

Workload management and well-being during external crises among nursing staff – a synthesis of research and experience-based evidence

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Background

There is a lot of evidence that the well-being of nursing staff is considerably affected by external crises, such as pandemics, due to increased overall workload. However, much less is known about workload management strategies that would support nursing staff's well-being, such as resilience and recovery, during these exceptional circumstances. To fill this knowledge gap, we conducted a mixed-methods study to investigate which workload management strategies are most effective in supporting the well-being of nursing staff during external crises.

Method

To gather research and experience-based evidence on workload management strategies that support the well-being of nursing staff during external crises, we conducted a systematic review of systematic reviews and used a range of participatory methods, including an electronic questionnaire, a semi-structured group interview and three workshops. A total of ten experts in nursing and/or occupational safety participated in these participatory parts of the study. Our search of relevant systematic reviews using Ovid Medline(R) and APA PsycInfo, Web of Science, Cochrane Reviews, CINAHL databases yielded a total of 1073 references after removing duplicates. After screening of abstracts, two independent reviewers selected 62 articles for full-text review and eighteen articles to be included for the systematic review. Both research and experience-based evidence was classified by workload management strategies into the following categories: a) work time and break arrangements, b) instructions and checklists, c) practices to prevent physical overload, d) management and leadership style and communication, e) use of human resources, f) definition of tasks, roles and duties, g) having a plan for managing facilities and patient flow, h) practicing for external crises in advance, i) having access to psychological interventions, j) receiving social support from managers and colleagues, and k) maintaining job skills and fitness for duty.

Results

Both research and experience-based results showed that caring leadership and systematic, well-timed and useful communication are effective workload management strategies in supporting the well-being of nursing staff during external crises. Based on research knowledge, practicing for external crises in advance, receiving social support from managers and colleagues, and psychological interventions, such as mindfulness sessions and cognitive-behavioural therapy, are effective in supporting the mental well-being of nursing staff during external crises. Less evidence was found for the other workload management strategies.

Conclusion

Our research suggests that several workload management strategies can be taken to support the well-being of nursing staff, both directly and indirectly, in times of external crises. In all, the role of managers, practicing for crises, and psychological interventions seem to be emphasized in this context.