

Assessing Awareness and Knowledge of Therapeutic Communication Skills Among Nursing Students in Swat, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Objective: A key element of high-quality healthcare is effective therapeutic communication between nurses and patients, which improves patient happiness, comprehension, and recovery results. The purpose of this study was to assess nursing students' awareness and understanding of therapeutic communication at a private nursing school in Swat, Pakistan.

Methods: A cross-sectional descriptive study was conducted over six months, from June to December 2023. A total of 100 nursing students (35 from the third year and 65 from the fourth year) were selected through convenience sampling. Data were collected using a structured, pre-tested questionnaire comprising 20 multiple-choice questions assessing verbal and non-verbal communication skills, empathy, active listening, and patient-centered care. Awareness levels were categorized as good (15–20 points), moderate (10–14 points), and poor (<10 points). Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were calculated using SPSS Version 23.0.

Results: Among the participants, 70% were male, and 30% were female. The overall mean awareness score was 16.3 ± 3.2 , indicating good awareness. Of the students, 80% demonstrated good awareness, while 20% exhibited poor awareness. Fourth-year students had slightly higher mean scores than third-year students, reflecting an improvement in academic progression. No statistically significant gender-based differences in awareness were observed.

Conclusion: While most nursing students exhibited good awareness of therapeutic communication, a notable proportion displayed knowledge gaps. The findings emphasize the need for targeted communication training and curricular modifications in nursing programs to enhance therapeutic communication skills and improve patient care outcomes.

Keywords: Communication; Doctor; Emergency; Hospital; Patient

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Introduction

Therapeutic communication, encompassing both verbal and non-verbal elements, is pivotal for building trust and rapport with patients, enhancing understanding, and improving compliance with treatment plans.¹ Non-verbal cues, including body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice, are particularly influential in

shaping patient outcomes.^{2, 3} This skill is a cornerstone of nursing practice, forming the basis of effective interaction between healthcare providers and patients. Therapeutic communication is a key component of patient-centered care, emphasizing empathy, active listening, and open dialogue to address patients' needs comprehensively. Its benefits include improved patient outcomes, greater satisfaction, and

enhanced adherence to treatment plans.

For nursing students, therapeutic communication is indispensable, especially during clinical placements where they engage with patients in real-life healthcare settings.³ Clinical placements, and structured hands-on learning experiences in healthcare environments, allow students to apply theoretical knowledge in practice while developing essential communication skills.

Research consistently highlights the role of therapeutic communication in improving health outcomes and care quality, underscoring its importance in nursing education.⁴ However, awareness and mastery of these skills among nursing students often vary, largely influenced by their educational background and clinical exposure. While advanced students may exhibit better comprehension, significant gaps remain, particularly among early-year students. Studies in South Asia reveal that although nursing students generally possess a basic awareness of therapeutic communication, many struggle to effectively apply these skills in clinical practice.⁵

In Pakistan, healthcare workers, including nurses, often lack adequate training in therapeutic communication.⁶ Research indicates that many healthcare professionals fail to prioritize empathetic listening, rapport building, and non-verbal cues during patient interactions, leading to suboptimal patient experiences. The nursing curriculum in Pakistan, especially in regions like Swat, has historically placed limited emphasis on communication skills, further contributing to this deficiency.

This study aims to assess nursing students' understanding of therapeutic communication at a private nursing school in Swat, Pakistan. By identifying gaps in awareness and application, the research seeks to provide insights that can inform curriculum development and improve patient care outcomes. It addresses a critical gap in existing literature, offers evidence on the current state of therapeutic communication skills among nursing students in Pakistan, and proposes strategies to better equip them for clinical practice.

Materials and Methods

This study utilized a cross-sectional descriptive design to evaluate the knowledge of nursing students regarding therapeutic communication with patients. The research was conducted over six months, from June 2023 to

December 2023, at a private nursing college in Swat, Pakistan.

Participants and Sampling

The target population consisted of third- and fourth-year nursing students, as these cohorts are nearing the completion of their studies and are expected to have developed foundational communication skills essential for patient care. A sample of 100 nursing students was selected using convenience sampling, allowing for the inclusion of readily available participants. This sampling technique was employed due to the accessibility of students and the structured academic schedules within the college.

The sample included 35 third-year students and 65 fourth-year students. The gender distribution was 30% female ($n = 30$) and 70% male ($n = 70$). The sample size was determined based on the total enrollment of students in the targeted years, ensuring adequate representation while balancing feasibility and resource constraints.

Data Collection Tool and Procedure

Data were collected using a structured, self-administered questionnaire designed to assess students' knowledge of therapeutic communication. The questionnaire consisted of 20 multiple-choice questions (MCQs) covering key aspects of therapeutic communication, such as verbal and non-verbal communication skills, active listening, empathy, and patient-centered care.

Each correct response was awarded one point, with a total maximum score of 20. Awareness levels were categorized as follows:

- **Good Awareness:** 15–20 points
- **Moderate Awareness:** 10–14 points
- **Poor Awareness:** Below 10 points

The questionnaire was pre-tested on a small group of nursing students ($n = 10$) to ensure clarity, relevance, and reliability. Based on the feedback, minor revisions were made to enhance the instrument's effectiveness.

The final version of the questionnaire was distributed to the participants in a classroom setting. Participants were given 30 minutes to complete the questionnaire. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring voluntary participation. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the study by not collecting personal identifiers.

Data Analysis

The collected data were entered into SPSS software (Version 23.0) for statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, were used to summarize the data and provide insights into the students' levels of awareness regarding therapeutic communication.

Results

Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the study participants. Out of 100 nursing students, 70% (n = 70) were male, and 30% (n = 30) were female. Regarding the year of study, 35% (n = 35) were in their third year, while the majority, 65% (n = 65), were in their fourth year.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Variables	Percentage	Frequency
Gender		
Male	70%	70
Female	30%	30
Study Year		
3rd Year	35%	35
4th Year	65%	65

As shown in Table 2, the majority of students demonstrated a good awareness of therapeutic communication. Specifically, 80% (n = 80) had good awareness, scoring between 15–20 points. In contrast, 20% (n = 20) had poor awareness, scoring below 10 points.

Table 2: Levels of Knowledge of Therapeutic Communication

Level of Knowledge	Frequency	Percentage
Good Awareness	80	80%
Poor Awareness	20	20%

Table 3 presents the mean awareness score for the participants. The overall mean score was 16.3, with a standard deviation of 3.2, indicating a generally high level of knowledge of therapeutic communication.

Table 3: Mean Awareness Score of Therapeutic

Communication

Group	Mean Awareness Score	Standard Deviation	Sample Size (N)
Overall	16.3	3.2	100

The analysis of awareness scores revealed no statistically significant difference between male and female students, indicating equitable knowledge levels across genders. However, fourth-year students demonstrated slightly higher mean scores compared to third-year students, suggesting an incremental improvement in awareness with academic progression. Despite the generally good awareness levels, 20% of participants scored poorly, highlighting the presence of knowledge gaps and emphasizing the need for targeted interventions to enhance therapeutic communication skills among nursing students.

The results highlight that while most nursing students possess a good understanding of therapeutic communication, gaps persist, particularly among a minority. These findings underscore the importance of incorporating enhanced communication training in nursing curricula to address these gaps and improve patient care outcomes.

Discussion

Therapeutic communication skills vary significantly among healthcare professionals in Pakistan and globally, reflecting differences in training, professional roles, and cultural influences. In Pakistan, doctors and dentists often receive limited formal training in communication skills, with the emphasis traditionally placed on clinical and technical expertise.⁷ Pharmacists and allied healthcare providers face similar challenges, as their educational curricula tend to prioritize pharmacological or technical knowledge over interpersonal skills.⁸ Globally, however, therapeutic communication is increasingly recognized as a core competency across healthcare disciplines. For instance, in many Western countries, medical and dental curricula integrate extensive training in communication, empathy, and patient-centered care, often supported by standardized patient encounters and simulation exercises.⁹ Nurses, particularly in high-income countries, are trained extensively in therapeutic communication as part of their patient care

responsibilities, often outperforming other healthcare professionals in this domain. These disparities highlight the need for a unified and context-specific approach in Pakistan, ensuring that all healthcare providers, regardless of their discipline, are equipped with the communication skills necessary for effective patient care. Addressing this gap can help align Pakistan's healthcare practices with global standards, improving patient outcomes and satisfaction.

The results of this study indicate that a significant majority of nursing students (80%) at the private nursing college in Swat have a good understanding of therapeutic communication. However, a notable proportion (20%) still lacks sufficient awareness, which highlights an area of concern for educators. Similar findings were reported by Kourkouta and Papathanasiou (2014) who found that advanced nursing students had better communication skills. In the same way, another study found that the majority of nurses who work in hospitals have good therapeutic communication abilities.¹⁰

In comparison, moderate therapeutic communication abilities and a good attitude towards the use and perception of caring behaviors were displayed by nursing students.¹¹ In contrast, a study found that high agreeableness scores were obtained from nursing students, and personality traits and therapeutic communication abilities were found to be related.¹² Cultural norms influence the communication styles of male and female students, with women often socialized to be more empathetic and communicative in caregiving roles.¹³

Additionally, improving patient satisfaction and treatment adherence requires therapeutic communication, and students with these abilities are better prepared to offer comprehensive care.^{14, 15} Therefore, the development of communication skills through both academic and practical training must be emphasized in the nursing curriculum.¹⁶⁻¹⁸

Additionally, the results indicate that fourth-year students and other students with more clinical exposure are more likely to gain a deeper comprehension of patient-centered communication.^{19, 20} Therefore, the gap seen in third-year students may be closed by including additional opportunities for hands-on practice, simulation exercises, and patient engagement scenarios in the early years of nursing education.^{21, 22}

This study was conducted at a single

private nursing college in Swat, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other institutions or regions. Additionally, the use of convenience sampling could introduce selection bias. Future research should include a larger and more diverse sample across multiple institutions to provide a comprehensive understanding of therapeutic communication awareness among nursing students in Pakistan. Incorporating longitudinal studies to track skill development over time and evaluating the effectiveness of curriculum changes could further enhance the evidence base. Strengthening early interventions and fostering a culture of continuous learning in therapeutic communication will be crucial for addressing the observed gaps and ensuring better patient care outcomes.

Conclusion

The findings of this study underscore the need to prioritize therapeutic communication training in nursing education. With 80% of nursing students demonstrating adequate knowledge, the results indicate a generally good level of awareness. However, the 20% with poor awareness highlights a critical gap that must be addressed through targeted interventions. It is recommended that nursing educators incorporate structured training on therapeutic communication skills early in the curriculum and reinforce it with consistent assessments throughout the program. The observed incremental improvement in communication skills with academic progression further emphasizes the importance of practical exposure, such as clinical placements and simulation-based learning, in enhancing these competencies. Future curriculum development should focus on providing early and sustained opportunities for hands-on practice and patient engagement to ensure all students are well-equipped to deliver patient-centered care and improve healthcare outcomes.

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Author Contribution

AB conceived the idea, collected data, and wrote the initial manuscript. JI collected data, analyzed the data, validated the results and all authors proofread the finalized manuscript.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board (IRB) prior to conducting the study (IRB-SMC/NUR/2023/159). All participants were informed about the purpose of the research, and their consent was obtained in accordance with ethical guidelines. The study adhered to principles of confidentiality, ensuring the data collected was used solely for research purposes.

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Conflict of Interest

None

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