

Investigation of academic stress and its impact on the mental health of nursing students in Benson Idahosa University

By

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Abstract

The study investigated academic stress and its effect on the mental health of nursing student in Benson Idahosa University. A descriptive cross-sectional study design was adopted. The objectives of the study were to identify the major academic stressors experienced by nursing students in Benson Idahosa University. The target population comprised of 300 students actively pursuing their nursing education in Benson Idahosa University during the time of the study. A simple random sampling technique was employed in selecting respondents for the study. Instrument for data collection was self-structured questionnaire in two sections. The data collected was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics which was captured into the IBM Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS). The findings of the study revealed depression (42%), anxiety (30%), stress (44%), loss of interest 13%) and general psychological wellbeing in the mental health assessment of Benson Idahosa University nursing students and they felt anxious about adapting to university life and completing the curriculum. More than 50% of first and second year nursing students experienced depression and required clinical treatment. The study recommended that educational institutions should establish proactive and easily accessible support services that target academic stress and mental health concerns. Regular workshops, counseling services and stress management programmes should be established to equip nursing students with coping strategies and create a conducive environment for seeking help.

Keywords: Stress; Stressors; Academic Stress; Mental Health; Anxiety.

INTRODUCTION

Background

Nursing is a disciplined profession involved in the delivery of healthcare to the society. It is also a helping profession, service oriented to maintain the health and well-being of people, an art and a science. However, the profession comes with stress both mentally and physically as its fast-paced and emotional nature bears on the professionals. Nursing colleges are now recognized as a stressful environment that often exerts a positive effect on the academic performances and psychological well-being of students. As stated by Aikabeli (2024) academic source of stress is examination, long hours of study, assignments, grade, lack of free time, lack of timely feed-back after performance, special elements of the academic programme like arrangement and conduct of workshop. Clinical sources of stress are taking care of ill patients, inter personal conflicts with peer groups, insecurity about personal clinical competence, fear of completing clinical requirement, dealing with uncooperative patients, work load, prolonged standing, learning psycho motor skills like bed making, bed bath and vital signs monitoring have also been associated with high level of stress. 2 also highlighted that the reaction of parents and friends to the results weigh down on the students and create exam stress, lack of interest to study and inability to follow the professor cause disinterest in attending classes.

Stress is a negative construct that may be linked to many life-threatening situations. It may be considered as an individual reaction to demands made on the body or response to a disturbing event in the environment 3. Stress is an element of daily life. An individual may feel pressured when expectations are extremely high and cannot be achieved readily. Some levels of stress may be motivating and helpful in achieving a productive life. However, excessive levels of stress experienced over a long period of time may induce significant physical and psychological problems 4. Stress can induce anxiety, depression, insomnia and undermine the achievement of goals 5; 6. In some cases, acute stress may cause sudden death in young people 7, and chronic stress as reported may impair development in children by lowering growth hormones 8. Stress may be induced by factors in both the internal and external environment. External factors include environmental pollutants, extreme temperatures, injuries, academic environment while internal factors refer to the reactions inside the body to a perceived threat in an environment and worrying psychological atmosphere 9; 10.

School-related stress affects young people's quality of life 11. Studies show that academic stress 12, including demands and pressure from school 13 and school-related worry 14 impacts psychological distress (symptoms of anxiety and depression) over and beyond previous depressive symptoms on an interpersonal, between-person level. However, the intraindividual (within-person) relationships between academic stress and psychological distress, including relevant explanatory mechanisms and moderators, have largely been ignored 15.

Coping with stress is vital for human survival and there are several strategies to reduce stress. Coping means investing one's thoughts and behaviours to manage internal and external perceived threats 16 and adapt to perceived threatening situations. The individual's ability to adapt to the stressful situation usually involves active or avoidant coping strategies. Adaptive behaviours aimed at changing or modifying stressors are considered active coping strategies and maladaptive behaviours that do not target stressors are considered avoidant coping strategies 17. Academic-related stress may be reduced by active strategies such as effective time management, social support and involvement in recreational activities 18.

Although people from all walks of life experience stress on a daily basis, students are more likely to experience stressful situations due to their academic requirements. Additionally, students are able to modify threatening situation when they adopt effective coping mechanism thus resulting in a better outcome and less depression. Although some levels of academic stress may be beneficial, the requirement of nursing training programmes precipitate excessive stress among nursing students and this needs to be identified early and managed appropriately to enhance educational preparedness. The

mental health of nursing students is a matter of concern due to the demanding nature of their academic programme. These researchers observed the prevalence of academic stress among nursing students at Benson Idahosa University which raises questions about its potential impact on their mental well-being. However, the researchers found that a comprehensive understanding of the specific academic stressors experienced by nursing students and the subsequent effect on mental health is lacking. They therefore decided to carry out this study to investigate the relationship between academic stress and the mental health of nursing students. By identifying the unique stressors and the implications for mental health, this research sought to provide insights that can inform the development of effective interventions and support systems to promote the mental well-being of nursing students in Benson Idahosa University and make recommendations.

Objectives of the Study

- a. To identify the major academic stressors experienced by nursing students at Benson Idahosa University.
- b. To assess the mental health status of nursing students at Benson Idahosa University.
- c. To determine the relationship between academic stress and mental health outcomes.
- d. To explore coping mechanisms utilized by nursing students to manage academic stress.
- f. To provide recommendations for interventions and support services to promote mental well-being among nursing students.

Research Questions

1. What are the major academic stressors experienced by nursing students in Benson Idahosa University?
2. What is the mental health status of nursing students in Benson Idahosa University?
3. What is the relationship between academic stress and mental health outcomes of nursing students in Benson Idahosa University?
4. What are the coping mechanisms utilized by nursing students to manage academic stress.

Hypotheses

1. There is a significant correlation between academic stress and the mental health of nursing students' in Benson Idahosa University, with higher levels of academic stress leading to poorer mental health outcomes.
2. There is no significant correlation between academic stress and the mental health of nursing students in Benson Idahosa University, with higher levels of academic stress leading to poorer mental health outcomes.

Research Design

A descriptive cross sectional study design was used for the study.

Research Setting

The study was conducted in Benson Idahosa University as the primary setting for investigating academic stress and its impact on the mental health of nursing students. The study took place within the nursing programme involving students enrolled in various academic levels, 100 level, 200 level, 300 level, 400 level and 500 level. The study settings within Benson Idahosa University provided a comprehensive representation of the academic environment where nursing students experience academic stress and its potential impact on mental health.

Study Population

The target population for the study comprised of students who were actively pursuing nursing education in Benson Idahosa University at the time of the study. It encompassed students from diverse backgrounds, representing different age groups, genders, ethnicity and cultural backgrounds. A stratified random sampling technique was employed. This technique ensured adequate representation

of nursing students across various academic levels, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the population. Stratification: The nursing student population at BIU was divided into distinct strata based on academic levels. This ensured proportional representation of students from each academic level in the sample.

Random Sampling: Within each stratum, a random sampling method was used to select participants. This involved assigning a unique identifier to each nursing student within a stratum and using a random number generator or table to select the desired sample size from each stratum.

Instrument of Data Collection

In the process of carrying out this research, the researchers elicited data through two major sources: primary and secondary sources of data. Primary sources of data comprised questionnaire/ interview and observation. To ensure that the questionnaire was fully optimized and that the sampling framework was not tampered with, the researchers in most cases personally administered and collected the questionnaire. The questionnaires were designed in various sections.

Section A: sought information on respondents' demography; Section B was designed to obtain information on Academic Stressors. Section C was designed to obtain data on mental health assessment and Section D was structured to get information on possible solutions to the identified problems associated with academic stress/ Coping Mechanisms.

Validity of Instrument

The validity of the instrument was ensured using face and content validity by giving the instrument to two experts in the field of measurement and effecting their observations before developing the final copy of the instrument. Construct Validity: The instrument included sections that aligned with the constructs of academic stress, mental health and coping mechanisms. The academic stressors section measured the specific stressors faced by nursing students, while the mental health assessment section captured symptoms of depression, anxiety, stress and overall psychological well-being. The coping mechanisms section evaluated the frequency of using various coping strategies. These sections reflected the underlying theoretical constructs related to academic stress and mental health.

Reliability of Instrument

After the content validation by the panel of experts, the instrument was subjected to trial testing. This was achieved through a pilot test carried out on selected pilot samples outside the target population. Data collected from the trial testing was analysed using Cronbach Alpha Reliability method in which a reliability coefficient of 0.83 was obtained for the instrument. This indicated that the instrument was about 83% reliable for collecting data for the study. To assess the internal consistency of the instrument, Cronbach's alpha coefficient can be calculated for each section. A high Cronbach's alpha value indicated a high degree of internal consistency, indicating that the items within each section of the instrument measured the same underlying construct consistently.

Method of Data Collection

The Method of Data Collection involved the distribution of questionnaire by various methods including online platforms (email, learning management system) and paper-based distribution during nursing programme classes and designated study areas by the researchers and a research assistant.

Method of Data Analysis

The data collected were presented and analysed using descriptive statistics such as frequency, percentages, mean and charts while the hypotheses were tested with t-test statistics and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) at the appropriate level of confidence (0.05).

Ethical Consideration

The study was conducted in compliance with ethical standards and guidelines. Ethical approval was obtained from Benson Idahosa University review board and ethics committee to ensure that the study adhered to the highest ethical principles and protected the welfare and rights of the participants. Ethical approval was obtained and participant confidentiality was ensured and informed consent obtained.

Results

Section A: Demographic Information

Gender of the participants

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	120	40.0
Female	180	60.0
Total	300	100.0

Age of the participants

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
16-20	82	27.3
21-30	169	56.3
31-40	49	16.3
Total	300	100.0

Academic level of the participants

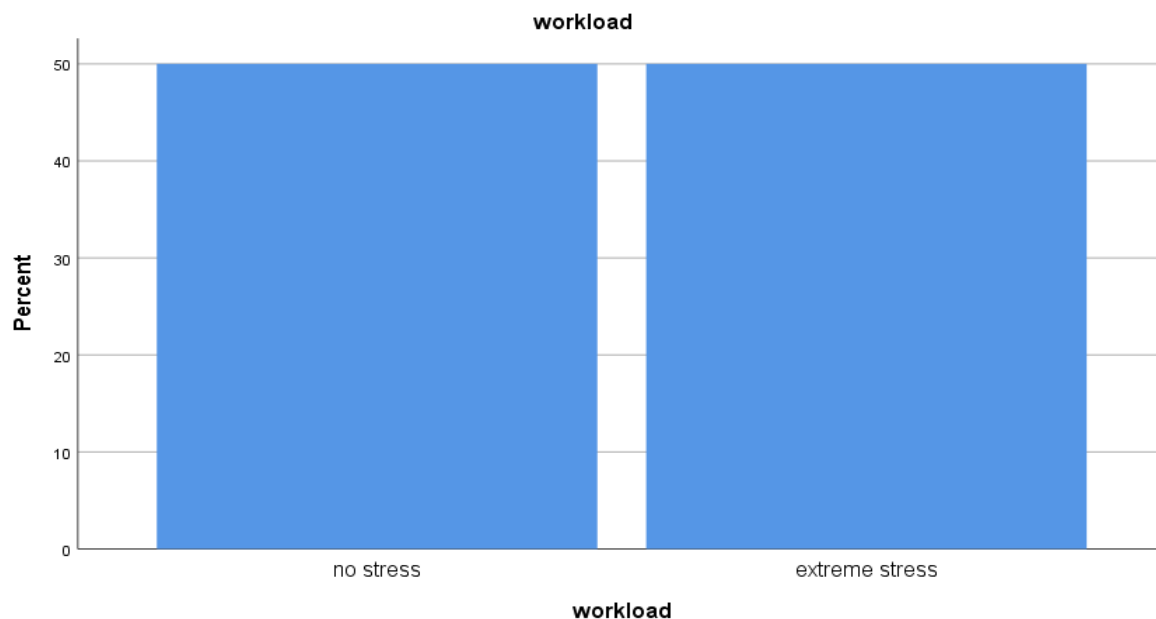
	Frequency	Percentage (%)
200L	91	30.3
300L	82	27.3
400L	64	21.3
final year	63	21.0
Total	300	100.0

Ethnicity of the participants

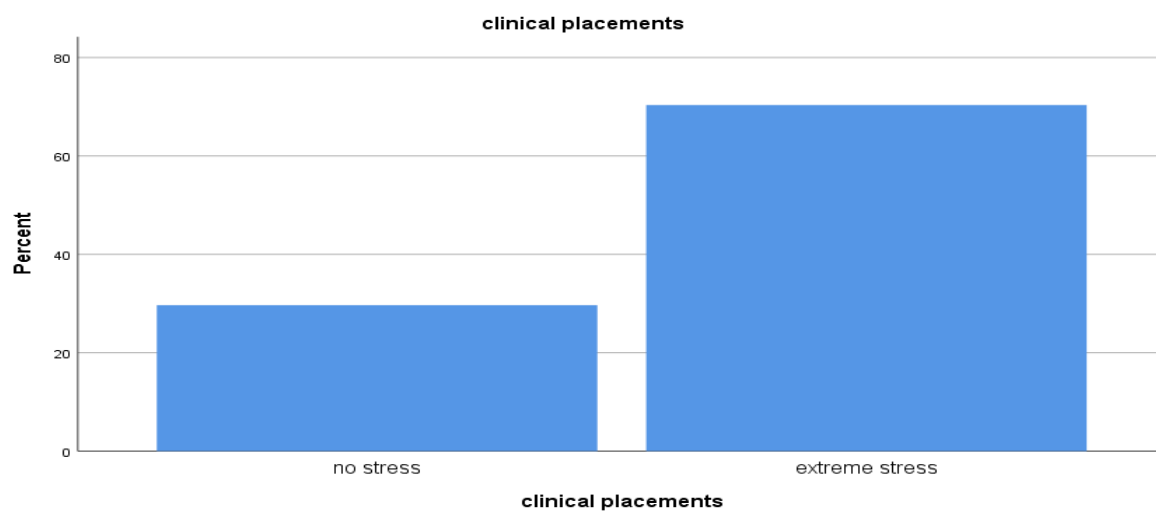
	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Igbo	66	22.0
Hausa	50	16.7
Yoruba	113	37.7
Others	71	23.7
Total	300	100.0

Section 2: Academic Stressors

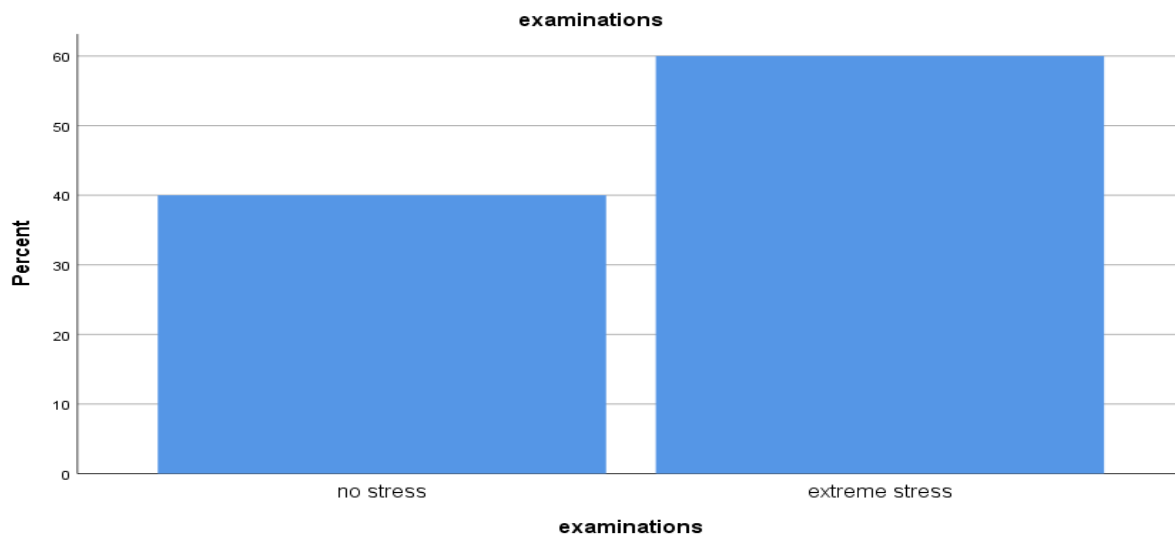
A graph of workload among participants



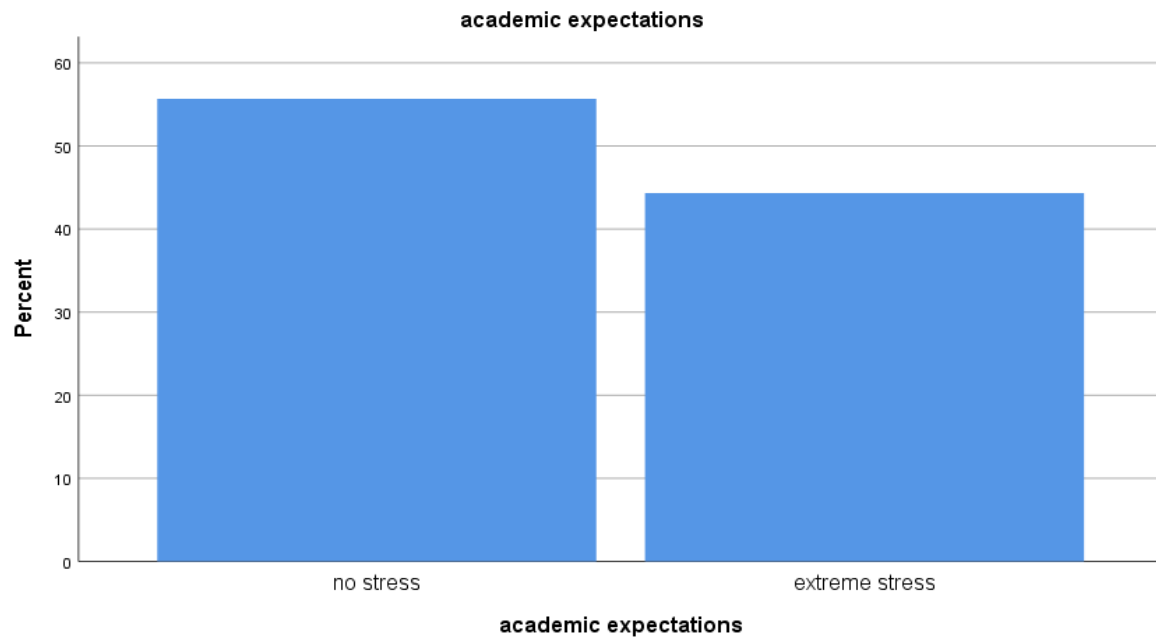
A graph of clinical placements among participants



A graph of examinations among participants



A graph of academic expectations among participants



A crosstab of academic stressor work and Pearson chi-square.

Academic stressors	No stress		Extreme stress		Chi-square value
	Males	females	Males	females	
Workload	36	114	84	66	32.000
Time Management	48	112	72	68	15.781
Clinical Placements	11	78	109	180	40.282
Examinations	38	82	82	98	5.787
Academic Expectations	69	98	51	82	.272

Section 3: Mental Health Assessment

Depression

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
not at all	71	23.7
a little bit	39	13.0
moderately	77	25.7
quite a bit	71	23.7
extremely	42	14.0
Total	300	100.0

Anxiety

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
not at all	102	34.0
a little bit	104	34.7
moderately	54	18.0
quite a bit	10	3.3
extremely	30	10.0
Total	300	100.0

Stress

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
not at all	90	30.0
a little bit	35	11.7
moderately	78	26.0
quite a bit	53	17.7
extremely	44	14.7
Total	300	100.0

Loss of interest

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
not at all	87	29.0
a little bit	125	41.7
moderately	41	13.7
quite a bit	34	11.3
extremely	13	4.3
Total	300	100.0

General Psychological Well-being

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
not at all	91	30.3
a little bit	29	9.7
moderately	90	30.0
quite a bit	38	12.7
extremely	52	17.3
Total	300	100.0

Section 4: Coping Mechanisms**Seeking Social Support**

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
never	91	30.3
rarely	91	30.3
sometimes	85	28.3
often	29	9.7
very frequently	4	1.3
Total	300	100.0

Engaging in Physical Activity

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
never	43	14.3
rarely	117	39.0
sometimes	55	18.3
often	49	16.3
very frequently	36	12.0
Total	300	100.0

Practicing Relaxation Techniques

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
never	54	18.0

rarely	80	26.7
sometimes	105	35.0
often	39	13.0
very frequently	22	7.3
Total	300	100.0

Utilizing Academic Support Services

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
never	78	26.0
rarely	81	27.0
sometimes	63	21.0
often	72	24.0
very frequently	6	2.0
Total	300	100.0

Implementing Time Management Strategies

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
never	63	21.0
rarely	81	27.0
sometimes	78	26.0
often	30	10.0
very frequently	48	16.0
Total	300	100.0

Discussion of Findings

During nursing education and training, nursing students are frequently exposed to various stressors which may directly or indirectly impede their learning and performance. The nature of clinical education presents challenges that may cause students to experience stress. Moreover, the practical components of the programme which is important in preparing students to develop into professional nurses' role by its nature have made the programme even more stressful than other programmes¹⁹. Nursing students and persons employed in the nursing profession have been identified as a population with an elevated stress level as the complexity of the nursing programme is classified into didactic courses and practicum sections. Stressors for student nurses included adjusting to a rigorous programme of theory, long hours of study and pressures of clinical practice²⁰.

The Results of the present study demonstrated the demographic information that revealed females were more than the males, with participants within the age of 21-30 years (56.3%) more than the rest of the age groups. This can be compared to a study by 21 that highlighted that all the socio-demographic characteristics are significantly associated with students feeling pressured. Students' stream of study, (Regular or Modular stream), age, gender, marital status, number of children, ethnicity and type of residence were all highly associated with the students' perceived level of stress. Female students were two times more likely to feel stressed than the male students and considering that previous studies also reported similar findings^{22; 23} may be an indication of a struggle among female students in an academic environment.

Several studies agreed with the finding of this study that there are many sources of stress during undergraduate nursing education and training^{24; 25}. The study also revealed that the academic stressors of the participants included workload, time management, clinical placements, examinations and academic exception from which they all (300 participants) experienced greater or extreme stress especially during clinical placements. This is similar to the findings of²⁶ study which reported that the

most common sources of academic stress identified by students were related to academic demands, assignments and examinations, high workload, combining clinical work and interaction with patients, health care team members and teaching staff. Without doubt, clinical practice is one of the crucial components of nursing education. However, students may face many challenges or threats in dynamic and complex clinical environments learning how to use high technology medical equipment, maintain good relationship with clinical staff and instructors, manage changes in patients' condition and deal with the demands of patients' relatives.

Another finding of the study revealed the prevalence of stress among university students which agreed with what has been reported by 27; 28; 29, that university students are experiencing academic challenges. Nursing students especially are likely to be affected as the curricula for training nurses include competency-based training and extra professional requirements. This requires student nurses to acquire knowledge, attitude, and skillsets through classroom teaching and experiential training. This can be overwhelming for some students. It is, therefore, important that nursing training institutions understand these challenges and provide support systems during the training. The logistic regression analysis identified lectures ($p = .001$), assignments ($p = .018$), examination ($p = .002$) as predictors of academic stress among students which is similar to the findings of 30 study which highlighted academic information and fear of failure as sources of stress among undergraduate medical students in Mangalore. Academic-related activities and financial obligations were mostly ranked high as sources of stress by the medical students.

According to 31 study, data showed differences in academic burnout according to clinical practice experience in those participants who had clinical practice experiences. Academic burnout differed according to major satisfaction, satisfaction with professors and implications for nursing. In contrast, there was no difference in academic burnout in those without clinical experience, according to general characteristics. These findings suggest that clinical practice of nursing students is related to academic burnout. In agreement with the findings of this study, a previous study by 32 showed that clinical practice stress is a significant factor influencing academic burnout in student nurses. Therefore, nursing instructors in schools as well as professionals in clinical practice environment must function as role models to improve satisfaction with instructors and give meaning to the nursing profession. In agreement with the results of this study showing differences in academic burnout according to clinical practice experience, another previous study by 33 reported that 49.2% of nursing students with clinical practice experience wished to change their major course.

In the clinical rotations, nursing students have to carry a high level of responsibility and accountability while dealing with patients. 34 and 35 revealed that sometimes, nursing students deal with seriously ill or dying patients which cause an increase in stress for them as revealed by the results of the present study which found that less than three quarters of the nursing students had stress. A possible explanation for this is that nursing students meet a wide range of patients with complex bio-psychosocial problems and needs, which require them to be competent in developing and sustaining therapeutic relationship equipped with adequate knowledge and skills in order to provide effective nursing care to such patients.

Based on the mental health assessment of the nursing students at Benson Idahosa University, results showed that according to their extreme values depression (42%), anxiety (30%), stress (44%), loss of interest (13%) and general psychological wellbeing (52%) were high. This is in contrast with a study conducted by 36 which revealed anxiety and depression were the main factors affecting academic burnout of nursing students without clinical practice experience. In agreement with the findings of this study, a previous study by 37 showed that nursing students feel anxious about adapting to university life and completing the curriculum and more than 50% of first and second year students experience depression and require clinical treatment. This evidence as also agreed by 38 indicate the need for active interventions to prevent depression and anxiety such as in-depth guidance of

professors for first and second year students' adaptation to university life, mentoring related to career and university life adjustment and access to counseling programmes

The result of this study highlighted that coping mechanisms were adopted by students which included seeking social support, engaging in physical activity, practicing relaxation techniques, utilizing academic support services and implementing time management strategies. This is similar to the findings of 39 which highlighted programmes such as simulation education, peer mentoring, and mindfulness that relieve stress of nursing students must be provided. Moreover, 40 revealed that major satisfaction does not only affect academic burnout; it improves nursing competency as well and is related to formation of nursing professional value. He therefore recommended that effort must be made to improve major satisfaction and relieve stress of nursing students. Additionally, 41 revealed that major satisfaction is related to various learning factors such as lecture rooms, clinical practice education, instructors, learning plans and programmes and therefore must be considered for interventions to improve major satisfaction.

Limitation of the Study

The study findings are not generalizable due to the characteristics of the sampled population as participants were from one university, and their experiences may not accurately reflect those of nursing students from other institutions or in different geographic regions. The reliance on self-reported data for both academic stress and mental health measures introduced the potential for response bias. Participants might underreport or over report their experiences due to social desirability or memory inaccuracies.

Suggestions for Further Studies

More studies are advocated for longer study period including more institutions from different geographic regions as these might reveal additional insights into the participants' experiences of academic stress and mental health state.

Conclusion

Academic stress and mental health are crucial issues in the training of nursing students. This study explored the relationship between academic stress and mental health among nursing students in Benson Idahosa University and delved into their experiences in terms of academic stressors, coping mechanisms and the potential impact on their mental well-being. It also shed light on the critical relationship between academic stress and the mental health of Benson Idahosa University nursing students. The findings revealed a significant correlation between academic stress and mental health outcomes and emphasized the importance of tailored interventions that consider the unique challenges and the potential long-term implications for their well-being. The researchers advised that implementing the recommendations from this study, educational institutions can contribute to a healthier and more supportive environment for nursing students, fostering their academic success and their overall mental and emotional growth as well.

In conclusion, while this study provided valuable insights into the relationship between academic stress and mental health of Benson Idahosa University nursing students, the limitations should be taken into account when interpreting and applying the findings. Further research with different methodologies and broader participant samples would be valuable to enhance the understanding of this complex issue.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the researchers recommend that educational institutions should establish proactive and easily accessible support services that target academic stress and mental health concerns by establishing regular workshops, counseling services and stress management programmes to equip nursing students with coping strategies and create a conducive environment for

seeking help. They also recommend periodic review of curriculum to ensure a balanced workload that considers the mental health of nursing students, distribute coursework and assessments more evenly throughout the semester to reduce the intensity of stress peaks. Institutions and Benson Idahosa University in particular should integrate mental health education into the nursing curriculum to equip students with knowledge about stress management, self-care and to recognize signs of mental health issues in themselves and their peers. Peer support programmes should be established to enable nursing students connect with and support each other with mentors who can share their experiences and strategies for managing stress to create a sense of camaraderie and understanding. Implement regular assessments of student well-being that go beyond academic performance. This would provide valuable data to monitor trends, identify high-stress periods and tailor interventions accordingly. It can contribute to the well-being of nursing students in Benson Idahosa University and inform educational institutions and policymakers seeking to address the challenges of academic stress and its impact on mental health,

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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