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Full Length Article

Exploring resilience in nurses caring for older persons



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 5 April 2016

Accepted 19 January 2017

Keywords:

Adverse working conditions

Care of older persons

Challenges encountered in caring
for older persons

Nurses' strengths

Resilience of nurses

ABSTRACT

Background: A shortage of nurses caring for older persons is experienced due to adverse working conditions. Resilience might empower nurses to persevere while caring for older persons. Research regarding the resilience of nurses caring for older persons is scarce.

Objectives: The objectives were to explore and describe the strengths and coping abilities of nurses caring for older persons and to formulate recommendations to strengthen their resilience.

Methodology: An explorative, descriptive qualitative research design was used. An all-inclusive sample of nurses caring for older persons in an urban setting in the North West Province, South Africa, participated in the study. During phase one, demographic information was obtained, and narratives were written (n = 43). Four focus group interviews were conducted in phase two (n = 17) and recommendations were formulated in phase three. Content analysis was used.

Principal results: Participants experienced adverse working circumstances while caring for older persons and they needed resilience to balance the emotional nature of the work, work ethics, staff shortages, physical demands of the work and the dependency of the older persons. These nurses used personal, professional, contextual and spiritual strengths to handle adverse working conditions.

Conclusions: By applying their personal, professional, contextual and spiritual strengths, nurses could further enhance these strengths and possibly their resilience. The participants' identified strengths were used to formulate recommendations to strengthen resilience of nurses caring for older persons.

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Peer review under responsibility of Johannesburg University.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.hsag.2017.01.003>

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1. Introduction

The aim of this study was to explore and describe the resilience of nurses caring for older persons. Resilience might enable nurses to better cope with adverse working conditions experienced while caring for older persons. This article reports on qualitative research that explored the resilience of nurses caring for older persons in the North West Province (NWP) of South Africa.

1.1. Background

Populations globally, including South Africa, are rapidly growing older (World Health Organization [WHO], 2011; Statistics South Africa, 2011). It is projected that the number of people aged 65 and older will increase from 524 million in 2010 to almost 1.5 billion in 2050 (WHO, 2011). The number of older persons in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is expected to grow faster than in the rest of the world and will increase from 46 million in 2015 to 157 million by 2050 (WHO, 2015).

These growing numbers of older persons require qualified nurses to provide specialised care (Fedele, 2015). However, adverse working conditions experienced by nurses caring for older persons cause international as well as national nursing shortages (Chenoweth, Jeon, Merlyn, & Brodaty, 2010; Christopher, Chiarella, & Waters, 2015; Department of Social Development [DSD], 2010; Fedele, 2015).

Nurses caring for older persons experience a low professional status and their work is physically and emotionally challenging (Chenoweth et al., 2010; Schmidt, Dichter, Palm, & Hasselhorn, 2012). These nurses often experience workplace violence (Isaksson, Graneheim, Richter, Eisemann, & Aström, 2008; Sharipova, Hogh, & Borg, 2010). Older persons with dementia place even more pressure on nurses because they require more time and knowledge and their demands are unpredictable (Josefsson, Sonde, Winblad, & Wahlin, 2007). This challenging behaviour of the older persons is stressful to the nurses and influences their health and work ability and may cause burnout (Schmidt et al., 2012). Lack of leadership and involvement from management in facilities may cause stress to the nurses and may contribute to the low job satisfaction experienced by these nurses (Testad, Mikkelsen, Ballard, & Aarsland, 2010). All these factors could aggravate stress and burnout and might cause nurses to resign, aggravating the nursing shortage (Schmidt et al., 2012).

Despite these adverse working conditions, some nurses manage to cope and persevere and some even flourish (Jackson, Firtko, & Edenborough, 2007; Koen, Van Eeden, & Wissing, 2011a). The resilience of these nurses might enable them to handle the adverse working conditions experienced while caring for older persons and to persevere (Jackson et al., 2007; Koen et al., 2011a).

1.2. Resilience theory

Resilience is the ability to adjust successfully to adversity experienced (Jackson et al., 2007). Resilience is needed to handle everyday difficulties as well as great life-changing events and the positive adjustment must be in accordance

with the difficulty experienced (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013). The quality of “bouncing back” and going forward in life after difficulties is evident in resilience (Earvolino-Ramirez, 2007, p. 76). Resilience refers to the ability to be resourceful and use all the available internal and external resources to handle different contextual and developmental challenges (Pooley & Cohen, 2010). Resilience can be defined as the part played by psychological processes and behaviour in encouraging the use of personal resources and protecting an individual from the potential negative consequences of stressors (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013). Nurses can be empowered to cope with stress at work and prevent burnout if they demonstrate resilient behaviour (Edward & Hercelinskyj, 2007).

1.3. Trends from research literature

Studies regarding nurses' resilience in caring for older persons seem to be scarce. In one such study, Cameron and Brownie (2010) investigated the resilience of registered nurses who cared for older persons in high-care residential aged care facilities. These nurses enhanced their resilience by using strengths such as clinical knowledge, skills and expertise, support and self-reflection (Cameron & Brownie, 2010). Studies regarding the resilience of professional nurses in public and private healthcare facilities were conducted by Koen et al. (2011a) and Koen, Van Eeden, Wissing, and Du Plessis (2011b). Koen, Van Eeden, Wissing, and Koen (2011c) formulated guidelines to enhance nurses' resilience.

Although valuable guidelines were formulated by Koen et al. (2011c), this research was not conducted in facilities caring for older persons and these guidelines do not focus on the practicalities faced by nurses caring for older persons. Although the research findings of Cameron and Brownie (2010) provided valuable information on how resilience is enhanced by these nurses, this research included only registered nurses and not enrolled nurses nor auxiliary nurses and no recommendations were formulated for strengthening resilience in nurses caring for older persons, indicating the need for this study.

1.4. Research problem

An increasing shortage of nurses caring for older persons became evident from several reports, while there is an increased need for such care brought about by the ageing population (Chenoweth et al., 2010; Christopher et al., 2015; DSD, 2010; Fedele, 2015; WHO, 2011). According to Jackson et al. (2007, p. 1, 7) nurses can be assisted to “survive” and “thrive” in the workplace by building their personal resilience.

However, the strengths and coping abilities nurses use while caring for older persons were unknown and no recommendations to strengthen resilience in nurses caring for older persons could be found in the literature. This situation gave rise to the following research questions:

- What strengths and coping abilities do nurses use while caring for older persons?
- What recommendations could be formulated to strengthen resilience in nurses caring for older persons?

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