This qualitative descriptive study identifies stressors and coping strategies among undergraduate nursing students during the first two semesters of clinical course work.

Nursing students experience large amounts of stress throughout their academic career due to substantial amounts of material, grade expectations, exams, clinics, and many other factors. This stress on an individual can be broken down into two categories: eustress and distress (Donovan, Doody, & Lyons, 2013). According to Donovan, Doody, & Lyons (2013), eustress is considered a positive response to stress, facilitating growth of the individual. Without distress, the individual would 'cope'. While stress has the ability to affect each individual differently, in general, it has many psychosocial, physiological, and psychological effects. Due to the intensity and importance of nursing school, it is important that students find a way to positively use stress experienced in order to continue to learn and advance in the program. The focus of the research was to identify common stressors experienced by students and to identify strategies and coping mechanisms that could be implemented by the staff and students to prevent or decrease their effects.

Participants

118 students were invited to participate, 56 students currently enrolled in Adult Health I and Adult Health II accepted the invitation and completed the survey. This study received approval from Eastern Kentucky University IRB.

Interview Guide

1. Demographic Data: Age, marital status, number of children the participant has, and the average number of hours worked per week.
2. Prior to beginning nursing school, would you rate yourself as a person who was minimally stressed, moderately stressed, or severely stressed?
3. Can you tell me what your biggest stressors in the nursing program are right now?
4. Can you describe your reaction to the previous mentioned stressors?
5. Rate your current level of stress, 0 being none to 5 being severely stressed.
6. Tell me what you do to control your stress/final relief.

Design & Analysis

This is a qualitative descriptive study utilizing email invitation and an online survey tool, SurveyMonkey for data collection. Data were analyzed using a constant comparative method.

Findings

1. Demographic Data

   - What is your age?
     - Under 20: 18.2%
     - 20-24: 64.7%
     - 25-29: 16.7%
     - 30-34: 2.7%
   - Marital Status
     - Single: 32.5%
     - Married: 26.3%
     - Widowed: 2.4%

2. How many children do you have?

   - No children: 32.7%
   - 1-3 children: 28.9%
   - 4-6 children: 24.2%
   - 7 or more children: 14.2%

3. In a typical week, how many hours do you work?

   - Less than 10 hours: 16.1%
   - 11-20 hours: 29.7%
   - 21-30 hours: 33.7%
   - 31-40 hours: 12.1%
   - More than 40 hours: 5.9%

4. Stress Response

   - Anxious
     - "I make studying and shifting through classes a little harder to do because all the work can feel overwhelming at times and I'm going to have all the work for the last test and pass it, there's more pressure on you than in any other class.
     - "There is a lot of material and everything is due this week."
     - "I have trouble sleeping and have had to put back on workers' medications for the first time in years."
   - Overwhelmed
     - "I get so overwhelmed at times that I have panic attacks."
     - "Overwhelmed: There is a lot of material and everything is due this week."
     - "I feel like everything is due this week, and I'm feeling overwhelmed and stressed."
   - Withdrawn
     - "I need to do something for myself."
     - "I need to run away from the stress and just be by myself."
     - "I need to do something to just be by myself."
   - Fatigued
     - "I'm usually exhausted by the end of a school day, almost like I'm going to pass out.
     - "I haven't slept well and get very nervous."
   - Discouraged
     - "I felt so anxious yesterday, it scared me."
     - "I felt so anxious yesterday, I don't know if I can get through it."
     - "I'm just so anxious today, I don't know if I can get through it."

5. Current Stress Levels

   - Rate your current level of stress, 0 being none to 5 being severely stressed.
   - No Stress: 39.2%
   - Minimally Stress: 44.6%
   - Moderately Stress: 16.1%
   - Severely Stress: 10.1%

6. Coping Strategies

   - Personal Activities
     - Go to the gym and exercise.
     - "I don't feel like doing anything."n
   - Social Engagement
     - I am surrounded by stress when I'm able to go home and see my family, sharing my stress with them.
   - Social Engagement
     - "I'm surrounded by stress when I'm able to go home and see my family, sharing my stress with them."

Conclusion

Stress is a common factor among undergraduate nursing students. Identified stressors include exams, amount of required study time and material, time management, fear, and clinical performance. Common stress responses include anxiety, sense of being overwhelmed, withdrawn, fatigued, and discouraged. Coping strategies employed by these undergraduate nursing students included engaging in personal activities, social activities, and seeking professional help. This data may be used by nursing faculty to develop an innovative approach to minimizing stress among undergraduate nursing students.