

Beyond the Pressure: Understanding Stress and Coping Strategies of 4th Year Nursing Students at University of Perpetual Help System Manila

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Abstract

Fourth year nursing students often experience high levels of stress due to academic demands and clinical responsibilities, particularly during the final phase of their nursing education. This study aims to explore the sources of stress, subjective levels of stress, and coping strategies of 4th year nursing students at University of Perpetual Help System Manila. A qualitative and descriptive research design was utilized. Data were collected by semi-structured interviews with selected 4th year nursing students. The responses were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns regarding the different individual stressors and coping strategies. The findings revealed that 4th year nursing students are significantly influenced by various stressors such as heavy academic workload, time constraint, academic pressure in requirements for graduation, long hours of clinical duty, inability to rest, and preparation for the licensure exam and career anxiety about the future. Several students also indicate they are struggling to keep up with their study commitments alongside family and personal responsibilities, which also increases their level of stress. To cope with all these problems, students reported a range of coping strategies. Problem-focused coping strategies were seen as well, such as effective time management, work prioritization, seeking academic assistance, and collaboration with classmates. Strategies like mindfulness practice, relaxation, journaling, engaging in hobbies, and turning to faith or spirituality were also practiced on a regular basis. Social support from peers, family, and clinical instructors served as a support system against emotional and physical exhaustion. The study highlights the resilience of nursing students despite the challenges they face, while emphasizing the need for structured mental health and wellness programs in nursing schools. The findings suggest that implementing stress management interventions and accessible support systems to students may help promote the well-being of future nurses.

Keywords: *Stress, coping strategies, fourth-year nursing students, academic pressure, clinical training, mental health, resilience, social support, qualitative research, thematic analysis.*



1. Introduction

Nursing is widely recognized as one of the most demanding courses in higher education, requiring not only academic competence but also emotional strength and mental resilience. As students progress through the program, the level of responsibility and pressure increases. While earlier years are often associated with heavy coursework, the fourth year presents a different challenge. At this stage, nursing students are expected to function with greater independence in clinical settings while managing academic requirements and preparing for graduation. This transition often places students under significant stress, which may affect their overall well-being and performance.

Previous studies have shown that nursing students commonly experience stress due to academic workload, clinical duties, and personal responsibilities. Stress, when not properly managed, may lead to negative outcomes such as anxiety, burnout, decreased academic performance, and physical fatigue. To cope with these challenges, students often rely on various coping strategies, including seeking social support, engaging in leisure activities, and practicing self-care. These coping mechanisms play an important role in helping students manage stress and maintain balance during their education.

Despite the growing research on stress among nursing students, limited research has focused on the specific experiences of fourth-year nursing students, particularly within the local context of University of Perpetual Help System Manila. Most existing studies discuss stress in general or include students from different year levels, which may overlook the unique challenges faced by those in their final year who are simultaneously handling academic demands, intensive clinical exposure, and the transition to professional practice.

In response to this gap, the present study aims to explore the stress experiences and coping strategies of fourth-year nursing students at University of Perpetual Help System Manila. Specifically, it seeks to identify the common sources of stress they encounter, the coping mechanisms they utilize, and the support systems they rely on. The findings of this study may provide valuable insights that may help improve student support, promote mental well-being, and better prepare future nursing students for the demands of their final year.

Statement of the Problem

This study aimed to evaluate the understanding of stress and coping strategies faced by fourth-year nursing students at University of Perpetual Help System Manila. It sought to identify the various factors contributing to these stresses, the coping strategies used and aimed to address the following questions:



Research Grand Question:

“How do fourth-year nursing students at University of Perpetual Help System Manila experience, interpret, and cope with stress during their final year of nursing education?”

1. How do 4th year nursing students define and interpret their experiences of stress?
2. What are the main sources of stress encountered by these students in both academic and personal matters?
3. What coping strategies do the students use to manage their stress?
4. How effective are these coping strategies in reducing stress?
5. What support systems (e.g. family, friends, faculty) do students rely on when dealing with stress?

2. Methodology

2.1 Study Design

This study utilized a **qualitative descriptive research design** to gather detailed student narratives, perspectives, and experiences of academic, clinical, and personal stress. The researchers aimed to investigate how nursing students felt stress and dealt with the demands of their last year of nursing school through qualitative research utilizing semi-structured interviews. The daily lives of students undertaking demanding academic and clinical training were comprehensively understood through this method.

2.2 Participants and Settings

The study was conducted at the College of Nursing at **University of Perpetual Help System Manila**. The study involved **fifteen (15)** fourth-year nursing students. **Purposive sampling** was used to select participants, ensuring that only students currently enrolled in their final year of nursing school were included. This sampling method allowed the researchers to gather data from participants who had direct **experience with the clinical and academic demands of the last year of nursing school**. The criteria for participant selection included year level, enrollment status, and willingness to take part in the study. The educational setting of the College of Nursing provided an appropriate environment for examining the stress experiences and coping strategies of fourth-year nursing students.



2.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through **semi-structured interviews** conducted either online or in person using an interview guide created by the researchers. Prior to data collection, official permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Dean of the College of Nursing. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, and informed consent was secured before the interviews began. To encourage openness and ensure confidentiality, interviews were conducted in a comfortable and private setting. With the participants' consent, all interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Throughout the data gathering procedure, ethical principles including voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymity were strictly observed too.

2.4 Data Analysis

The data collected from the interviews were analyzed using **thematic analysis**. The transcribed interview responses were carefully reviewed and coded to identify significant statements related to stress experiences and coping strategies. Similar codes were then grouped into categories, which were further organized into broader themes. This analytical process allowed the researchers to identify recurring patterns and themes that described the challenges faced by fourth-year nursing students and the coping mechanisms they used. The data were analyzed systematically to ensure that the findings accurately represented the participants' experiences and perspectives.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1 Results

Data for this study were gathered through in-depth interviews with fourth-year nursing students at University of Perpetual Help System Manila. The transcribed interview responses were analyzed using thematic coding and content analysis, which led to the identification of major themes related to stress experiences and coping strategies.

3.1.1 Can you describe what stress means to you as a 4th year nursing student, and how it affects you both emotionally?

CODES	THEMES
CODE 1: Physical, emotional, and social impact	THEME 1: Multidimensional Nature of Stress
CODE 2: Pressure that may result in stress	THEME 2: Manifestations of stress
CODE 3: Stress as Motivator	THEME 3: Sources of stress
CODE 4: Lack of stress management	THEME 4: Challenges in stress management
CODE 5: Academic stress	THEME 5: The Role of stress

The analysis revealed that stress was experienced by fourth-year nursing students in various ways. Twenty percent (20%) of the participants described stress as affecting their physical, emotional, and social well-being; these students reported experiencing bodily exhaustion, emotional instability, and reduced social interaction, indicating that stress had a holistic impact on their daily functioning and overall quality of life.

Another 20% reported that stress resulted in distraction, low mood, fatigue, and irritability. This group highlighted difficulty in maintaining concentration during lectures and clinical duties, accompanied by emotional withdrawal and heightened sensitivity. Similarly, 20% of the participants defined stress as feeling of constant pressure, particularly related to academic demands. This persistent pressure created a sense of being overwhelmed, reinforcing the perception that academic responsibilities were continuous and difficult to manage, especially during the final year of nursing education.

Some participants (13.33%) viewed stress as a source of motivation, stating that it pushed them to perform better academically, students perceived stress as a driving force that encouraged time management, focus, and increased effort. Another 13.33% reported difficulty in managing stress, indicating challenges in applying effective coping strategies students expressed feelings of helplessness and uncertainty in handling academic and clinical pressures, suggesting a need for stronger support systems and stress-management



interventions within the institution. A smaller number of participants (6.67%) described stress mainly as primarily arising from academic factors, while another 6.67% reported that stress negatively affected their sleep due to excessive busyness.

3.1.2 What are the things-whether academic or personal-that usually cause you stress as a 4th year nursing student?

CODES	THEMES
CODE 1: Academic workload and pressure as a graduating student	THEME 1: Academic pressure and graduation requirements
CODE 2: Financial struggles	THEME 2: Personal and Internal pressure
CODE 3: Subject-specific stress	THEME 3: Time management issues
CODE 4: Overthinking about the future and surroundings	THEME 4: Emotional and cognitive reactions

The analysis revealed that stress among fourth-year nursing students was caused by both academic and personal factors. The majority of participants (33.33%) identified academic deadlines and financial difficulties as major sources of stress. These students reported feeling overwhelmed by simultaneous academic requirements while also managing financial responsibilities related to tuition fees, daily expenses, and graduation-related costs, which intensified their overall stress levels.

Twenty percent (20%) of the participants reported experiencing pressure related to both personal responsibilities and academic workload. It highlighted the difficulties in balancing family obligations, personal commitments, and demanding academic tasks, suggesting that stress is not solely academic in nature but is also influenced by challenges in personal life. Another 20% indicated that academic requirements, particularly preparation for the nursing licensure examination, contributed significantly to their stress. The pressure to perform well in the licensure exam created anxiety and fear of failure, as students perceived the examination as a critical determinant of their future professional success. Additionally, 13.33% of the participants reported that stress was caused by limited time due to academic and clinical duties. These students struggled with time

constraints, reporting difficulty in allocating sufficient time for rest, study, and personal activities.

A smaller number of participants identified subject-specific academic demands (6.67%) that indicates a those students found certain nursing subjects particularly challenging, requiring additional effort and study time, which added to their academic burden and overthinking about their future (6.67%) as sources of stress that presents the including concerns about employment, career readiness, and professional competence, significantly contributed to their stress levels.

3.1.3 When you're feeling stressed, what do you usually do to manage or relieve it?

CODES	THEMES
CODE 1: Rest and Sleep as a stress reliever	THEME 1: Rest and Sleep as Primary Coping Mechanism
CODE 2: Taking a physical pause to manage emotional stress	THEME 2: Physical Activity as an Outlet
CODE 3: Eating as a coping mechanism	THEME 3: Food Consumption and Emotional Eating
CODE 4: Personal relaxation activities	THEME 4: Self-reflection and Prioritization

The analysis revealed that participants employed various strategies to manage and relieve stress. The most commonly reported coping mechanism was rest and sleep, with 40% of the participants identifying it as their primary way of managing stress.

Social activities, such as going out and unwinding with friends or classmates, were reported by 26.67% of the participants as a means of relieving stress. Additionally, 13.33% of participants reported coping with stress through food consumption or emotional eating.

A smaller number of participants (6.67%) engaged in physical activities such as jogging or running to clear their minds. Another 6.67% reported resting and reflecting in

order to prioritize tasks, while an additional 6.67% used personal relaxation activities such as listening to music, journaling, reading, or watching content to manage stress.

3.1.4 How well do you think those coping strategies work for you when you're under stress?

CODES	THEMES
CODE 1: Coping strategies maintaining mental stability	THEME 1: Taking care of the mind through rest and balance
CODE 2: Self Motivation through focus and goals	THEME 2: Finding focus and motivation through action
CODE 3: Social understanding and emotional support	THEME 3: Emotional support and coping with stress in social ways

Our analysis revealed that 33.33% of participants coping strategies are effective in shifting attention and refreshing the mind, and 13.33% of participants feels recharged when regaining control or momentum particularly after organizing tasks or regaining a sense of direction in their academic responsibilities, and another 13.33% of participants feels motivated after achieving goals, accomplishing tasks provided a sense of achievement and reinforced confidence, encouraging continued effort despite academic pressure and another 13.33% answered support and understanding from others ease stress including family, friends, and peers, helped ease their stress and lastly 6.67% answered acknowledge strategies don't fully help; tend to ignore stress, also it highlights that sleep is essential and helpful, strategies help maintain mental stability, and reflecting alone or with others helps in finding solutions.



3.1.5 Are there any people you consider your support system? How do they help you cope?

CODES	THEMES
CODE 1: Family & Friends as emotional outlet	THEME 1: Social Emotional Support
CODE 2: Companionship as emotional support	THEME 2: Alternative Emotional Support
CODE 3: Faculty and peers as institutional support	THEME 3: Institutional and Academic Support

Our analysis revealed that 46.67% of the participants consider their friends at school their primary support system, appreciating the shared experiences and emotional release through venting mutual understanding, and emotional validation helped reduce feelings of stress and isolation. Family follows closely 33.33%, providing essential emotional and financial support which helps alleviate stress related to academic expenses and daily needs. This only shows that while family provides financial and emotional support, peers provide the “shared professional identity” that prevents burnout.

Some of the 6.67% of participants find comfort in non-traditional support systems. These sources offered emotional relief and companionship, allowing students to cope with stress in more personal and individualized ways, and another 6.67% of participants considered romantic partners. These participants emphasized emotional understanding, encouragement, and reassurance as key factors that helped them manage stress and maintain emotional balance, and another 6.67% participated in institutional support from clinical instructors and fellow students especially in leadership roles. Overall, students rely on help to manage stress, particularly those who understand the demands of nursing school.



3.2 Discussion

The results of this study indicate that fourth-year nursing students experience high levels of stress originating from multiple sources, including academic demands, clinical responsibilities, financial concerns, and performance expectations. As students approach graduation, they are confronted with heavy academic workloads alongside intensive clinical duties, leading to feelings of being overwhelmed and pressured to meet high standards while still undergoing training. These findings are consistent with recent studies which report that academic and clinical stressors remain the primary contributors to psychological strain among senior nursing students (Savitsky et al., 2020; Labrague et al., 2021).

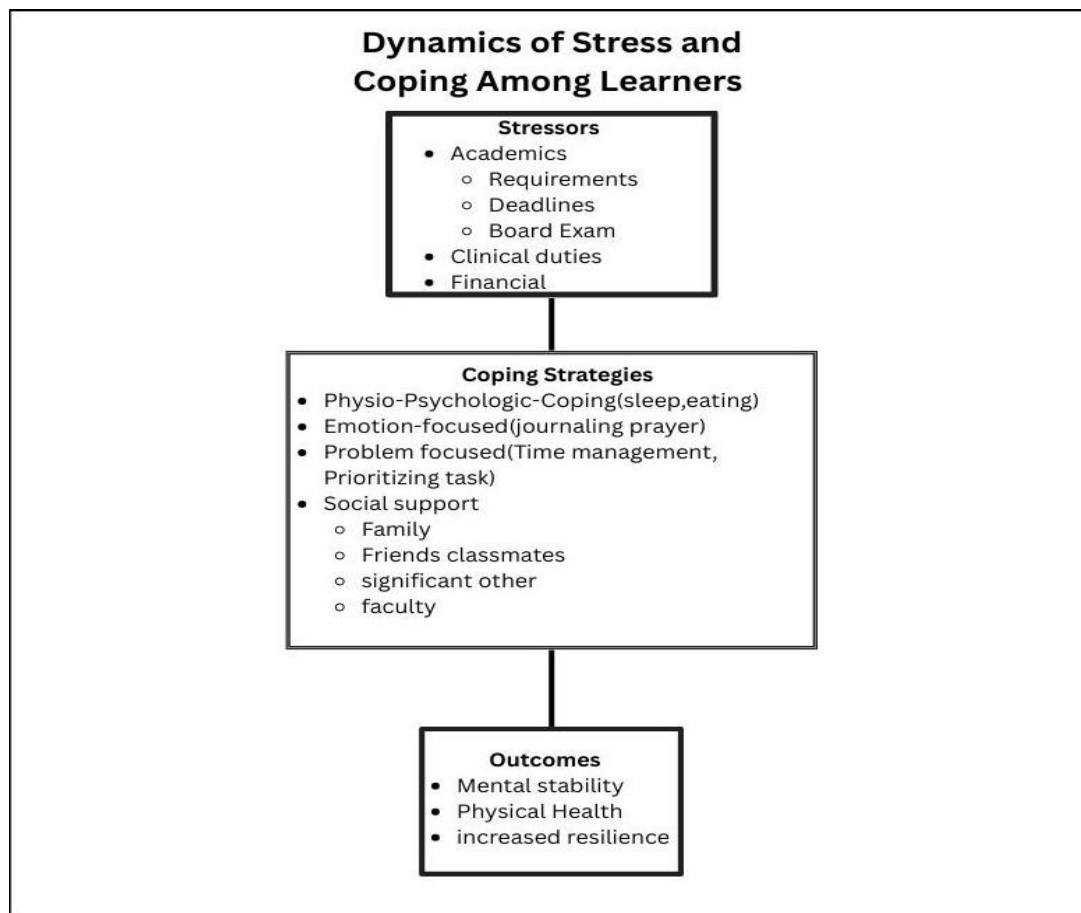
Academic pressure and clinical exposure significantly affect students' mental and physical well-being. Long clinical duty hours, fear of making errors in real patient care, and continuous evaluation by instructors and clinical supervisors intensify anxiety and emotional exhaustion. Similar findings were reported in recent literature, which identified clinical performance anxiety, workload demands, and constant assessment as major stressors among nursing students (Gallego-Gómez et al., 2020; Aslan & Pekince, 2021). Moreover, students are often expected to function at a near-professional level despite still being in training, which may contribute to self-doubt and reduced self-confidence.

Financial burden also emerged as a significant source of stress. Expenses related to tuition fees, accommodation, daily living costs, and graduation requirements place additional pressure on students nearing program completion. Recent studies confirm that financial strain significantly affects nursing students' emotional well-being and academic focus, particularly during the final year of study (Benavente et al., 2021; Ratanasiripong et al., 2021). Despite these stressors, the findings show that students actively employ various coping strategies to manage stress.

Adaptive coping mechanisms such as adequate sleep and rest, time management, prayer, journaling, and seeking support from family, peers, and friends were commonly utilized. Recent research has demonstrated that both problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies are effective in reducing emotional distress and enhancing resilience among nursing students (Labrague & De los Santos, 2020; Li et al., 2022). Social support, in particular, played a vital role in helping students cope with emotional exhaustion and maintain focus amid demanding academic and clinical workloads. These findings suggest a clear manifestation of the interdependence adaptive mode. While family serves as a vital foundation for financial and emotional stability, peers provide a unique "shared professional identity". This specific form of social support acts as a buffer against burnout, as fellow nursing students offer a level of clinical understanding and professional validation that those outside the program cannot provide. Although some participants reported maladaptive coping behaviors such as binge-eating or social withdrawal, the majority demonstrated resilience by relying on constructive coping strategies that promote emotional stability.

This finding aligns with recent evidence highlighting resilience as a protective factor that enables nursing students to adapt effectively to stressors inherent in nursing education (Turner et al., 2022). The findings emphasize that while stress is an inevitable component of the final year of nursing education, effective coping strategies and strong support systems can mitigate its negative effects. These results underscore the importance of institutional support in fostering students' mental health and overall well-being during this critical phase of their academic journey.

3.3 Conclusion



The results of this research have a strong connection to the conceptual structure of Callista Roy's Adaptation Model, which illustrates stress reactions as four different categories of coping: physiological, psychological, occupational, and reliance. According to Roy, stress occurs when one's usual coping methods are ineffective in meeting life's demands and adaptation is the practice of resource mobilization and strategy application to return to the state of being that is not disturbed. With that, as observed by Espulgar et al. (2024), student nurses face numerous challenges that can negatively impact their



emotional well-being and academic performance. These challenges include demanding academic requirements, intense clinical training, insufficient academic and clinical support, and unfavorable educational environments. Thus, the nursing students who took part in this study encountered a variety of stressors that were very difficult to handle and they were, academic stress through excessive workloads and exam preparation for licensing, clinical assignments necessitating long hours and concentration, financial concerns arising from tuition and living costs, and high performance expectations from teachers, colleagues, and themselves. All these factors together led to a significant rise in the stress levels experienced by the students which in turn, made them look for new ways to cope that would allow them to function at a satisfactory level both in their personal life and in school.

As noted by O'Mara et al. (2020), effective coping strategies are essential for nursing students to manage the stressors associated with their education and clinical experiences. Coping mechanisms, such as seeking social support, engaging in extracurricular activities, problem-solving, and practicing emotion-focused coping, can help nursing students navigate the challenges they face. In response, the participants' coping techniques outlined in this study can be viewed as straightforward examples of adaptive responses. The energy level of the students stayed up, and they didn't get physically worn out due to going to bed, eating at regular intervals, and taking small breaks, which was the direct manifestation of physiological adaptation. Writing in a diary, praying, meditating, and engaging in critical thinking were the activities that helped students to manage their emotions, avoid confusion, and develop their sense of self and personal power, thereby self-concept adaptation occurred. Time was managed effectively by the students, academic tasks were prioritized, and the whole schedule was consistently followed by them, all of which pointed to role function adaptation. Similarly, Yasmin et al. (2018) found that students who use good coping strategies tend to do better in school, manage stress more easily, and become more emotionally strong. The students, yet with all the outside pressure, managed time wisely, set their academic tasks according to priorities, and followed the full schedule. Thus, they not only bore the responsibility of students but also that of future healthcare providers. Students relied on social support networks of family, friends, classmates, and teachers to give them emotional strength, advice, and hands-on assistance during tough times; this was a clear example of interdependence adaptation.

According to Geraldin et al. (2024), stress is an inevitable part of this journey, but it takes on different forms depending on the student's year level. Which is why an important perspective of the study's results with regard to the notion of adaptation is that it should not be interpreted in a way that one no longer has any stress or is enjoying all the luxuries of life to the fullest. Rather, adaptation means that a person can continue living, doing their own and professional tasks, and even recuperating from stressors without being overwhelmed. The various ways through which the students acclimatized to the situations allowed them to tackle the conflicting demands of their academic and personal lives and still emerge unscathed, which is in line with Roy's view that adaptation is an ever-changing and elastic process of negotiating the demands of both the inner and



outer environments. Besides, this study emphasizes the importance of Roy's model in the present-day nursing schooling by pointing out the aspect that the adaptive skills are complex, interconnected, and most important for the support of resilience under the extreme stress of the educational atmosphere.

3.4 Recommendation

The following are recommendations based on the study's findings and conclusion:

1. **Nursing Students** - Practice overall self-care by maintaining proper sleep, a balanced diet, and regular exercise to support both physical and emotional health. Improve time management through goal setting and structured study plans, while also seeking support from family and peers to strengthen resilience.
2. **Parents and Guardians** - Provide emotional reassurance and support, especially during times of high stress, to help the student feel heard and valued.
3. **Nursing Faculty and Professors** - Establish a supportive learning environment by encouraging open discussion, while providing constructive feedback and guidance to build students' confidence and help them manage academic and clinical responsibilities effectively.
4. **School Administrator** - Institutions should implement stress-reduction programs, provide accessible and specialized mental health services, and ensure a balanced curriculum to avoid student overload.
5. **School Counselors** - Guidance counselors should regularly conduct stress management, relaxation, and resilience workshops while also facilitating peer support groups and open discussions on personal and academic concerns.
6. **Future Researchers** - Future research should apply Roy's Adaptation Model to better understand coping across physiological, self-concept, role function, and interdependence domains.

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