

Empathy and compassion in nursing: a narrative review of interventions preventing burnout and fostering resilience

Empatia i współczucie w pielęgniarstwie: przegląd narracyjny działań zapobiegających wypaleni zawodowemu i wzmacniających odporność psychiczną

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STRESZCZENIE

EMPATIA I WSPÓŁCZUCIE W PIELĘGNIARSTWIE: PRZEGLĄD NARRACYJNY DZIAŁAŃ ZAPOBIEGAJĄCYCH WYPALENIU ZAWODOWEMU I WZMACNIAJĄCYCH ODPORNOŚĆ PSYCHICZNĄ

Cel pracy. Opieka oparta na współczuciu ma zasadnicze znaczenie dla wysokiej jakości opieki zdrowotnej. Empatia i współczucie to kluczowe umiejętności pielęgniarek, jednak ich przejawianie często utrudniają stres, presja czasu i nadmierne obciążenie pracą. Zmęczenie współczuciem może prowadzić do wypalenia zawodowego i obniżenia jakości opieki. Niniejszy przegląd miał na celu zidentyfikowanie skutecznych działań mających na celu poprawę jakości opieki pielęgniarstwa opartej na współczuciu, wspieranie satysfakcji zawodowej pielęgniarek oraz zmniejszenie ryzyka wypalenia zawodowego.

Materiał i metody. Przeprowadziliśmy przegląd narracyjny międzynarodowej literatury (2014–2023) z baz MEDLINE i CINAHL Ultimate, skupiając się na empatii, współczuciu, wypaleniu zawodowym oraz interwencjach pielęgniarstwach. Po przeanalizowaniu tytułów, streszczeń i pełnych tekstów artykułów uwzględniono 44 odpowiednie publikacje. Ze względu na zróżnicowanie wyników, zostały one podsumowane w formie narracyjnej.

Wyniki. Praktyki oparte na uważności, terapia poznawczo-behawioralna oraz praktyki refleksyjne skutecznie zmniejszają poziom stresu wśród pielęgniarek. Wsparcie ze strony kierownictwa, pozytywne środowisko pracy oraz wykorzystanie narzędzi cyfrowych dodatkowo poprawiają radzenie sobie ze stresem. Włączenie empatii i regulacji emocjonalnej do programu kształcenia pielęgniarek wzmacnia ich odporność psychiczną i zwiększa satysfakcję z pracy.

Wnioski. Chociaż empatia i współczucie mają kluczowe znaczenie w pielęgniarstwie, mogą one również przyczyniać się do wypalenia zawodowego i zmęczenia współczuciem. Wzmacnianie pozycji pielęgniarek poprzez edukację, dbanie o siebie oraz regulację emocjonalną, wspierane przez zdrowe środowisko pracy i pracę zespołową, ogranicza wypalenie zawodowe, zwiększa satysfakcję z pracy i poprawia jakość opieki nad pacjentami. Prowadzenie badań naukowych ma zasadnicze znaczenie dla utrzymania odporności psychicznej i opieki zdrowotnej opartej na współczuciu na całym świecie.

Słowa kluczowe: współczucie, pielęgniarki, wypalenie zawodowe, zdrowie w miejscu pracy, zmęczenie współczuciem

ABSTRACT

EMPATHY AND COMPASSION IN NURSING: A NARRATIVE REVIEW OF INTERVENTIONS PREVENTING BURNOUT AND FOSTERING RESILIENCE

Aim. Compassionate care is vital for quality healthcare. Empathy and compassion are key skills for nurses, but they are often hindered by stress, time pressures and excessive workload. Compassion fatigue can lead to burnout and lower-quality care. This review sought to identify effective interventions for enhancing compassionate nursing care, supporting nurses' job satisfaction, and reducing the risk of burnout.

Material and methods. We conducted a narrative review of international literature (2014–2023) from MEDLINE and CINAHL Ultimate, with the focus on empathy, compassion, burnout, and nursing interventions. After screening titles, abstracts, and full texts, a total of 44 relevant articles were included. Due to heterogeneity, findings were synthesized narratively.

Results. Mindfulness, cognitive-behavioral therapy and reflective practices effectively reduce stress among nurses. Supportive leadership, positive work environments and the use of digital tools further enhance stress management. Integrating empathy and emotional regulation into nursing education strengthens resilience and improves job satisfaction.

Conclusions. While empathy and compassion are central to nursing, they may also contribute to burnout and compassion fatigue. Empowering nurses through education, self-care, and emotional regulation supported by healthy workplaces and teamwork reduces burnout, enhances job satisfaction, and improves patient care. Ongoing research is essential in order to sustain resilience and compassionate healthcare worldwide.

Key words: compassion, nurses, burnout, occupational health, compassion fatigue

INTRODUCTION

Compassionate care is a crucial element of quality healthcare, as it is based on understanding and responding to patients' emotional and psychological needs. Such an approach improves patient satisfaction, strengthens the therapeutic relationship and contributes to better treatment adherence. Research findings confirm that compassionate care has a positive impact on treatment outcomes, reduces patients' anxiety and improves quality of life [1].

In order to better understand compassionate nursing care, it is essential to first clarify the concept of empathy, which represents its foundational psychological component. Empathy is an emotional response that depends on the interaction between personality traits and various aspects of an individual's mental state. Empathic responses are triggered automatically, but they can also be consciously regulated [2]. The concept of the integrated model of empathy, which includes affective and cognitive components, was developed by Feshbach & Feshbach, while Hoffman added a motivational component that encourages prosocial behavior. Empathy develops throughout the lifespan and encompasses affective, cognitive, and behavioral components [3-5]. It is an important personality trait and a key skill for health professionals, encompassing the ability to understand patients' feelings while maintaining appropriate boundaries to prevent empathic distress, particularly in complex situations [6].

Although empathy enables understanding of another person's emotional experiences, compassion represents a related but distinct construct that involves a deeper understanding of another person's suffering, accompanied by a proactive, selfless motivation to alleviate it, despite the fact that these two terms are often used interchangeably in the literature. Compassion entails an emotional response to another person's distress without directly sharing in it, but encompasses the altruistic desire of the individual to alleviate the suffering of another person [6-8]. It consists of three basic elements: recognizing distress, helping people in need, and responding to their difficulties [9]. These conceptual differences are further supported by neuroscientific evidence, as differences between empathy and compassion are also evident at the neuroscientific level, where different areas of the brain are activated in response to suffering [7].

While empathy and compassion are essential for high-quality nursing care, sustained exposure to patients' suffering may place nurses at increased emotional risk. Due to frequent exposure to patients who suffer, nurses are prone to stress that may lead to compassion fatigue and burnout [10,11]. If signs are not recognized in time, this may lead to disengagement, moral distress, and burnout [12].

The relationship between compassion, emotional resources, and occupational outcomes has been also conceptualized in theoretical models. Coetzee & Laschinger developed a model of compassion fatigue that emphasizes the importance of adequate resources and support [13]. In the absence of resources, nurses tend to focus on their own distress, which can result in emotional overload. However, when resources are balanced, they are able to focus on patient care, which leads to better outcomes and greater satisfaction.

Empirical evidence further highlights the protective and risk-related roles of empathy in relation to burnout. To date, three systematic reviews have investigated the relationship between empathy and burnout in nursing populations. Wilkinson et al. and Yue et al. report a negative association between empathy and burnout, with professional commitment reducing the risk of burnout. Hunt et al. [14-16] emphasize that cognitive empathy and the ability to regulate emotions reduce burnout among nurses. Overall, these findings underscore the need for targeted interventions to reduce compassion fatigue and are therefore essential for improving the situation [17-19].

AIM

The aim of this literature review is to examine recent research on promoting the development of empathy and compassion, as well as on preventing burnout among nurses, with a particular focus on burnout related to empathy and compassion fatigue rather than occupational burnout in general. The findings provide a foundation for fostering satisfaction in the provision of compassionate nursing care and for enhancing overall job satisfaction among nurses. We formulated the following research question: Which interventions or approaches effectively promote compassion satisfaction, enhance compassionate nursing care, and prevent burnout and compassion fatigue among nurses?

METHODS

We conducted a narrative review of international scientific literature to enable a critical and objective analysis of areas that are not yet well examined and where little literature is available [20,21].

Review method

The collection of relevant sources was carried out in the bibliographic databases MEDLINE and CINAHL Ultimate. We included articles published in scientific journals between 1st January 2014 and 31st December 2023. For the literature search, keywords and phrases in English were used to create the following search string: AB („compassion satisfaction” OR „compassionate care” OR „empathetic care” AND AB („burnout prevention”

OR „burnout” OR „compassion fatigue” OR „emotional exhaustion” OR „secondary traumatic stress”) AND AB nurse* AND (intervention* OR strateg* OR program* OR training* OR support).

The selection of relevant articles was conducted systematically to ensure rigor and transparency. Initially, two independent reviewers screened all titles and abstracts retrieved from the literature search to identify potentially relevant studies. Subsequently, the same reviewers independently assessed the full-text articles for eligibility based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Any disagreements between the study reviewers were resolved through discussion and consensus. This approach ensured that study selection was carried out objectively and consistently, minimizing the risk of bias.

We included peer-reviewed articles focusing on nurses in any healthcare setting or undergraduate nursing students and addressing empathy or compassion in relation to burnout or compassion fatigue. Studies were required to explicitly examine empathy or compassion as a concept, factor, or outcome associated with burnout or compassion fatigue in nursing.

Exclusion criteria included articles published in languages other than English, studies focusing on populations

other than nurses or nursing students (e.g., physicians, caregivers or mixed healthcare professionals without separate nursing data) and studies examining burnout exclusively in the context of exceptional or crisis situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or humanitarian crises (e.g., the migrant crisis in Syria).

Review results

The search of bibliographic databases yielded a total of 492 records (250 from CINAHL Ultimate and 242 from MEDLINE). After removal of duplicate records ($n = 26$), 466 unique records remained. Titles and abstracts were independently screened against predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, resulting in the exclusion of records that were not relevant to the research question, did not focus on the target population, or did not address the topic of interest ($n = 366$). The full texts of the remaining 100 articles were retrieved and assessed for eligibility. During full-text screening, 56 articles were excluded due to reasons such as insufficient relevance to the study aim, lack of empirical data, inappropriate study design, or failure to meet inclusion criteria. Ultimately, 44 studies were included in the final analysis.

■ Tab. 1. Summary table of interventions for enhancing compassionate care and reducing burnout among nurses

Theme	Main interventions	Reported effects / key findings	Key references
Meditation, mindfulness, and emotional self-regulation	Mindfulness training, meditation sessions, guided breathing, Mindful Self-Compassion programs	Reduced burnout and compassion fatigue; improved stress management, job satisfaction, resilience, and work-life balance; enhanced ability to cope with high-stress situations; short sessions are also effective	Biber, 2022; Ceravolo & Raines, 2019; Freedenberg et al., 2020; Hevezi, 2016; Horner et al., 2014; Kharatzadeh et al., 2020; Morrison Wyld et al., 2017; Rajeswari et al., 2020; Rushton et al., 2021; Schorch et al., 2021 [22-31]
Psychosocial and emotional support	Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), structured psychosocial support, self-compassion interventions	Increased resilience; reduced burnout; improved coping with emotional and psychological stressors; particularly beneficial in oncology and high-stress settings	Biber, 2022; Franco & Christie, 2021; McVicar et al., 2020; Partlak Günüşen et al., 2021; Schorch et al., 2021; Van Klinken et al., 2023 [22,31-35]
Self-care and relaxation	<i>Snack and Relax</i> ® program with brief relaxation exercises	Decreased stress; enhanced well-being and enthusiasm; lower burnout risk	Markwell et al., 2016 [36]
Spirituality and personal growth	Spiritual self-care, meaning-making practices	Fostered a sense of meaning in the nursing role; improved well-being and reduced burnout	Copeland, 2021; Davis et al., 2023 [37,38]
Resilience programs	<i>THRIVE</i> ® program, progressive muscle relaxation, breathing exercises, reflective practices	Enhanced coping skills; improved resilience; reduced compassion fatigue and stress in demanding healthcare settings	Blackburn et al., 2020; Flarity et al., 2016; Pehlivan & Güner, 2020; Semerci et al., 2021 [39-42]
Enhancing professional quality of life	Journal writing, reflection groups, debriefing sessions	Reduced stress and PTSD symptoms; improved compassion satisfaction, emotional processing, cohesion and resilience	Beres et al., 2022; Copeland, 2021; Davey et al., 2021; Nerovich et al., 2023 [37,43-45]
Mentoring and support networks	Formal mentorship programs, peer support networks	Lower burnout; higher compassion satisfaction; improved retention and professional guidance	Drury, 2022; McCall, 2023; Wahl et al., 2018 [46-48]
Education and training	Compassion care training, Caritas Circles, 3R (Resiliency, Mindfulness, Respiration, and Support), workshops on self-compassion	Increased job satisfaction and patient care quality; reduced stress; improved emotional awareness and resilience	Davey et al., 2021; Dreher et al., 2019; Franco & Christie, 2021; Fu et al., 2021; Griffin et al., 2021; McEwan et al., 2020; McVicar et al., 2020; Paiva-Salisbury & Schwanz, 2022; Saab et al., 2019 [32,33,44,49-54]
Complementary therapies	Therapy animal visits, aromatherapy with patchouli oil	Increased compassion satisfaction; reduced burnout and stress	Ginex et al., 2018; Shin et al., 2020 [55,56]
Artistic expression and creative workshops	Storytelling Through Music (STM), dance/movement therapy, mandala painting, motivational text messages, play activities	Decreased loneliness, insomnia, stress and burnout; improved self-awareness, compassion satisfaction and joy in nursing practice	Phillips et al., 2020; Sánchez et al., 2014; Yilmazer et al., 2020; Yilmaz et al., 2018 [57-60]
Leadership and work environment	Supportive leadership, recognition of nurses' work, positive organizational culture	Improved motivation, job satisfaction, resilience and patient outcomes; reduced burnout and compassion fatigue	Cosentino et al., 2021; Kelly & Lefton, 2017 [61,62]
Digital technology	<i>Provider Resilience</i> mobile app, mindfulness/meditation apps, online Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)	Reduced burnout; improved resilience and compassion satisfaction; accessible and flexible delivery of support programs	Bhardwaj et al., 2023; Finucane et al., 2023; Jakel et al., 2016 [63-65]

Due to the heterogeneity of study designs, populations, and outcome measures, a meta-analysis was not feasible. Therefore, a narrative synthesis was conducted. The synthesis followed a thematic approach. Firstly, data relevant to the review aim were extracted from each included study, including study characteristics, population and key findings related to empathy, compassion, burnout and compassion fatigue. These findings were then systematically compared across studies. Key themes were identified and validated across studies and were subsequently used to structure the narrative synthesis of the results.

RESULTS

As shown in Table 1, analysis of the articles included in the literature review identified several key themes related to strategies for enhancing compassionate nursing care, alleviating compassion fatigue, and addressing burnout among nurses. Overall, the most consistent evidence supported mindfulness-based interventions, meditation, and emotional self-regulation programs, which were frequently associated with reduced burnout and compassion fatigue and improved resilience and stress management. Psychosocial support and resilience-focused programs also showed positive effects, particularly in high-stress clinical settings. Other approaches, including education and training, mentoring, complementary therapies, creative activities, digital interventions and supportive leadership, demonstrated generally positive but more variable effects. Themes, intervention categories and their reported outcomes are summarized in Table 1.

DISCUSSION

This narrative review aimed to identify interventions that promote compassion satisfaction and prevent empathy-related burnout among nurses. Our findings show that interventions targeting individual coping skills, organizational support and education play a central role in reducing burnout and compassion fatigue and in strengthening compassion satisfaction among nurses.

Compassion and empathy are essential elements of nursing daily practice, enabling nurses to develop connections with patients that surpasses professional distance. Compassion involves understanding and sharing patients' suffering, while empathy refers to the ability to perceive and understand another person's emotions and perspectives. Although conceptually distinct, these terms are often used interchangeably in the literature, highlighting the need for clearer definitions and conceptual clarity in future research [66].

In daily practice, emotional stress, time constraints and heavy workloads may limit nurses' ability to sustain compassionate and empathetic care. Without appropriate emotional regulation and professional boundaries, prolonged empathic engagement may contribute to emotional exhaustion and burnout [67].

Reviews of international literature identify numerous effective strategies for reducing burnout and strengthening compassion among nurses. These strategies can be

grouped into several categories: psychological and emotional approaches that help nurses manage stress, improve self-regulation, and strengthen emotional stability. Mindfulness, meditation and cognitive-behavioral therapy are important methods associated with improved work-life balance and reduced burnout. Similarly, programs that integrate meditation and guided breathing for emotional regulation have a significant impact on stress management.

Resilience-building programs, highlighted in the literature as key for reducing burnout and compassion fatigue, such as the THRIVE© program, incorporate breathing exercises and progressive muscle relaxation to strengthen nurses' capacity to manage emotional challenges and stressful situations. The reviewed findings align with earlier work emphasizing that resilience is a critical protective factor against occupational stress and that both individual- and organizational-level resilience strategies should be considered. Examples of such strategies include communication skills, coaching, role-playing, and stress-resilience training [68]. Structured resilience interventions have positive impact on nurses' mental well-being, but identified implementation challenges need to be addressed for successful adoption [69].

Techniques for spiritual growth and personal transformation encourage nurses to seek meaning in their professional work, which positively influences professional identity and reduces burnout. Spiritual practices and reflective techniques enhance job satisfaction and improve compassionate care. Complementary therapies and artistic expression—such as aromatherapy and therapeutic animal-assisted interactions—also help reduce stress and improve overall well-being. Creative workshops, storytelling through music, and dance-based techniques foster emotional expression and reflection, which help reduce burnout and cultivate self-compassion. These approaches collectively underscore the importance of self-care among nurses.

Organizational factors emerged as equally important. Supportive leadership, mentoring, peer support, and structured debriefing were associated with reduced burnout, improved job satisfaction and stronger team cohesion. Authentic leadership, in particular, has been shown to reduce workplace stress and enhance nurses' professional quality of life [70]. Similarly, organizational restructuring that promotes compassionate work environments may improve job satisfaction and retention [71].

Mobile applications and web-based interventions provide easy access to meditative and therapeutic content. Relaxation apps and interventions such as online ACT therapy are adaptable and effective for stress management. The development of digital tools could help nurses monitor their burnout levels and receive support through digital platforms for coping strategies [72]. With the use of appropriate applications, nurses may become more empowered to recognize and manage compassion fatigue and prevent burnout [73]. It would also be valuable to design or upgrade various forms of digital psychosocial support that were developed during the COVID-19 pandemic or that have been created for other populations to promote well-being [74-75].

Implications for practice

The findings highlight the importance of a multifaceted approach to preventing burnout and fostering compassion in nursing practice. Continuous training in empathy for nurses could help them establish appropriate emotional distance and engage more professionally with patients through cognitive empathy, thereby improving the quality of care and treatment outcomes [67]. Measures should also be implemented to reduce nurses' stress, such as activating individual and social support systems, providing training in stress-management skills, regulating workloads, and improving salaries and working conditions.

Strategies for preventing burnout and fostering compassionate care should be included early in undergraduate and graduate nursing curricula, with a strong emphasis on self-care. This would reduce the emotional burden and burnout experienced by students during their studies and increase their likelihood of remaining in the profession. By empowering students to practice self-care, they would feel more competent in their demanding roles and more fulfilled in their work. Incorporating an "emotional curriculum" would equip nursing students with a proactive approach to developing resilience toward psychosocial challenges in clinical practice [76].

In the case of practicing nurses, we recommend holding empathy workshops at least once per year as part of lifelong learning. This would provide the foundation for strengthening empathetic skills, while developing cognitive empathy would protect nurses from burnout and reduce intentions to leave the profession. If healthcare leaders, professional associations and society as a whole wish to retain nurses within the profession and in the country, while ensuring quality patient care, it is essential to provide adequate resources and enable the continuous implementation of the strategies described above. Further research is needed on reducing burnout among healthcare professionals, especially nurses [77].

Compassion has received growing attention from researchers, policymakers, educational institutions, healthcare professionals, and patients, who consistently recognize compassion as a central feature of a positive healthcare experience [78]. Nurses equipped with the knowledge and skills to provide compassionate care also positively impact nurses' turnover, as they experience better professional quality of life [79].

Limitations of the study

A limitation of our review is that it included a relatively small number of bibliographic databases. The restriction to the past 10 years was intentional, as earlier literature reviews already presented in the introduction, had covered previous periods. Additionally, as a narrative review, the synthesis was qualitative rather than quantitative, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Finally, variation in definitions and conceptual clarity of compassion and empathy across studies may have influenced the consistency of findings, emphasizing the importance of standardized terminology in future research.

CONCLUSIONS

Empathy and compassion are essential to nursing but can also contribute to the risk of burnout if not managed effectively. Key themes identified in this review include the development of professional emotional boundaries and emotional regulation, educational interventions to enhance self-care and resilience, and organizational strategies such as supportive leadership, teamwork, and professional collaboration. Our findings indicate that these interventions collectively reduce burnout, strengthen compassion satisfaction, and improve job satisfaction, professional commitment, and ultimately patient safety, care quality, and treatment outcomes.

Education and ongoing training play a vital role in preparing both nursing students and practicing nurses to care for their physical, psychological, social and spiritual well-being. By fostering self-awareness, emotional regulation and work-life balance, nurses are better equipped to sustain compassionate care over the long term.

Strengthening nurses' capacity for compassionate care through the combination of individual, educational and organizational strategies is critical to protect nurses' well-being, reduce burnout and ensure the delivery of safe, high-quality and compassionate healthcare worldwide.

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