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Attitudes of Nursing Students in Pakistan Regarding Mental Health Awareness

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Abstract

Introduction: Mental health awareness is crucial for nursing students, as they play a vital role in patient care. This study explores their attitudes, perceptions, and willingness to engage in mental health education and care, highlighting factors influencing their perspectives and the need for improved awareness. **Methodology:** This cross-sectional descriptive study was conducted at a nursing institute in Karachi, Pakistan, with a sample of 132 undergraduate nursing students selected through stratified random sampling. A validated self-administered questionnaire assessed demographic details, mental health awareness, attitudes, and help-seeking behaviors. Data were analyzed using SPSS, employing descriptive and inferential statistics, ensuring ethical considerations. **Result:** Among 132 nursing students, 68% had prior exposure to mental health topics, but only 40% had a strong understanding. Stigma was prevalent, with 45% holding negative perceptions. Only 30% showed strong willingness to pursue mental health nursing. Barriers to seeking help included fear of judgment (60%) and lack of trust (50%). **Conclusion:** The study found that nursing students had moderate mental health awareness but exhibited stigma and reluctance toward psychiatric nursing. Limited exposure and societal perceptions influenced their attitudes. Integrating mental health education into curricula and awareness campaigns is essential to reduce stigma, improve confidence, and enhance students' ability to support mental health care effectively.

Key words: Attitudes, Nursing Students, Mental Health, Mental Health Awareness

Introduction

Mental illness is typically defined as a condition that causes serious disorders in an individual's thinking or behavior. It is increasingly being recognized as a significant source of morbidity worldwide, cutting across all genders, ages, and socioeconomic backgrounds. However, despite the existence of treatment, studies have shown that nearly two-thirds of individuals suffering from mental illness do not seek professional mental health services [1]. Psychosocial health care is yet

the alternative development which has substituted traditional psychiatric mode toward reform and a better standard for patient-focused practices [2]. Although nursing with psychiatric practices adapted an organic approach, improvements still need revision. Nursing, as a crucial profession in psychiatric reform, must invest in various strategies, including improved workflow, better knowledge among nurses, enhanced interpersonal relations, and structured training programs [3]. However, many nursing students do not feel adequately prepared to work as psychiatric mental health nurses, and few consider it a career option [4]. Stigmatizing attitudes toward mental illness are also not limited to the general population but are rather prevalent among the healthcare providers. Evidence shows that people with a mental illness commonly face stigma and discrimination from health care providers within both mental and physical health service settings [5]. Additionally, poor mental health among university students is becoming a critical issue in many countries, including Malaysia, where negative attitudes toward mental health persists despite government efforts to raise awareness [6]. Mental illness rates among young people are high, yet help-seeking behavior remains low, particularly among those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Understanding the influences on help-seeking, including attitudes toward mental illness, stigma, and mental health literacy, is important, though research in this area is not well developed [7]. The same applies in Ireland and the UK, with studies showing PMHPs prevalence in postnatal depression, anxiety disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, eating disorders, and bipolar disorder. According to reports, the prevalence of postnatal depression in Ireland is between 13.2% at six weeks postpartum and 9.8% at twelve weeks. In a UK study of women evaluated by midwives with the use of the Whole questions during the first visit after antenatal enrollment, a population prevalence of 27% (95% CI 22–32) was reported, with depression during antenatal assessment at 11% and anxiety disorders at 15%, with other psychiatric conditions, including bipolar disorder and borderline personality disorder, occurring in smaller percentages [8]. Such findings emphasize the global burden of mental health challenges and its need for comprehensive awareness and intervention strategies. In this context, the study aims to look at the attitudes of nursing students in Pakistan regarding mental health awareness, societal views, level of perception, and willingness to participate in mental health education and patient care. It seeks to evaluate their perspectives on mental health, including social stigma and interest in learning and providing care, and also identify the influence of factors on these attitudes.

Methodology

This study used a cross-sectional descriptive design to evaluate the attitudes of nursing students in Pakistan toward mental health awareness. It was conducted at a nursing institute in Karachi, Pakistan, ensuring a focused and in-depth analysis of students' perspectives. The target population included undergraduate nursing students enrolled in the institute, with a sample size of 132 participants selected through a stratified random sampling technique to ensure adequate representation across different academic years. The inclusion criterion was nursing students who had achieved at least a semester of this degree and given their consent voluntarily to participate while excluding students, either with existing professional experience working in psychiatric and mental health nurses or those with unwillingness for participation. A self-administered structured questionnaire was administered to collect data on four categories: demographic information such as age, gender, academic year, and prior exposure to mental health education; awareness of mental health (knowledge and understanding of issues regarding mental health); attitudes towards mental health, such as perception, stigma, and willingness to take part in mental health education and care; and help-seeking behavior and barriers to the process of students likely to seek support. The questionnaire was an adaptation from previously validated mental health attitude scales that had

been used in the literature to ensure reliability and validity. A pilot study with 10 participants was carried out to ensure that the questionnaire was clear and accurate. The data collection involved online and paper-based surveys administered to the students at the nursing institute. Participants were given a detailed explanation of the questionnaire and informed consent was sought to ensure that the research was conducted ethically. The data collected were analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), where descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were used to summarize the findings. Chi-square tests and t-tests were employed as inferential statistical tests for testing the demographic variables' relationship with attitudes towards mental health. To ensure respect for ethical practice, ethical clearance was sought before embarking on the study by contacting the relevant ethical review board at the respective institutions. Information was given to participants about what the research entails and confidentiality throughout the process of gathering information from the participants was assured. They were assured that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any adverse effects. No personal identifiers were collected, thus maintaining anonymity and privacy. The study was conducted with respect to ethical guidelines on research involving human participants, thus upholding their rights and welfare. This methodological approach ensured a systematic and rigorous investigation into the attitudes of nursing students towards mental health awareness, providing valuable insights into their perceptions, stigma, and readiness towards engaging in mental health education and patient care.

Result

A total of 132 nursing students from a nursing institute in Karachi, Pakistan, participated in the study shown in table 1. The demographic analysis showed that 75% (n = 99) of the participants were female, while 25% (n = 33) were male. The majority of students (60%, n = 79) were in their third and fourth years of study, while the remaining 40% (n = 53) were in their first or second years.

Table 1: Demographic Distribution of Participants

Demographic Variable	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	33	25%
Female	99	75%
Academic Year		
First/Second Year	53	40%
Third/Fourth Year	79	60%

Findings indicated that 68% (n = 90) of the students had prior exposure to mental health topics through coursework, workshops, or clinical practice. However, only 40% (n = 53) demonstrated a strong understanding of mental health disorders, symptoms, and management which is shown in table 2. A significant proportion (35%, n = 46) held misconceptions about mental illness, associating it with supernatural causes or personal weakness.

Table 2: Mental Health Awareness

Mental Health Awareness Criteria	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Prior Exposure to Mental Health Topics		
Yes	90	68%
No	42	32%

Strong Understanding of Mental Illness		
Yes	53	40%
No	79	60%

Table 3 highlighted a moderate level of stigma among nursing students. While 55% (n = 73) of the participants expressed neutral or positive attitudes toward individuals with mental illnesses, 45% (n = 59) held negative perceptions, believing that people with mental disorders are unpredictable or dangerous. Stigmatizing attitudes were more prevalent among students in their early years of study.

Table 3: Attitudes Toward Mental Health and Stigma

Attitude Toward Mental Health	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Positive/Neutral Attitudes	73	55%
Negative Attitudes	59	45%

Only 30% (n = 40) of the students expressed a strong willingness to pursue further education in mental health nursing or work in psychiatric settings. 50% (n = 66) were hesitant, citing a lack of confidence, inadequate training, and fear of stigma as barriers. The remaining 20% (n = 26) stated they would actively avoid mental health-related roles due to personal biases or discomfort in dealing with psychiatric patients summarized in table 4.

Table 4: Willingness to Engage in Mental Health Education and Care

Willingness to Work in Mental Health Nursing	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Strong Willingness	40	30%
Hesitant	66	50%
Avoidant	26	20%

Despite recognizing the importance of mental health, only 42% (n = 56) of students reported being comfortable seeking professional help for their own mental well-being. The primary barriers included fear of social judgment (60%, n = 79), lack of trust in mental health services (50%, n = 66), and limited access to psychological support (45%, n = 59).

Table 5: Help-Seeking Behavior and Barriers

Help-Seeking Behavior & Barriers	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Comfortable Seeking Help	56	42%
Barriers to Seeking Help		
Fear of Social Judgment	79	60%
Lack of Trust in Mental Health Services	66	50%
Limited Access to Psychological Support	59	45%

Chi-square analysis revealed a significant association ($p < 0.05$) between academic year and mental health awareness, with senior students demonstrating higher levels of knowledge than juniors. Additionally, students with previous exposure to mental health education showed more positive attitudes ($p = 0.02$) toward mental illness compared to those with no prior learning experience.

Table 6: Statistical Associations Between Academic Year and Mental Health Awareness

Academic Year	Strong Understanding of Mental Illness	p-value
First/Second Year	22%	0.02
Third/Fourth Year	60%	

Discussion

In this study, the attitudes of nursing students in Pakistan regarding mental health awareness, societal perceptions, and willingness to engage in mental health education and patient care were explored. The findings highlight several significant insights into the students' understanding of mental health, their attitudes toward individuals with mental illness, and the barriers they face in both seeking help and pursuing careers in mental health nursing. The results suggest that while mental health awareness is increasing, there remains a gap in knowledge and significant stigma surrounding mental illness among nursing students. This discussion will contextualize the results in light of existing literature and explore the implications for nursing education and practice in Pakistan. In a study of midwives, 71.1% reported high levels of knowledge and 72% expressed confidence in identifying depression and anxiety in women. However, only 43.9% felt confident in providing care, and a smaller proportion (17.8%) felt equipped to support women effectively. Additionally, midwives showed a desire for more education on perinatal mental health issues, with the mean score for the Mental Illness: Clinician's Attitudes scale indicating positive attitudes toward women with severe mental illness [8]. In contrast, nursing students in this study demonstrated a lower level of mental health awareness, with only 40% showing strong understanding of mental health disorders. In a study examining stigma and attitudes toward mental illness, the participants had mean scores of 29.7 ± 4.9 on personal stigma and 24.3 ± 6.1 on perceived stigma, with an average ATSPPHS score of 16.5 ± 3.8 . Additionally, the participants reported a mean openness score of 7.8 ± 2.6 and a value scale score of 8.7 ± 3.0 , indicating moderate stigma but openness toward mental health issues [9]. In contrast, the findings from this study revealed that nursing students exhibited moderate levels of stigma, with 45% expressing negative attitudes toward individuals with mental illness, compared to the lower levels of perceived stigma reported in the earlier study. Furthermore, while 55% of nursing students had positive or neutral attitudes toward mental health, their overall openness and willingness to engage in mental health care were still limited, reflecting the need for further education and awareness to reduce stigma and enhance openness, as observed in the previous study's higher scores in these areas. Another study found that 112 students screened positive for anxiety and depression symptoms, with significant differences in knowledge scores regarding mental illness ($P < 0.001$). Factor analysis revealed key etiology factors, and paired t-tests identified significant differences in treatment beliefs. The study also reported positive changes in mental health knowledge and reduced stigma, recommending the inclusion of mental well-being programs in curricula [10]. In contrast, this study found a moderate level of knowledge and stigma among nursing students, with only 40% displaying strong understanding of mental health issues and a significant portion (45%) holding negative attitudes. This highlights the need for targeted education to reduce stigma and improve mental health knowledge, similar to the recommendations from the previous study. Furthermore, a study found that nurses lack knowledge, communication skills, and confidence in dementia care, with interventional studies showing improved knowledge and attitudes post-training [11]. Similarly, this study reveals a need for enhanced mental health education among nursing students to improve their attitudes and confidence in providing care. Furthermore, in comparison, this study found that nursing students had moderate knowledge about mental health, with significant stigma and reluctance to engage in mental health care, similar to the high levels

of anxiety and perceived mental healthcare needs reported during the COVID-19 pandemic. Both studies emphasize the need for enhanced mental health awareness and intervention [12, 16]. A significant majority recognized the importance of preventive measures, with 92% acknowledging handwashing and 78% supporting social distancing. Similarly, in this study, while nursing students showed awareness of mental health issues, 45% still held negative attitudes, emphasizing the need for increased education and professional support to improve perceptions [13]. A significant correlation was observed between attitude and perception of the need for mental health services, as well as anxiety levels among respondents. Similarly, this study found that nursing students exhibited moderate awareness but significant stigma, highlighting the impact of perception on willingness to seek mental health support and education [14,15]. A significant correlation was found between attitude, perception of mental health needs, and anxiety levels among respondents. Similarly, this study revealed that while nursing students demonstrated awareness of mental health, stigma remained prevalent, affecting their willingness to seek support. Both findings highlight the critical role of perception in shaping attitudes toward mental health care and the need for targeted interventions [17, 18].

Conclusion

The study found that nursing students had moderate mental health awareness but exhibited stigma and reluctance toward psychiatric nursing. Limited exposure and societal perceptions influenced their attitudes. Integrating mental health education into curricula and awareness campaigns is essential to reduce stigma, improve confidence, and enhance students' ability to support mental health care effectively.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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