Archives of Anesthesiology and Critical Care (Summer 2025); 11(3): 375-379.

Available online at http://aacc.tums.ac.ir

Research Article

Distress Tolerance and Factors Affecting It among Nurses Working in the COVID-19 Intensive Care Unit

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 07 February 2025
Revised 28 February 2025
Accepted 14 March 2025

Keywords:
Nurse;
COVID-19;
Distress tolerance;
Intensive care unit

ABSTRACT

Background: Nurses, as professionals in the caring profession, try to perform safe and effective nursing interventions all the time and support patients to achieve the most favorable treatment outcomes. Nowadays, one of the important and international issues in nursing is distress tolerance. This study aimed to determine distress tolerance and affecting it among nurses working in the COVID-19 intensive care unit.

Methods: This study is cross-sectional. The sample consisted of 128 nurses working in the intensive care unit. A non-randomized convenience sampling method was used to select the samples based on the inclusion criteria. The data collection instruments included two questionnaires: a demographic characteristics questionnaire and a standardized distress tolerance questionnaire. The data were analyzed using SPSS software version 25, employing both descriptive and inferential statistical tests.

Results: The mean age of the samples was 34.95 ± 6.77 years. The highest scores of distress tolerance subscales included appraisal (17.89±3.62), tolerance (8.97±2.60), absorption (8.83±2.30), and regulation (2.25 ±8.39), respectively. The statistical test of linear regression showed that service history and shift work have a significant power to predict nurses' distress tolerance.

Conclusion: The distress tolerance of nurses working in the ICU units was low. Factors such as service history and shift work influence their distress tolerance. Accordingly, it is necessary to plan to improve nurses' distress tolerance.

Introduction

Distress tolerance is defined as the degree to which individuals can withstand negative physical or psychological states [1].

High levels of distress tolerance can lead to critical self-analysis regarding one's abilities and circumstances. They are able to identify multiple solutions to a specific problem, even in stressful situations. They use more suitable coping strategies and have higher flexibility. Therefore, the probability of their adaptation to different environments is higher [2]. Low distress tolerance also makes it difficult for individuals to manage and regulate their emotions in stressful situations [3].

Nowadays, one of the important and international issues in nursing is distress tolerance, since the distress of nurses and patients has a direct relationship, Therefore, reducing distress in either the nurse or the patient can impact the distress level of the other [4].

Nurses are exposed to stress due to the complex conditions they face in the work environment with patients and their companions [5]. The nursing profession has a stressful nature, and this stress has become a major problem for nurses [6], so that the American National Occupational Safety Association has identified nursing as one of the top 40 high-stress occupations [7]. One of the

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DOI: 10.18502/aacc.v11i3.18500

important units in a hospital where nurses work is the intensive care unit (ICU) [8].

This unit is inherently stressful due to its complexity, its active and productive nature, and the use of complex technical equipment, which is one of its challenges. Nurses working in these unit's experience significantly more depression, irritability, anxiety, and anger than nurses in other units [9].

These nurses suffer from more stress due to facing many stresses, including sick patients who need ventilators, unstable condition of patients, constant checking of vital signs and unstable level of consciousness in patients, and prevention of bedsores. In this regard, the health of nurses working in COVID-19 units is crucial due to their high risk of infection and subsequent complications [10], since COVID-19 has caused numerous problems for nurses, such as extreme fatigue, physical discomfort due to long working hours in these units, concern about infection, and psychological distress [11].

Based on the studies conducted, psychological problems in nurses who directly take care of corona patients are more than in other nurses [12-13]. Varghese et al. (2021), in a systematic review, reported a significant increase in mental health problems among healthcare teams, particularly among nurses working in COVID-19 units. Researchers found that rapid, continuous, and timely preventative psychological interventions are essential to prevent the collapse of healthcare systems in response to epidemics [14].

Because distress tolerance is important for medical staff, especially nurses in ICUs and during the COVID-19 outbreak, and because no study had been done in this area before, this one was done to find out how distress tolerance is affected by things that nurses in the ICUs of COVID-19 deal with.

Methods

This study was conducted in 2011 on 128 nurses working in the ICUs of Ziaian Hospital in Tehran. The study design was cross-sectional. Using a sample size formula and the findings from previous similar studies, with a statistical power of 90%, a confidence level of 95%, and a correlation coefficient of 1.5, a sample size of 120 was determined. However, we studied 135 people, taking into account the 15% probability of dropout in the samples. We conducted a convenience random sampling based on the inclusion criteria, after obtaining the necessary permissions and adhering to the research's ethical principles. Inclusion criteria for the study were: provision of informed consent, University degree in nursing, more than one year of work experience, and working in a COVID-19 unit for more than 6 months. Unwillingness to continue participation in the research and incomplete questionnaires were considered as exclusion criteria.

In this study, data was collected using two questionnaires: a demographic information questionnaire (including gender, age, marital status, employment status, and type of shift work) and the Distress Tolerance Scale (DTS). The Distress Tolerance Scale has 15 questions and 4 subscales (distress appraisal or subjective evaluation, absorption by negative emotions, regulation efforts to relieve distress, and distress tolerance). We score this scale using a five-point Likert scale Azizi et al. also reported the Cronbach's alpha value of the distress tolerance scale as 0.67, and the test-retest reliability of this questionnaire was obtained at 0.79 [15].

All ethical principles in research, such as confidentiality, obtaining informed consent, etc., have been observed in this study. We analyzed the data using SPSS-25 software and employed descriptive and inferential statistical tests (regression). P value of less than 0.05 was considered as significant level.

Results

The mean age of the samples was 34.95 ± 6.77 years. The highest percentage of samples were male (61.7%) and married (89.8%) (Table 1).

The mean distress tolerance score in nurses was 44.09 ± 5.09. The mean distress tolerance score and its subscales are presented in (Table 2). We used a linear regression model to identify factors influencing distress tolerance and the impact of each. The Factors of service history and shift work have a significant predictive power for distress tolerance, such that these variables together predict 26.9% of the variance in the distress tolerance variable (Table 3).

Table 1- Demographic characteristics of nurses

Variable		n	%
Gender	male	79	61.7
	female	49	38.3
Marital status	Without spouse	13	10.2
	With spouse	115	89.8
Employment type	formal	62	48.4
	In treaty	18	14.1
	Project-based	34	26.6
	Contractual	14	10.9

Shift type	Fixed morning	17	13.3
	Fixed evening	17	13.3
	Fixed night	16	12.5
	Rotational	78	60.9

Table 2- The mean scores of the total distress tolerance and its subscales

Variable	Mean±SD
Tolerance	8.97±2.60
absorption	8.83±2.30
Appraisal	17.89±3.62
Regulation	8.39±2.25
total score of distress tolerance	44.09±5.09

Table 3- Regression analysis of variables predicting distress tolerance in nurses

Variable	B	SE	β	P
(Constant)	8.283	1.264		0.000
Service history	0.468	0.147	0.273	0.002
Gender	-0.201	0.467	-0.038	0.668
Marital status	-0.557	0.780	-0.065	0.476
Service history	-0.303	0.210	-0.127	0.151
Shift work	0.442	0.207	0.189	0.035
Adjusted R2=0.269, f=8.969				

Discussion

In our study, nurses had a low average score for distress tolerance, which is similar to the findings of the study by Taheri et al. [16]. The lower level of distress in our study may be due to their direct contact with severely ill COVID-19 patients and subsequent problems. The results of a study by Hedai et al. during the Covid-19 epidemic showed that psychological problems such as depression, anxiety, etc. have significantly increased [17]. The results of a meta-analysis showed that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the prevalence of psychological problems (such as anxiety, depression, etc.) was significantly high among healthcare workers [18]. Kaveh et al. and Taghizadeh et al. reported that psychological problems due to COVID-19 are significantly more common in the treatment team, especially nurses, than in the rest of the community [19-20]. In the fight against COVID-19, nurses had the most significant involvement among healthcare workers. Therefore, their psychological distress is much greater compared to other healthcare staff [19,21]. Research also reported that nurses working in Covid-19 units experience various mental health sufferings [22]. Melniko et al. reported that the negative impact of COVID-19 on the health of nurses caring for COVID-19 patients was greater than that of other nurses [23].

In the study by Sirati Nair et al., most of the medical staff, especially nurses, who worked directly with Covid-19 patients reported severe and unhealthy levels of stress and mental distress [24]. Low psychological distress in nurses working directly with COVID-19 patients during the pandemic has also been reported in several other studies [25-28], These results are similar to the results of our study. Individuals with high distress tolerance tend to react to distress with greater adaptation compared to individuals with lower distress tolerance [29]. Nurses with high distress tolerance report greater resilience and higher social adjustment [30].

In our study, shift work was significantly associated with distress tolerance, which is consistent with other similar studies in this field [31, 32]. The results of the studies indicated that nurses with night time or rotational shifts have poorer physical and mental health, more absenteeism, less job satisfaction [33], and more stress and fatigue compared to daytime shifts [34]. Abdul Salam et al. showed that irregular sleep was significantly and negatively associated with lower distress tolerance [31]. This may be because poor sleep quality, irregular sleep patterns, and insufficient or excessive sleep duration can lead to poor concentration, fatigue and low energy, feelings of helplessness, and distress intolerance. The results of a study carried out by Saksvik-Lehouillier et al. showed that experience and history were the effective variables in distress tolerance. Nurses who had just started nighttime work had less tolerance than more experienced nurses in nighttime work [32]. The results of these researchers' study are similar to the findings of our study. With increasing age and experience, nurses' ability to manage workplace stress increases. People who have a higher service history have more ability to cope successfully in difficult situations [35-36]. Increased age, education, and work experience enhance nurses' ability to cope with stress and critical situations. These capabilities improve nurses' adaptability, leading to more effective and flexible performance [37].

Strengths and Limitations

The Covid-19 pandemic, conducting studies on a large number of nurses working in the ICU is the strengths of our research. Some nurses did not cooperate well due to the Corona situation, so they entered the study with informed consent by choosing the right time (beginning of the shift), giving sufficient information, and answering their questions.

Conclusion

Finally, the distress tolerance of nurses working in the ICU units was low. Also, factors such as service history and shift work affect their distress tolerance. Thus, it is necessary to plan to improve nurses' distress tolerance. We recommend conducting a similar study on other members of the healthcare team. Also, more studies should be conducted on nurses in other regions of Iran and other countries.

Acknowledgments

The master's thesis in nursing at Tehran University of Medical Sciences, with the ethics code IR.TUMS.MEDICINE.REC.1400.544, served as the basis for this article. We hereby appreciate Tehran University of Medical Sciences and all the nurses for their cooperation in this study.

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