

Therapeutic presence: nursing in the care of emotional disorders

Presencia terapéutica: enfermería en el cuidado de los trastornos emocionales

Presença terapêutica: enfermagem no cuidado de transtornos emocionais

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Abstract

This study aimed to analyze the impact of the nurse's therapeutic presence in the care of patients with emotional disorders, using Kristen Swanson's Theory of Presence Care as a theoretical framework. The study was conducted through a theoretical reflection, based on a bibliographic review of the literature between 2020 and 2024. The analysis revealed that the nurse's presence is essential to establish a relationship of trust and empathy, promoting a safe environment that favors the emotional expression of patients. In addition, therapeutic presence helps in adherence to treatment and in the development of emotional self-management skills. The study highlighted the challenges faced by nurses, such as the high workload and the lack of specific training, which can compromise the effectiveness of care. Despite this, the growing appreciation of mental health offers opportunities to strengthen the role of nurses, improving clinical outcomes and promoting more humanized care. The adoption of strategies that integrate emotional and physical care is essential to face the complex challenges of mental health in the post-pandemic context.

Descriptors: Psychiatric Nursing; Mental Health; Nursing Care; Nurse-Patient Relations; Emotional Disorders.

Resumen

El objetivo fue analizar el impacto de la presencia terapéutica de la enfermera en el cuidado de pacientes con trastornos emocionales, utilizando como marco teórico la Teoría del Cuidado de la Presencia de Kristen Swanson. El estudio se realizó a través de una reflexión teórica, basada en una revisión bibliográfica de la literatura entre 2020 y 2024. El análisis reveló que la presencia de la enfermera es fundamental para establecer una relación de confianza y empatía, promoviendo un ambiente seguro que favorezca la expresión de los pacientes. Además, la presencia terapéutica ayuda a la adherencia al tratamiento y al desarrollo de habilidades de autogestión emocional. El estudio destacó los desafíos que enfrentan las enfermeras, como la elevada carga de trabajo y la falta de formación específica, que pueden comprometer la eficacia de los cuidados. A pesar de esto, la creciente valoración de la salud mental ofrece oportunidades para fortalecer el papel de las enfermeras, mejorar los resultados clínicos y promover una atención más humanizada. La adopción de estrategias que integren el cuidado emocional y físico es fundamental para afrontar los complejos desafíos de la salud mental en el contexto pospandemia.

Descriptorios: Enfermería Psiquiátrica; Salud Mental; Atención de Enfermería; Relaciones Enfermera-Paciente; Trastornos Emocionales.

Resumo

Objetivou-se analisar o impacto da presença terapêutica do enfermeiro no cuidado de pacientes com transtornos emocionais, utilizando a Teoria do Cuidado de Presença de Kristen Swanson como referencial teórico. O estudo foi conduzido por meio de uma reflexão teórica, fundamentada em uma revisão bibliográfica da literatura entre 2020 e 2024. A análise revelou que a presença do enfermeiro é essencial para estabelecer uma relação de confiança e empatia, promovendo um ambiente seguro que favorece a expressão emocional dos pacientes. Além disso, a presença terapêutica auxilia na adesão ao tratamento e no desenvolvimento de habilidades de autogestão emocional. O estudo destacou os desafios enfrentados pelos enfermeiros, como a alta carga de trabalho e a falta de formação específica, que podem comprometer a eficácia do cuidado. Apesar disso, a valorização crescente da saúde mental oferece oportunidades para fortalecer o papel do enfermeiro, melhorando os desfechos clínicos e promovendo um atendimento mais humanizado. A adoção de estratégias que integrem cuidados emocionais e físicos é fundamental para enfrentar os complexos desafios da saúde mental no contexto pós-pandemia.

Descritores: Enfermagem Psiquiátrica; Saúde Mental; Cuidado de Enfermagem; Relações Enfermeiro-Paciente; Transtornos Emocionais.



Introduction

Nursing care goes beyond clinical interventions, also encompassing emotional, social, and psychological aspects that directly influence patients' health. In mental health, this dimension is even more relevant, especially when caring for individuals with emotional disorders such as depression and anxiety, which compromise psychological balance. The therapeutic relationship between nurse and patient, based on active presence and emotional support, is a central element in mental health care^{1,2}.

Kristen Swanson's Caring Presence Theory offers a framework for understanding this relationship. The nurse's presence is not limited to physical proximity but also includes the emotional and psychological willingness to be with the patient. This presence, when well-established, contributes to an environment of safety and trust, which can help emotionally vulnerable patients. Evidence shows that the nurse's presence can reduce anxiety symptoms, improve treatment adherence, and promote patient autonomy in managing their emotional disorders^{3,4}.

In recent years, the mental health landscape has been significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has brought profound changes to daily life. The transition of many professional activities to remote work and prolonged social isolation has harmed interpersonal interactions and individual relationships with themselves and others. The lack of adequate resocialization after the period of isolation has affected emotional well-being, resulting in increased cases of anxiety, depression, and other emotional disorders. In this context, the presence of nurses in mental health care becomes increasingly important, providing emotional support and helping to rebuild lost social connections^{5,6}.

This study seeks to critically analyze the impact of the nurse's therapeutic presence in the care of patients with emotional disorders, considering Kristen Swanson's Theory of Presence Care, exploring the implications of this approach for clinical practice, especially in a post-pandemic scenario, in which emotional recovery and the restructuring of social relationships are essential for the reestablishment of patients' well-being.

Methodology

This study is characterized as a theoretical reflection with a qualitative approach, based on bibliographic research of the literature current between the years 2020 and 2024.

The literature review was conducted using PubMed, CINAHL, and SciELO databases, using the descriptors "Psychiatric Nursing," "Therapeutic Presence," "Mental Health," "Nursing Care," and "Emotional Disorders." The search focused on articles published between 2020 and 2024, written in Portuguese and English, that discuss the role of nurses in mental health and their influence on the management of emotional disorders.

Eligibility criteria included studies analyzing the role of therapeutic presence in the mental health care of patients with emotional disorders, especially in the context of social isolation and changes in social interaction patterns following

the pandemic. Studies focusing exclusively on pharmacological or quantitative interventions without qualitative discussions or a relationship with the nurse's therapeutic presence were excluded.

Data analysis consisted of a critical interpretation of the selected articles, relating the evidence found to the principles of Swanson's Theory of Caring Presence. Critical reading of the texts allowed us to identify thematic categories that address the importance of empathic care, interpersonal interaction, and therapeutic presence in the management of emotional disorders, also considering the impacts of social isolation and remote work on relationships between self and other.

Kristen Swanson's Caring Presence Theory was used as the central theoretical framework for the reflective analysis. The theory proposes that the nurse's presence is an essential element of care, especially in mental health settings, where emotional support and interpersonal connection play fundamental roles in patient well-being³.

Results and Discussion

From the analysis of the selected literature, three main thematic categories emerged that allow for a critical discussion about the impact of the nurse's presence in the mental health care of patients with emotional disorders. The categories identified were: Therapeutic presence in mental health; The impact of social isolation and remote work on interpersonal relationships; and Issues for the nurse's role in the mental health context.

Therapeutic presence in mental health

The nurse's therapeutic presence is widely recognized as a central component in the care of patients with emotional disorders, considered a determining factor in the therapeutic process. According to Swanson's Theory of Presence Care, this approach goes beyond mere physical presence. It involves a deep connection between nurse and patient, characterized by empathy, mindfulness, and intentionality in the act of caring. The reviewed literature highlights that the nurse, by "being with" the patient authentically and attentively, creates an environment conducive to building a relationship of trust, essential for patients' emotional openness^{3,7}.

This emotional connection, which allows nurses to understand patients' subjective needs, is a fundamental aspect in the treatment of disorders such as depression, anxiety, and other emotional conditions. By fostering a listening and welcoming environment, nurses ensure patients feel understood and valued, which is crucial for the proper management of emotional symptoms. Literature indicates that patients with emotional disorders often experience feelings of isolation and misunderstanding, and the active presence of nurses acts as a catalyst to break down these barriers⁸.

One of the most important aspects of therapeutic presence is the creation of a strong and stable therapeutic bond. This bond, as described by Swanson, is built on the nurse's attitude of being available, both physically and emotionally, to the patient. This availability is perceived by



the patient as a form of ongoing support, which helps regulate emotions and develop strategies to cope with their difficulties. Furthermore, presence care involves providing a safe environment where the patient feels comfortable expressing their anxieties and fears, without judgment⁹.

The trust generated by this type of relationship is frequently mentioned in the literature as a factor that directly contributes to treatment adherence. Studies show that therapeutic presence promotes not only trust in the professional but also in adherence and the treatment process, increasing the patient's willingness to follow guidance and adhere to therapeutic, pharmacological, or psychosocial interventions. In disorders such as depression and anxiety, where treatment adherence is often hampered by emotional and cognitive factors, the trust established by the nurse can be decisive in the positive evolution of the clinical condition⁹.

Furthermore, therapeutic presence is not limited to direct care during times of crisis but extends to ongoing monitoring. By monitoring the patient's progress through different phases of treatment, the nurse demonstrates a commitment to long-term care, which further strengthens the relationship of trust and fosters a sense of security in the patient. This continuity of care is especially relevant in chronic emotional disorders, where maintaining constant support can prevent relapses and promote emotional stability¹⁰.

Another point highlighted in the literature is the role of therapeutic presence in developing patients' emotional self-management skills. By establishing a caring relationship based on trust and emotional support, nurses can help patients develop strategies to recognize and manage their emotions more effectively. This type of intervention has been associated with improved self-efficacy and increased autonomy and independence in managing their emotional disorders^{10,11}.

The nurse's presence transcends physical and technical care, encompassing a relational dimension that is fundamental to mental health. The positive impact of this therapeutic presence is widely recognized in the literature as a form of comprehensive care that not only treats symptoms but also promotes patients' emotional well-being holistically¹⁰.

The impact of social isolation and remote work on interpersonal relationships

The social isolation imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with the transition to remote work, has brought profound changes to social interactions and interpersonal relationships, resulting in significant repercussions for mental health. The lack of in-person interaction and the new dynamics of remote work have intensified feelings of loneliness and disconnection, in addition to exacerbating preexisting emotional conditions¹².

A literature review indicates that the lack of regular social contact has harmed individuals' interactions with both themselves and others, leading to a deterioration in emotional well-being and hindering psychological balance. With limited in-person interactions, many people have lost

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the emotional support provided by everyday social ties, such as friends, family, and coworkers, which has heightened feelings of alienation and insecurity. This forced distancing has directly impacted mental health, leading to an increase in emotional disorders and harming the quality of life of many individuals^{12,13}.

Remote work, in turn, challenged workers' ability to separate their personal and professional lives, contributing to mental and emotional exhaustion. The home environment, previously seen as a space for rest and family life, became the workplace as well, overlapping responsibilities and requiring new adaptations. This scenario fueled increased occupational stress, as workers were forced to juggle professional and personal demands simultaneously, without the clear boundaries that a traditional workplace provided. Studies show that this adaptation process resulted in emotional overload, exacerbating symptoms of anxiety, fatigue, and burnout^{14,15}.

In the context of mental health, social isolation not only affects external relationships but also the individual's relationship with themselves. Without the necessary social support, many people faced difficulties in healthily processing their emotions, leading to increased psychological distress and emotional disorders. The post-pandemic period brought new challenges to the surface, such as the need for resocialization and the rebuilding of social bonds, which for many was a complex and fearful process. The difficulty of resuming in-person interaction after long periods of distance has been a source of stress for many individuals, who experience insecurities related to social reintegration¹³⁻¹⁵.

From this perspective, the role of nurses in promoting comprehensive care becomes especially relevant. The therapeutic presence of nurses can help reconnect people with themselves and their support networks, facilitating the resocialization process. By creating an environment of acceptance and active listening, nurses help patients face the emotional challenges arising from prolonged isolation and changes in social interactions. Furthermore, nurses' emotional support contributes to the reorganization of interpersonal relationships in a healthier way, helping patients cope with the return to social and professional life^{3,10}.

Studies also highlight the importance of interventions that promote a gradual process of resocialization, considering individual difficulties and offering ongoing support. Nurses, as facilitators of this process, can guide and support the rebuilding of social and professional ties, ensuring that the return to in-person interaction is less stressful and more natural. By helping patients recognize and work through their emotions, nurses help individuals regain emotional stability and resume interpersonal relationships with greater confidence^{7,8,10,14}.

Problems for nurses' performance in the context of mental health

Nurses' work in mental health care is permeated by a series of challenges that compromise treatment efficiency and patient well-being. Among the main obstacles are high



workloads, scarcity of human resources, and the need for ongoing, high-quality training. These structural factors directly impact nurses' ability to provide effective therapeutic presence and comprehensive care^{1,2}.

One of the main challenges nurses face is work overload, often resulting from insufficient staffing on healthcare teams. This situation leads to increased daily demands, limiting the time available for each patient and hindering the development of trusting and empathetic relationships. Literature indicates that this lack of time can compromise the quality of care, as therapeutic presence requires an emotional and relational investment that often cannot be achieved in a high-pressure, resource-poor environment^{5,16}.

Additionally, the shortage of qualified and skilled mental health professionals is a recurring problem, affecting the ability of healthcare institutions to provide adequate care. Specific mental health training is essential, but nurses often lack adequate training to manage the complex emotional disorders they may encounter. The lack of continuing education and specializations focused on mental health limits nurses' ability to implement effective interventions and stay up to date on best practices and therapeutic approaches^{16,17}.

The growing appreciation for mental health, especially after the pandemic, offers an opportunity to expand the role of nurses in this field. Increased awareness of the importance of mental health care has led to the implementation of policies that seek to strengthen healthcare teams, promoting the inclusion of nurses as essential members. This recognition is vital, as it allows nurses to play a more active role in the early detection of emotional disorders and provide appropriate interventions^{1,2,6}.

Specific training programs can be an effective solution for equipping nurses with the skills needed to meet the demands of mental health. Continuing education not only improves technical competence but also promotes a more integrated approach to care, addressing both patients' emotional and physical needs. Including topics such as empathic communication, crisis management, and psychosocial interventions in training can increase nurses' confidence and the effectiveness of care provided.

The use of technologies such as teleconsultations stands out, as they have proven to be a useful tool for overcoming geographical barriers and facilitating access to care. Telemedicine allows nurses to connect with patients

Therapeutic presence: nursing in the care of emotional disorders who, for various reasons, may have difficulty accessing in-person services, such as those living in rural areas or with reduced mobility. This form of care also offers a means of emotional support and psychological counseling, maintaining continuity of care in situations that might otherwise lead to treatment abandonment^{18,19}.

However, implementing technologies in mental health nursing practice also faces challenges, such as the need for adequate infrastructure, investment, and professional training to use these tools effectively. Furthermore, it is crucial to ensure that patient privacy and confidentiality are maintained during virtual interactions¹⁸.

Despite the challenges that hinder nurses' role in mental health care, emerging new opportunities, combined with the increased value of the profession and the development of appropriate and appropriate training programs, create a favorable environment for development. Nurses' roles can be expanded both in-person and remote settings, enabling a more efficient response to the population's mental health needs, while also fostering greater communication with members of the multidisciplinary team. Strengthening this role is essential to ensuring quality care that respects the patient's individuality and promotes their emotional health.

Conclusion

The therapeutic presence of nurses, based on Kristen Swanson's Theory of Presence Care, has proven to be an essential strategy in managing emotional disorders such as depression and anxiety, especially in the post-pandemic context. By being emotionally and psychologically available, in addition to their physical presence, nurses play a vital role in creating an environment of trust and safety, promoting patients' emotional well-being, which corroborates Florence Nightingale's Environmentalist Theory²⁰. The literature reviewed shows that this active presence of nurses is essential to improve treatment adherence and aid in the emotional recovery of patients affected by social isolation and the impact of changes in interpersonal relationships. It emphasizes the need to invest in strategies that strengthen the work of nurses in the field of mental health, especially through quality training and adapting working conditions, so that the practice of therapeutic presence can be implemented efficiently. In a scenario of growing demand for mental health care, the comprehensive support provided by nurses not only treats symptoms but also promotes a holistic approach to recovery and emotional resilience.

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