

## Original Research Article

# Undergraduate nursing students' attitude towards mental illness: a cross sectional study

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** People suffering from mental illness commonly face stigma, bias, and discrimination by general public. Health care professionals are not immune to social biases and share the public's attitude meted out to people with mental illness. Nursing students are future health manpower. There are only few studies conducted on medical students' attitude towards people with mental illnesses in India. We have planned this study to examine the undergraduate nursing students' attitude towards people suffering from mental illnesses.

**Methods:** It was a cross-sectional study. A total of 220 undergraduate nursing students were selected randomly with their consent to complete the Attitude Scale for Mental Illness (ASMI).

**Results:** The nursing students were found to have a significant positive attitude towards mental illness in five of the six attitudes factors: Restrictiveness (8.42), benevolence (28.6) and stigmatization (7.3), separatism (15.6) and stereotype (9.4) However, these students had negative attitude in pessimistic predictions (12.5) domain as they rated this domain slightly on the higher side.

**Conclusions:** Academic education in this field must be conceptualized and planned in order to favor the change of the attitudes that includes greater utilization of those teaching strategies that challenge beliefs and assumptions and promote a commitment to provide holistic care to people with mental illness.

**Keywords:** Attitude, Mental illness, Nursing students

## INTRODUCTION

Health care professionals are also involved in social biases and surprisingly share the general public's attitude related to people with mental illnesses.<sup>1</sup> Nurses play a vital role in caring for the mentally ill in sickness and in rehabilitating the mentally ill after an acute episode of illness. A large proportion of patients and their families who are seeking help for their mental illness rightfully expect the hospital and nursing staff to be aware of their needs and treat them sympathetically as unique

individuals without any bias and discrimination.<sup>2</sup> Worldwide, it is an ongoing concern that the subject of psychiatry, psychiatrists, mental health professionals and the mentally ill patients are severely affected by the negative biases and the cultural stereotypes of the general public.

The attitudes and knowledge of the health care professionals on mental illness has been argued to be a major determinant of the quality and outcome of care for mentally ill patients.<sup>3</sup> In reality, the universality of

harmful beliefs and subsequent negative attitudes towards mentally ill is quite prevalent even among nursing students. Stigma and discrimination are the main obstacles confronting the mentally ill today and it is the ignominy and trepidation of this discrimination that prevents the mentally ill from seeking help and care for their disorders. On the contrary, the number of people with mental illnesses is increasing in India.<sup>4</sup>

Students starting the nursing course bring with them stereotypes and bias in relation to mentally-ill people, thus depicting lack of knowledge as to their possibilities of recovery and social living. In day to day practice it is seen that undergraduate nursing students show unfavorable attitudes toward psychiatric/mental health nursing as a career.<sup>5</sup> Nursing students are future health manpower of our country. They will be part of societal development.

In order to fulfill their role, they need to be trained in such a manner as to develop positive attitudes toward needy people. Nurses need to be able to provide mental health education and care with a positive attitude in the community, as community care is the most accessible form of care world-wide. We have devised this study to examine the nursing students' opinions who were studying in 1<sup>st</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> year of BSc nursing college of urban nursing college of Himachal Pradesh India, about mental illness.

**METHODS**

The study was carried out among undergraduate nursing students, from July 2017 to August 2017. Selection criteria for participants included: nursing students studying in 1st year to 4th year of their course and those among them who were willing to participate in the study. Exclusion criteria included participants who were not willing to participate. A total of 220 students were enrolled in the study after obtaining their consent.

**Study tool**

A self-administrated questionnaire was used consisting of information regarding the age, education, annual family income, residence and history of mental illness in the family.

**Attitude scale for mental illness (ASMI)**

The ASMI-a valid and reliable, self-report measure of attitudes-was administered to students along with a brief demographic form. The ASMI section comprises of 34 items and measures the general attitude to mental illness. Respondents were provided the choice of five response categories to tick, based on their feelings from totally disagree to totally agree (totally disagree = 1, almost totally disagree = 2, sometimes agree = 3, almost totally agree = 4, totally agree = 5) accordingly.

*It consists of six conceptual factors*

- Benevolence, separatism, stereotyping, restrictiveness, pessimistic prediction and stigmatization.
- Benevolence is intended to measure the paternalistic and sympathetic views of the respondents.
- Separatism is intended to measure the respondents' attitude of discrimination.
- Stereotyping measures the degree of respondents' maintenance of social distance towards the mentally ill.
- Restrictiveness refers to viewing the mentally ill as a threat to society.
- Pessimistic prediction is the negative evaluative component towards the mentally ill. This factor was intended to measure the level of bias towards mental illness.

Stigmatization is the feeling of disgrace or discredit, which sets a person apart from others. This factor was intended to measure the discriminatory behavior of the students towards mental illness.

**Procedure**

Verbal explanation of the aims and objectives and methodology was given to all the participants. When they agreed to participate in the study, they were asked to complete the questionnaire by themselves in about 30 minute's time. Data collection tools contained no identifying information and therefore the confidentiality was maintained.

**RESULTS**

The sample consisted of 220 participants whose age ranged between 17 and 25 years (M ± SD = 19.5±1.43). Most of the participants (63%) hailed from urban areas followed by 37% from rural background. Annual average income for the participants' family was 2.34 ± 1.50 lakh rupees. Only 46 (21%) out of 220 participants had a relative with a history of mental illness.

**Table 1: Mean scores of responses of the participants to the attitude towards mentally ill patients.**

Subscales	No of items	Possible score	Cut off (mid) point	Mean± SD
Separatism	10	5-50	30	15.6±2.67
Stereotyping	4	4-20	12	9.4±3.3
Restrictiveness	4	4-20	12	8.42±2.6
Benevolence	8	8-40	24	28.6±4.32
Pessimistic prediction	4	4-20	12	12.5±3.5
Stigmatization	4	4-20	12	7.3±2.7

Table 1 explains the responses (mean scores) of the participants to the attitude towards mentally ill patients.

Higher scores were observed on the domain of benevolence ( $28.6 \pm 4.32$ ), but slightly high scores were noted on pessimistic prediction ( $12.5 \pm 3.5$ ). Higher scores on pessimistic prediction domain of the scale indicated an unhealthy attitude of nursing students toward those with mental illness. However, less than cut-off point scores were observed in restrictiveness ( $8.42 \pm 2.6$ ), stigmatization ( $7.3 \pm 2.7$ ), stereotypy ( $9.4 \pm 3.3$ ), separatism ( $15.6 \pm 2.67$ ) domains. No significant correlation was found between nursing students' attitudes towards mental illness and their age, gender, socio-economic status and place of residency.

## DISCUSSION

Studies on nursing students' attitude towards patients suffering from mental illness are very few in India. These studies mainly highlighted the comparison of the effectiveness of the mental health course on attitudinal changes towards mentally ill patients. The authors felt that it is critical to examine the attitudes of student nurses toward mentally ill. Thus, this multidimensional scale helps us identify both the negative and positive aspects of the attitudes where we can work on to intervene, underpin and strengthen the attitudes of nursing students to provide efficient care to persons with mental illness.<sup>6,7</sup> In the present study, the results showed that nursing students have significant positive attitudes towards mental illness in five of the six attitudes factors which are: restrictiveness, benevolence, stereotyping, separatism and stigmatization. The participants showed less restrictive attitude toward mentally ill as they scored low to the statements in restrictiveness domain.

These findings indicated nursing students agreed that mentally ill people can enjoy personal or social life events such as marriage, having children, working, or a family. In our study, nursing students had less stigmatizing attitudes toward people with mental illness. These findings were not in coherence with a previous study that showed mental illness is deeply discredited by the society and rejected as a result of which the same was also rated high by medical students.<sup>8,9</sup> The present study findings are in coherence with a study conducted among Jordanian nursing students as it was found nursing students had significant positive attitudes toward mental illness in four of the five attitudes factors: Authoritarianism; benevolence; mental hygiene ideology; and interpersonal etiology.<sup>10</sup>

The stigma related to mental illness is an international concern and a long-standing challenge for research to understand its basis, mechanisms and consequences in order to be able to formulate means by which stigma and its impact may be ameliorated. In addition, research assessing population attitudes toward mental illness reveals that stigma towards the mentally ill is evident in many national and cultural settings.<sup>11,12</sup> Higher benevolence scores indicated that most of the nursing students would express warmth and selflessness towards

the persons suffering from any form of mental illnesses. These findings were similar with previous research.<sup>13</sup> In a comparative study, it was found that Brazilian students present more positive attitudes toward mental disorders, as they showed to be less authoritarian, restrictive and discriminative than the Chilean and Peruvian students.<sup>14,15</sup>

The nursing students had positive score on stereotyping domain. Students starting the nursing course bring with them stereotypes and bias in relation to mentally-ill people, thus showing lack of knowledge as to their possibilities of recovery and social living. In a previous study finding, nursing students had a negative attitude when it came to accept the sovereignty and self-reliance of the mentally ill and in considering them as part of the larger unaffected community.

In contrast to most societies, stereotypes about mental illness, such as an influence of evil spirits, religious afflictions and deviations from societal norms, were not rated high by these students. Furthermore, they had pessimistic attitude regarding recovery and rehabilitation of mentally ill patients.<sup>16-18</sup>

The present study showed that nursing students have significant positive attitudes toward mental illness in five of the six attitudes factors i.e. restrictiveness, benevolence, stigmatization, separatism and stereotype. However, these students have negative attitudes in pessimistic predictions domains since it was rated slight high. These findings are important for nursing teaching and training.

They demonstrate the need for specifically focusing training to target the students with the most negative attitudes. Thus, academic education from courses in this area must be planned so as to favor the change of the attitudes that include greater use of teaching strategies that challenge beliefs and assumptions and encourage a commitment to provide gentle and effective care to people with mental illnesses.

## CONCLUSION

The present study has certain limitations that include relatively small sample size. Despite this limitation, it would be useful to conduct similar research in this area among students after completing academic education and perhaps comparing the students from other than nursing disciplines to see if there are any similarities and/or differences in the results.

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