



Building First Semester Nursing Student Confidence for Test Taking: A STARS Pilot Project



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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Test anxiety
Attrition
Retention
Nursing students
Test performance

ABSTRACT

This quasi-experimental pilot study implemented a relaxation technique in first semester registered and practical nursing students enrolled in a nursing fundamentals course. Data were collected and analyzed to determine the effectiveness of the Confidence Training for Tests intervention in reducing test anxiety levels. The study demonstrated clinical significance, showing a difference in mean test anxiety scores. Findings revealed that there was a 5.8 point difference in the mean sum of the item responses pre- and postintervention.

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Introduction

Nursing programs are concerned with expectations of producing qualified and safe nurses. Several factors are measured when assessing program success. Some of these factors include attrition and retention rates (Fontaine, 2014). Low graduation rates and high attrition rates are a concern for higher education institutions and departments of nursing (Harris, Rosenberg, & Grace O' Rourke, 2014). Attrition rates have been documented averaging 47% to 50% overall per cohort (Harris et al., 2014). Resoundingly, this high level of attrition affects the availability of nurses entering into practice. When assessing retention of nursing students, this statistic is based on program completion within 150% of the program length (Fontaine, 2014). Furthermore, not only is the nursing department faced with attrition and retention rates, enrollment is affected by program entrance requirements.

Program requirements are often difficult for nursing students to achieve. By juggling family, work, and school responsibilities, students currently enrolled in college experience higher levels of stress than students did in the past (Yucha, Kowalski, & Cross, 2009). The personal and academic demands placed on nursing students can affect the students' need to perform well during the academic process,

thereby leading to anxiety during the evaluation process (Beggs, Shields, & Goodin, 2011).

Background

Test anxiety is defined as the physical and behavioral responses to unintended consequences or failure to achieve a desirable test score (Roykenes, Smith, & Torill, 2014). Students enrolled in nursing programs have been found to have increased levels of anxiety over counterparts enrolled in other college programs. Test anxiety affects nursing students in 30% of the reported cases (Shapiro, 2014). Causes of test anxiety include poor preparation for the test, discomfort with the testing process, and inadequate perception of testing skills (Beggs et al., 2011).

Test anxiety is significant and affects the life of nursing students physically, emotionally, and educationally. Relaxation techniques such as biofeedback-assisted relaxation techniques have been successful in decreasing test anxiety (Prato & Yucha, 2013). Two studies have measured the effectiveness of guided reflection, relaxation, and guided imagery in decreasing students' test anxiety (Chernomas & Shapiro, 2013; Evans, Ramsey, & Driscoll, 2010). In addition, support systems such as families, peer tutors, and educational coaches increase success in completing nursing program courses (Shapiro, 2014).

Significance

Students faced with test anxiety may experience low confidence levels and discouragement from failing to complete the nursing

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program (Hadenfeldt, 2012). To reduce the incidence of test anxiety, educators must recognize the issues faced by the students to perform in academic programs and the demand of the institution to maintain enrollment while producing employable workers in the health care system (Hadenfeldt, 2012). Test anxiety has the possibility of damaging confidence, delaying academic achievement, decreasing program retention rates, and decreasing the production of nurses.

Purpose

The purpose of this pilot project was to examine the effect of relaxation techniques, Confidence Training for Tests (Driscoll, 2012), in the reduction of test anxiety in first semester nursing students at a community college associate degree (ADN) and practical nursing (PN) program. Desired outcomes included improved course and program retention rates, increased educator insight about the effect of test anxiety on the student, and a win-win situation for the student, faculty, institution, and health care industry.

Literature Synthesis

Students enrolled in nursing programs experience higher test anxiety levels than other students enrolled in health occupations programs and college curricula (Ainsworth et al., 2010; Evans et al., 2010; Markman, Balik, Braunstein-Bercovitz, & Ehrenfeld, 2011; Prato & Yucha, 2013; Roykenes et al., 2014 and Shapiro, 2014). Results of a study on test anxiety of nursing students revealed that 50% of nursing students exhibited high test anxiety to moderately high test anxiety when screened with the Westside Test Anxiety Scale (WTAS; Evans et al., 2010). Using the Confidence Training for Tests audio CD (Driscoll & Davis, 2009), Evans et al. (2010) described statistically significant test gains in the treatment group over the control group when the Health Education Systems Incorporated examination was administered ($p < .05$). Markman et al. (2011) reported that nursing students had a 0.88 probability of suffering test anxiety, and as a result a probability of 0.76 that test anxiety would prevent academic success. Acquiring an effective method to alleviate test anxiety remains an issue for educators.

Westside Test Anxiety Scale

Driscoll (2004) developed a tool known as the WTAS in 2004. The tool places a strong emphasis on cognitive impairment during test performance. Six of 10 items are based on test anxiety, and 4 items are based on worry and dread when taking a test (Driscoll, 2007). Worry and dread impedes concentration and are associated with cognitive impairment on tests. Therefore, recognizing worry weakens performance; the scale assesses cognitive worry in addition to test anxiety. The WTAS is easy to administer, is available on-line, and can be scored on-line by the computer, by the student, or by the researcher. Finally, all items are scored positively, thus making scoring effortless when administered (Driscoll, 2004). The WTAS measurement tool is self-administered utilizing a Likert scale to answer 10 questions about test anxiety. Each score is tallied with a possibility of 50 total points. The points are divided by 10 with the following results given: (a) 1.0 to 1.9 low test anxiety, (b) 2.0 to 2.5 normal test anxiety, (c) 2.5 to 2.9 high normal test anxiety, (d) 3.0 to 3.4 moderate high test anxiety, (e) 3.5 to 3.9 high test anxiety, and (f) 4.0 to 5.0 extremely high test anxiety (Driscoll, 2007).

The WTAS addresses impairment and worry and dread, thereby addressing cognitive worry (Driscoll, 2007). The scale includes four worry and dread items and six impairment items. When comparing the WTAS to other test anxiety tools, the impairment items are comparable, thus supporting face validity and criterion-related validity (Driscoll, 2007). Correlation studies in 2005 and 2006 were used to

demonstrate reliability of the WTAS. In the studies, control and intervention groups were compared ($r_{(23)} = 0.49, p < .01$). Replication studies have also been implemented ($r_{(32)} = 0.40, p < .01$; Driscoll, 2007).

Confidence Training for Tests

The Confidence Training for Tests audio CD utilizes active physical exercises that seek to control anxiety and adaptive images, which improve attitudes, thereby increasing interest in learning and testing. The stretch-tense, deep breath-release relax suggestions sequence (STARS) is an anxiety reduction series consisting of stretching, tensing, breathing, and relaxation to decrease stress over a short period. Stretching and tensing the muscles causes the activation of the physiological response of fatigue. Deep breathing counteracts the shallow respirations connected to anxiety. Therefore, the fatigue associated with tense muscles and the deep breathing causes the individual to relax (Driscoll, 2004).

Following the stretching and relaxation sequence, the individual is told to imagine a pleasant, interesting, or challenging activity. The individual is asked to store the image. This is thought to counteract anxiety and hopelessness. Eight learning and testing scenes are reviewed with the individual. The individual is then asked to imagine the stored activity and to pair the activity in preparation for the examination, followed by taking the examination. The experience leads to the individual remembering information to answer with the appropriate response on the examination. Sequences are introduced to the individual to decrease anxiety and prepare the individual for the eight scenes (Driscoll, 2004).

The recorded intervention is recommended to be performed at least twice, with the individual reviewing the CD as needed. The recommendations allow the CD to be reviewed as an individual or group. Individual results are then recorded using the WTAS for comparison of pre-and postintervention data (Driscoll, 2004).

Methodology

This was a quasi-experimental pilot study that implemented the Confidence Training for Tests relaxation techniques in first semester ADN and PN students enrolled in a fundamentals of nursing course. The participants in the study were recruited from the ADN and PN programs at a local 2-year community college, who were 19 years old or older. In addition, the students were registered in the first semester fundamentals of nursing course, in their perspective program, designed to introduce students to the concepts and basic skills in providing patient care.

The college serves seven counties in the western part of Alabama, with an enrollment of 1,709 students system wide. The Commissions on Colleges, Southern Association of Colleges, accredits the college. The nursing ADN and PN programs are approved by the Alabama Board of Nursing and accredited by the Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing.

The primary investigator (PI) implemented the study after obtaining permission to conduct the study from the institution program directors; institutional review board approval was obtained. The WTAS and Confidence Training for Tests CD were selected as the measurement tool and project intervention, respectively. Authorization was obtained from the tool and intervention developer.

Sample

The PI began the implementation process of the study by meeting with the first semester ADN and PN students enrolled in fundamentals of nursing. Although there was a large group from which to obtain the recruitment sample ($n = 80$), just 31.25% ($n = 25$) of the available population was recruited. Reasons for the low participation

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