

2006

Evaluation of the Effectiveness of a Humor Workshop on the Perceived Stress of Nurse Practitioner Students

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Recommended Citation

Emerson, Stephanie A., "Evaluation of the Effectiveness of a Humor Workshop on the Perceived Stress of Nurse Practitioner Students" (2006). *Master's Projects*. 760.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31979/etd.3356-ecug>

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SAN JOSE STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF NURSING

MASTER'S PROGRAM PROJECT OPTION (PLAN B)
PROJECT SIGNATURE FORM

STUDENT NAME Stephanie A. EMERSON

SEMESTER ENROLLED Summer 2006

TITLE OF PROJECT EVALUATION OF THE

EFFECTIVENESS OF A HUMOR WORKSHOP ON

THE PERCEIVED STRESS OF NURSE

PRACTITIONER STUDENTS

NAME OF JOURNAL JOURNAL OF NURSING ^{Education} RESEARCH

The project and the manuscript have been successfully completed and meet the standards of the School of Nursing University. The project demonstrates the application of professional knowledge, clinical expertise, and scholarly thinking. An abstract of the project and two copies of the manuscript are attached.

Colleen Kelly

8/10/06

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EVALUATION OF A HUMOR WORKSHOP ON PERCEIVED STRESS

Evaluation of the Effectiveness of a Humor Workshop on the

Perceived Stress of Nurse Practitioner Students

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Abstract

A quasi-experimental one-group pretest posttest design was used to evaluate the effectiveness of a humor workshop on the perceived stress of a sample of nurse practitioner students ($n = 9$) at a major university. Testing aimed at measuring perceived stress, was completed before and after participation in a workshop focusing on the application of humor skills in the healthcare environment. For the total sample, the mean pretest score was 15.22, $SD = 5.42$ and the mean posttest score was 10.33, $SD = 3.90$. A dependent samples t -test revealed a statistically significant difference ($t = 4.55, p < .002$). Results indicate that participation in a humor workshop of this type may be associated with lower levels of perceived stress.

Authors Note

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The authors thank Patty Wooten RN Nurse-Humorist, Santa Cruz, California 95060 www.JestHealth.com, for generously donating her knowledge and expertise as conductor of the humor workshop. Without Patty's tremendous contribution, this study could not have taken place.

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Evaluation of the Effectiveness of a Humor Workshop on the Perceived Stress of Nurse Practitioner Students

Stress is defined as the state in which the demands of a given situation are perceived to be more than one can handle (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; McGowan, 2001). Each person has a unique stress threshold, dependent in part, on his or her ability to cope with the stressors perceived to be present at a given time (Lazarus & Folkman). A situation flanked by uncertainty and unmanageability is perceived as stressful, thus the perceived level of stress is high. As the situation becomes manageable and more certain, it is perceived to be less stressful and the perceived level of stress declines. When put in perspective and handled effectively, stress can be exciting and motivating. Many people, in fact, seem to thrive in stressful situations. Too much stress however, becomes overwhelming and is ultimately damaging.

Burnout is the consequence of unmanaged stress and embodies three distinct dimensions of stress – intense exhaustion, cynicism, and a feeling of inefficacy (Maslach, 2003). Intense exhaustion leads to cynicism and an overwhelming desire to separate from the offending source of exhaustion and a sense of inefficacy ensues.

Burnout contributes to the growing nursing shortage much like a negative feedback loop. Shortages beget increased workloads and working conditions deteriorate. A decline in physical and mental health and a rise in discontent result, leading to greater turnover and elevated dropout rates. Elevated dropout rates correlate to an increase in nursing shortages (Unrue & Fottler, 2005). In order to stop this cycle, nurses must learn strategies that will enable them to deal with the stress associated with nursing. Educating nurses about how best to deal with stress and avoid burnout may help improve retention rates of nursing personnel.

The role of the nurse practitioner (NP) represents an evolving career opportunity for many registered nurses. Assuming the role of a NP affords the ability to diagnose, treat, and educate patients. This increase in autonomy undoubtedly alleviates much of the frustration associated with the registered nurses' limited scope of practice. The life of the NP student however, can be extremely intense. Students must complete rigorous coursework as well as manage their own physical, financial, and emotional issues and family obligations while juggling the addition of clinical rotation hours. NP students must learn strategies enabling them to deal with stress so they can avoid the danger of burnout and focus on their new role as NP's.

The use of humor has been shown to be a successful method for coping with stress. Metcalf and Felible (1993) asserted, "Humor can help you thrive in change, remain creative under pressure, work more effectively, play more enthusiastically, and stay healthier in the process" (p. 5). The purpose of this pilot study was to evaluate the effectiveness of a humor workshop, on the perceived stress of a group of NP students. The significance is in the discovery of strategies that will diminish levels of perceived stress that can lead to burnout.

Literature Review

Perceived Stress of the Nurse Practitioner Student

The aim of Maville, Kranz, & Tucker's (2004) qualitative study was to explore perceived stress in a convenience sample (n = 12) of NP students. The theoretical framework that guided the study was Cox's (1991) interactionist model of stress. In Cox's model, stress is thought to be the result of an individual's interpretation of the gravity of a threat and the resources with which to manage the situation. After completing a demographic questionnaire, in-depth interviews were completed and recorded. Transcripts of the recordings were analyzed and emerging categories were clustered into themes. Six qualitative questions were asked. All respondents answered

affirmatively to the question that asked if stress was felt in their present courses. Two themes, increased autonomy and increased ability, emerged from the question that asking why they returned to school to become NPs. No themes emerged from the question that asked how the NP student handled stress. Two themes, faculty and student responsibility, emerged from the question asking if anything could be done to reduce the stress of the program. Respondents suggested that staff provide more lectures and additional hands-on practice while noting that the obligation of the students to provide their own learning was too great. The respondents indicated that they did not know how the stress of their program compared to other graduate programs. The last question, which asked how the student was paying for school, resulted in a mixed response that included educational grants, loans, scholarships, and him or herself. Financial concerns were a key source of student stress. Reported stress levels ranged from an intermediate level to the greatest amount of stress ever having had experienced. The study suggests that an awareness of the student NP's perceived level of stress can offer insight for the development of practices that will facilitate stress reduction.

Humor Identified as a Coping Mechanism

Murphy's (2004) qualitative study conducted within a large nephrology clinic was designed to examine the perceived stress and coping mechanisms of nephrology nurses in Northern Ireland. Study participants (n = 10) were selected by random sampling. Information was gathered through recorded interviews using open-ended questions. Transcripts from the recordings were analyzed and specific themes emerged from the data. Five thematic topics that emerged from the data included (a) job content – comprised of work experience, job satisfaction, and staffing issues, (b) professional concerns related to standards of care, (c) professional relationships with colleagues, (d) extrinsic elements – comprised of political and personal

concerns, and (e) resource issues such as shortages in needed supplies. Coping mechanisms used by these nurses included smoking, socializing, drinking alcohol, reading, watching television, participating in sports activities, and having a sense of humor.

Perry (2005) investigated the coping strategies and perceived stressors of Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetists (CRNAs) (n = 20). In this qualitative study, participants were interviewed one time and were observed in the clinical setting for a total of 65 hours. Observation included observing during surgery, during magnetic resonance imaging, in the recovery room, in the break room, and while making preoperative rounds. Results indicated that the CRNAs perceived the greatest amount of stress from interpersonal relationships at work. Coping strategies used by the CRNAs included prayer, reflection, humor, verbalization, and doing hobbies. Humor was defined as telling jokes, sarcasm, and making humorous comments not only to induce laughter, but also as a way to express concern without appearing curt.

Schulman-Green's (2003) qualitative study, explored the coping mechanisms utilized by physicians (n = 20) routinely caring for dying patients. Hour-long semi-structured interviews were recorded and the ensuing transcripts were examined for recurring themes of which eight were revealed. These coping mechanisms included *medicalization* – defined as identifying the patient by their diagnosis or medical procedure, patient dehumanization, patient directed anger ascribing misconduct to the patient for the purpose of then having the right to distance oneself from the offending patient, the use of euphemisms, the use of humor – described as gallows humor, denial, emotional numbness, and talking to colleagues for support.

In exploratory research by Turner et al., (2005) 363 interns participated in a study that evaluated the frequency of use and the efficacy of self-care strategies utilized during the internship year. Participants completed a 35-item questionnaire in which a 5-point Likert scale

where 1 meant never and 5 meant always, was used to rate how often a particular self-care strategy was used and its perceived effectiveness. Of the 35 items listed, the self-care strategy used most often was the utilization of close friends or family for support. The third most often used strategy was humor. The least utilized strategy was to seek therapy for self. The self-care strategy that was deemed the most effective was again – support of close friends and family. The use of humor came in second in effectiveness, along with exercise and adequate sleep.

In each of the reviewed studies, humor was identified as an effective coping strategy to combat stress. Little research however, has examined the efficacy of an intervention focusing on promoting the use of humor as a coping mechanism to minimize perceived stress. Therefore, the research question for this pilot study was: Will a humor workshop effectively reduce the perceived stress of NP students? The NP students were chosen because they fell under the graduate nursing departments' jurisdiction, rendering them easily accessible for this study.

Conceptual Framework

The present study was established upon the assumption that perceived stress is positively influenced by humor as a method of coping (Murphy, 2004; Perry, 2005). This framework was based on the review of current literature and served to guide the development of this study.

Methodology

Research Design

The study used a quasi-experimental one-group pretest posttest design. The instruments included Cohen and Williamson's (1988) 10-Item Perceived Stress Scale (PSS10) and a demographic questionnaire. The PSS10 was used for both pre and post testing. The NP students participated in a humor workshop immediately following the collection of the demographic questionnaire and PSS10. Posttests were mailed so that the study participants received them two

weeks after the workshop. Study participants were instructed to complete the posttest upon receipt and return in the postage paid envelope that was provided.

Instruments

The PSS10 is a 10-item measure that uses a Likert scale ranging from 0 (never) to 4 (very often) to measure responses. The scale establishes the extent to which the circumstances in one's life are regarded as stressful (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983) and is one of the most widely utilized instruments for determining an individual's perception of stress. The measure consists of ten questions that ask about the participant's thoughts and feelings during the past 30 days. A lower total summed score indicates lower perceived stress. The scale was derived from an earlier 14-item version, resulting in a slight improvement in both the total explained variance and internal reliability. Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the internal reliability of the PSS14 was .75, while the PSS10 was .78 (Cohen & Williamson, 1988). Permission to use the PSS10 was not necessary because it was used for academic research and educational purposes. The demographic questionnaire was developed for the purpose of this study and included: age, gender, educational level, student status, employment status, living situation, and length of time as a nurse.

Sample and Setting

A convenience sample of 9 NP students from a major university in the San Francisco Bay Area, were enrolled in the study. Approval to conduct the study was obtained from the University Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to data collection. Study packets were then distributed to all of the NP students. Each of the packets contained a letter of invitation that also described the study and pretest materials including consent forms, the PSS10, and a demographic questionnaire. The students were instructed to arrive at the workshop with completed pretest materials if they chose to participate. The workshop took place in a large classroom on campus.

Intervention

The treatment intervention was a humor workshop conducted by Patty Wooten RN, BSN. Ms. Wooten is a nationwide expert in the application of humor. Her presentations focus on the theoretical to the practical application of humor skills and program development while promoting the implementation of humor to reduce stress, manage change, recuperate from illness, and improve the workplace atmosphere. The humor workshop lasted 2 hours and included a didactic lecture, a group discussion, a video presentation, a question and answer period, and a number of interactive exercises involving all of the study participants.

Data Collection and Analysis

Pretest data were collected prior to the start of the humor workshop. All posttests were returned by the 23rd day following the humor workshop for a response rate of 100 percent. Data entry and statistical analysis was performed by a university statistician.

Results

The age of the test sample ranged from 25 to 54 years, and their years of nursing experience ranged from less than 2 years to more than 20 years. All were female, 5 (55.6%) were enrolled as part-time students, 4 (44.4%) were full-time students, 7 (77.8%) were employed part-time and 2 (22.2%) did not work. The majority, 5 (55.6%) were Caucasian, and 4 (44.4%) were Asian/Pacific Islander. Most, 4 (44.4%) lived with their significant other, 2 (22.2%) with their significant other and children, 2 (22.2%) with just their children, and 1 (11.1%) lived alone. The highest level of education for 6 (66.6%) of the participants was a Bachelors in Nursing, while 3 (33.3%) had a Masters in Nursing. For the total sample, the mean pretest score was 15.22, SD = 5.42 and mean posttest score was 10.33, SD = 3.90. A pre-post dependent sample *t*-test showed

the following results ($t = 4.55, p < .002$) indicating a statistically significant difference between the pretest and posttest scores.

Limitations of the Study

Overall, this research study consisted of numerous limitations. Nursing is a continuum of care, with the particular circumstances of each day constantly changing. As such, the two week time lapse between the pretest and the posttest posed a threat to internal validity, including history and maturation. Also, extraordinarily demanding or unusually trouble-free circumstances during this time frame may have disproportionately influenced the study participant's posttest results. In addition, the study was limited by the small non-random sample size and the study design that lacked a comparison group. Additionally, the cultural sensitivity of the PSS10 is unknown. These limitations render it difficult to generalize the research findings.

Conclusion

Implications for Nurse Practitioners Students

The results of this study suggest that participation in a humor workshop focusing on the theoretical and practical application of humor skills may be associated with lower levels of perceived stress. Realizing the role of humor in the reduction of perceived stress may be beneficial to the NP student as it may facilitate an increase in the use of humor in times of stress. The education of nurses and nurse practitioners alike, about the mediating effects of humor could play a role in improving retention rates of nursing personnel by helping to avoid burnout.

Implications for Further Study

Results of this study indicate a need for more comprehensive research. It would be beneficial to repeat the study with a larger sample size, which would allow for a comparison group, or within a longer period, which would allow for a time series design.

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