EXPERIENCE EXCHANGE

Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder in nursing education: Implications for teaching, learning, and practice

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ABSTRACT

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) remains under-recognized within nursing education despite its prevalence. ADHD is recognized as a chronic neurodevelopmental disorder. It often manifests as persistent patterns of inattention, impulsivity, and difficulties with executive functioning, which can significantly impact a student's academic and clinical performance. While clinicians typically diagnose ADHD during childhood, it sometimes continues into adulthood and is increasingly identified among college students, including those in nursing programs. Few studies have specifically explored ADHD's impact on nursing students, underscoring the need for further research and a deeper understanding of this chronic neurodevelopmental disorder. This paper examines the complex causes of ADHD and emphasizes how core symptoms affect nursing students' engagement, task completion, and clinical competence. The demanding nature of nursing education highlights the importance of executive functions in supporting self-regulation, planning, and time management. Additionally, effective teaching strategies for helping students with ADHD are outlined. Nurse educators play a critical role in promoting academic and clinical success by adopting responsive, evidence-based teaching practices that acknowledge neurodiversity.

Key Words: Academic accommodations, Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, Executive functioning, Inclusive education, Nurse educator strategies, Nursing students

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a chronic neurodevelopmental condition characterized by persistent inattention and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity that disrupts daily functioning and developmental milestones. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition, Text Revision (DSM-5-TR), used by clinicians to diagnose and classify mental disorders, officially recognizes ADHD. Diagnosis of ADHD is based on functional and behavioral criteria, not on imaging studies or standardized laboratory tests.[1] Attention-Deficit Disorder (ADD) is an older term that was mainly used in the DSM-III, published in 1980. It referred to individuals with attention difficulties, excluding those with hyperactivity.[1] The causes of ADHD are complex and involve multiple factors. Although the exact cause is not fully understood, research indicates that ADHD results from a combination of genetic, neurobiological, environmental, pre- and perinatal, psychosocial, and environmental influences.[2,3]

There is a notable diagnostic overlap between ADHD and

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learning disorders because of their shared clinical features and developmental histories. The overlap between ADHD and learning disorders can complicate the process of differential diagnosis. While both present with academic difficulties and attentional challenges, ADHD mainly presents with impulsive behaviors that originate from neurological factors and are beyond the individual's complete control. Symptoms of ADHD often include trouble maintaining attention, disorganization, forgetfulness, restlessness, and impulsivity.[4] ADHD usually develops in childhood, but its symptoms frequently persist into adulthood and significantly impact multiple areas of functioning. Therefore, students entering college in their late teens and early 20s may have an ADHD diagnosis.[5]

The National Center for Health Statistics' Rapid Surveys System[6] collected data between October and November 2023. This data provides updated national estimates on the prevalence of diagnosed ADHD among adults in the United States. Approximately 15.5 million adults in the U.S. reported having a current ADHD diagnosis.[2] Nearly half of these adults said they were diagnosed at or after age 18, highlighting a higher number of adult-onset or late-identified cases of ADHD. The data reflect the increasing recognition of ADHD as a condition that can persist into adulthood or go undiagnosed until later in life.

2. Prevalence of ADHD among college students

ADHD is a common neurodevelopmental disorder among college students, with estimates suggesting that about 16% of students in the United States report clinically significant ADHD symptoms.[7] Approximately 16% of college students meet the diagnostic criteria for ADHD,[8] with higher rates seen in English-speaking countries, including the U.S. Notably, around 25% of students registered with accessibility services are diagnosed with ADHD.[9] Recent data show that ADHD prevalence is nearly equal in males (15.7%) and females (16.1%) among college students, challenging the long-held belief that males are more affected. This change likely reflects increased awareness and better diagnosis of ADHD in females, who have historically been underdiagnosed due to differences in symptom presentation.[10] Males are more likely to show externalizing symptoms like hyperactivity, impulsivity, and disruptive behaviors. These may include fidgeting, talking excessively, difficulty staying seated, and acting without thinking. In contrast, females tend to display internalizing symptoms such as inattention, distractibility, and daydreaming; they often appear quietly inattentive rather than disruptive. Symptoms can include disorganization, forgetfulness, difficulty finishing tasks, and becoming easily overwhelmed.[10]

In higher education, the term "accessibility services" is now commonly used instead of "disability services" to emphasize a more inclusive, student-centered, and strengths-based approach. The author will refer to the term "accessibility services" throughout this manuscript.

2.1 Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to enhance nurse educators' understanding of ADHD by providing an overview of its key features, examining its potential impact on the academic and clinical performance of nursing students, and presenting teaching and institutional strategies to support the success and well-being of students with ADHD within nursing education programs.

2.2 Pathophysiology

Executive functioning originates in the brain's prefrontal cortex. It encompasses core processes that help humans manage goal-directed behaviors. These behaviors include working memory, which helps us retain and apply information, and cognitive flexibility, which allows us to switch between tasks.[3] The prefrontal cortex plays a critical role in executive functioning, including inhibitory control, which supports self-regulation and impulse management. It also regulates higher-order cognitive processes such as planning, organization, task initiation, and completion. These functions help humans to manage time efficiently, prioritize responsibilities, regulate emotional responses, and adapt flexibly to changing demands or environments.[3]

Individuals with ADHD often face challenges with executive functioning, which can impact their ability to regulate attention, stay organized, initiate tasks, and control impulses. For nursing students, these challenges may appear as difficulty meeting assignment deadlines, maintaining focus during classroom instruction or skills laboratory tasks, understanding instructions, or transitioning smoothly between class and clinical duties.[11,12] These deficits can significantly affect academic performance and clinical success without the proper support and accommodations in place.

2.3 Treatment approaches for ADHD

Treatment of ADHD in adults, including college students, is best approached through a comprehensive, multimodal framework that combines pharmacologic and non-pharmacologic strategies.[13] Pharmacologic interventions are generally the first-line treatment options for those with moderate to severe symptoms of ADHD. Methylphenidate and amphetamine salts are considered stimulant medications and have demonstrated high efficacy by increasing dopamine and norepinephrine levels in the brain.[14] The prescribing clinician must carefully monitor these medication classes

due to potential side effects such as insomnia, appetite suppression, and cardiovascular concerns. For those who cannot tolerate stimulant medications, non-stimulant options like atomoxetine (Strattera), guanfacine ER (Intuniv ER), and clonidine ER (Kapvay) are available.[3, 14] Off-label use of antidepressants such as bupropion (Wellbutrin) is also commonly prescribed to treat ADHD, particularly in cases of coexisting depression or anxiety. Treatment options are highly individualized for each patient, taking into account the severity of symptoms, functional impairment, and any coexisting conditions.

Non-pharmacologic interventions also play a vital role in promoting functional success among adults with ADHD. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is a structured, time-limited type of psychotherapy often used in psychiatry. It is based on the idea that thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are connected, and that changing negative thought patterns can improve emotional regulation and behavior. CBT helps patients recognize and challenge distorted or unhelpful thinking, develop healthier coping mechanisms, and practice new skills to manage symptoms of conditions like depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and ADHD.

ADHD coaching helps build executive functioning skills, while psychoeducation enhances self-awareness and informed self-management.[13] To help improve attention and reduce impulsivity in individuals with ADHD, mindfulness-based interventions have also shown promise. Mindfulness meditation is a practice of focusing attention on the present moment, often through breathing or body-awareness exercises. This helps reduce distractibility by training sustained attention and increasing awareness of when the mind wanders. Another proven intervention is mindful breathing, which includes short, structured breathing exercises (e.g., "three deep breaths) and promotes calmness, reduces impulsivity, and provides an accessible coping tool for children and adults.

Implementing consistent routines, engaging in regular exercise, maintaining healthy sleep patterns, and practicing healthful eating habits can be beneficial and further support symptom management. Environmental modifications and time management tools (e.g., planners, timers) are also helpful in reducing cognitive overload. Extended test time, a distraction-free environment, and note-taking assistance are essential academic accommodations to support college students with ADHD.[9, 13] Workplace accommodations are vital for students involved in internships or employment. This multi-layered approach aligns with best practices for managing ADHD and encourages academic persistence and success in college settings.

2.4 Understanding ADHD and its impact on nursing students

Due to the cognitive and organizational demands of rigorous curricula, nursing students with ADHD often face unique challenges. The structure of pre-licensure nursing programs, which include complex theoretical instruction, frequent high-stakes evaluations, and intensive clinical rotations, can create significant obstacles for students with ADHD.[9] Inattention, impulsivity, and difficulties with executive functioning are key symptoms of ADHD. These challenges can hinder the students' ability to manage their time effectively, remain focused, complete assignments, and remember essential information. Such difficulties not only affect academic performance but may also jeopardize a student's capacity to deliver safe and effective care in clinical settings.[11] Nurse educators and academic institutions must be aware of these obstacles and implement focused, evidence-based interventions to foster success and retention among nursing students with ADHD. The author will discuss these strategies later in this article.

2.5 Rejection sensitivity dysphoria in individuals with ADHD

Rejection Sensitivity Dysphoria (RSD) is a condition marked by intense emotional sensitivity and pain caused by the perception, whether real or imagined, of rejection, criticism, or failure. RSD is a recognized challenge in emotional regulation that often co-occurs with ADHD, especially in adolescents and adults. Individuals with RSD oftentimes display powerful emotional responses to interpersonal rejection or perceived disapproval, which can lead to overwhelming feelings of shame, embarrassment, or humiliation.[3, 14, 15] These emotional responses tend to be disproportionate to the situation and can lead to social withdrawal, anger outbursts, or sudden mood changes. Given the high-stakes nature of assessment in nursing education, nurse educators need to understand how RSD can affect students diagnosed with ADHD. Such students may show heightened emotional reactions to perceived failure or criticism. Adverse outcomes, such as poor exam scores, unsuccessful skills competency evaluations, clinical performance issues, or course failures, can trigger RSD.[4]

Academic success and psychosocial well-being among students can be affected by emotional dysregulation, which presents a significant barrier to both. These factors underscore the importance of nursing programs adopting supportive, evidence-based teaching strategies and implementing early, proactive interventions to support students. These approaches are critical for enhancing academic achievement and supporting comprehensive development. The incorpora-

tion of CBT and mindfulness practices is used in teaching individuals with ADHD to manage RSD. Dialectical behavior therapy skills, which focus on emotional regulation, distress tolerance, and interpersonal effectiveness, have also been used to help individuals manage RSD.

3. Review of the Literature

There remains a significant gap in studies specifically focusing on nursing students with ADHD, despite the increase in research on ADHD in higher education.[16] This gap in the literature limits our understanding of the unique academic, clinical, and psychosocial challenges faced by this group of students, emphasizing the urgent need for targeted empirical research in this area. The author included research studies and anecdotal accounts that go beyond the typical 5–7-year publication window to offer a broader context in the literature review.

Davidson et al. reported that about 18% of undergraduate students have a diagnosed learning disability, with ADHD being the most common subtype.[11] The study highlighted the unique challenges nursing students with ADHD face in clinical settings, including difficulty managing everyday distractions and organizing patient care tasks effectively. Implementing targeted coaching strategies has been shown to help these students refocus their energy productively and improve their ability to stay focused during clinical rotations. The authors also describe how a nurse educator utilized coaching sessions to support a nursing student with ADHD who was underperforming in the clinical portion of the course.[11] They employed the prevent-teach-reinforce (PTR) model[17] to support the student in successfully completing the course. PTR follows a systematic five-step process, including teaming, goal setting, assessment, intervention, and evaluation. These findings align with a study by Holtz et al.,[4] which recommends that institutions enhance accommodations, develop coaching programs, and executive functioning workshops to support students with ADHD.

Kiransal and Kaya found that preceptors generally have limited experience working with students who have learning disabilities. Their understanding of legal responsibilities and the use of accommodations to support these learners is minimal, and most have received little to no formal education or training on the topic.[18] However, despite these gaps, preceptors held a somewhat optimistic view of students and new graduates with learning disabilities and expressed a willingness to support and work with them. Tufty et al.[9] and Runnels[19] report similar findings regarding preceptor training to help students with ADHD. Universities should continue to support and train nurse educators. Web-based training for nurse educators has been practical in achieving this goal.[19]

L'Ecuyer studied nursing students with learning difficulties.[16] ADHD affects an individual's ability to learn and can impede academic success due to the various challenges it presents in educational settings.[20] The author focused on three perspectives: schools of nursing, nurse educators, and students. Nursing programs recognize the challenges faced by students with learning difficulties, and providing varying degrees of accommodations is essential for their success. Nurse educators showed less concern about students with ADHD compared to those with visual or hearing impairments, limited hand function, or mental health disabilities. However, nurse educators supported the development of a clinical needs assessment tool.[21] Students found it difficult to disclose their diagnosis due to fears of shame and possible adverse reactions from others. Ikematsu et al.[12] note similar findings and emphasize the importance of creating a safe environment for disclosure, promoting open dialogue, and maintaining confidentiality. This approach assists students with ADHD to feel secure in requesting accommodations without fear of judgment or stigma.

Ikematsu et al. reported that some nursing students may show behaviors such as excessive excuse-making, social withdrawal, blaming others, or relying heavily on peer cues to guide their actions.[12] These patterns could indicate underlying developmental disorders or special educational needs. Compared to other students who are challenging to teach, those with potential developmental issues are more likely to exhibit these behaviors more frequently in both the classroom and clinical settings. Nurse educators should be aware of the possibility of special educational needs when working with students exhibiting these signs. Ginapp et al.[5] report similar findings, where students describe the effects of alexithymia (difficulty identifying and expressing emotions) as common and perceive it as a key symptom when they are trying to manage their feelings.

4. Challenges Faced by Nursing Students with ADHD

Nursing students with ADHD may encounter periods of increased anxiety, low self-esteem, or fear of stigma, which can be barriers to their academic engagement and performance.[21] Without adequate support, students may struggle to organize assignments, prioritize patient care assignments, or adapt to new situations, including the unpredictable nature of clinical settings. Students are more likely to succeed academically and clinically when nurse educators implement early interventions, including personalized accommodations and informed support.[22] Adopting these inclusive teaching

strategies and providing tailored academic accommodations play an essential role in creating learner-centered environments that leverage students' strengths and address their challenges. Nursing education involves rigorous classroom, skills lab, simulation, and clinical components, demanding high levels of organization, attention to detail, and adaptability.[23] These demands can pose barriers for students with ADHD in these areas.

4.1 Strategies for nurse educators

By creating structured learning environments, nurse educators aim to establish a solid foundation that supports nursing students with ADHD. By establishing predictable routines, reviewing expectations, and organizing course content, they decrease cognitive load and promote academic success.[11] Providing detailed syllabi, weekly task lists, and assignment deadlines in various formats, such as written documents, in-class verbal cues, and postings on learning management systems, helps students plan, prioritize, and manage their academic responsibilities.[24] These methods help decrease uncertainty and strengthen executive functioning skills, which individuals with ADHD often find challenging to maintain.

Multiple instructional methods further enhance learning for students with ADHD by engaging multiple senses and catering to diverse cognitive processing styles.[22] Incorporating visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learning opportunities, such as simulation-based experiences, case studies, and hands-on skill labs, can help improve focus and retention.[12] Active learning strategies are also highly effective in keeping students engaged. Learning strategies such as "Think-Pair-Share," small-group discussions, and role-play scenarios not only foster collaboration but also help maintain attention in learners with ADHD. Shortening lecture times and incorporating movement or discussion breaks can help reduce attention fatigue and enhance classroom participation.[25]

Another crucial aspect of effective instruction is helping students develop time management and organizational skills. Nurse educators can encourage students to use digital planners and task management apps to help them prioritize assignments and track their clinical assignment responsibilities. It would help students if nurse educators also schedule planning sessions and weekly check-ins to provide personalized support and reinforce accountability.[11] Exams typically account for a significant portion of a nursing student's course grade. Due to this, reasonable accommodations such as extended exam time, distraction-free testing environments, and breaking larger assignments into smaller, manageable tasks can significantly enhance academic performance.[24]

Additional strategies include providing clinical and psychosocial support. Assigning clinical preceptors familiar with ADHD can create a more supportive environment during clinical rotations.[11,20] Offering structured pre- and post-lecture materials and allowing extra time for clinical skills assessments helps students with ADHD build confidence and competence. Nurse educators can give short breaks and reinforce attentive behaviors to boost student engagement and academic performance.[5,24] They should also work with campus accessibility services to establish formal agreements that ensure academic accessibility.[24] Students who qualify for these services can receive personalized accommodations that promote equity and support their educational success.[9,26]

4.2 Implications for nursing education

The increasing enrollment of students with ADHD in nursing programs presents both significant challenges and valuable opportunities for nurse educators. Core symptoms of ADHD, such as inattention, impulsivity, and deficits in executive functioning, may hinder students' ability to successfully navigate academic challenges and clinical responsibilities that are part of their nursing education program.[12] Without appropriate support systems, these students face a higher risk of academic underperformance, increased stress, and dropping out. To promote student success and retain students in nursing programs, nursing education must adopt inclusive teaching strategies that recognize neurodiversity and intentionally support the unique learning needs of students with ADHD.[12,27] This also includes training nurse educators on ADHD-related learning barriers, designing courses deliberately, and collaborating with campus support services, such as the accessibility services office, to ensure that students with ADHD can meet course objectives and stay in good academic standing in the nursing program.[19]

The impact on nursing education extends beyond academic achievement to include the development of a skilled, diverse, and inclusive nursing workforce. Nurse educators can support students with ADHD by employing evidence-based teaching strategies, working with students to provide personalized academic accommodations, and cultivating a supportive learning environment that promotes success. These approaches mirror the inclusive, patient-centered philosophy that underpins professional nursing practice.[22,28] Such practices align with the inclusive, patient-centered methods fundamental to nursing. Educators who demonstrate flexibility, creativity, and advocate for students not only help individual learners succeed but also contribute to the broader goal of training competent, compassionate nurses prepared to care for diverse patient populations.

4.3 Recommendations for future research

It would benefit nursing education if future research focused on examining the academic, clinical, and psychosocial experiences of nursing students with ADHD to help inform evidence-based educational practices.[24] Longitudinal studies that track the progress, retention, and success of nursing students with ADHD throughout nursing programs, as well as qualitative research that captures their lived experiences and perceptions of support, are also valuable. Researchers should evaluate the effectiveness of specific instructional strategies, accommodations, and nurse educator development programs to help improve the positive academic performance of students with ADHD.[11, 29] Investigating how ADHD influences clinical performance, professional identity formation, and readiness for practice will also help contribute to a more inclusive understanding of how to foster an inclusive and supportive nursing education environment for students with ADHD.

5. Conclusion

In summary, ADHD is a complex neurodevelopmental disorder with various genetic, neurobiological, and environmental factors that influence its onset and expression. For nursing students managing the academic and clinical challenges of a demanding nursing program, the main symptoms of ADHD, particularly inattention, impulsivity, and executive function deficits, can act as significant obstacles. The prevalence of ADHD among college students is on the rise, yet research specific to nursing education about students with ADHD remains limited. Available literature and case studies suggest that, with appropriate support, including structured learning environments, tailored accommodations, and inclusive teaching strategies, students with ADHD can achieve academic success and deliver safe, effective patient care.

Understanding how ADHD impacts student performance and success is essential for nurse educators and academic institutions to foster a diverse and competent nursing workforce. Creating learning spaces that accommodate neurodiversity not only boosts student engagement and retention but also exemplifies the inclusive, patient-centered care that nursing aims to promote. As more students with ADHD enroll in nursing programs, nursing education must adapt through evidence-based teaching methods, greater awareness among nurse educators, and collaborative institutional efforts to ensure equal access to learning and professional growth regarding ADHD. Implementing these strategies can help build a more accessible and responsive nursing education system, preparing future nurses to handle the complex demands of today's healthcare environment with empathy, skill, and resilience.

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