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HELPLESSNESS OR SELF CARE?

A Study of Nursing Practice with Depressed Patients
in an In-care Setting

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
in Nursing Studies at Massey University

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to investigate the practice of nurses when working with depressed patients in an in care setting. A survey of the literature shows that the role commonly prescribed for nurses who work in psychiatric settings is one that emphasises a one-to-one relationship based on models of psychotherapy and focusses on individual illness, pathology, symptoms and psychodynamics. It is suggested that this is not a role which most nurses working in New Zealand psychiatric settings would be able to implement in practice.

Three perspectives of nursing practice were explored in the study: what nurses were seen to do in practice; what they thought they should do as evidenced in results of an exercise to rank different possible interventions; and what patients said were helpful nursing interventions. A framework was developed for the study which depicts the process of helplessness (depression) as the negative 'mirror-image' of the process of self care. Results were analysed within this framework to determine whether or not nurses tended to support behaviours which were indicative of movement towards helplessness or encourage those which indicated progress towards self care.

Results suggest that nurses in this study sample did not encourage progress towards self care by their interventions. There was little evidence of positive reinforcement for independent or coping behaviours with patients in the study sample. Further, the nursing practice

showed little relationship to the role prescribed in the literature. The nurses did demonstrate a warm, caring, friendly approach that seemed to stem from a more traditional 'succouring' or 'mothering' view of the nurse's role.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Recently the issue of "sexist" treatments of populations has assumed major importance. The feeling is that stereotypes are developed and maintained by the way in which information is presented. However, since there is a large body of information relating to nursing practice where a traditional use of language sees patients as 'he' and nurses as 'she', to maintain continuity for the reader these terms are retained in this study. In this context, both terms should be read to include both sexes. It is hoped that readers will accept the spirit in which these terms are used.

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GLOSSARY

ALIENATION "A sense of the basic fragility and contingency of human life; the impotence of reason confronted with the depths of existence; the threat of nothingness; and the solitary and unsheltered condition of the individual before this threat" (Barrett, 1962).

AVAILABILITY The process of using a problem-solving approach in interaction to determine if a patient has a need for help and then attempting to meet that need.

Ministrative Availability: Response to patient signals indicating need for help with attempt to minister to this need. "Although the word 'ministering' has the connotation of physical presence, a nurse can still be ministratively available to a patient when she is not physically at his side. If a nurse lets a patient know when she gives him care and information how he can summon her again, that she is aware of his needs-for-help, and that she will return, she is being ministratively available to him" (Schmidt, 1972, 1087).

Receptive Availability: Sensitivity and receptivity to the patient and his needs.

"BARS" Behaviourally Anchored Rating Scales:- A procedure for constructing a performance scale that has unambiguous anchors (Smith and Kendall, 1963; Schwab, Heneman and DeCotiis, 1975).

CONSISTENCY OF CARE Identification and implementation of a specific approach to providing care when patients exhibit certain behaviours.

DEPRESSION For this study, patients were taken to be depressed if they exhibited on admission to hospital at least four of the following eight symptoms indicative of a

depressive episode (Kalkman and Davis, 1980, 266).

1. Appetite disturbance with gain or loss of weight.
2. Sleep disturbance with either too much or too little sleep
3. Loss of energy with fatigue or tiredness
4. Psychomotor disturbance with either agitation or retardation
5. Loss of interest and/or pleasure in activities and a decrease in sex drive
6. Self reproach and/or guilt
7. Decreased concentration and reported inability to think or make decisions
8. Recurrent suicidal thoughts including wishes to be dead and/or suicidal behaviour.

HELPLESSNESS

A condition where the subject sees the power to change his environmental contingencies as being outside his own control (Seligman, 1975).

LEARNED HELPLESSNESS

A condition characterised by symptoms such as passivity; difficulty in learning that responses produce relief; lack of aggression; weight loss; appetite loss; social and sexual deficits. The learned aspect denotes a conditioned response where the perceived locus of control shifts from the self to outside the self.

NURSING CARE

In this study, nursing care refers to the behaviours exhibited during unstructured time in the clinical setting by nursing staff in interaction with depressed patients who are receiving in-care treatment.

REINFORCEMENT

The consequences governing behaviour. This may be positive, as in a rewarding sense, or negative, as in a punishing sense.

**SECONDARY
GAIN**

The additional gratification or extra attention gained because of care given in relation to a primary problem.

SELF CARE

The practice of learned activities that individuals initiate and perform on their own behalf in maintaining life, health and well being (Orem, 1980, 28).

SICK ROLE

Acceptance of being sick and temporarily withdrawing from adult responsibilities to concentrate on the problem of getting well (Lederer, 1952).

**UNSTRUCTURED
TIME**

That time outside of the weekday daily programmed sessions of individual, group, occupational, or recreational therapy which occur from 8.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m. in the clinical setting used in this study.