in their chosen path. The study underscored the need to investigate and address the distinctive challenges faced by nursing students with anxiety disorders.

Practical Implications

Researchers primarily employed interviews to comprehend student nurses' experiences with anxiety disorders during their Related Learning Experience (RLE). They found that generalized anxiety disorder and panic disorder significantly hindered student nurses across physical, emotional, social, and clinical domains. This study addressed the prevalent concern, aiming to inform educators about accommodating students with anxiety. The findings supported designing a student-centered curriculum that adapted to learners' needs without compromising their well-being. Additionally, the study aided future researchers and nursing schools in addressing anxiety-related challenges, potentially necessitating alternative approaches for affected students. Extensive research on this topic could enhance the understanding of anxiety, shedding light on coping strategies used by student nurses.

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