Increasing Empathy in Mental Health Nursing Using Simulation and Reflective Journaling

Empathy and its significance to nursing is widely recognized. It is also complex, making it problematic to teach at an undergraduate level. Research shows simulation provides a safe environment that prepares nursing students for clinical rotations (Mousa, 2015). This approach encourages effective therapeutic communication between students and patients. Each of the 44 students who participated in this simulation found it a valuable experience. Students felt more confident in communicating with patients and their individual situations. Conclusions of this study validate the importance for nurse educators to implement teaching methods to include simulation experiences focusing on the reduction of the stigma associated with mental illness through improved empathetic responses.

Nursing is a profession whose cornerstone is built on compassion and deep empathy for all patients regardless of background, color, ethnicity, or gender. Empathy is complex and it is challenging to effectively teach during traditional classroom activities. Experiential learning activities allow students to apply theory by using authentic opportunities to develop concepts, such as empathy.

The Hearing Voices® simulation allowed students the opportunity to encounter auditory hallucinations similar to what patients experiencing mental illness endure (Hearing Voices Network, n.d.). Active experimentation and reflective observation were primarily used in this activity to engage students through a series of tasks and activities. The objectives of this learning activity served two purposes. First, psychiatric nursing students participating in Hearing Voices improved therapeutic communication skills through enhanced understanding of empathy. Second, it resulted in improved clinical practice achieved through the self-reflection activity. The framework used for developing this assignment was Kolb’s cycle of learning, which uses a four-stage cycle of learning while engaging four different learning styles. Specifically, this learning activity provided a transforming experience so students could apprehend and comprehend the concepts via the transformation process (McLeod, 2017).

In preparation for this assignment, students received didactic information in the traditional classroom setting on schizophrenia, psychosis, and therapeutic communication. After the concepts of schizophrenia and psychosis were presented, the learning activity was reviewed with students. They were instructed to download the free app, Hearing Voices, onto their smartphones (Footsqueek, 2018). Students were offered the option to check out an MP3 player with the Hearing Voices app if they did not have a smartphone to complete the assignment.

The first part of the assignment included completing simple activities in the community setting while listening to the Hearing Voices simulation via earphones. Some examples of the activities included ordering food from a fast food restaurant, solving mathematical equations, and conversing with another person. Kolb’s learning theory supports the use of the concrete experience, ending with reflection of the experience (McLeod, 2017).

The second portion of the learning activity involved students completing reflective journal entries about the experience, which included open-ended focus questions regarding the experience. The questions were directed toward the feelings evoked from community activities as well as communication challenges involved in the simulation. A review of the reflection journal confirmed learning objectives were met and students had an increased awareness of struggles faced by patients with schizophrenia, psychosis, and auditory hallucinations. When given the prompt “What I learned from this experience,” students reported:

• I really was challenged by this simulation! I think it is a great assignment to educate one about mental illness and how debilitating it can be to one’s daily life.

• It has completely changed how I view people who hear voices. I respect everyone, but I respect those that take action and try whatever necessary to silence or least quiet the voices.

Each of the 44 students who participated found it to be a valuable experience. Students felt more confident in communicating. Perhaps, they felt better being able to empathize with patients and their individual situations. Conclusions of this study validate the importance for nurse educators to implement teaching methods to include simulation experiences focusing on the reduction of the stigma associated with mental illness through improved empathetic responses.

Further research is needed to identify experiential learning and simulation activities to engage nursing students. Specifically simulation experiences that allow the students to engage critical thinking skills and apply theoretical concepts. These are needed in preparation for their clinical practice.

References


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