



## Review

## Nursing and midwifery students' stress and coping during their undergraduate education programmes: An integrative review



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## ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** The aim of this review is to examine the literature related to the sources of stress, coping mechanisms and interventions to support undergraduate nursing and midwifery students to cope with stress during their undergraduate education.

**Design:** Integrative literature review.

**Data Sources:** The databases CINAHL, PubMed and PsycINFO were searched for articles published between 2010 and 2016. Search terms in various combinations were used for example; student nurse, student midwife, undergraduate, stress, coping and interventions.

**Review Methods:** An integrative review based on Whittemore and Knafl's approach was used to conduct the review.

**Results:** The search generated 25 articles that met the inclusion criteria. The key sources of stress emanated from clinical, academic and financial issues but predominantly from the clinical environment. Students used a variety of coping strategies, both adaptive and maladaptive. These appear to be influenced by their past and present circumstances such as, their needs, what was at stake and their options for coping. Interventions for student nurses/midwives to cope with stress were varied and in the early stages of development. Mindfulness showed some promising positive results. Interventions focussed on the individual level excluding the wider social context or organisation level.

**Conclusions:** Stress is pervasive in all aspects of undergraduate nursing and midwifery education. Nursing and midwifery educators need to be aware of this impact and provide appropriate support to students in both the clinical and academic environments. Further research is needed to capture the experience of stress from the students' perspective as well as the barriers and facilitators to supporting students from the preceptors'/mentors' perspectives. Finally, more intervention studies are needed to identify and compare what interventions are effective in supporting students to cope with stress during their undergraduate education.

## 1. Introduction

The literature on stress and coping in undergraduate nursing and midwifery education is vast, stems back over many decades and continues to grow. This is perhaps due to the complex nature of nursing and midwifery as professions, the ongoing changes in the healthcare system and the challenges for students to achieve competencies to meet their profession's clinical and academic requirements. Due to this volume of literature the need for a review is justified on the basis of potential

reconceptualization of the expanding and diverse knowledge base of the topic as it continues to grow. The aim of this review therefore, is to examine the literature related to the sources of stress, coping mechanisms and stress management interventions to support nursing and midwifery students during their undergraduate education.

## 2. Background

Stress, meaning hardship or adversity, is pervasive and can impact

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on one's everyday life both personally and professionally. Although stress can be difficult to define, there are at least three main definitions found in the literature. The first definition focuses on stress as a response to toxic or aversive stimuli whereby the body may go through three distinct phases: alarm, resistance and exhaustion (Seyle, 1956). The second definition suggests that stress emanates from a stimulus or pressure from an external source. An external stimulus might include, major life events (Holmes and Rahe, 1967) or hassles which are defined as “irritating, frustrating, distressing demands that to some degree characterise everyday transactions with the environment” (Kanner et al., 1981). The third definition, implies that stress is a dynamic process, incorporating both internal and external factors and the interactions between them (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984, 1987). This definition places importance on cognitive factors such as the person's thoughts, attitudes and beliefs toward the stressor. If one evaluates a stressor as harmful or as a threat, rather than benign or a challenge then the person may become distressed (primary appraisal). If one evaluates a stressor as harmful and/or a threat to self, then the next appraisal one makes is whether they have the coping skills to deal with it (secondary appraisal).

Stress can be viewed either as neutral, good (known as “eustress”) or bad (known as “distress”). In terms of distress, there are two types: acute (short-term) and chronic (long-term), which is often seen as the most detrimental for health. Although stress can have some positive effects on individuals there is much evidence to suggest that stress can have a profound cognitive, emotional, physiological and/or behavioural impact on nursing/midwifery students. Cognitive impact includes; ineffective coping, fear, anxiety, worry and feeling overwhelmed (Jimenez et al., 2010; Khajehei et al., 2011; Goff, 2011; Chernomas and Shapiro, 2013). Emotional impact includes, irritability and exhaustion, feeling depressed, decrease in self-confidence, poor concentration, loss of focus and motivation (Goff, 2011; Khajehei et al., 2011; Chernomas and Shapiro, 2013). Physiological impact includes; palpitations, nausea and vomiting (Jimenez et al., 2010; Khajehei et al., 2011; Chernomas and Shapiro, 2013), crying, irritability and exhaustion (Goff, 2011), dizziness, perspiring and stammering (Khajehei et al., 2011). The most common behavioural changes reported included, limited time to engage in leisure activities and maintain a work life balance (Chernomas and Shapiro, 2013).

Sources of stress and predictors of stress are frequently used interchangeably in the literature. Stuart (2013) proposes that predictors of stress are risk factors, which predispose the person to stress. These may be biological, psychological and sociocultural in nature for example, gender, personality traits, cognitive styles and strength of attachments (Stuart, 2013), and categorised generally as intrinsic (those that occur within the person), or extrinsic predictors (those external to the individual).

Some of the intrinsic predictors of stress in students have been identified as; self-control and self-efficacy, coping styles, personality factors and mental health issues. Students with low levels of self-esteem or lower confidence were found to have higher levels of stress (Chan et al., 2011; Chernomas and Shapiro, 2013; Wolf et al., 2015). Chen and Hung (2014) also found that students who had a personality type inclusive of traits of introversion, lower confidence, tendency to self-blame, inadequate decision making abilities, poor self-control and poor social behaviours, to be more prone to stress. Both Chernomas and Shapiro (2013) and Wolf et al., (2015) found that students who experienced higher levels of stress, anxiety and depression prior to the commencement of the programme experienced greater levels of stress during the programme than those students with lower baseline levels. In contrast Gibbons et al. (2011) found that students with high levels of dispositional control, self-efficacy and support were less stressed.

The clinical environment is reported as the main extrinsic predictor of stress for students (Gibbons et al., 2011; Suresh et al., 2012; Chernomas and Shapiro, 2013; Chen and Hung, 2014; Wolf et al., 2015). In some studies, year of programme has also been identified as

an extrinsic factor that may predict stress (Chan et al., 2011; Wolf et al., 2015).

Generally coping is acknowledged as the act of dealing with emotions or behaviours with the intention of reducing the physical or psychological effects of excess stress (Largo-Wright et al., 2005). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) define coping as the “constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” (p.141). They identified two types of coping; problem-focused and emotion focused. Problem-focused coping aims to reduce stressful demands or expand resources to deal with it; whereas, emotion focused coping aims to regulate a person's emotional response to the situation. Segerstrom and O'Connor (2012) argue that what is most important is not trying to change the circumstances (problem-focused) or emotional response (emotion-focused coping) per se, but, whether the individual is using an approach strategy (actively trying to change problems through effort or acceptance or reappraisal) as this may have a better psychological and physical health outcome than avoidance strategies (e.g. disengaging or distraction).

Some of the more common coping strategies identified by students include; family, social and spiritual support, exercising, problem solving, transference, avoidance, denial as well as smoking, drugs and alcohol (Seyedfatemi et al., 2007; Chan et al., 2009; Murdock et al., 2010; Shaban et al., 2012; Reeve et al., 2013; Al-Zayyat and Al-Gamal, 2014a; Bam et al., 2014; Yeşil et al., 2015; Wolf et al., 2015; Zhao et al., 2015).

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Problem Identification

Due to the expanding and diverse volume of research on stress in undergraduate nursing/midwifery students, we identified a need for a more in-depth understanding of the key stressors, coping mechanisms and stress management interventions to inform nursing and midwifery educators of how best to prepare students for the challenges and complexities of contemporary nursing/midwifery practice. The aim of this integrative review therefore was to examine the literature related to the sources of stress, coping mechanisms and interventions to support undergraduate nursing and midwifery students cope with stress during their undergraduate education programmes. More specifically the authors were keen to explore the following:

1. What are the main sources of stress for student nurses/midwives during their undergraduate education programmes?
2. How do students cope with stressful events during their education programmes?
3. What stress management interventions have been conducted to help students cope with stress during their education programmes?

The integrative review method proposed by Whittemore and Knafl (2005) was chosen to enhance the rigour of this review. This is a modified version of Cooper's (1998) five-stage framework; problem identification, literature search, data evaluation (quality appraisal), data analysis and presentation of findings (Cooper, 1998). The modified version as proposed by Whittemore and Knafl (2005) incorporates a systematic process with the intent to summarise and synthesise findings from empirical research with diverse methodologies. This was particularly important in the current review as it was anticipated that both experimental and non-experimental studies would provide greater knowledge and understanding of stress and coping in undergraduate nursing/midwifery students during their education programmes.

#### 4. Literature Search

The initial literature search was conducted in December 2015 and

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