



The effect of emotional freedom technique on stress and anxiety in nursing students: A pilot study



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SUMMARY

Background: Stress and anxiety have been identified as significant issues experienced by student nurses during their education. Some studies have suggested that the stress experienced by nursing students is greater than that experienced by medical students, other non-nursing healthcare students, degreed nurses, and the female population in general. A recently introduced energy type therapy, emotional freedom technique (EFT), has shown some success in reducing symptoms of anxiety, stress, and fear in a variety of settings.

Objective: The purpose of this study was to determine the efficacy of EFT in decreasing anxiety and stress as a potential intervention to assist students in stress management.

Design: The study used a mixed method design of both qualitative and quantitative measures. Quantitatively, in a one group pretest–posttest design, participants received group instruction in the technique and were encouraged to repeat it daily. Self-reported anxiety was measured at baseline, and then weekly for four weeks using the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) and the State–Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI). The qualitative survey was completed by participants at the end of the study in order to capture a more subjective experience.

Setting: The pilot study was conducted in a two-year college in the southeastern region of the United States.

Participants: All enrolled nursing students in an associate degree nursing program were invited to participate. Participation was voluntary, resulting in an original convenience sample of thirty-nine nursing students ($N = 39$).

Methods: Data collection instruments included a demographic questionnaire, pretest State–Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI) and Perceived Stress Scale (PSS). A qualitative questionnaire was also administered at the end of the four weeks. STAI and PSS were administered weekly. Data analysis using RMANOVA was performed at the second, third and the fourth week.

Results: Decreases in anxiety as measured on both the STAI and PSS were statistically significant ($p = .05$). For PSS, STAI state and trait data, the reduction in self-reported stress was statistically significant with a mean difference baseline to week 4. Qualitative data suggested that nursing students experienced a decrease in feelings of stress and anxiety including a decrease in somatic symptoms.

Conclusions: Overall, findings suggested that EFT can be an effective tool for stress management and anxiety relief in nursing students.

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1. Introduction

Psychological stress has long been identified to be an unfortunate consequence of a career in nursing. Conditions which contribute to this are increased job demands, inadequate staffing, increased acuity of patients, lack of administrative support, a rapidly changing healthcare environment, and the emotional challenges of working with the sick and dying. Stress and anxiety have also been identified as significant issues experienced by student nurses during their education. In fact, some studies have suggested that the stress experienced by nursing students

is greater than that experienced by medical students, other non-nursing healthcare students, degreed nurses, and the female population in general (Baldwin, 1999; Beck et al., 1997; Rhead, 1995). Nursing students have identified major areas of stress as coursework, clinical experiences, and personal issues (Jones and Johnston, 1997, 2000; Lindop, 1999; Timmins and Kaliszzer, 2002; Elliott, 2002; Rhead, 1995; Jimenez et al., 2010).

A variety of stress management approaches for nursing students have been suggested and tested. Jones and Johnston (2000) made a strong endorsement for a multifaceted approach to stress reduction using problem solving, time management, relaxation techniques, as well as other interventions. This same study also emphasized the need for interventions that dealt with the interface between student nurses and the healthcare organization. Galbraith and Brown (2011), in their comprehensive literature review of successful interventions for

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managing stress, identified that the most successful interventions had a strong theoretical basis and included, “cognitive reappraisal of maladaptive cognitions, as well as relaxation” (p. 718).

Although the role of complementary therapies in the treatment of stress and anxiety is not new, there has been increased interest in the role of energy or biofield therapies in reducing anxiety and promoting feelings of well-being. Biofield therapy is described by the National Institutes of Health's [National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine \(2012\)](#) as “the manipulation of various energy fields to affect health” (p.1). A recently introduced energy type therapy is emotional freedom technique (EFT). While similar to other energy based therapies such as Reiki and Healing Touch, EFT may have more in common with acupuncture, a well-known Chinese medicine technique ([Church, 2010](#)). EFT combines the tapping of meridian points with a focus on the feared object or negative emotion to provide desensitization to the fear. In addition, there is repetition of a statement of self-acceptance, suggested to contribute to cognitive restructuring, a well-known psychotherapeutic technique, where the individual identifies and corrects negative thoughts ([Church, 2010](#)). Tapping the meridian points relieves stress, and through the application of this non-traumatic physical stimulus while also introducing the fear with self-acceptance, the negative somatic response that is associated with that memory and all similar memories is interrupted ([Craig, 2010](#)).

EFT is currently receiving much attention in the treatment of compulsive behavior, phobias, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Therapeutic results and relief of symptoms are often quick and dramatic, demonstrating rapid improvement in the participant's ability to tolerate stress.

2. Review of the Literature

An examination of the literature was performed to better understand the prevalence of anxiety reported by nursing students and the effectiveness of a variety of interventions. The review focused on three main questions: (1) Has anxiety been identified as a significant issue for nursing students? (2) What particular interventions have been successfully applied to reduce anxiety? and (3) Has EFT been identified as a potential intervention for decreasing anxiety in nursing students or other groups?

A literature search was performed using the Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature database (CINAHL) for the period of October 2000 through 2011. This database was chosen due to its extensive coverage of nursing, biomedicine, health sciences, and alternative/complementary medicine. Search elements included anxiety, stress, nursing students, complementary therapies, energy therapies, and emotional freedom technique (EFT). In the case of EFT, since only a scant number of articles were recovered from the CINAHL search, an EFT website, <http://www.eftuniverse.com/> was also used to identify peer reviewed articles.

A limited number of articles were generated regarding stress and anxiety in nursing students requiring an expansion of the search to 1995. This may reflect current lack of interest in this topic as a research focus even though in the contemporary nursing education environment students report stress and anxiety as concerns. [Deary et al. \(2003\)](#) examined a cohort of nursing students to better understand causes of stress, burnout, and attrition using six different instruments and concluded that stress and the use of negative coping skills increased as the nursing program progressed and psychological symptoms increased. [Watson et al. \(2008\)](#) found that life changes and stress contributed to distress, and that newly qualified nurses had a higher reported stress than nursing students. [Gibbons et al. \(2008\)](#) identified sources of distress to include new clinical experiences, lack of support from staff, and a number of stressors regarding coursework demands and grades. [Jimenez, Navia-Osorio and Diaz. \(2010\)](#) uncovered three kinds

of stressors in nursing students, clinical, academic, and external, with clinical rotations the most intense source of stress.

Interventions for relieving the stress and anxiety usually focused on a multifaceted approach. [Charlesworth et al. \(1981\)](#) evaluated a five week stress management program for nursing students and found that those enrolled in the program experienced a reduction in test anxiety. [Boutin and Tosi \(1983\)](#) compared the effects of hypnosis and the combination of hypnosis and cognitive restructuring against a control and placebo group and noted better results from the group receiving the combined approach. [Jones and Johnston \(2000\)](#) designed a six session stress management intervention, which included a presentation on coping skills, problem solving strategies, cognitive techniques, time management skills, and relaxation techniques, showing anxiety was less in those students receiving the intervention. [Hamrin et al. \(2006\)](#) reported that a peer-led support group demonstrated self-reported reductions in anxiety and improved coping. [Hsiao et al. \(2010\)](#) found that spiritual health was negatively associated with clinical practice stress and depressive tendency.

Although there was no information available regarding the use of EFT in nursing students, the literature did suggest that EFT might be successful in decreasing anxiety and feelings of distress in a variety of populations and settings. [Wells et al. \(2003\)](#) found that EFT was more effective in reducing human phobias of small animals than a comparative group using deep breathing. [Waite and Holder \(2003\)](#) compared EFT against other methods and a control group and found EFT to be just as effective at reducing fear as the other interventions, but more effective than the control group. [Rowe \(2005\)](#) compared a group using EFT pre-treatment to post-treatment, finding a statistically significant decrease in all components of psychological distress. [Brattberg \(2008\)](#) demonstrated a statistically significant improvement in pain, anxiety, depression, vitality, social function, and performance in a group of women with fibromyalgia who received EFT. [Church et al. \(2009\)](#) examined the effects of EFT on psychological symptoms in a sample of veterans finding a statistically significant improvement in symptoms. [Church \(2009a\)](#) studied the effect of EFT on athletic performance in basketball players, which demonstrated an improvement in the number of free throws, but not jump height. Additional studies by Church ([Church, 2009b](#); [Church et al., 2010](#)), on small groups of veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) indicated significantly less psychological symptoms when compared to control groups. [Church and Brooks \(2010\)](#) investigated the effects of multiple rounds of EFT with healthcare workers on physical discomfort, emotional childhood experiences and substances craved finding a reduction in symptoms. [Church et al. \(2012a, 2012b\)](#) undertook a study on EFT and its effect on depression among college students with lower depression scores for those using EFT. [Church et al. \(2012a, 2012b\)](#) investigated the effect of EFT on the salivary production of cortisol and found that the EFT group had significantly less production of cortisol than other study groups.

To summarize the literature, stress and anxiety have been identified as areas of concern for nursing students. A variety of stress management approaches have been suggested and tested with the most successful interventions having a basis in cognitive reappraisal and relaxation. EFT has been recently introduced and is currently receiving much attention in the treatment of compulsive behavior, phobias, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. With the gap in the literature on the use of EFT in nursing students, the purpose of this project was to determine the efficacy of emotional freedom technique (EFT) in decreasing anxiety and stress in nursing students enrolled in an associate degree nursing program.

3. Methods

The research proposal, study design and all participant related content was reviewed and approved by the university and healthcare system Institutional Review Boards (IRB). In observance of IRB guidelines, all participants were provided a description of the study and how

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