



PERCEIVED STRESS AND COPING STRATEGIES AMONG NURSING STUDENTS: A REVIEW

Nursing

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ABSTRACT

Stress among nursing students has become a major concern due to academic workload, demanding clinical training, and emotional challenges during professional education. This narrative review aimed to identify the major stressors experienced by nursing students and the coping strategies used to manage stress. A literature search was conducted using PubMed, Medline, Scopus, CINAHL, and Google Scholar for studies published between 2015 and 2026. A total of 26 studies were included in the review. The findings showed that examinations, clinical responsibilities, fear of making mistakes, inadequate professional skills, interpersonal pressures, and adjustment to clinical environments were the major stressors. Common coping strategies included problem-solving, emotional support, communication, positive thinking, reflective practices, and spiritual activities. The review highlights the importance of supportive educational environments, mentorship, and stress management interventions to improve psychological well-being, resilience, and professional development among nursing students.

KEYWORDS

Nursing Students, Stress, Coping, Clinical Posting, Academic Work, Nurses

INTRODUCTION

Stress experienced by healthcare professionals has gained increasing attention due to the ongoing physical workload and emotional challenges involved in caring for patients. When these pressures persist over time, can adversely influence both individual well-being and effectiveness in professional responsibilities.¹

The young nursing students and nurses frequently face challenging clinical and academic responsibilities due to the demanding requirement of their work. Many nursing students feel anxious due to limited practical knowledge, lack of confidence, and fear of committing mistakes while caring for patients as dealing with lives. Exposure to health emergency conditions, dealing with mass trauma cases, specialized hospital units, and unfamiliar clinical environments may further increase stress levels.²

The young nursing students face the common stressors including academic expectations, examinations, clinical assignments, skill learning and difficult adjustment to hospital environment during nursing education. In addition, students must learn to manage emotionally demanding situations while adapting to professional responsibilities at an early stage of their career. Nursing education programmes are designed to prepare students with the knowledge, skills, and clinical competence required to provide safe and effective patient care.³ The classroom teaching, clinical training, academic work forms an essential part of nursing education as it allows students to apply theoretical concepts in real healthcare settings. There is no comparison between the workload and responsibilities of patients care among nurses and nursing students still the young students experience similar workplace pressures during clinical postings.

A low and moderate amount of stress may sometimes encourage students to stay motivated and focused on their goals. However, excessive stress can negatively influence mental health, academic achievement, and overall quality of life. Coping strategies play a major role in helping nursing students managing stress during their educational journey. Since nursing requires continuous involvement in emotionally demanding situations, prolonged stress may negatively affect student's mental health, academic performance, and overall wellbeing. Excessive stress can also reduce concentration, memory, learning ability, and decision-making skills.⁴ In some cases, persistent stress may contribute to burnout, emotional exhaustion, and withdrawal from nursing programmes.

Stress management and coping strategies therefore play an important role in helping nursing students adapt to clinical learning environments. Different students respond to stress differently and use various coping mechanisms to manage challenging situations. If students fail to adopt healthy coping methods, stress can adversely influence their physical health, emotional wellbeing, and academic achievement.

Need of the review

The review study is needed to understand the various sources of stress experienced by nursing students during academic and clinical training and to identify effective coping strategies used to manage stress. Nursing students are frequently exposed to emotionally demanding situations, over academic workload, and unfamiliar clinical environments, which may negatively affect their mental health, learning ability, and professional development. Therefore, reviewing existing evidence is important to help educators and institutions develop supportive interventions, improve clinical learning experiences, and promote the overall wellbeing of nursing students.

Studies retrieved through electronic database searches
(PubMed, Medline, Scopus, CINAHL, and Google Scholar)
(n = 112)

Studies retrieved from supplementary
sources and gray literature.
(n = 28)

Total records identified
(n = 140)

Duplicate records removed
(n = 74)

Full-text articles assessed for eligibility
(n = 66)

Full-text articles excluded with reasons
(n = 40)

Relevant studies appraised
(n = 26)

PRISMA search strategy and article selection process.

Methodology

This review was conducted to explore perceived stress, common stressors, and coping strategies among nursing students during academic and clinical training. The review process was guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework. Relevant literature published between January 2015 and January 2026 was searched using electronic databases including PubMed, Medline, Scopus, CINAHL, and Google Scholar.

The search was performed using combinations of keywords and Boolean operators such as ("perceived stress" OR "academic stress" OR "clinical stress") and ("nursing students" OR "student nurses") and ("coping strategies" OR "coping mechanisms"). Additional sources were identified from reference lists and selected gray literature.

Studies published in English that examined stress and coping methods among nursing students were considered eligible for inclusion.

Articles lacking clear methodology, non-peer-reviewed publications, and studies unrelated to nursing student stress were excluded. Two reviewers independently screened the retrieved studies and extracted relevant information, including study characteristics, major stressors, and coping approaches. The quality of selected studies was evaluated using standard critical appraisal guidelines. Since the review was based entirely on previously published literature, ethical approval was not required.

Data from India studies regarding stress among nursing students

Research evidence from different parts of India indicates that nursing students commonly experience considerable levels of stress during their educational training. A descriptive study conducted in western Rajasthan revealed that the majority of nursing students experienced a moderate degree of stress. Academic burden and concerns related to interpersonal interactions were identified as the primary contributors to stress. Students particularly reported negative attitudes of other healthcare professionals toward nursing, insufficient leisure time, and fear of examinations as significant factors affecting their psychological well-being.⁵ Similarly, a study by Surat Ram and colleagues highlighted that a large proportion of nursing students experienced severe distress because of the intensive demands of nursing education and clinical training.⁶

In another cross-sectional observational study conducted among B.Sc. nursing students at a tertiary care centre in West Bengal, to assess stress and coping mechanisms. The findings showed that **18.9% of students experienced low stress, 67.2% moderate stress, and 13.9% high stress.** Higher stress levels were observed among students in advanced academic years, those who entered nursing unwillingly, had long-term illness, or lacked family support. Coping patterns also showed a significant relationship with perceived stress levels.⁷

Global Data

A study conducted by Chidinma Abarbie and colleagues reported that 99% of nursing students experienced a moderate level of stress. The major contributors to stress were patient care responsibilities, academic workload, and expectations related to clinical performance. Additionally, 27.9% of students stated that comparisons made by teachers created extra pressure and increased peer-related stress. The study also found that 22.5% of students considered the competitive atmosphere within both academic and clinical settings as a significant source of stress.⁸

Chaabane et al. (2021) conducted an overview of systematic reviews to examine perceived stress, stressors, and coping strategies among nursing students in the Middle East and North Africa region. The review included **7 systematic reviews and 42 primary studies from 9 countries.** Findings showed that stress levels ranged from **0.8–65% (low), 5.9–84.5% (moderate), and 6.7–99.2% (high).** Major stressors were related to **clinical workload, patient care, assignments, examinations, and course demands.** Students commonly managed stress through **problem-focused, emotion-focused, and dysfunctional coping approaches.**⁹

Factors Contributing to Stress among Nursing Students

Clinical posting and patient care

Clinical training is considered one of the most demanding components of nursing education, often exposing students to substantial psychological and emotional stress. Elevated stress levels during clinical postings may lead to anxiety, emotional fatigue, reduced self-confidence, poor concentration, and burnout when appropriate coping mechanisms are not adopted. Nursing students frequently perceive greater stress because of heavy academic responsibilities, extensive coursework, demanding schedules, and clinical obligations.¹⁰ The simultaneous pressure of theoretical learning and practical performance further intensifies their stress experience and negatively affects their overall well-being. Clinical practice therefore plays a vital role in enhancing students' practical skills, professional confidence, communication abilities, and decision-making capacity.

Stress related to academic performance demands and workload

Assignments and academic workload are major contributors to stress among nursing students because they must manage classroom learning alongside demanding clinical responsibilities. Concern about obtaining poor grades often creates continuous pressure to perform well in examinations, assignments, and practical evaluations. Clinical practice adds another level of stress, as students are expected to apply

theoretical knowledge accurately while providing safe patient care in real healthcare settings. Many students also experience anxiety when they feel unable to meet the expectations of teachers and clinical instructors, leading to self-doubt and reduced confidence.¹¹ These academic and clinical commitments can further interfere with family interactions, social relationships, and personal activities, creating challenges in maintaining a balanced and healthy student life.

Stress Due to Inadequate Professional Knowledge and Clinical Skills

Insufficient professional knowledge and limited clinical competence are common sources of stress among nursing students, particularly during clinical training. Students often experience difficulty understanding medical history, interpreting clinical terminology, and applying theoretical concepts in real patient care situations.

Lack of confidence in performing nursing procedures may increase fear of making mistakes and reduce self-assurance while delivering care. In addition, inadequate understanding of patient diagnoses and treatment plans can make it challenging for students to participate actively in clinical decision-making and communicate effectively with healthcare teams. These difficulties may create feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, and hesitation during patient interactions.¹²

Stress Associated with the Clinical Environment

The clinical environment itself can become a significant source of stress for nursing students during their training period. Entering a hospital setting often exposes students to unfamiliar routines, professional expectations, and complex patient care responsibilities. Lack of familiarity with ward facilities, equipment, and workflow may create uncertainty and reduce confidence while performing assigned tasks. Such experiences can generate feelings of pressure and anxiety, especially among students with limited clinical exposure. Continuous orientation, supportive supervision, and gradual exposure to clinical responsibilities may help students adapt more effectively and improve their confidence in handling environmental and patient-related challenges.¹³

Peer-Related and Personal Stressors Among Nursing Students

Stress related to peers and daily life can influence both the academic performance and emotional well-being of nursing students. Competition among classmates may create pressure to achieve higher grades, perform better in clinical practice, and meet academic expectations. Students may also feel stressed when teachers compare their performance with others, which can affect confidence and create fear of underachievement. The demanding nature of nursing education often limits opportunities to participate in extracurricular and recreational activities, reducing time available for relaxation and personal interests.¹⁴ These combined pressures can affect motivation, emotional balance, and overall student experience, highlighting the importance of supportive peer interactions and a balanced academic environment.

Stress Related to Faculty and Nursing Staff Interactions

Interactions with teachers and nursing staff can significantly influence the stress experienced by nursing students during clinical education. One common source of stress is the difference between theoretical knowledge taught in classrooms and its actual application in clinical practice, which may create confusion and uncertainty. Students may also hesitate to discuss patient conditions with faculty members or healthcare professionals because of fear of making mistakes or appearing inexperienced. Stress can increase when expectations from teachers exceed students' current level of knowledge and clinical exposure.¹⁵

Coping strategies used by nursing students

Active Confrontation with Stress

Many nursing students cope with stress by directly addressing challenging situations instead of avoiding them. They attempt to understand the source of stress and respond in ways that help improve their clinical abilities and professional growth. Effective communication plays an important role in this process, as students often face difficulties expressing concerns, managing expectations, and handling emotionally demanding situations. Strengthening communication and assertiveness skills through training may help students manage challenges such as patient care responsibilities, academic pressure, and expectations from faculty members more effectively. Emotional preparedness and supportive learning

experiences can reduce the intensity with which these situations are perceived as stressful.⁶

Mastering the Mind and Body

Students also adopt personal methods to regulate emotional and mental stress. These include taking mental breaks, engaging in enjoyable activities, expressing emotions in healthy ways, maintaining positive thoughts, practicing self-reflection, and participating in spiritual or religious activities such as prayer. These approaches help students regain emotional balance and maintain psychological well-being during demanding periods.¹⁶

Avoidance

Some students respond to stress by distancing themselves from stressful experiences or diverting attention to other activities. Although this approach may provide temporary emotional comfort, continued avoidance can prevent effective resolution of problems. Over time, unresolved stress may affect emotional stability, reduce academic performance, weaken decision-making ability, and lower confidence in dealing with future challenges.¹⁷

Problem-solving behaviour

Problem-solving is frequently adopted as a constructive coping approach among nursing students. Students who use this strategy attempt to identify the source of stress and focus on actions that can improve or control the situation. Maintaining a positive outlook while actively seeking solutions may strengthen confidence and encourage better adaptation to academic and clinical demands.¹⁸

Negative Coping Strategies

In some situations, students adopt unhealthy responses to stress that may negatively affect their well-being. These responses can include emotional outbursts, irritability, disturbed eating habits such as overeating or skipping meals, smoking, alcohol use, and other harmful behaviour. Prolonged exposure to stress, particularly in clinical settings, may also contribute to poor sleep, reduced concentration, risky behaviours, and thoughts about discontinuing their academic program.¹⁹

Developing Professional Competency

Research indicates that nursing students frequently manage stress by strengthening their professional competence through active learning approaches. Clinical exposure allows them to gain confidence and apply knowledge in real care situations. Students often improve their understanding by observing peers and healthcare professionals, seeking guidance from educators and senior students, and reflecting on their experiences. Continuous development of both theoretical understanding and practical skills supports adaptation to clinical demands and reduces stress.²⁰

Correcting Wrong Interventions

Evidence suggests that nursing students often cope with stress by responding promptly when they recognize an error during clinical practice. Taking immediate corrective action helps minimize the possibility of patient harm and improves students' sense of responsibility and professional accountability. Addressing mistakes actively, rather than avoiding them, supports learning and builds confidence. This approach may also reduce emotional distress by creating opportunities for reflection, improvement, and safer future clinical practice.²¹

Purposeful Exposure to Stressful Situations

Research suggests that nursing students may cope with stress by intentionally approaching situations they find challenging rather than avoiding them. Facing fears in a controlled and gradual manner helps students become more comfortable with clinical responsibilities and unfamiliar procedures. Repeated exposure to difficult tasks can strengthen confidence, improve coping ability, and reduce anxiety over time. This approach also supports the development of resilience and decreases dependence on avoidance as a response to stress.²²

Use of Communication Skills

Research findings indicate that nursing students frequently use communication skills as a coping strategy to manage stress in clinical settings. Effective interaction with patients, faculty, and healthcare staff helps reduce misunderstandings and improves confidence during patient care. Establishing trust with patients encourages cooperation and creates a more supportive clinical experience. Communication

also helps students regulate emotions, express concerns appropriately, and respond more effectively to stressful situations.¹⁷

Thought Diversion and Mental Control

Evidence from studies suggests that nursing students often manage stress by controlling their thoughts and redirecting attention away from stressful experiences. Engaging in alternative activities or consciously shifting focus may help reduce repetitive negative thinking and emotional overload. This approach allows students to regain mental balance and continue functioning effectively during academic and clinical demands. Thought management strategies may support emotional stability and improve overall coping with stress.²³

Realistic and Positive Thinking

Research indicates that nursing students commonly use realistic and positive thinking to manage stress during academic and clinical training. Accepting personal limitations and recognizing that learning develops gradually may reduce unrealistic expectations and perfectionist tendencies. At the same time, self-encouragement and positive self-talk help students maintain motivation and confidence when facing difficult situations. These cognitive approaches support emotional adjustment, strengthen resilience, and improve the ability to cope with stress effectively.¹⁹

Emotional Expression and Spiritual Coping

Research suggests that nursing students often manage stress through emotional expression and spiritual coping strategies. Sharing feelings and discussing stressful experiences with peers, family members, or mentors may provide emotional relief and reduce feelings of isolation. Expressing emotions in a healthy manner can support psychological well-being and improve coping capacity. In addition, practices such as prayer and spiritual activities may provide comfort, strengthen hope, and help students maintain emotional balance during stressful situations.²⁴

Avoiding Stressful Situations and Giving Up

Research findings indicate that some nursing students cope with stress by avoiding difficult tasks or limiting interactions that create discomfort or anxiety. Although avoidance may provide temporary relief, it may reduce opportunities to develop confidence and clinical competence. In some cases, prolonged stress can lead students to withdraw from stressful experiences or discontinue active coping efforts. Such responses may negatively affect learning, adaptation, and long-term stress management abilities.²⁵

DISCUSSION

The present review indicates that stress is a common and multifactorial experience among nursing students during both academic and clinical training. Findings from Indian and international studies consistently showed that most students experience moderate stress, while a smaller proportion report severe stress levels. This finding aligns with previous literature suggesting that nursing education combines academic pressure, emotional demands, and professional responsibilities within a highly competitive learning environment. Possible reasons for variations in stress levels across studies include differences in educational systems, clinical exposure, faculty support, cultural expectations, and availability of mental health resources.

Clinical training emerged as one of the major stressors among nursing students. Fear of making mistakes, limited practical experience, and anxiety related to patient safety were frequently reported in studies from India, the Middle East, and Western countries. In contrast, some international studies observed lower stress levels in institutions with structured mentorship programmes and simulation-based learning, suggesting that supportive clinical environments may reduce anxiety and improve confidence.²⁶

The review further showed that positive coping strategies such as problem-solving, emotional support, communication, and reflective practices improved adaptation and resilience, whereas avoidance behaviours negatively affected learning and emotional well-being. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies, intervention-based stress management programmes, and cross-cultural comparisons to better understand changing stress patterns among nursing students.

CONCLUSION:

The review highlights that positive coping strategies such as problem-

solving, communication, emotional support, and reflective practices can help students manage stress effectively. Supportive educational environments, guidance from faculty, and stress management interventions are essential to promote resilience, improve clinical learning, and support the professional growth of nursing students.

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