

## ABSTRACT

Mental wellbeing of student nurses is important as they are a group dealing directly with human beings. Student nurses during their training face various stressful situations. These situations may lead to psychological distress among them. This issue has not been addressed previously among student nurses in Nursing Training Schools in Sri Lanka. Practicing coping strategies for stress is an essential element to prevent them becoming psychologically distressed as well as to promote their mental health.

This research was carried out with the objectives of describing demographic and socio-economic characteristics, work and non-work related factors, assessing the status of psychological distress, describing some factors associated with status of psychological distress and of coping strategies among female student nurses in the NTS Galle.

A cross-sectional descriptive study was carried out among female student nurses in the NTS Galle. All 525 female student nurses were included to the study on the advice of the ethical committee and since was feasible to collect information although the calculated sample size was 422. The female student nurses belonged to 3<sup>rd</sup> year (2006 batch) and 2<sup>nd</sup> year (2007 batch). A self administered questionnaire (SAQ) collected demographic, socio-economic characteristics, work and non-work related factors. Assessment of status of psychological distress was done using the already validated General Health Questionnaire-30 (GHQ-30) Sinhala version. A third SAQ gathered information on problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies for stress. Data was analyzed using SPSS package and appropriate statistical tests were applied.

The mean age of 513 female student nurses who participated in the study, was  $24 \pm 1.4$  years. Majority were Sinhala (99.6%) and Buddhists (98.8%). The proportion of female student nurses who were the eldest in their families was 41% and 39.6% had two siblings. Only 24.6% female student nurses were residing at home, 59.8% were residing in boarding houses and 12.5% were in the hostel while attending the NTS. Both parents were alive in 84.6% student and parents were unemployed in 29.6% female student nurses. Among female student nurses 35.9% belonged to social class Vb and a majority (81.9%) indicated that their monthly allowance they receive from the government was adequate for their monthly spending. Among female student nurses 73.1% had passed

the G.C.E.A/L examination in the science subject stream. During the time of data collection 31.8% were in medical wards for the clinical training and 47.6% had done night duty shifts.

This study found that 46.6 % female student nurses were psychologically distressed. Psychological distress was significantly higher among female student nurses with inadequate monthly allowance for monthly spending ( $p < 0.001$ ). Though a majority of female student nurses were affected by work overload (85%), a significant association with psychological distress was not found. Dissatisfaction about the choice of career and the training environment, boredom at work, dissatisfaction with work, not rewarded for good work and lack of opportunity to use abilities, clinical incompetence and fear of failure in examinations were identified as main stressors during the training that were significantly associated with psychological distress among them ( $p < 0.05$ ).

Conflicts with superiors and conflict situations with colleagues, inadequate response to the needs of female student nurses and unavailability of professional counseling service in the NTS were stressors that affected the female student nurses and had affected the psychological distress status significantly ( $p < 0.05$ ).

Among non-work related factors, an illness or a major injury of female student nurses and illness/major injury or death of a family member or a close person, increasing arguments with family members, missing opportunities to meet beloved ones and financial problems during the past four weeks were significantly associated with psychological distress ( $p < 0.05$ ) more than 40% of student nurses practiced each of problem-focused coping strategy seldom. Majority of the female student nurses were frequently practicing the comfort in religion or spiritual beliefs while harmful coping strategies were practiced by a lower proportion of them.

It is important to establish a professional counseling service in the NTS and encourage female student nurses to practice effective stress coping strategies.

**Key words:** Student nurses; Psychological distress; Coping strategies; GHQ-30;  
Sri Lanka