



## **Self-Care and Self-Compassion Education for Undergraduate Nursing Students: An Innovative Approach**

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<sup>1</sup>This manuscript was completed during the first author's senior year as a portion of undergraduate research work completed with Dr. Smith-Peters, who served as her undergraduate research mentor throughout the university's undergraduate research program. Dr. Smith-Peters co-authored the article advising on the stress intervention program for the study group.

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### **Abstract**

**Background:** The purpose of this study was to evaluate how undergraduate nursing students who have received education in self-care and self-compassion perceive stress compared to undergraduate nursing students who had not received the same education over a six-week period. Undergraduate nursing students consistently report feeling stress, anxiety, and depression. Literature shows a gap in licensed nurses practicing the self-care interventions they teach to patients **Method:** 45 junior year nursing students were invited to participate in the study voluntarily. A randomized control study allowed students to participate in one of two groups - a control group (where no educational sessions were provided); and an intervention group (where weekly intervention sessions regarding self-compassion and self-care were provided over a six-week period). Themes of the program included healthy eating, regular exercise, and stress-reducing interventions. **Results:** were measured at two periods using the Perceived Stress Scale: 1) before training was offered; and 2) after the six-week training period. The perceived stress levels of the control group and intervention were compared. **Conclusion:** The group that received education expressed a reduction in perceived stress levels. Qualitative data demonstrated that the intervention was beneficial, demonstrating that students had learned new tools for the management of stress.

**Keywords:** self-care, nursing students, stress

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Nursing is a notoriously stressful and fast-paced profession. Through a search in existing literature, the examiners found that nurses are at high risk for high levels of stress, burnout, caregiver fatigue, and depression (Onan et al., 2019). There is a gap in literature regarding the consistency of nursing curricula to include competencies regarding self-care and self-compassion (Docherty-Skippen et al., 2019). As a result, undergraduate nursing students consistently report feeling stress, anxiety, and sometimes depression as they progress through their education (Jenkins et al., 2019). Furthermore, Andrews et al. (2018, pp 8) stated that “there is a dearth of literature focusing on how nurses care for themselves as they try to provide compassionate care in a challenging job”. Consequently, both nursing students and practicing nurses struggle with the practice of self-care and self-compassion to combat negative stress.

### **Background and Literature Review**

Undergraduate nursing education presents students with a rigorous curriculum. Despite the challenges, many nursing students graduate successfully and matriculate to graduate studies. However, the ability to practice self-compassion and self-care during stressful situations is not consistently developed. In fact, Mills (2019) suggests that students may learn negative coping mechanisms as they attempt to adjust to the demands of the nursing curricula and many hours of clinical training. Because today’s nursing students will be future nurses, it is imperative that nursing faculty will be able to model self-care and self-care compassion. Incorporating self-care interventions into nursing education by helping the students to recognize negative stress and apply positive coping mechanisms is essential in developing efficient, independent, and resilient future registered nurses (Onan et al., 2019). There is a gap in practice among the self-care that nurses practice compared to what they preach to patients. Ross et al. (2019) completed a study that indicates this gap. For example, 80.1% of nurses participating in the study reported being sedentary and spent 3 or more hours per day sitting, “particularly those working outside of direct patient care in management, research, and education”. In addition, more than half of the nurses participating in the study were overweight. The practice of regular self-care and self-compassion provides a healthier physical and mental state, which in turn affects psychological well-being leading to better patient care (Vidal-Blanco et al., 2019). Nursing school is a time of intense learning, self-discovery, and limited time for leisure activities. However, “the physical, mental, and social dimensions of self-care can attenuate the negative effects of this situation” (Vidal-Blanco et al., 2019, pp 1).

A comprehensive literature search of databases including EBSCO host, CINAHL, MEDLINE, PubMed, OVID, the Joanna Briggs Institute, and Cochrane Libraries was conducted. The purpose of the literature study was to identify and systematically demonstrate evidence of problematic areas of coping with stress and anxiety for nurses and student nurses. Search keywords included: nurses, nursing students, stress, undergraduate, and anxiety. Referenced articles are scholarly reviewed and were written from the period of 2014-2020. The researchers selected articles containing evidence related to anxiety, stress, or coping techniques in undergraduate nursing students and licensed nurses in the United States and internationally.

### **Purpose of Study**

Multiple studies support the use of self-care techniques and overall self-compassion attitude as a means to reduce stress and other negative feelings in nursing students. Luo et al. (2019) carried out a similar study to the one reported here and the results strongly suggest a negative link between self-compassion and perceived stress. The authors suggest that self-compassion is a good method for coping with stress and that “interventionalists can consider using self-compassion training to alleviate perceived stress, anxiety, and depression in nursing students”. The purpose of this current study was to evaluate how undergraduate nursing students who receive training in self-care and self-compassion perceive stress compared to undergraduate nursing students who have not received the same education over a six-week period.

### **Participants & Setting**

Potential participants were told they would be randomly divided into two groups. 45 potential participants matched the criteria – they were undergraduate nursing students who had completed the first 2 years of general studies and were in the midst of their first semester of nursing studies. During the time that the study began, the participants were experiencing the first semester of immersion into the acute care setting for clinical training. Thus, stress levels may be expected to increase. Participants were recruited by a visit to classes to explain the study and interventions regarding self-care and self-compassion. Inclusion criteria consisted of students who were currently enrolled in the pre-licensure BSN program. Written consent was obtained for each participant. Potential participants were instructed that they would be randomly divided into one of two groups - a control group (where no educational sessions were provided); and an intervention group (where weekly intervention sessions regarding self-compassion and self-care were provided over a six-week period). Themes of the program included healthy eating, regular exercise, and stress-reducing interventions.

Each study participant was assigned a confidential identification number to allow data tracking of survey results. Participant survey responses and questions were recorded by the confidential identification number. Responses were de-identified by the nursing professor (co-author) to maintain student confidentiality. Although a senior student worked on the project

through the university's undergraduate research program, the student received only de-identified data for the completion of data analysis to maintain the confidentiality of the participants.

The study took place at the undergraduate nursing building where students met for weekly sessions (outside of class time). Each session lasted for a duration of 30 minutes. Meetings were often a relaxed experience with refreshments, allowing comfortable dialogue among participants. The authors moderated the sessions.

The control group did not meet. The control group only participated in online surveys at weeks one, three, and six. A total of 11 participants signed up for the study and a total of seven participants completed the study fully.

### **Method**

Permission for the study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of the University. Data were collected from student participants of the 6-week educational program on self-care and self-compassion. Participants were within their first year of nursing studies in an undergraduate nursing program in a Southeastern University in the United States (n=45). Forty-four point percent of the students (n= 20) consented to participate in the study. The participants were randomly chosen to participate in one of two groups: 1) a control group receiving no educational sessions regarding self-care and self-compassion (n= 13); and 2) an intervention group, which received weekly educational interventional sessions regarding self-care, self-compassion, and stress management over a 6-week period (n=7).

The educational program occurred over a six (6) week period consisting of weekly (30-minute) face-to-face sessions. During the sessions, the students discussed new positive interventions to cope with perceived stress. The major themes of the program included self-care and self-compassion. Examples of themes include healthy eating, regular exercise, stress-reducing interventions (such as mindfulness, rest, coping methods), and self-awareness regarding stress and anxiety. Sessions also included education regarding available resources on campus, group discussions, as well as a visit from a licensed mental health counselor. See table 1 for an illustration of the sessions (Table 1). Participants in the intervention group expressed positive comments regarding participation in the program.

**Table 1. Weekly Plan for Educational Sessions**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Topic</b>	<b>Objectives</b>
<b>Week 1</b>	Theme: Introduce Self-Care Self-Compassion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>· Identify methods of Self-Care and Self-Compassion</li><li>· Introduce alternative methods of stress reduction, mindfulness</li><li>· Developing a personal plan</li></ul>
<b>Week 2</b>	Theme: Recognizing Stress; Interventions]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>· Recognizing stress; Where to find help</li><li>· Healthy Eating</li><li>· Getting Fit</li></ul>
<b>Week 3</b>	Superman - Superwoman Complex	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>· Introduce relaxation techniques, rest</li><li>· Saying “no”/ Limiting stress</li><li>· Sharing healthy snack alternatives</li></ul>
<b>Week 4</b>	Stress Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>· Introduce relaxation techniques, positive coping mechanisms</li><li>· Reflect on success</li><li>· Relaxation techniques</li><li>· Visit from mental health counselor</li></ul>
<b>Week 5</b>	Relaxation Techniques	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>· Self-report success with self-care</li></ul>
<b>Week 6</b>	Conclusion: Personal Benefits Gained from Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>· Review Personal Results</li></ul>

The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) by Dr. Sheldon Cohen (hereafter referred to as the PSS), was used to measure the level of student perceived stress during chosen phases of the study (Cohen, 1983). The PSS is the most commonly used tool to measure the perception of stress by a specific individual (Cohen, 1983). The PSS consists of 10 questions regarding the individual’s personal feelings and reaction toward stressful events in their life within the last month. Investigators administered four questions of the PSS to the participating students during 2 phases: 1) at week 1 (before training was offered); and 2) at week 6 (after the training was concluded). The perceived stress levels were compared.

## Results

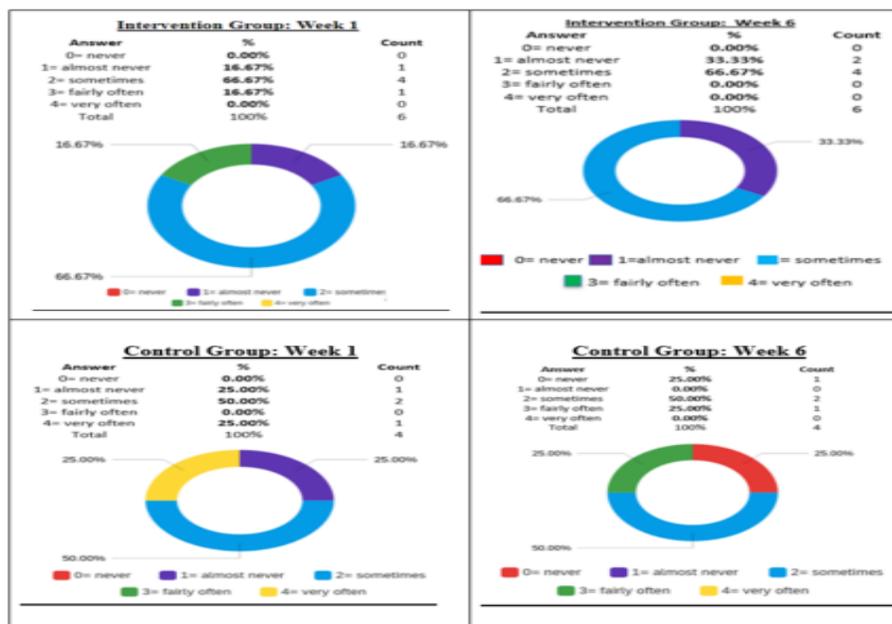
The perceived stress levels of the control and intervention groups were compared using the PSS. Data was analyzed using Qualtrics © Software. Ten out of twenty participants completed the survey at week 1 and week 6. Therefore, only the results of the completed surveys are comparable. Comparable results from the participants who completed the assessments are listed in Chart 1.

The PSS utilizes a Likert scale where participants rate their response to questions as 0= never, 1= almost never, 2= sometimes, 3 = fairly often, and 4= very often. Students considered themselves feeling overwhelmed when reporting at level 2 or above on the perceived stress scale (rating at sometimes, fairly often, or very often). When questions regarding feeling overwhelmed, the intervention group showed improvement over 6 weeks. A total of 83.34% (n=5) of students in the intervention group reported feeling overwhelmed at week 1, compared to 66.7% (n=4) of the intervention group at week 6. The control group did not change as 75% (n=6 students) reported feeling overwhelmed (at 2 or above) at week 1, compared to 75% (n=6 students) of the control group at week 6.

Chart 1

*Results from the Perceived Stress Scale administered to participants at week 1 and week 6.*

Reviewer Question: “In the past month how often have you felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?”



Along with the PSS results, qualitative data were collected from the students throughout the intervention. The students from the intervention group were provided with index cards where they could privately record their answers to specific questions (see Table 2). The collected qualitative data (participant comments) were analyzed by selecting the most significant comments related to the subject of the study. See Table 2 for qualitative data of student response to questions regarding the intervention.

Table 2

*Participant Responses Regarding Self-Care Education*

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**Question: What relaxation techniques help you?**

**Responses:**

“I have begun a routine of stress reduction activities (line running, watching funny videos) and they have helped.”

“I did not run before participating in this project, but I do now. It is effective. I look forward to it.”

“The first thing that I liked was all the recommended activities. There were many cool things to try.”

**Question: How do you feel your stress management skills have changed since starting this program?**

**Responses:**

“It is making me think about new ways of dealing with stress and anxiety, rather than just letting it bubble.”

“It has helped me to focus better.”

“I now take nightly walks with my boyfriend.”

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**Question: How do you feel this program has helped you?**

**Responses:**

“Weekly sessions have helped me stay mindful of relieving my stress.”

“It was helpful to hear ideas from other people.”

Table 2 Continued

*Participant Responses Regarding Self-Care Education*

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**Responses continued:**

“I have considered seeing a therapist again.”

“It was nice to see that others shared in the same struggle”.

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**Discussion of Results**

The qualitative data in Table 2 demonstrates that the training was beneficial for participants. The participants expressed that they had learned new tools for the management of stress through written comments. Participants expressed comfort in knowing that other students shared helpful interventions of dealing with stress. The group was very cohesive, following the study for the remainder of tenure through the program. The quantitative data from Chart 1 was analyzed using Qualtrics © Software. Although, it showed neither an improvement, nor worsening of the coping mechanisms between the control and intervention groups, qualitative data demonstrated positive student experiences. It is thought that a better understanding of quantitative data may occur with a repeat of the study, and an increase in sample size.

**Limitations and Recommendations for Future Study**

Limitations of the study included a small sample size. Due to busy schedules, students also experienced difficulty meeting face-to-face during the educational sessions. During the 6-week period of the study, the participants experienced increased rigor in their nursing courses. Although this was expected, some students experienced difficulty attending the sessions due to time constraints. Future recommendations for future studies would include extending the intervention over a greater time period than 6 weeks, increasing the sample size, and offering the meetings in an electronic format to ease the burden of scheduling.

## Conclusion

The topic needs further research. However, the positive feedback from participants demonstrates that the inclusion of self-care and self-compassion in nursing curricula could prove to be beneficial. The findings suggest needs for nursing faculty to model this behavior to students while reminding them to care for themselves. Based upon past research, it was expected that the group that received education would show significant reduction in perceived stress levels as compared to the control group. The student reports of beneficial gains suggest that information regarding self-care and self-compassion incorporated into the curriculum of undergraduate nursing students could prove to be beneficial.

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## Promissory Note

This manuscript has never been published and is free from plagiarism. There are no conflicts of interest.

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