

Assessment of Coping Strategies Among Nursing Students: Basis for Psychological First Aid

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Abstract: **Background:** Nursing students experience considerable stress and emotional challenges due to the rigorous demands of their academic and clinical responsibilities. **Aim:** This study assesses the coping strategies that nursing students use to maintain their emotional well-being, with a focus on both problem-focused and emotion-focused approaches. **Methods and Design:** A descriptive correlational design was employed to examine the relationships between students' demographic profiles, their coping strategies, and their overall well-being. Data were collected using validated questionnaires and analyzed through descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation. **Results:** Of the 30 participants, demographic factors were found to significantly influence nursing students' coping strategies. The consistent use of both problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies indicates that students adopt a balanced approach to stress management. **Conclusion:** The study highlights the need for tailored interventions, including Psychological First Aid (PFA), that consider students' demographic characteristics to address their specific coping needs. The findings underscore the importance of supporting nursing students in developing a diverse and effective set of coping mechanisms.

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1. Introduction

Nursing as a profession is inherently demanding, both physically and emotionally. The field requires a unique balance of academic rigor and clinical experience, which significantly influences the emotional wellness of those involved, especially student nurses. The concept of emotional well-being is increasingly recognized as a crucial factor in the success of nursing students, as it affects their ability to cope with stress, maintain a positive mindset, and provide effective patient care. Emotional well-being in nursing education is a dynamic state influenced by personal resilience, support from peers and mentors, and external stressors, making it a vital area of focus in nursing education [1].

Student nurses face numerous challenges that can negatively impact their emotional well-being and academic performance. These challenges include demanding academic requirements, intense clinical training, insufficient academic and clinical support, and unfavorable educational environments. Additionally, in clinical settings, nursing students encounter improper social standards, limited educational opportunities, and overworked nurses, all of which can impede their learning and contribute to stress [2,3,4]. The lack of effective coping mechanisms exacerbates these challenges, leading to a decline in academic performance, emotional well-being, and the overall quality of care provided to patients [5].

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Effective coping strategies are essential for nursing students to manage the stressors associated with their education and clinical experiences. Coping mechanisms, such as seeking social support, engaging in extracurricular activities, problem-solving, and practicing emotion-focused coping, can help nursing students navigate the challenges they face [6,7]. Research indicates that students who employ effective coping strategies exhibit better stress management, improved academic performance, and enhanced emotional resilience. These outcomes are crucial for the development of competent and compassionate nurses who can provide high-quality care to their patients [8,9].

This study aims to contribute to the understanding of how student nurses can effectively manage the stressors associated with their education. Specifically, This research seeks to investigate and answer the following research questions: 1) What are the coping strategies of nursing students' well-being based on: Problem-focused strategies and Emotion-focused strategies?, and 2) What is the correlation between nursing students' coping strategies for well-being and their demographic data?

By identifying and promoting effective coping strategies, the study seeks to enhance the emotional well-being and academic success of nursing students. The findings of this research will not only benefit individual students but also contribute to the creation of a supportive educational environment that fosters both academic excellence and emotional resilience. This study underscores the importance of addressing the emotional health of nursing students as a critical component of their education and future professional practice, ultimately leading to improved patient care and outcomes [10,11,12].

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Design

This study utilized a descriptive correlation research design to explore and measure the relationships between coping strategies and emotional well-being among second-year nursing students. This design was chosen because it allows researchers to identify and quantify the relationships between variables without manipulating any of them, making it ideal for studying naturally occurring variables like coping strategies and emotional well-being [13]. Descriptive correlation designs are particularly useful in educational and psychological research, where the focus is on understanding complex interactions between variables [14].

2.2 Setting of the Study

The study was carried out at a nursing institution in Manila, Philippines. This location was specifically chosen to examine the coping strategies of second-year nursing students as they navigate their academic and practical training environments.

2.3. Sampling

The study involved all 30 second-year nursing students enrolled in a nursing institution during the second semester of Academic Year 2023-2024. Inclusion criteria required participants to be 18 years or older and currently enrolled as second-year nursing students. Participation was voluntary, with the option to withdraw at any time.

Exclusion criteria included non-nursing students, those under 18, and those unable to comprehend the study or comply with ethical guidelines. The participants were chosen because second-year nursing students begin their clinical practicum duties at this stage, making it a crucial period to assess their coping strategies and emotional well-being as they transition into more hands-on aspects of their training.

A convenience sampling method was used for its simplicity and efficiency, enabling quick and cost-effective data collection from easily accessible participants. This approach is common in educational and psychological research when the target population is readily available [15].

2.4. Research Instrument

The primary instrument for data collection was the 16-item Coping Strategies Inventory Short-Form [16]. This validated tool measures a range of coping strategies across three subcategories: emotion-focused engagement, problem-focused disengagement, and problem-focused engagement. The questionnaire used a 4-point Likert scale ranging from "never" (1) to "always" (4), allowing participants to rate the frequency of their coping behaviors.

2.5. Ethical Considerations

The study was approved by the Institutional Ethics Review Board (IERB) of the institution. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, emphasizing the voluntary nature of their participation and their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity were prioritized throughout the study, with data anonymized and securely stored to protect participants' identities. Potential psychological risks were carefully assessed, and a psychiatric nursing expert was designated as the primary contact for addressing any participant concerns. Participants received a small token of appreciation for their involvement.

2.6. Data Gathering and Data Analysis

After obtaining approval from the school's Dean of Studies, the researchers administered the survey questionnaires to the selected participants in April 2024. The surveys were distributed via Google Forms, with participants given 10 to 15 minutes to complete them. Responses were collected after one week to ensure thoughtful and accurate input. Following data collection, the responses were systematically organized and prepared for analysis.

Descriptive statistics, including demographic data, were meticulously entered into Microsoft Excel to ensure accurate analysis. The data were then analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), which provided a robust exploration of relationships and patterns. Specifically, the mean was used to analyze demographic profiles, such as age and other quantitative variables related to coping strategies and emotional well-being. The standard deviation was applied to assess variability in these profiles, while Pearson correlation was utilized to examine the relationship between coping strategies and demographic factors.

Upon completing the analysis, the data were discarded in accordance with the study's protocol. The processed findings were then evaluated to provide insights into the coping strategies and emotional well-being of the participating student nurses. This comprehensive approach ensured that the study's results were accurate, reliable, and reflective of the complex interactions between coping strategies and emotional well-being among nursing students.

3. Results

3.1. Demographic Profile

3.1.1. Sex

Table 1 illustrates the respondents' demographic profile in terms of sex. Out of the 30 participants, 66.7% were female, 30.0% were male, and 3.3% preferred not to disclose their sex. The findings show a higher representation of female respondents, which may reflect the general gender distribution in nursing programs. Understanding the gender composition is crucial for analyzing gender-based differences in coping strategies and for developing targeted interventions to support the well-being of nursing students.

Table 1. Respondents' Demographic Profile in Terms of Sex

Sex	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Female	20	66.7
Male	9	30.0
Prefer not to say	1	3.3
Total	30	100.0

3.1.2. Age

Table 2 presents the respondents' demographic profile in terms of age. The majority of participants (86.7%) were aged between 20 and 24 years, with the remaining 13.3% being under 20 years old. This age distribution is typical of undergraduate nursing students and is essential for contextualizing the study's findings, especially when exploring age-related differences in coping strategies and well-being. The data suggests that interventions aimed at enhancing coping strategies should consider the developmental needs and challenges faced by students within this age range.

Table 2. Respondents' Demographic Profile in Terms of Age

Age Range	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Under 20	4	13.3
20 - 24	26	86.7
Total	30	100.0

3.2. Coping Strategies of Nursing Students

3.2.1 Problem-Focused Engagement

Table 3 shows the problem-focused engagement strategies used by nursing students. The high mean scores indicate that students frequently engage in proactive coping methods, such as planning and directly addressing problems. These findings align with research that emphasizes the effectiveness of problem-focused strategies in managing academic stress [17]. The results suggest that educational interventions should reinforce these proactive coping mechanisms to help students manage stress more effectively.

Table 3. Strategies for Maintaining Well-being Among Nursing Students Based on Problem-Focused Engagement

Indicator	Mean	Standard Deviation	Verbal Interpretation
I make a plan of action and follow it	3.27	0.52	Always
I tackle the problem head-on	3.17	0.59	Always
Weighted Mean	3.22	0.43	Always

Table 4 presents the problem-focused disengagement strategies. The mean scores suggest that students sometimes resort to avoidance strategies, such as hoping the problem resolves itself or trying to forget about it. While these strategies may provide temporary relief, they are less effective in the long term and could lead to increased stress if overused. The findings are consistent with a study that noted that reliance on avoidance strategies could exacerbate stress and anxiety among nursing students [18].

3.2.2. Problem-Focused Disengagement

Table 4. Strategies for Maintaining Well-being Among Nursing Students Based on Problem-Focused Disengagement

Indicator	Mean	Standard Deviation	Verbal Interpretation
I hope the problem will take care of itself	2.83	0.95	Sometimes
I try to put the problem out of my mind	2.97	1.10	Sometimes
Weighted Mean	2.90	0.84	Sometimes

Table 5 summarizes the overall use of problem-focused strategies. The findings indicate that while problem-focused engagement is frequently used, problem-focused disengagement strategies are also employed, albeit less consistently. These results highlight the need for interventions that encourage active problem-solving while discouraging reliance on avoidance strategies. Supporting students in developing effective problem-focused coping skills could enhance their resilience and academic success.

Table 5. Overall Problem-Focused Strategies

Indicator	Mean	Standard Deviation	Verbal Interpretation
Problem-Focused Engagement	3.22	0.43	Always
Problem-Focused Disengagement	2.90	0.84	Sometimes
Weighted Mean	3.06	0.45	Always

3.2.3. Emotion-Focused Strategies

Table 6 shows that nursing students frequently use emotion-focused engagement strategies, particularly maintaining a positive outlook. The findings are in line with [19], who found that positive reframing is a common coping mechanism among students, helping them manage stress and maintain emotional well-being. These strategies should be encouraged, as they contribute to a healthy emotional state and better academic performance.

Table 6. Strategies for Maintaining Well-being Among Nursing Students Based on Emotion-Focused Engagement

Indicator	Mean	Standard Deviation	Verbal Interpretation
I look for the silver lining or try to look on the bright side	3.50	0.63	Always
I try to talk about it with a friend or family	2.80	0.93	Sometimes
I ask a close friend or relative for help or advice	2.97	0.96	Sometimes
Weighted Mean	3.15	0.60	Always

Table 7 reveals that nursing students also frequently engage in emotion-focused disengagement strategies. While these strategies can provide short-term relief, over-reliance on them may not be sustainable in the long run. Research suggests that students who frequently use disengagement strategies may experience higher levels of stress and burnout [20]. Educators should, therefore, guide students towards a balanced approach that includes both emotion-focused engagement and problem-focused strategies.

Table 7. Strategies for Maintaining Well-being Among Nursing Students Based on Emotion-Focused Disengagement

Indicator	Mean	Standard Deviation	Verbal Interpretation
I try to spend time alone	3.53	0.57	Always
I let my feelings out to reduce the stress	3.14	0.79	Always
I step back from the situation and try to put things into perspective	3.46	0.51	Always
I hope for a miracle	3.40	0.81	Always
Weighted Mean	3.37	0.49	Always

Table 8 provides a summary of emotion-focused strategies. The data shows a balanced use of both engagement and disengagement strategies. This comprehensive approach to emotional regulation can be effective, provided that disengagement strategies do not become the primary coping mechanism. [20] emphasize the importance of a flexible coping style that includes a mix of strategies, tailored to the specific stressors encountered by students.

Table 8. Overall Emotion-Focused Strategies

Indicator	Mean	Standard Deviation	Verbal Interpretation
Emotion-Focused Engagement	3.15	0.60	Always
Emotion-Focused Disengagement	3.37	0.49	Always
Weighted Mean	3.26	0.43	Always

3.2.4. Correlation Between Nursing Students' Coping Strategies and Demographic Data

Table 9 presents the correlation between nursing students' coping strategies and their demographic data, focusing on gender and age. The results indicate weak negative correlations between gender and problem-focused strategies (-.400) and emotion-focused strategies (-.191), suggesting that female nursing students are less likely to use these strategies compared to their male counterparts. Similarly, a very weak negative correlation was found between age and problem-focused strategies (-.282), indicating that older students are less inclined to use problem-focused strategies. These findings align with [21], who observed that male students often prefer problem-solving approaches, while female students may rely more on emotional coping mechanisms. The results highlight the need for targeted interventions that consider these demographic differences to enhance the well-being of nursing students.

Table 9. Correlation Between Nursing Students' Coping Strategies and Well-Being with Their Demographic Data

Demographic Variable	Problem-Focused Strategies	Emotion-Focused Strategies	Others	Overall Coping Strategies	Level of Correlation	Findings	Conclusion
Gender	-.400**	-.191**	.008**	-.277	Weak Negative Correlation	Reject H0, Significant Relationship	Female students use fewer problem-focused strategies
Age	-.282**	-.077**	.007**	-.168	Very Weak Negative Correlation	Reject H0, Significant Relationship	Older students use fewer problem-focused strategies

4. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that nursing students predominantly use emotion-focused coping strategies to manage the stress associated with their academic and clinical responsibilities. This preference for emotion-focused strategies, such as spending time alone, expressing feelings, and hoping for a miracle, indicates that nursing students may often feel overwhelmed by the demands placed upon them. These findings are consistent with those of other studies, such as the research, which found that nursing students frequently use emotion-focused coping mechanisms, particularly when they perceive stressors as beyond their control [22]. Additionally, nursing students' emotional responses to stress are often influenced by the intensity of their clinical experiences, which can lead them to adopt coping strategies that focus more on emotional regulation than problem-solving [23]. This reliance on emotion-focused disengagement reflects the high-pressure environment of nursing education, where immediate solutions to stressors may not always be available.

The study also highlights the frequent use of problem-focused coping strategies, although to a lesser extent than emotion-focused strategies. Nursing students reported engaging in proactive behaviors such as making plans and tackling problems head-on. These strategies are typically associated with better long-term outcomes in stress management, as they involve addressing the root causes of stress rather than just the emotional responses. This aligns with the findings study who emphasized that nursing students who engage in problem-focused coping are more likely to experience lower levels of stress and better academic performance [24]. However, the lower frequency of these strategies compared to emotion-focused ones might suggest that students find it challenging to implement problem-focused approaches consistently, possibly due to the complexity or immediacy of the challenges they face in their training. Similarly, while problem-focused coping is effective, its application is often limited by the high-stress and time-constrained nature of nursing programs [25].

Interestingly, the study identified weak negative correlations between demographic factors, such as gender and age, and the use of problem-focused strategies. This finding suggests that certain groups, particularly female and older students, may be less inclined to employ problem-focused coping mechanisms. These students might perceive problem-focused strategies as less effective in their specific contexts or may feel less empowered to take direct action against stressors. This is supported by a study who found that female

nursing students were more likely to engage in emotion-focused coping due to societal expectations and gender roles that emphasize emotional expressiveness over problem-solving [26]. Additionally, older students might face additional stressors, such as balancing education with family responsibilities, making them less likely to employ problem-focused strategies [27]. These insights are crucial for educators and program developers who aim to support nursing students in building effective coping skills. Tailoring interventions to address the unique needs of these demographic groups could enhance their ability to manage stress more effectively.

5. Limitations and Recommendations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The sample size was relatively small and limited to second-year nursing students from a single institution, which may affect the generalizability of the findings to other nursing student populations. The cross-sectional design also limits the ability to draw conclusions about the long-term effects of coping strategies on students' well-being and academic performance. Additionally, reliance on self-reported data could introduce response bias.

Despite these limitations, future research should involve larger and more diverse samples across multiple institutions to enhance generalizability and explore additional coping strategies beyond the problem-focused and emotion-focused categories, including cultural, social, and environmental factors. Tailored Psychological First Aid (PFA) programs should be developed to address specific needs, such as gender-specific interventions to empower female students with proactive coping skills and age-appropriate support for older students balancing education with additional responsibilities. Integrating PFA into the nursing curriculum through regular workshops, peer support groups, resource centers, and accessible counseling services can provide ongoing support and equip students with essential stress management tools. Finally, educational institutions should promote a culture of mental health awareness through educational campaigns and create an environment where students feel supported and encouraged to seek help, thereby enhancing their overall well-being and success in their nursing education.

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, this study underscores the significant impact of coping strategies on the well-being of nursing students, revealing a predominant reliance on emotion-focused strategies to manage the stresses of their academic and clinical responsibilities. While these strategies provide immediate emotional relief, the study highlights the importance of integrating problem-focused approaches to address the root causes of stress more effectively. The identified correlations between demographic factors such as gender and age and the use of specific coping strategies suggest that tailored interventions are necessary to meet the diverse needs of nursing students. By implementing Psychological First Aid (PFA) programs that are responsive to these demographic variations, educational institutions can better support students in developing a balanced repertoire of coping mechanisms. This, in turn, can enhance their emotional resilience, academic performance, and overall preparedness for the demands of the nursing profession. Ultimately, fostering a supportive environment that prioritizes mental health and equips students with effective coping strategies is essential for cultivating a resilient and competent future nursing workforce.

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