

RESEARCH CONNECTION

Mental Health Nurses with disabilities adapt to overcome systemic barriers

By Andrea Thomson RPN, MPN, & Joanne Winsor Murray RN, MN



Why this research is important

There was little to no available literature specific to the experiences of mental health nurses who experience disabilities. These perspectives are important to capture to better understand the unique experiences of those in this nursing specialty.

How the research was conducted

Interpretive description was applied as the research method to answer the following questions: What are the perspectives and experiences of mental health nurses who experience disabilities? What practices facilitate or limit the inclusion of mental health nurses who experience

What you need to know

Nurses with disabilities hold a crucial role in the healthcare workforce, and given their lived experiences, they have the potential to improve patient care. However, these nurses often experience stigma, marginalization, discrimination, and ableism. They are likely to encounter workplace barriers such as a lack of accessibility, unsupportive workplaces, and challenges related to disability disclosure.

disabilities? Ten mental health nurses who self-identified with disabilities were interviewed. The participants also provided details on workplace accommodations provided (or not provided) during their nursing practice.

What the researchers found

The experiences as a mental health nurse and the accommodations provided differed based on the practice setting. Overall, participants reported that community-based settings were more accommodating compared to acute and long-term care. In addition, the risk of encountering violence while at work was concerning for participants, especially those employed in acute care settings. Experiences of violence while at work could lead to new onset or worsening symptoms of mental and

physical disabilities. Stigma and discrimination perpetuated by colleagues and management were also noted. Regardless of the type of disability or the workplace setting, the factor that led to success and positive experiences involved supportive leadership.

The experience of disability was often described from a strengths-based perspective. The participants discussed adapting to the challenges noted to provide safe, competent, and ethical care. They noted the importance of fitness to practice, self-care, and taking an active role in their recovery as well as their nursing practice. In addition, the experience of disability enhanced invaluable empathy, compassion, and advocacy skills.

How this research can be used

Mental health nurses with disabilities are required to adapt with and without support from employers. The ability to adapt provided them with many strengths, yet multiple barriers remain. Supportive leaders and/or management was the most common factor that led to success and positive experiences regarding workplace inclusion. A supportive, trusting approach from management that leaned toward integrating nurses with disability as opposed to just ‘accommodating’ them was associated with improved inclusion.

About the researchers

Andrea Thomson is a Registered Psychiatric Nurse and assistant professor in the Department of Psychiatric Nursing. Andrea is a Brandon University alumna, having obtained both her undergraduate and master’s degrees through BU. Andrea is building a research program on the experiences of disability and inclusive practices within the nursing profession and nursing education.

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Joanne Winsor Murray has been a Registered Nurse for 25 years, holding positions as an educator, manager, and consultant. She is an assistant professor in the Department of Psychiatric Nursing at Brandon University. Joanne completes research exploring families' experiences in health care with a growing interest in psychiatric nurses and their education experiences.

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Publication based on this research

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