



Nurses' Experiences and Coping Strategies in Managing Mental Health Patients in Hospitals

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ABSTRACT

The nursing profession in mental health settings plays a pivotal role in managing patient with psychological disorders, yet there is limited understanding of the emotional and psychological challenges faced by nurses in this field. While much research has focus on general clinical practices, the personal experiences and emotional labor of nurse remain underexplored. This study addresses the gap in knowledge by exploring the live experiences of nurses who care for patients with mental health disorders. Using phenomenological approach, this research seeks to uncover the meaning nurses assign t their professional roles and the emotional challenges they face in these settings. Dat were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 12 nurses (8 female and 4 males) aged between 25 and 45 years, who had at least two years of experienc working in psychiatric wards of two general hospitals. Participants were selected throug purposive sampling to ensure diverse experiences in managing acute and chronic menta health cases. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Three key themes emerged (1) emotional exhaustion and empathy fatigue in daily care interactions; (2) adaptiv coping mechanisms, including peer debriefing, humor, and mindfulness practices; an (3) the critical role of organizational support in fostering psychological resilience. Th findings revealed that nurses experience significant emotional strain, a lack of menta health training, and insufficient institutional support, but they develop copin mechanisms such as peer support and self-care practices. These insights underscore th need for structured mental health training and peer-support programs tailored to nurse in psychiatric settings. These results contribute to a deeper understanding of emotiona labor in nursing and highlight the importance of institutional and peer support i improving nurses' well-being. These findings offer valuable insights for healthcar systems aiming to improve nurse resilience and suggest avenues for future research o emotional resilience and professional development in mental health nursing.



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INTRODUCTION

The management of patients with mental health disorders in hospital settings presents a complex and multifaceted challenge. Mental health conditions, including depression, anxiety, and psychosis, affect millions globally and have a significant impact on the healthcare system (Shahrour & Dardas, 2020). Nurses, as primary caregivers in clinical environments, play a pivotal role in managing both the physical and psychological needs of patients with mental health conditions (Merry et al., 2021). However, despite the growing prevalence of mental health issues, the specific experiences of nurses in this domain remain insufficiently explored, especially in terms of their emotional and psychological responses. This gap in the literature calls for a deeper exploration of the lived experiences of healthcare professionals who interact directly with patients facing such disorders.

The relevance of understanding the experiences of nurses in managing mental health patients extends beyond clinical care to the broader societal context (Merry et al., 2021). In many cultures, mental health remains stigmatized, often leading to a lack of understanding and empathy. Nurses

working with mental health patients are not only tasked with providing medical care but also managing societal misconceptions about mental health (Godshall, 2021). Their experiences are shaped by both their professional responsibilities and the socio-cultural attitudes towards mental illness, which can influence how they interact with patients and the emotional toll they experience. Understanding these personal experiences is crucial, as it can inform both clinical practice and the development of policies that better support healthcare workers in this demanding field.

Given the significance of these experiences, there is a pressing need for a deeper understanding of the subjective meanings nurses attach to their roles in mental health care (Chen et al., 2021). Phenomenological research is particularly suited to this task as it emphasizes the lived experiences of individuals, focusing on how they make sense of and assign meaning to their professional encounters. By exploring the emotions, challenges, and coping mechanisms of nurses, phenomenology provides a lens through which to uncover the essence of these experiences (Y. Liu et al., 2020). This understanding is not only important for improving the well-being of healthcare professionals but also for enhancing patient care by fostering a more empathetic and effective clinical environment.

Research into the experiences of individuals within specific phenomena has become an important field, particularly in understanding the subjective dimensions of professional roles and challenges. In the context of nursing and mental health care, much of the existing literature has focused on the general tasks and clinical practices involved in managing patients with mental health disorders (Lartey et al., 2020). However, there remains a notable gap in our understanding of the personal, emotional, and psychological experiences of nurses working in these settings (Luo et al., 2023). While quantitative research has provided valuable insights into the prevalence and outcomes of mental health disorders, it often fails to capture the rich, nuanced experiences of those who provide care, which are deeply embedded in individual perception and social context.

The methodological challenges in exploring the deep meanings and personal experiences of healthcare professionals are significant. Quantitative approaches, which dominate much of healthcare research, are often insufficient for investigating the subjective and experiential nature of the phenomenon (N. Liu & Zhang, 2020). They tend to reduce complex emotional and psychological experiences into measurable variables, overlooking the personal meaning that individuals attach to their experiences. For instance, while surveys may gather data on job satisfaction or stress levels, they cannot adequately address the internal, emotional responses that nurses have in relation to their work with mental health patients. This is where phenomenology offers a distinct advantage (Chew et al., 2021). By focusing on the lived experiences of individuals, phenomenology allows for a deeper exploration of how nurses interpret and give meaning to their daily interactions with patients, highlighting the emotional and psychological challenges that may otherwise be overlooked in traditional research.

However, the limitations of previous research highlight the necessity of this phenomenological study. Existing methods often fail to provide a comprehensive understanding of the essence of the experiences faced by nurses in mental health settings (Shaban et al., 2024). Much of the research in this area has been restricted to general overviews of workload, stress, or job satisfaction, without delving into the nuanced emotional journeys that healthcare providers undergo (Betriana & Kongsuwan, 2020). Phenomenology, with its focus on rich, descriptive data from the perspective of the participants, can fill this gap by revealing the core of the experience and offering insights that can lead to more supportive policies and improved care practices.

In the context of nursing and mental health care, much of the existing research relies on practical, generalized approaches that primarily focus on quantifiable outcomes, such as workload, stress levels, or patient outcomes (Debesay et al., 2022). These solutions, while useful in providing broad insights, often fail to capture the rich, complex nature of the lived experiences of nurses (S. Kim et al., 2023). Traditional methodologies, such as surveys and statistical analyses, are limited in their ability to explore the personal, emotional, and psychological dimensions of the professional experience. While these methods provide valuable data on trends and general patterns, they miss the subtleties of how nurses subjectively experience their roles and the emotional challenges they face in

managing patients with mental health disorders. This gap in understanding leaves us with a less comprehensive view of the phenomenon, particularly regarding the internal struggles, coping mechanisms, and emotional resilience that nurses rely on in their day-to-day work.

To address these limitations, adopting a phenomenological approach offers a significant advantage. By focusing on the lived experiences of nurses, phenomenology allows for a deeper exploration of the meaning they assign to their experiences (Krzyzaniak et al., 2021). This method goes beyond surface-level data, tapping into the essence of their professional encounters and revealing the emotional, social, and personal factors that influence their work. Phenomenology is uniquely suited for uncovering the complexity of the emotional toll that nurses experience in mental health settings, as it captures the nuanced, subjective dimensions of their practice (Deliktas Demirci et al., 2021). Thus, the need for this study becomes clear: by employing a phenomenological approach, the research aims to provide a holistic understanding of the challenges and emotional landscapes faced by nurses, offering a richer, more detailed exploration of their experiences.

Relevant research on the experiences of nurses in mental health settings has focused on the challenges they face in managing patients with psychological disorders, but few studies have fully explored the emotional and psychological dimensions of their work (Marey-Sarwan et al., 2022). Previous studies have often applied quantitative methods, measuring stress, workload, or job satisfaction, which fail to capture the nuanced, subjective experiences of healthcare providers. Theories related to emotional labor, stress coping, and professional burnout have provided valuable insights into the broader context of nursing work, but they have not sufficiently addressed how nurses interpret and make sense of these experiences at a personal level (Ali et al., 2020). To fill this gap, a phenomenological approach is proposed, focusing on understanding the lived experiences of nurses, as it offers an in-depth exploration of the meaning they attach to their roles in mental health care. By examining the subjective perceptions of nurses, this study aims to offer a more holistic view of the emotional and professional challenges they face.

The phenomenological approach used in this study allows for the exploration of nurses' lived experiences, focusing on how they perceive and interpret their work with patients suffering from mental health disorders (Silverman et al., 2021). This approach was chosen because it provides the opportunity to delve deeper into the meanings and emotional responses that nurses have in relation to their professional roles. Unlike traditional research methods that limit understanding to measurable outcomes, phenomenology prioritizes the essence of human experience, revealing the personal and emotional layers that are often overlooked (Burton et al., 2020). By adopting this methodology, the study addresses the knowledge gap identified earlier, offering a richer, more detailed understanding of the emotional labor and resilience required in mental health nursing. The goal is to uncover the complexities of nurses' experiences in a way that reflects the deep and multifaceted nature of their work.

The structure of this article follows a logical flow, beginning with an introduction to the research context and the significance of exploring nurses' experiences in mental health care (Burton et al., 2020). The article proceeds to describe the phenomenological approach employed in the study, including details about the data collection and analysis process. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key themes that capture the essence of nurses' experiences (Maideen et al., 2022). The findings are presented and discussed in relation to the existing literature, followed by conclusions that emphasize the implications of the study for both nursing practice and mental health care policies. This structure ensures a comprehensive exploration of the research questions, presenting findings in a clear and systematic manner.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed a phenomenological approach to explore the experiences of nurses in managing patients with mental health disorders in a hospital setting. Phenomenology was chosen as the research design because it focuses on understanding and interpreting the lived experiences of

individuals, providing deep insights into how they make sense of their interactions with the world. This approach is particularly relevant for investigating the personal and subjective experiences of nurses, as it allows for the exploration of the meaning they attach to their professional roles and challenges (Wocial, 2020). A descriptive phenomenological approach was used, as it is effective in capturing the essence of lived experiences without attempting to explain or theorize about the phenomena (Johnson, 2014). This method is well-suited for providing rich, detailed accounts of participants' perceptions and actions, thus ensuring that the complexity of their experiences is fully understood.

Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that individuals with direct and relevant experience in the phenomenon being studied were included. The inclusion criteria required participants to be registered nurses working in a hospital setting who had experience caring for patients with mental health disorders. Exclusion criteria were established to eliminate individuals who lacked direct patient care experience or those who were not currently working in a clinical setting. The final sample consisted of 12 nurses, aged between 25 and 50 years, with an average age of 36 years. The group included both male and female nurses with varying years of professional experience, ranging from 3 to 18 years, thus ensuring a diverse perspective on the challenges faced by nurses in managing mental health patients. This demographic variation was crucial in capturing a broad range of experiences and insights.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, which provided participants the opportunity to express their experiences freely while ensuring that specific topics related to the research questions were addressed. The interview protocol included open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed descriptions of the nurses' experiences, emotions, and perceptions of working with patients with mental health disorders (Huang et al., 2021). Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was conducted in a private, quiet room within the hospital to ensure confidentiality and comfort for the participants. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent, and field notes were taken to document non-verbal cues and observations during the interviews. The interview guide was informed by existing literature and refined based on feedback from a pilot interview, ensuring that it was contextually relevant and aligned with the study's objectives.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a common approach in phenomenological research that allows for the identification and interpretation of key themes within the data. The analysis process involved several steps, beginning with the transcription of interviews, followed by careful reading and re-reading of the data to gain a comprehensive understanding of the content (De Brasi et al., 2021). The data were then coded into meaningful units, which were grouped into categories based on shared themes. This thematic framework was continuously refined through an iterative process of reviewing and comparing the data, ensuring that the themes accurately reflected the lived experiences of the participants (Gray et al., 2021). NVivo software was used to assist in the organization and management of the data, though the emphasis remained on the careful, manual interpretation of themes. The ultimate goal was to identify and describe the essence of the nurses' experiences in managing mental health patients, focusing on the challenges, coping strategies, and emotional resilience they exhibited.

Ethics

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant ethics committee prior to data collection. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were fully briefed on the study's aims, procedures, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. All participants were assured of the confidentiality of their responses, and their anonymity was preserved by using pseudonyms in the final report. Audio recordings and interview transcripts were securely stored, and access was restricted to the research team. The study adhered to international

ethical standards for research, ensuring that participants' dignity and privacy were respected throughout the research process.

RESULTS

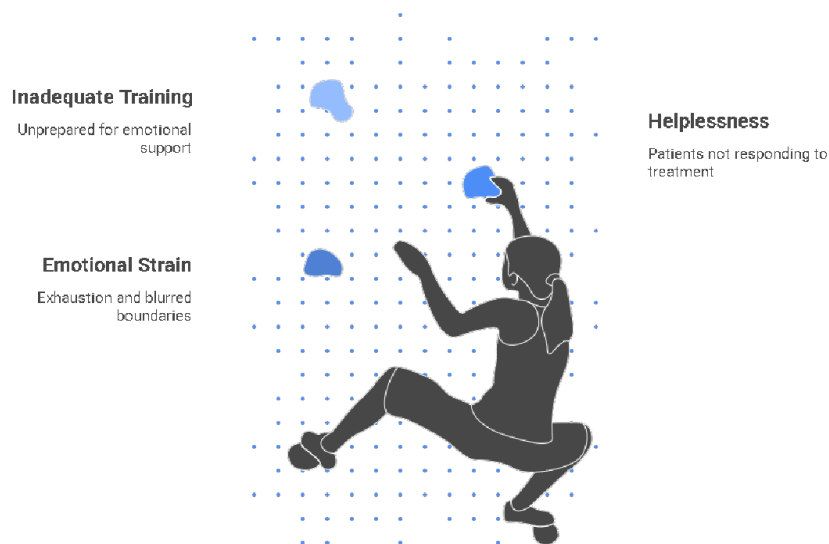
Challenges in Managing Patients with Mental Health Disorders

The experiences of nurses in managing patients with mental health disorders in hospitals are multifaceted and often complex. Nurses reported facing significant emotional and psychological challenges, which impacted their professional and personal well-being. One nurse explained, "It's not just about administering medication; it's the emotional toll of seeing patients struggle with their mental health. We are not just caregivers but also emotional supporters." This quote highlights the dual role that nurses play: not only as healthcare providers but also as emotional anchors for patients. Nurses also mentioned feeling a sense of helplessness when patients do not respond to treatment or when they experience recurrent episodes of mental illness. As one nurse described, "Sometimes it feels like we're just going in circles, trying the same treatments with little result. It's disheartening."

This theme, labeled "Emotional and Professional Strain," was derived from multiple recurring narratives describing exhaustion, helplessness, and blurred emotional boundaries between personal empathy and professional responsibility. Through iterative coding and comparison, these subthemes coalesced into a broader construct of 'emotional dissonance,' reflecting the internal conflict nurses face when professional duty clashes with emotional fatigue.

The emotional strain that nurses face was further compounded by inadequate mental health training, which many participants indicated as a gap in their professional development. A nurse stated, "I wasn't trained to handle the emotional side of mental health care. I know how to manage medication, but when it comes to emotional support, I feel unprepared." Analytically, this reveals a structural deficiency in nursing education and institutional orientation, suggesting that emotional competency is often undervalued compared to clinical competency. The recurrence of this sentiment across participants indicates a systemic gap rather than an individual shortfall.

Nurses' Mental Health Management Challenges



Coping Strategies and Emotional Resilience

In response to the challenges, nurses developed various coping strategies to maintain their emotional well-being. Many nurses highlighted the importance of peer support as a primary coping mechanism. One nurse reflected, "Talking to my colleagues after a tough shift helps me process everything. It's reassuring to know they understand what I'm going through." This theme, termed

“Collective Coping and Peer Validation,” emerged through the aggregation of codes related to emotional sharing, debriefing, and mutual reassurance. The data indicate that social connectedness within nursing teams functions as both a psychological buffer and an informal support system compensating for institutional gaps.

Nurses reported that discussing their experiences with colleagues allowed them to release emotional stress, gain perspective, and strengthen their coping mechanisms. Additionally, nurses mentioned the importance of personal self-care practices, such as engaging in hobbies, physical activity, and seeking counseling when necessary. One participant shared, “I’ve learned to take time for myself, even if it’s just a walk in the park. It helps me clear my mind and come back to work with a fresh perspective.”

Across participants, these strategies aligned with the analytical category “Adaptive Resilience,” which integrates individual (self-care) and collective (peer support) coping mechanisms. This duality demonstrates how emotional resilience in nursing is socially constructed—built not only through personal reflection but through shared experience within the professional community.

Perceptions of the Healthcare Environment

The healthcare environment itself was a significant factor in shaping nurses' experiences. Nurses expressed concerns about the understaffing and high patient turnover rates, which they felt contributed to increased stress and diminished quality of care. A nurse explained, “When we’re understaffed, it’s not just about the number of patients; it’s about the quality of care we can provide. I wish we had more time to really connect with each patient.” This subtheme, “Structural and Environmental Constraints,” was identified through patterns of discourse linking workload, resource inadequacy, and emotional fatigue. Analytical triangulation across interview data revealed that these contextual stressors amplify emotional strain and reduce opportunities for reflective practice.

Furthermore, nurses reported a lack of institutional support for mental health care provision. One nurse stated, “There’s no real system in place to help us when we’re emotionally drained. We’re expected to just keep going, but there’s no acknowledgment of the emotional labor involved.” This analytical pattern consolidates into the theme “Institutional Neglect of Emotional Labor,” representing an organizational culture that prioritizes operational efficiency over emotional sustainability. The consistency of this narrative across participants indicates a systemic rather than isolated concern, reinforcing the need for organizational-level interventions.

The findings of this study reveal the multifaceted challenges faced by nurses in managing patients with mental health disorders. Emotional strain, lack of training, and inadequate institutional support emerged as key themes. These themes were systematically derived through a multi-step thematic analysis that involved open coding, axial grouping, and cross-validation among researchers to ensure analytical rigor and credibility.

However, nurses also demonstrated resilience through peer support and personal coping strategies, underscoring the importance of these mechanisms in mitigating emotional stress. The interplay between personal agency and institutional context highlights that emotional resilience is both an individual adaptation and a product of workplace culture. To enhance the well-being of nurses and improve patient care, systemic changes, including better staffing, more comprehensive mental health training, and institutional support, are necessary. These findings lay the groundwork for further exploration into improving mental health care practices in hospital settings.

DISCUSSION

Summary of Key Findings

This study explored the lived experiences of nurses working with patients suffering from mental health disorders, revealing that emotional strain, lack of training, and insufficient institutional support were key challenges faced by nurses in these settings (Font-Jimenez et al., 2020). The findings also highlighted the coping mechanisms nurses developed, including peer support and self-

care practices, which allowed them to navigate the emotional demands of their roles (Zhang et al., 2021). These experiences directly address the research question regarding how nurses perceive and respond to the challenges of caring for patients with mental health conditions, offering new insights into the emotional and psychological dimensions of their professional roles.

Contribution of Findings to the Research Question

The findings from this study provide significant answers to the overarching question posed in the introduction about the experiences of nurses in mental health settings (Zhao et al., 2021). The study illustrates that nurses' emotional resilience is not only shaped by their professional skills but also by their ability to manage personal emotions and stress. The emotional toll of working with mental health patients is profound, with nurses frequently feeling overwhelmed by their inability to effect lasting change in their patients' conditions (Puente-Fernández et al., 2020). However, the coping strategies they develop, particularly peer support and self-care practices, enable them to sustain their emotional well-being and maintain professional efficacy. By focusing on the subjective experiences of nurses, this study enriches the current understanding of emotional labor in healthcare and underscores the importance of organizational and social support systems in mental health nursing.

Relation to Existing Literature and Theory

The findings of this study are consistent with previous research that has identified emotional labor and burnout as significant issues for healthcare professionals, particularly those working in mental health care (Lee & Kim, 2020). However, unlike many quantitative studies, this research provides a more nuanced understanding by emphasizing the personal and emotional experiences of nurses, highlighting how these challenges affect their sense of self and their work-life balance. The study also supports the notion that peer support plays a critical role in mitigating the emotional toll of nursing (Diaz et al., 2021), which is consistent with the findings that nurses in this study relied heavily on conversations with colleagues to process their emotions. Additionally, the lack of formal mental health training, as identified in this study, aligns with findings from previous studies that suggest healthcare systems often fail to adequately prepare staff for the emotional complexities of working with mental health patients (H. Kim & Kim, 2020). This research complements existing literature by providing deeper insights into the emotional challenges nurses face, while also contributing new knowledge about the coping mechanisms that help them manage these challenges.

Implications of Findings

The findings of this study offer both scientific and practical implications for nursing practice, particularly in mental health settings (Combrinck et al., 2022). The emotional challenges faced by nurses in managing mental health patients highlight the need for targeted interventions that support emotional resilience and professional well-being. The importance of peer support and self-care practices suggests that hospitals and healthcare organizations should consider fostering supportive work environments where nurses can share experiences and receive psychological support. Additionally, the study underscores the need for comprehensive mental health training for nurses, which could enhance their ability to cope with the emotional demands of their work and improve patient care (Li et al., 2022). The relevance of these findings extends beyond the specific setting of this study, as they provide insight into the broader issue of emotional labor in healthcare professions, particularly in contexts where staff are required to engage emotionally with patients suffering from complex psychological conditions.

Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights into the experiences of nurses working with mental health patients, there are several limitations that may affect the generalizability of the findings (Ondrejková & Halamová, 2022). One key limitation is the relatively small sample size of 12 participants, which may not fully represent the diversity of experiences among nurses working in different settings or with varying levels of experience. Additionally, the study was conducted in a single hospital, which may limit the transferability of the findings to other healthcare environments. The phenomenological approach, while rich in detail, focuses on individual experiences and may not fully capture the structural or organizational factors influencing nurses' emotional experiences (Truitt

& Snyder, 2020). Future research could expand the sample size and include multiple hospital settings to gain a broader understanding of the phenomenon. Furthermore, longitudinal studies would be beneficial to explore how nurses' emotional resilience and coping strategies evolve over time.

Prospective Statement for Future Research

The findings of this study open several avenues for future research in the field of nursing and mental health care (Chipps et al., 2022). One potential direction is to examine how organizational policies and support systems influence the emotional well-being of nurses in mental health settings. Longitudinal studies could explore how the experiences of nurses change over the course of their careers and how interventions such as professional development or peer support programs impact their emotional resilience. Additionally, research could be extended to explore the experiences of nurses working in different healthcare systems or in more diverse cultural contexts, which may provide further insight into the universal and context-specific aspects of emotional labor in nursing (Nydahl et al., 2020). The findings from this study can thus serve as a foundation for future studies aimed at improving the working conditions and emotional well-being of healthcare professionals, ultimately contributing to better patient care outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the experiences of nurses in managing patients with mental health disorders, addressing the gap in understanding the emotional and psychological challenges faced by healthcare professionals in this setting. The findings reveal that nurses encounter significant emotional strain, lack of sufficient training, and inadequate institutional support, but they also develop coping mechanisms, including peer support and self-care practices, to sustain their well-being. These insights provide a deeper understanding of emotional labor in nursing, offering a more holistic view of the professional challenges that have often been overlooked in previous research. By focusing on the lived experiences of nurses, this study contributes valuable knowledge that can inform healthcare practices and policies aimed at improving the emotional resilience of nurses. However, this study is not without limitations. The sample size was relatively small and limited to nurses from two hospitals, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to broader healthcare settings. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data through interviews may introduce subjective bias. Future research could address these limitations by incorporating larger, multi-site samples and employing mixed-methods approaches to enhance validity and depth of understanding.

From a policy and practice perspective, the findings emphasize the urgent need for institutional reforms that prioritize nurses' mental health. Healthcare policymakers should consider implementing structured mental health training, regular supervision sessions, and peer support groups to strengthen nurses' coping capacities. Hospital administrators are encouraged to integrate emotional well-being programs into organizational culture and allocate resources for psychological counseling and professional development. These actionable steps can foster a more supportive work environment, reduce burnout, and ultimately improve the quality of mental health care delivery. Future research could expand on these findings by exploring how organizational support and long-term interventions affect the well-being of nurses in mental health settings. Further studies could also examine how these challenges vary across different healthcare systems or cultural contexts to inform more context-specific policy frameworks.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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