



Promoting Belonginess of Nursing Students during the COVID-19 Pandemic -Maintaining Physical Distancing While Promoting Social Proximity

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Abstract

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, many nursing faculty and students were forced to maintain physical distancing which resulted in mandatory remote modes of teaching and learning. As a result of such physical distancing, nursing students are at risk for social isolation and a decreased sense of belonging. This editorial discusses ways to promote belongingness in nursing students despite a distance learning format.

Keywords: COVID-19; Nursing; Physical distancing; Pandemic

Abbreviations: COVID-19: Coronavirus Disease 2019.

Introduction

The Effects of Social Distancing on Belonginess in Nursing Education

At a time where we are social distancing and staying away from others during the COVID-19 pandemic, creating a sense of belongingness is key in nursing education. Levett-Jones and Lathlean [1] posit that belongingness actually acts as a prerequisite for the learning of nursing students. The feeling of belonging to a group is intuitively appealing to the human being. We are social creatures. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theorizes that the feeling of belonging is a human need and is fundamental to our growth as people. Social exclusion has proven over and over again to have damaging effects. Social science and psychological research have found that a lacking of a feeling of belonging can lead to low self-esteem, an increase in levels of stress, anxiety, depression,

decreased feelings of well-being and happiness [2-5]. Nurse educators must clearly understand the relationship between belongingness and learning of nursing students.

What is belongingness? Levett -Jones & Lathlean [1] explain: Belonginess is a deeply personal and contextually mediated experience that evolves in response to the degree to which an individual feels

- Secure, accepted, included, valued and respected by a defined group,
- Connected with or integral to the group, and
- That their professional and/or personal values are in harmony with those of the group (p. 104).

Belonginess of an individual has the ability to evolve over time in response to the actions of the group to which one aspires to belong or the individual's actions themselves. This article will discuss interventions the educator can implement to promote belonginess during the COVID-19 pandemic where distance learning has been thus far required.

Interventions to Promote Belonging

Underrepresented students have a bigger risk of not feeling a sense of belonging. A good example of students who may lack a sense of belong are first-year students who begin to live and acclimate to a new community yet experience a limited amount of people with whom they can identify. As a result, the social changes exacerbate the stress of such students. Interventions implemented during the freshman year that attempted to reframe such adversity as normal and affecting all first-year students while simultaneously not minimalizing such feelings were met with effective results. The grade point average and physical health of such students were found to improve over that of the control groups. Interestingly, the most significant improvements were seen in non-Asian ethnic minorities when compared to European Americans. By reframing the adversities of being a first-year student, it decreased the likelihood that students ascribed such difficulties as the results of their differentness [6]. By creating a sense of social belonging in our classrooms, we can lessen the impact of marginalization and possible feelings of isolation in students. Nursing instructors and staff act as the front-line in potentially leveraging these effects by easing the emotional load of nursing students [7].

There are four techniques that can be utilized to build belonging: the reframing of current issues, the facilitation of connections, and social check ins. Current challenges can be reframed by simply surveying students in the online classroom for the common responses to the pandemic. As a result, it shows students that many of them are having alike feelings and apprehensions. The second technique is by way of facilitating connections. This can be done by pairing students up for exchanges in communication such as group work. Therefore, at the next virtual class meeting, they will be able to find a friendly face with whom they are familiar. The last technique is a social check in. A social check in can be held by using digital polling software to create a word cloud. Students can express their emotions before jumping into the content. It can be as simple as letting students reconnect with each other through the chat function of an online meeting before getting started. This facilitates their adjustment to the new format and situation before teaching begins. Lastly, we can encourage students to reach out to their family and friends if they are required to perform self-care [7].

Conclusion

It is essential at this time where we are practicing physical distancing that we do not practice social distancing as well. A supportive adult in our students' lives is essential to having them cope and build perseverance. Connecting with others and building belongingness allows our students to experience attention, as well as better physical and emotional health. Belongingness is about feeling connected and having relationships with one another. When students feel as if they belong, they will have the prerequisite for their academic success. Students who feel they belong are less likely to withdraw and become depressed and pessimistic and are more likely to feel invested and to persevere [7]. As educators, it is our commitment to foster optimism, a sense of community and belongingness so that we can promote the best academic outcomes in our students.

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