



It's More Than Just Stress': A Qualitative Analysis of Anxiety in Bachelor of Science in Nursing Programs

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Article details:

Published: 30th June 2025



Abstract

Many nursing students express extreme anxiety and stress during nursing school. The cause of the stress is considered complex and multifaceted. The purpose of this study is to explore the nature of self-perceived anxiety experienced by Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) students. The research was conducted through comprehensive focus groups conducted at a university in the southeastern United States. The results expressed by students revealed

three primary stress themes: personal, academic and professional. The manuscript addresses a critical gap in nursing education research by providing an in-depth examination of the personal, academic, and professional stressors that contribute to student anxiety as well as recommendations for comprehensive student support strategies. The research contributes to the broader understanding of student mental health in nursing programs and offers practical implications for educational institutions.

Keywords: Nursing students, Anxiety, Stress, Nursing Education, Nursing Profession, Focus Groups, Qualitative Research

To cite this article :

Angela Collier PhD, RNC, Brooke Epperson DNP, MBA, MSNEd, R. (2025). It's More Than Just Stress': A Qualitative Analysis of Anxiety in Bachelor of Science in Nursing Programs. *International Journal of Health, Education & Social (IJHES)*, 8(6), 79–90.



**The International Journal of Health, Education and Social
(IJHES)**



International Journal of Health, Education and Social (IJHES)



Introduction

Admission into a nursing program brings a lot of change into a students' life. The pace of nursing education is more intense, the workload of assignments, exams, and clinical requirements increase significantly for a student (Fitzgerald & Konrad, 2021). Students often have multiple demands regarding personal obligations outside of school. Expectations placed by society, by the institution and by the student themselves may produce feelings of anxiety (Yuksel & Bahadir-Yilmaz, 2019).

The foundation for most baccalaureate nursing programs in the United States are the standards set by the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN, 2024). These standards aim to educate individuals to be practice ready upon graduation for their programs. "Formal nursing education strives to prepare and graduate nurses who are ready to practice according to employers' expectations for competent patient care delivery" (McGarity et al., 2023, p.1). Nursing competency includes the core abilities that are required to understand the needs of the patient, the ability to provide care, to collaborate, and the ability use critical thinking skills. The culmination of these skills and competencies often results in nursing education being rigorous and demanding. According to Novik (2024), a nursing major ranks in the top 30 of most difficult degrees to obtain in the United States.

Students view their experience as they transition into a nursing program as one of the most uncertain and anxiety filled periods in their academic journey (McDonald, Brown, & Knihniski, 2018). Anxiety is a complex emotional state involving tension, worried thoughts, panic, and nervousness (American Psychological Association, 2024). Numerous studies have revealed that nursing students who experience various degrees of anxiety. The main stressors include lack of confidence in knowledge and skills, and fear making mistakes, patient death, and establishing professional relationships (Melo, Williams, & Ross, 2010). Anxiety is typically exacerbated in later semesters related to the nursing licensure examination, graduation, and job interviews.

There have been strategies developed to help address nursing academic burnout such as peer/faculty mentoring, debriefing, journaling, and the promotion of self-care,



the question. Even with the implementation of strategies to prevent academic burnout, the question remains, “what is the self-perceived cause of increased anxiety in nursing students completing a BSN”?

Purpose

This was a qualitative study using focus groups. The purpose of the study was to identify contributing factors of self-perceived anxiety in undergraduate nursing students. The study involved four focus groups of undergraduate nursing students in a Bachelor of Science of Nursing program in a university in the southeastern portion of the United States. Inclusion criteria included undergraduate nursing students who had completed at least one semester of nursing school. After obtaining Institutional Review Board approval, participants were recruited by script during a nursing course. Participation was strictly voluntary. Each participant signed a consent and was allowed to withdraw from the focus group at any time. The student participants were informed that participation would not affect any grades or completion of the nursing program.

Methods

In this study, a descriptive qualitative design was used to allow for flexibility to investigate phenomena from a population BSN nursing students to understand and explore in-depth nursing students' experiences. Institutional Review Board approval was obtained from the University Office of Research Integrity. A convenience sampling technique was used to recruit participants to produce a sample representative of the population. The authors invited students to participate in the focus groups via in-person solicitation. Interested students were encouraged to attend the scheduled focus groups and, an information sheet and consent form was presented to each respondent prior to data collection. There were four cohorts of undergraduate nursing students that qualified for the focus groups. Each cohort ranged in size from 35-40 students. The focus group was held immediately following class for each cohort in a private classroom. Each focus group had approximately 8-12 students. There was a total of 34 students in the four focus groups. 32 female and 2 male participants. Participants



from every level (1-5) were represented in the focus groups. Guiding questions were used to initiate discussion (See Table 1).

Two moderators led the discussion. One moderator led the discussions while the other moderator took extensive notes of the discussions and monitored the recorder. The sessions were recorded using the Otter application for transcription purposes. The discussion lasted approximately one hour for each group. The transcripts were deleted after analysis. Data was analysed using the thematic analysis. Each recorded interview was transcribed by the researchers. Data were coded and categories were identified for further analysis. Major themes were extracted out of the categorized data. Analysis of data revealed similar responses from participants regarding factors impacting their nursing school experience and anxiety inducing factors.

Focus Group Discussion Guide

Table 1. Guiding Questions

1. How do you feel about being a student in nursing?
2. Is there anything about the clinical experience that might cause you to feel anxious about it?
3. Is there anything about the didactic class experience that might cause you to feel anxious about it?
4. What do nursing students worry about regarding clinical experiences?
5. What do nursing students worry about regarding didactic experiences?
6. Would you like to talk about those experiences which you found most anxiety producing?
7. How do you think clinical experiences can be improved?
8. How do you think didactic experiences can be improved?
9. Which nursing school experiences do you find enjoyable?



Results

During the focus groups, all students were engaged and appeared eager to answer questions. One student even cried during the sessions when discussing some of the trials she had experienced during nursing school. After the sessions, the results were analysed by both moderators. The analysis was completed, and the results were divided into themes and later coded. The themes were consistent among the two researchers. These themes were read by a student in the same program for subject matter verification. There were three themes that emerged during the study. Those included: personal stressors, academic stressors and professional stressors. The personal stressors can be attributed to the students' feelings, previous experiences or perceptions. Academic stressors are those specific to nursing school. Academic stressors were divided into didactic stressors and clinical stressors. Didactic stressors were those factors causing anxiety from the classroom/lecture setting. Clinical stressors were identified as those in the hospital/and or lab setting. Professional stressors are those related to the nursing profession. These students had been in professional settings either through clinicals or working in the hospitals.

Personal Stressors

Many students indicated "self-inflicted pressure". In all four focus groups, the students stated that it was such an honor to be accepted into their nursing program. They believed that this type of degree would provide them with "great future opportunities". They discussed how hard they worked to get into the program, as well as how they continued to work hard in each nursing class. They did not want to "disappoint" anyone by not being successful in the program.

Another consistent personal stressor was maintaining a work/life balance. They stated that the rigor of the nursing program required many hours of studying. They stated they "felt guilty if they were not studying". This led each focus group to realize they had to redefine their support system. Many students stated they lost some friends they had before nursing school but regained friends within the nursing program. They stated, "no one understands the stress of nursing school except other nursing students."



This statement was consistent in all four groups. Another anxiety among these nursing students was finding a counselor who understood their stressors. Many had sought outside resources for therapy, however, most felt professional therapists could not relate to what they have experienced in nursing school and or nursing profession.

Academic Stressors

Academic stressors were divided between didactic/lecture anxieties and clinical causes of anxiety. Regarding the lecture courses the students consistently voiced content overload. They stated there was too much information given to them too fast. The students consistently reiterated the amount of information they were responsible for knowing was not realistic in the short time frames. Another concern was testing inconsistencies among the different instructors. Students stated for each test they had to “think like a nurse, like NCLEX, and like the professor”. During the class time, students did not like the instructor “reading off the power point”. They preferred case studies and real-life examples to explain the concepts. Another concern was the amount of group work. Students stated there were differing standards between students in the groups. Group projects allowed for those with lower standards to “ride the coattails” of higher achieving students.

In the clinical setting, care plans were an overarching area of concern. Students felt there was too much emphasis placed on care plans and too much time involved for no grade only a pass/fail option. They were very explicit about the inconsistency with grading among faculty. They discussed how the format of the care plan changed between the different semesters of nursing school. One student stated she was “learning how to do a new care plan format each semester”. They were also concerned with the time spent gathering the information while on the unit. Students believe they must gather all the necessary information while on the unit because once they left for the day they could no longer get needed patient information. Spending the time in the medical record sometimes took away from important hands-on learning opportunities while in the clinical setting.



Besides care plans concerns, the students expressed feeling “like a burden” to the nurse while in the clinical setting. They stated some nurses on the units did not want to teach students or even enjoyed their jobs as nurses. It made the students feel very uncomfortable and unwanted. Another concern was the “fear of the unknown”. Students stated that there needs to be more organization, and the expectations needed to be clearly explained. They felt “thrown to the wolves” in some instances. Other stressors were the perceived pressure to already know everything in clinicals. Students felt that nurses did not understand they were just learning about the population and did not know how to care for the patients. Many students expressed concerns regarding the attendance policy. They felt there was no alternate plan for unavoidable illnesses or absences during clinicals.

Professional Stressors

During the focus groups, students identified stressors related to being in the nursing profession. Many were “terrified” of transitioning to a new graduate nurse. They recognized the responsibility and liability of being a nurse. They stated that nurses were the “last line of defense”. They feared making a mistake and “losing their license”. Other professional stressors unique to nursing included dealing with death and dying. Many times, the student experienced their first death and did not feel adequately prepared to handle the situation appropriately. These students have spent several hours in a hospital clinical setting and/or work in the hospital setting. They identified certain toxic environments of some hospitals which increased their anxiety levels. Those included but not limited to nursing shortage, nurse abuse and perceived lack of administrative support.

Discussion

The findings of this qualitative study reveal the multifaceted nature of anxiety experienced by undergraduate nursing students, highlighting the complex interplay between personal, academic, and professional stressors. Personal stressors emerged as a critical dimension, with participants consistently reporting challenges related to self-doubt, financial pressures, and work-life balance. Maintaining a work-life balance for



students is essential component of overall student wellbeing while in the nursing program (Oliveria et al., 2023). Many students described experiencing persistent feelings of self-doubt, which significantly contributed to their overall anxiety levels. Students indicated the need for university counseling services from a provider who could understand their situations and experiences while in the clinical setting (Sodeify & Tabrizi, 2020). These internal psychological struggles were often exacerbated by external pressures, including family expectations, financial constraints, and the need to balance multiple responsibilities while pursuing their nursing education.

Academic stressors represented another substantial source of anxiety for participants, characterized by the rigorous demands of nursing curriculum and high-stakes assessment processes. Students frequently expressed overwhelming stress related to complex coursework, challenging clinical requirements, and the constant pressure to maintain high academic performance. Participants revealed their concerns regarding different teaching strategies, modalities, and grading standards within their nursing courses. The comprehensive nature of nursing education, which requires competency in both theoretical knowledge and practical skills, created a persistent sense of uncertainty and fear of not progressing in the program. Simulation experiences, didactic examinations, skills demonstrations, and the fear of making critical mistakes during clinical placements were particularly significant contributors to students' anxiety, reflecting the high-stakes nature of nursing education.

Professional stressors further compounded students' anxiety, revealing concerns about their future roles and responsibilities as nursing professionals. Participants articulated significant apprehension about transitioning to practice, professional competence, and the potential consequences of their actions in clinical settings (Ko & Kim, 2022). The transition from student to professional role creates additional psychological strain, with students expressing fears about workplace expectations, patient safety, and their ability to meet professional standards. Students also expressed anxiety related to their interactions with current nursing professionals in the clinical setting and their negative perception of the healthcare landscape. These findings



emphasize the need for comprehensive support strategies that address the holistic experiences of nursing students, including targeted mental health interventions, mentorship programs, and educational approaches that prioritize student well-being alongside academic and professional development (Worthy et al., 2023).

Limitations

There were some limitations to our study. First, we used a relatively small sample size with samples from only one university with a Bachelor of Science program. The results may not be applicable to all nursing students in associate degree, diploma, or certificate programs. Further research is necessary with students from different institutions, types of degree programs, and various program lengths.

Conclusion

This qualitative study provides insights into the complex landscape of anxiety experienced by undergraduate nursing students. By illuminating the personal, academic, and professional stressors, the research highlights the challenges facing prelicensure nursing students. The findings emphasize that anxiety is not a singular, isolated experience but an important phenomenon deeply rooted in the educational journey of nursing students.

The results of this study have significant implications for nursing education and student support systems. Educational institutions should focus on developing comprehensive, holistic approaches that address student anxiety proactively, integrating mental health support, resilience-building strategies, and targeted interventions across personal, academic, and professional stressors. Recognizing and addressing these stressors, nursing programs can potentially improve student retention, academic performance, and ultimately, the quality of future nursing work force (Bakker et al., 2020).

Future research should continue to explore the impacts of anxiety on nursing students' educational experiences and professional experiences. Longitudinal studies across different nursing programs could provide deeper understanding and more targeted support strategies. Ultimately, this study contributes to a growing body of



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knowledge that recognizes the importance of student mental health in nursing education and the need for compassionate, comprehensive support for nursing student



International Journal of Health, Education and Social (IJHES)



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The International Journal of Health, Education and Social (IJHES)

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