Mental Health Simulations Using a Standardized Patient to Provide Dimensional Learning for Undergraduate Nursing Students

Joan L. Hadley MS, APRN, PMHCNS-BC and Joanne R. Tuero BSN, MSN, RN, VHA-CM

University of Utah College of Nursing, Salt Lake City, Utah

Veterans Affairs Salt Lake City Health Care System, Salt Lake City, Utah

Background

Using Standardized Patients (SPs—hired actors) trained to model mental health disorders can boost nursing students’ confidence in performing mental status assessments, interviewing skills, and therapeutic communication. Multiple mental health conditions such as suicidal behavior, psychosis, schizophrenia, post traumatic stress disorder/traumatic brain injury, and depression can be introduced to undergraduate nursing students using simulation. Simulation provides a safe place to explore feelings, practice assessments, and apply therapeutic communication skills.

Methods

• Faculty members prepared SPs by scripting them for their assigned roles.
• Students conducted mental status exams, assessed for suicidal risk, applied therapeutic use of self, built rapport, and administered medications.
• SPs assisted in the teaching and the evaluation process of the scenario.
• During the debriefing session, SPs shared with the students how it felt to be the patient. They also provided students with feedback.
• Students evaluated the simulation experience through a 15-item survey that included two open-ended questions.

Results

To date, 110 baccalaureate nursing students at the University of Utah College of Nursing have participated in mental health simulations using SPs. Ninety-four percent of participants overwhelmingly rated the simulation as a very positive experience (strongly agree or agree).

The highest ranked item (99%) was: “Simulator faculty facilitators promoted a safe atmosphere for learning” while “The objectives of the simulation experience were clear from the beginning” ranked the lowest at 88% who strongly agreed or agree.

From the two open-ended questions, themes emerged:

What went well in this scenario?

Feeling Real
“By using an SP, it made it realistic and life-like.”
“SP helped with interactions & responses.”
“I could totally become immersed in the scene.”

Safety in Learning
“It felt safe to be uncomfortable and unsure.”
“….safe environment to practice care of a psychotic patient.”
“Feeling support, having adequate information and resources before scenario.”

Improving my Skills
“Medication assessment & administration, patient safety and discharge teaching.”
“Patient was able to depict a mental illness & it really helped me understand the appropriate nursing interventions for the situation.”

What could we improve next time?

Resource Availability
“Having all indicated PRN medications available”
“….being able to control technical support”
“….students being able to hear the nurse when she calls the provider for orders regarding the patient.”

Discussion

• The benefits of simulation with SPs include the use of adult learning principles which facilitate critical reflection. Additional advice to students from experts and peers enhances skill development.

• SPs add the dimension of reality by soliciting from the student a real life encounter with a person who reacts to the emotional interactions. Each student receives immediate feedback according to the intervention they used.

• Evaluations of sessions showed that students gain confidence, feel less fearful, as well as improve and increase their ability to provide holistic, mental health care.

• Faculty learned to anticipate that students might seek other medications, equipment and seating. These items should be made available.

Objectives

Students will be able to:
• Conduct multiple levels of assessment utilizing affective mental health screening tools
• Utilize safety protocols in mental health nursing
• Demonstrate therapeutic communication techniques for assessing a client diagnosed with a mental illness
• Model professionalism through use of empathy and caring behaviors
• Conduct an abnormal involuntary movement assessment as well as safely administer PRN medications
• Discuss ethical implications for involuntary commitments, forced medication, and use of least restrictive measures as indicated

References

