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Phenomenological Exploration of Mental Health Experiences of Nursing Students in Undergoing Clinical Education

Finni Fitria Tumiwa[1*], Cicilia Karlina Lariwu[2], Angelia Pondaa[2], Christiane Prisilia Sarayar[2], Linnie Pondaag[2], Pingkan Christy Timbuleng[2], Maria Jeinny Regar[2]

[1] Health Administration Study Program, Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Kesehatan Bethesda, Indonesia
[2] Department of Nursing, Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Kesehatan Bethesda, Indonesia

Corresponding Author Email: fhinny.tumiwa@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Mental health is a critical component of overall well-being, especially for nursing students who encounter distinct academic and clinical stressors throughout their education. This study seeks to gain an in-depth understanding of nursing students' experiences during clinical practice, with a particular focus on their mental health. This study used a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore in-depth the mental health experiences of nursing students during clinical education. The study involved 15 final year nursing students who met the inclusion criteria such as being or having undergone clinical practice and being able to articulate their experiences. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions and supported by observations of non-verbal responses. Data were analyzed using identification of meaningful statements, thematic grouping, and descriptive construction, while applying bracketing to minimize researcher bias. The findings identified five key themes affecting nursing students' psychological well-being during clinical practice: psychological stress, lack of confidence and fear of mistakes, social support, coping strategies, and personal meaning of the experience. Despite facing various pressures, students were able to build mental resilience through social support and coping strategies and found positive meaning from the practice experience. Nursing educational institutions are advised to provide psychological support and stress management training to help students cope with stress during clinical practice.

Key Messages:

- Nursing students face significant psychological stress during clinical education, which can have a negative impact on their mental health.
- Social support and effective coping strategies play a vital role in helping students manage stress and build mental resilience.

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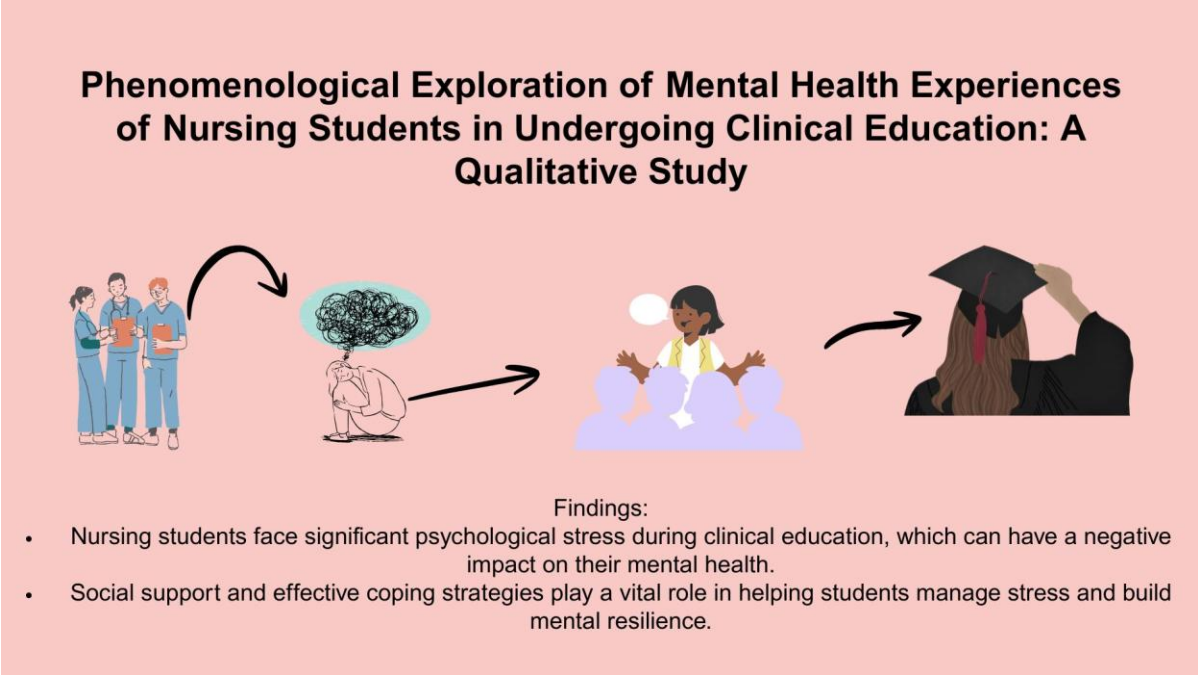
GRAPHICAL ABSTRACT



INTRODUCTION

Mental health is an important aspect of human life that is no less crucial than physical health. Mental health as a state of well-being in which individuals are aware of their own abilities, can cope with normal life pressures, work productively, and are able to contribute to their community (1–3). In the context of increasingly complex modern life, psychological stress is a common challenge faced by various groups, including students (4,5). Mental health is also crucial to overall well-being, especially for nursing students facing academic and clinical pressures. They are required not only to perform intellectually but also to engage in emotional labor, managing their emotions while caring for patients and interacting with healthcare teams (6). This emotional demand can lead to psychological stress, affecting their mental health during clinical education.

Students as a young adult age group are in a very dynamic development phase. They are faced with academic demands, social pressures, searching for identity, and adjusting to new environments. Various studies have shown that the college period is a period that is vulnerable to mental health disorders, such as stress, anxiety, and depression (7–9). This is exacerbated by the lack of mental health literacy and the stigma that still sticks to individuals who experience psychological problems (10). Students from the health sciences field, especially nursing, have their own challenges in undergoing their studies. In addition to facing high academic pressure, nursing students are also required to be directly involved in clinical practices that require physical and mental readiness (11). They must interact with patients, health workers, and face clinical situations that are not always ideal. This can cause complex emotional stress.

In clinical practice, nursing students not only learn technical skills, but also face emotional dynamics such as anxiety in dealing with critical patients, fear of making mistakes, and feelings of insecurity (12). These challenges often cause internal conflicts that impact their psychological condition. Unfortunately, these experiences are often not well documented because they are subjective and hidden behind the demands of professionalism. Previous quantitative studies have revealed the prevalence of mental disorders in nursing students, but there are still few studies that explore in depth how they experience, interpret, and deal with these pressures in the context of clinical practice (13,14). Therefore, a phenomenological approach is considered appropriate to explore the meaning of their subjective experiences that may not be covered by statistical methods. By understanding the mental health experiences of nursing students phenomenologically, nursing higher education institutions can obtain a completer and more humane picture of the psychological needs of their students (6,15). These findings are expected to be the basis for designing psychosocial interventions, support systems, and learning

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approaches that are more empathetic and responsive to student needs.

Based on the description above, this study aims to explore in depth the experiences of nursing students in undergoing clinical practice in terms of mental health aspects. A phenomenological approach was chosen to explore their personal meaning and significance of the pressures, challenges, and strategies used in maintaining mental health during the clinical education process.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological method to explore in depth the mental health experiences of nursing students in undergoing clinical education. This approach was chosen because it is in accordance with the purpose of the study, namely, to explore the subjective meaning of personal experiences experienced by participants in the context of their real lives. Phenomenology allows researchers to understand the direct experiences of individuals as they experience, think, and feel (16).

This study was conducted in February 2025 at the Nursing Study Program, Bethesda Tomohon College of Health Sciences (STIKes), North Sulawesi. This location was chosen purposively because it has an intensive nursing education program based on clinical practice, as well as a student population that meets the criteria as participants in this phenomenological study. The focus of the study was directed at nursing students who had or were undergoing clinical education, with the assumption that they had direct experience of psychological pressures, challenges, and dynamics during practice. The purposive sampling technique was used to select participants who were considered capable of providing in-depth and relevant information to the focus of the study. Inclusion criteria included final year nursing students or those undergoing clinical practice, willing to be participants, and able to express their experiences verbally. A total of 15 students participated in the study. The number was determined to be sufficient when data saturation was reached; no new themes or significant insights were emerging during the final interviews, indicating that the depth and breadth of the phenomenon had been adequately captured.

Data collection was carried out through semi-structured in-depth interviews, using flexible open-ended question guides to allow free exploration of participants' experiences. Interviews were conducted face-to-face on campus or at a mutually agreed location, recorded with the consent of the participants, and lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. During the interview, the researcher also recorded non-verbal expressions and emotional responses that emerged as additional data to enrich the analysis. Data were analyzed using a phenomenological thematic analysis approach by referring to the stages of Moustakas (1994), namely: horizontalization (identifying meaningful statements), clustering of meanings (grouping meanings into themes), and compiling textural and structural descriptions to form the essence of the experience. To maintain objectivity and minimize researcher bias, bracketing was practised throughout the study. This was done through reflexive journaling, where the researcher continuously documented personal assumptions, thoughts, and emotional reactions, and through peer debriefing, allowing for critical feedback and increased reflexivity. These strategies ensured that interpretations remained grounded in participants' lived experiences rather than the researcher's preconceptions.

This study upholds aspects of research ethics, including voluntary participant consent through an informed consent form, as well as protecting data confidentiality by disguising participant identities using certain codes. This research has obtained official permission from STIKes Bethesda Tomohon before the data collection process was carried out.

CODE OF HEALTH ETHICS

This research has obtained a research permit from the Bethesda Tomohon College of Health Sciences (STIKes) with the number 233/STIKES/ST/XL/2024, as a form of fulfillment of ethical principles in conducting research.

RESULTS

Psychological Pressure During Clinical Practice

Most of the nursing students interviewed revealed that clinical education brings quite heavy psychological pressure. They have to adapt to a dynamic and often tense hospital environment, especially

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when dealing directly with patients in critical condition. Pressure also comes from time demands and high expectations from lecturers and preceptors. One participant stated, “Every time I want to enter a room, especially the ICU, I feel very stressed... afraid of making mistakes, afraid of being scolded by the preceptor” (P-7, female, 21 years old). Something similar was expressed by another participant who said that the tight practice schedule made her tired and stressed, “The tight practice schedule makes me tired, sometimes I don’t have time to rest, my mind is always stressed” (P-2, male, 22 years old). In addition, concerns about their abilities when having to deal with serious patients also added to their psychological burden, as explained by P-11 (female, 23 years old): “I often feel anxious because I have to meet patients in serious conditions, I’m afraid I can’t help well.”

Feelings of Lack of Confidence and Fear of Making Mistakes

Feelings of lack of confidence are very common experiences among nursing students during clinical education. They feel that their technical and emotional abilities are still inadequate, so that there is a fear of making mistakes that could impact patients. P-3 (male, 22 years old) said, "I know I'm still learning, but every time I make a mistake, I feel like a failure... it makes me stressed." A similar fear was also experienced by P-9 (female, 21 years old), who said, "Sometimes I feel less confident when I have to perform medical procedures, afraid that something will go wrong and the patient will be uncomfortable." The strict supervision during practice also adds to this fear, as said by P-5 (male, 22 years old), "The feeling of fear of making mistakes often haunts me during practice, especially if there is a strict supervisor."

Social Support as a Protective Factor

In dealing with significant pressure, social support emerged as one of the protective factors that greatly helped students maintain their mental health. Many participants mentioned classmates as a major source of strength. As expressed by P-12 (female, 22 years old), “My group mates are like a second family, we take care of each other’s mental health.” Support from family, especially parents, also provides great motivation, “My parents always give me encouragement and motivation, that’s what makes me strong” (P-1, female, 20 years old). In addition, attention from the supervisor is also a significant reinforcement, as explained by P-14 (male, 23 years old), “The caring supervisor makes me feel like I’m not alone in facing the pressure.”

Coping Strategies to Maintain Mental Balance

Nursing students use various coping strategies to cope with stress and maintain mental balance during clinical practice. One strategy that is widely used is writing a journal as a form of personal reflection, as expressed by P-10 (female, 20 years old), “Every night I write in a journal, that’s my way of relieving stress.” Relaxation activities such as listening to music or meditation are also chosen by some students, “I usually listen to music or meditate for a while before starting practice to calm my mind” (P-6, male, 21 years old). In addition, some students rely on spiritual activities, such as praying, to gain inner peace, “Praying is a way for me to feel calmer and more confident” (P-8, female, 22 years old).

Personal Meaning Behind Clinical Experience

Despite facing various pressures and challenges, nursing students also find positive meaning in their clinical education experience. Many realize that clinical practice is not only about technical skills, but also about character development and empathy. P-14 (male, 23 years old) stated, “I realized that being a nurse is not only about skills, but also about the heart.” The learning process during clinical practice is also considered a stage of maturity and responsibility, “The clinical practice experience makes me more mature and responsible” (P-4, female, 22 years old). Furthermore, this experience helps them grow emotionally and prepare themselves for the world of work, as expressed by P-13 (female, 23 years old), “Through this challenge, I feel like I have grown emotionally and am ready to face the world of work later.”

While all participants reported similar core challenges, some subtle patterns emerged. Female participants more frequently mentioned emotional coping strategies such as journaling and prayer, while male participants more commonly cited external stressors like supervisor strictness. However, these patterns were not definitive and would require a larger sample for broader generalization.

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Table 1. Summary of Key Themes from Nursing Students' Clinical Experience

Theme	Brief Definition	Representative Quote
Psychological Pressure	Emotional stress due to demanding hospital environments, critical patients, and expectations.	"Every time I want to enter a room, especially the ICU, I feel very stressed..." (P-7)
Lack of Confidence and Fear of Mistakes	Self-doubt and anxiety about clinical competence and fear of being judged for errors.	"I know I'm still learning, but every time I make a mistake, I feel like a failure..." (P-3)
Social Support as a Protective Factor	Support from peers, family, and supervisors that helps buffer emotional strain.	"My group mates are like a second family, we take care of each other's mental health." (P-12)
Coping Strategies	Individual methods for managing stress and maintaining emotional balance.	"Every night I write in a journal, that's my way of relieving stress." (P-10)
Personal Meaning	Positive personal growth and deeper understanding of nursing gained from clinical practice.	"I realized that being a nurse is not only about skills, but also about the heart." (P-14)

DISCUSSION

This study found that nursing students experienced significant psychological stress during clinical education. This stress includes anxiety in dealing with critical patients, tight time demands, and expectations from lecturers and preceptors. This finding is in line with research which shows that nursing students face high stress during clinical practice which has the potential to significantly affect their mental health (17). In addition, the academic pressure and the clinical practice environment can cause emotional exhaustion in nursing students (18–20). Psychosocial stress theory supports this finding by emphasizing that stress arises from a mismatch between external demands and an individual's ability to cope. Educational institutions need to provide structured stress management training programs to help students manage stress during clinical education.

Feelings of insecurity and fear of making mistakes are common experiences experienced by students. These results are consistent with a study which identified that uncertainty and fear of making mistakes are the main factors causing anxiety in nursing students (21). In addition, low self-confidence contributes to stress experienced during clinical practice (22). In the context of self-efficacy theory, self-confidence plays a major role in an individual's ability to face difficult tasks, including clinical practice. It is recommended for supervisors to provide constructive feedback regularly and encourage the development of students' self-confidence through simulations and directed practices.

Social support emerged as a protective factor that helps students maintain mental health amid clinical pressures. Students particularly valued emotional support from peers, family, and empathetic supervisors, which provided a sense of reassurance and belonging. This finding is in line with research that suggests the importance of social support as a buffer against stress in nursing students (23,24). This is also reinforced by a study which found that students with high social support had lower levels of anxiety when undergoing nursing practice (25). A similar finding in Korea stated that emotional support from classmates and lecturers significantly reduced the risk of burnout in final year nursing students (26). Social needs theory also emphasizes that positive interpersonal relationships are a basic need that can improve psychological well-being. Institutions need to develop a mentoring system and peer-to-peer support groups to strengthen students' social networks during clinical education.

The coping strategies used by students, such as journaling, meditation, and prayer, support the results of previous study which showed that spiritual and reflective coping were effective in reducing anxiety in nursing students (27). Students found deep personal meaning in the clinical practice experience, in the form of emotional growth and development of empathy (28). This finding is consistent with research which states that clinical experiences strengthen students' understanding of the role of nurses holistically (29–31). Nursing education should emphasize more reflective and humanistic approaches in clinical practice to help students internalize experiences into meaningful life lessons. The findings of this study

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have potential long-term implications for students' professional identity formation and career retention in nursing. Persistent stress and lack of coping resources during training may contribute to early career burnout, job dissatisfaction, or attrition from the profession. Conversely, students who receive strong support and develop adaptive coping mechanisms may be more likely to thrive and remain in the field. Therefore, addressing mental health during clinical education is not only important for immediate well-being but also for sustaining a competent and resilient nursing workforce.

This study has several limitations that must be acknowledged. First, it was conducted at a single nursing school (STIKes Bethesda Tomohon), which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other institutions with different curricula, support systems, or cultural contexts. Second, while efforts such as bracketing and reflexive journaling were used to minimize researcher bias, subjectivity remains an inherent limitation in qualitative research. Finally, the sample size, while adequate for phenomenological depth, may not capture the full diversity of experiences across broader populations of nursing students. Future research could explore specific avenues, such as longitudinal studies tracking nursing students' mental health throughout their clinical education, or comparative studies examining differences across various healthcare institutions to enhance the generalizability of findings.

CONCLUSION

This study revealed that nursing students experience various psychological stressors during clinical training, including feelings of insecurity and fear of making mistakes. Social support and various coping strategies play an important role in helping them manage stress and maintain mental health. In addition, clinical experiences provide deep personal meaning, helping them grow emotionally and professionally. Therefore, it is essential for educational institutions to provide structured stress management training programs to improve students' mental well-being during clinical practice. Educational institutions need to implement systematic stress management training and ongoing psychosocial support for nursing students. Future research should consider longitudinal studies to track mental health trajectories throughout nursing education and early professional practice, as well as intervention-based studies to evaluate the effectiveness of targeted support programs in reducing stress and promoting resilience.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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