

High Test Anxiety among Nursing Students

by

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Abstract

Nursing programs can be highly stressful, and the investigation was undertaken to see if nursing students are more test anxious than students in other fields. The Westside Test Anxiety Scale has administered to 298 nursing students at two colleges, and to a comparison group of 471 high school and college students. Fully 30% of nursing students were found to have high test anxiety, versus 17% of students in the comparison populations. Statistically, test anxiety was found to be significantly higher for the nursing students compared to other students. It is recommended that nursing programs be aware of the high stress and anxiety among their students and seek ways to overcome it.

As with other students, nursing students are under considerable pressure to meet multiple classroom and practicum requirements. In addition, nursing students are also under the impression that even a minor mistake might seriously harm a patient as well jeopardize the students' own careers. Several nursing instructors have the impression that nursing students are more anxious about their course of studies than are students in other fields, and are more highly test anxious.

The current study is to assess the frequency and severity of test anxiety among college nursing students.

Method

The Westside Test Anxiety Scale was used as the principal measure of anxiety (Driscoll, 2007). The Westside Scale was chosen because it is primarily a measure of anxiety impairment, because recent population sample results were readily available, and because anxiety changes as measured by the Westside scale have been found to correlate with changes in test performance (Miller et al., 2007).

The Westside scale is scored from 1.0 (no anxiety) to 5.0 (panic). A score of 3.5 or higher is considered highly anxious while 4.0 or higher shows extreme anxiety. The 3.0–3.4 range indicates "moderately high" anxiety. Scores for several high school and college student populations were collected prior to the investigation, resulting in a data pool of 471 students.

The entire class of nursing students from a large state university and from a small private college completed the Westside scale. The state university class had 119 students, while the private college class had 186 students.

Results

Of the high school and college students in the prior samples, 17% were found to have high test anxiety (see Table 1). The research literature reports approximately 16%–20% of students in the high test anxiety range (cf. summary by Ergene, 2003), so the calibration for the Westside scale appears to be similar to that of other widely used scales.

In addition, another 18% of our high school and college samples had moderately high anxiety, indicating modest anxiety impairment. So in all, 35% of students had moderately high anxiety or higher.

Among nursing students, 30% were found to have high test anxiety, which is close to double the figures for the comparison population samples. In addition, another 26% of nursing students had moderately high anxiety, which is again higher than the comparison figures.

Test Anxiety for Nursing vs. General Population

	General Population		2Nursing Schools		State U.	Small College
	%	Subj.	%	Subj.	%	%
High	17%	79	30%	92	34%	27%
Moderately High	18%	85	26%	78	29%	23%
High + Moderately High	(35%)		(56%)			
Normal range	65%	307	44%	135	37%	50%
Total	(100%)	471		298	112	186
Numerical Means	2.87		3.13		3.18	3.09

The categories were converted to numerical scores for analysis. The mean score was 2.87 (high normal) for the earlier population samples, and was 3.14 (moderately high) for the nursing students. The difference was statistically significant ($F = 26.2$,

$p < .001$, $SD = 0.67$) for the two schools combined, and also significantly higher for each of the two schools compared to the non-nursing samples.

Discussion

The results show considerably higher incidence of test anxiety among the two nursing colleges compared to samples from the broader population. The higher anxiety is seen in the percentage of highly anxious students, and in the average anxiety scores for the students.

While the results were attained at two specific colleges, the strength of the findings suggest that the same trends should be expected in other similar nursing programs.

The two colleges here have standard nursing programs and we have no reason to expect either of them to be either more stressful or less stressful than other such programs across the nation.

It is recommended that nursing programs recognize that many nursing students experience unusually high anxiety, and that programs seek out whatever counter-measures seem feasible. We wish our nursing programs the best in combating what appears to be an epidemic of high anxiety among nursing students.

References

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