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# Feelings, thoughts and experiences of nurses working in a mental health clinic about individuals with suicidal behaviors and suicide attempts

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** It is of the utmost importance to determine the views of nurses about patients with suicidal behavior and who attempt suicide so that they can help such individuals.

**Aim:** The aim of this study was to investigate the feelings, thoughts and experiences of nurses working in a mental health clinic regarding individuals with suicidal behaviors and suicide attempts.

**Methods:** A qualitative study design was employed. Data in this research study were collected through individual in-depth interviews. The study population included 121 nurses working at a Mental Health and Diseases Hospital in Turkey. The study sample consisted of 33 nurses who had been working at the hospital for at least one year, had experience working with patients who attempted suicide, and agreed to participate in the study.

**Results:** The nurses understood the patients; they experienced sadness, worry, anxiety, stress, unrest and fear; they were blamed by the hospital administration when a patient committed suicide; they blamed themselves and doctors for patient suicides; and they had developed proposals to prevent suicide among hospitalized or discharged patients. The nurses also stated that patients committed suicide in the evening or in the early hours of the morning by strangling or hanging themselves or by shocking and unforeseen methods, although the nurses performed the necessary emergency intervention procedures.

**Conclusion:** It is recommended that planned group meetings for nurses be arranged and that follow-up guidelines/protocols for patients with suicidal tendencies who are residing in mental health clinics be prepared by a committee of healthcare professionals.

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## Problem

Little is known about the feelings, thoughts and experiences of nurses working in a mental health clinic regarding individuals with suicidal behaviors and suicide attempts.

## What is Already Known

There are very few international studies dealing with the feelings, thoughts and experiences of nurses working in mental health clinics in relation to patients who show suicidal behavior or suicide attempts. In particular, we have not encountered any study in Turkey exploring the views and experiences of nurses in relation to patients with suicidal behavior or suicide attempts.

## What this Paper Adds

In this study, we sought to obtain important information at an institutional level by determining what nurses working in mental health clinics felt and thought, what problems they experienced and how they coped with them when working with patients who showed suicidal behavior and suicide attempts.

## 1. Introduction

To commit suicide is to end one's life knowingly and willingly (Berber, 2008). Suicide attempts include all deliberate attempts to commit suicide that do not result in death. In other words, they are a person's self-hurting or injuring acts that are not fatal (Duru & Özdemir, 2009; World Health Organization, 2014). Suicide is the ninth most common cause of death in all age groups and the second most common cause of death in the 18–24 age group (Bedworth & Bedworth, 2010). In 2012, 804,000 people worldwide lost their lives due to suicide, and the annual rate of suicide was found to be 11.4

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per 100,000 individuals (15.0 in males and 8.0 in females) (World Health Organization, 2014).

In Turkey, statistics on suicide were first recorded in 1962. The rate of suicide doubled between 1974 and 1998, and suicide has become an important public problem in Turkey (Duru & Özdemir, 2009). According to data for 2011, the rate of suicide in Turkey is approximately 3.62. The major reasons for suicide have been reported to be disease (19.39%), marital discord (9.41%) and financial difficulty (8.03%) (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2011).

Mental illnesses play a considerable role in suicide. It is known that 80% of people who have attempted to commit suicide have been previously diagnosed with a mental disorder (Nock, Hwang, Sampson, & Kessler, 2010). In a study by Takahashi et al. (2011), suicidal behavior was found to be higher (55.5%) in patients hospitalized in a mental health clinics than in those treated outside the clinic. A suicide attempt is an “emergency” situation in psychiatric terms. Nurses have an active and important role in monitoring and following up on those patients residing in a mental health clinics who are at risk for suicide attempts because with their holistic approach and extensive experience, having spent long periods with the patients and their families, nurses are equipped to identify and promptly address the needs of the patients at an early stage (Temel, 2009). Nurses must be aware of the signals indicating the potential for suicide to prevent a planned suicide attempt. The primary goal in mental health clinics is to prevent suicide and to ensure that the environment is safe by restricting patient access to dangerous materials (Sun, Long, Boore, & Tsao, 2005).

In Ouzouni and Nakakis's study (2009), a measure of attitudes towards patients who have attempted suicide were developed. This measurement tool, enables health care professionals to enhance their understanding of their attitudes towards patients who attempt suicide in order to enhance the provision of effective care to them. A study of psychologists and nurses (Osafu, Knizek, Akotia, & Hjelmeland, 2012) found variation between the professions. Psychologists generally saw suicide as a mental health issue, emphasized a caring and empathic view of suicidal persons and approached suicide prevention from a health service point of view. In contrast, nurses held a moralistic attitude toward suicide as a crime, viewed suicide persons as blameworthy and approached suicide prevention from a proscriptive perspective. Kishi, Kurosawa, Morimura, Hata, and Thurber (2011) compared the attitudes of nurses with and without working experience in a psychiatry clinic, towards patients with a risk of suicide. Nurses who worked in the psychiatric unit or had the experience in psychiatric nursing had more favorable attitudes toward suicidal patients and viewed themselves as having more relevant skill training in dealing with suicidal patients than those who did not. According to the results it was suggested that less favorable attitudes may to some extent be the result of lack of knowledge regarding suicidal patients. The attitudes of psychology students towards suicide and suicide prevention and what they understood based on suicidal behavior were also determined. It was reported that the students mainly saw the causes as intra-personal and almost all of them believed that suicide can be prevented. It was indicated that a huge impact of religion on the attitudes toward suicide as well as some lack of distinction between their religious and professional roles and responsibilities in this study (Knizek, Akotia, & Hjelmeland, 2011). In a study, the results indicated that the psychology students had a generalized negative attitude toward suicide. In addition, it was stated that religious beliefs and family harmony were cultural contexts influencing the interpretation of suicidal behaviour as breach of divine and communal moralities (Osafu, Hjelmeland, Akotia, & Loa Knizek, 2011). In one of the studies performed in a psychiatry clinic (Sun et al., 2005), the way psychiatric nurses and patients perceived the care provided in psychiatry clinics to the patients who had suicidal ideation was assessed. In this study, it was stated that the

importance of psychiatric nurses being aware of the warning signals of suicide in order to prevent a planned suicide attempt was emphasized. According to this study, the primary goal is to prevent suicide and to ensure that the ward environment is safe by restricting the patient's access to dangerous items. In addition, it was reported that the nurses' therapeutic communication skills is important to prevent the patients' suicide attempts. Moreover, the experiences and attitudes of nurses and doctors in psychiatry clinics with respect to suicidal behavior and suicide attempts were documented (Anderson, Standen, Nazir, & Noon, 2000). According to this study, it was reported that attitudes towards suicide are complex, and attitudes towards suicidal behaviour cannot be viewed simply in terms of negative or positive positions.

There are very few international studies dealing with the feelings, thoughts and experiences of nurses working in mental health clinics in relation to patients who show suicidal behavior or suicide attempts. In particular, we have not encountered any study in Turkey exploring the views and experiences of nurses in relation to patients with suicidal behavior or suicide attempts. Thus, it is of the most importance to determine the views of nurses about patients with suicide attempts and suicidal behavior so that they can help such individuals. Nurses working in mental health clinics should have the skills to promptly recognize and prevent any suicidal behavior.

In this study, we sought to obtain important information at an institutional level by determining what nurses working in mental health clinics felt and thought, what problems they experienced and how they coped with them when working with patients who showed suicidal behavior and suicide attempts. The aim of this study was to investigate the feelings, thoughts and experiences of nurses working in a mental health clinic about individuals with suicidal behaviors and suicide attempts.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Research design and participants

This was a qualitative study using personal in-depth interviews as the data collection method. A qualitative study differs from conventional/quantitative studies with respect to study questions, goals, sample selection, data collection and analysis methods. The data collected in a qualitative study are not reduced to numbers as in a quantitative study; instead, the main objective is to present a descriptive and realistic situation on the subject for the reader. To achieve this goal, the data collected should be detailed and in-depth, and the opinions and experiences of the persons involved in the study should be presented as directly as possible (Streubert & Carpenter, 1999).

The study population consisted of all nurses (121 nurses) working in a Mental Health and Diseases Hospital in Turkey (a regional hospital). The sample consisted of nurses who had been working in this hospital for at least 1 year, who had the experience of working with patients with a history of suicide attempts and who agreed to take part in the study. The sample of our study was chosen using the purposive sampling method. In selecting the sample for the purpose, participants are selected who can give detailed information on the purpose of the research (Streubert & Carpenter, 1999). Therefore, the sample of our study has been chosen for the purpose of learning more about the feelings, thoughts and experiences of nurses about individuals with suicidal behaviors and suicide attempts.

The sampling approach required the continuous collection of data until reaching the stage at which the concepts and processes that could be the answers to the study question began to appear repeatedly (saturation point). The investigators decided that they

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