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Knowledge and Attitude Towards Mental Ill Health in a Tertiary Institution in Nigeria

Ilochi Nwabunwanne Ogadinma

Department of Human Physiology, Faculty of Basic Medical Sciences, Federal University, Otuoke, Bayelsa State, Nigeria.
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9708-2190

***Corresponding Author**: Ilochi Nwabunwanne Ogadinma
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Abstract

Stigma is a major barrier to health care that can impact the care received by patients and their health outcomes. The knowledge and attitudes of undergraduate nursing students regarding mental illness is important if the quality of care for people with mental illness is to be improved. This study examined the knowledge and attitudes of student nurses to mental illness in the Federal University Otuoke, Bayelsa state, Nigeria. Specifically, the study aimed to find out the level of knowledge of the student nurses about mental ill health, evaluate the attitudes of the student nurses towards mental health patient, and to find out strategies for improving the attitude of student nurses towards mental ill health. Cross sectional descriptive quantitative research design was used. The subjects were 332 students from the third and fourth year of nursing and a sample of 180 students was selected. Structured questionnaire was developed by the researcher and used to collect data. The instrument was face validated and the reliability was tested by Spearman's rank-order correlation with the coefficient of 0.93. The data were analysed using frequency distribution tables and percentages. The results showed that the knowledge of mental ill health was satisfactory among the undergraduate nursing students. Some pupils, however, despite their knowledge, had negative attitudes towards caring for patients presenting with mental health issues and others had positive attitudes. Based on these findings, the study recommended that nursing schools should consider changing their curriculum to include a wider scope of mental health education that includes a wide range of mental health disorders, evidence-based practices, and the roles and responsibilities of the nurse in the mental health delivery system.

Keywords: *Knowledge, Attitude, Prevalence, Mental, Ill-Health, Nurses, Students, University.*

Introduction

Globally mental illness continues to be significantly more stigmatized than physical illness, often due to enduring misconceptions and general lack of public understanding. Despite advancements in mental health awareness, many individuals still hold false beliefs that mental disorders are signs of personal weakness or moral failure, rather than legitimate medical conditions (Henderson et al., 2023). This stigma is frequently rooted in fear and misinformation, which fosters discrimination, social exclusion, and reluctance to seek help (Corrigan et al., 2022). In contrast, physical illness is more readily acknowledged and supported, as they are perceived to have clear biological causes and visible symptoms. The disparity in perception between mental and physical health reflects broader societal attitudes and systemic gaps in education about mental health (Rusch et al., 2021). Addressing stigma requires not only increasing public knowledge but also challenging the harmful stereotypes that perpetuates inequality on how different health conditions are viewed and treated.

Mental illness, also referred to as mental health conditions, encompasses a wide range of disorders that affects an individual's mood, thinking and behavior (Ilochi, Cyprian and Chuemere, 2024). These conditions include, depression, anxiety disorders, schizophrenia, and bipolar disorders, amongst others and they can significantly impair

a person's ability to function in daily life. Although mental illness is common and treatable, they are often misunderstood due to the complexity of their symptoms and the invisible nature of their effects. Research shows that mental health disorders are influenced by a combination of genetic, biological, environmental and psychological factors (National Institution of Mental Health, 2023). Recognizing the broad spectrum and real life impact of mental illnesses is a critical step towards reducing misconceptions and improving mental health outcomes (Ilochi, 2026).

Studies have shown that individuals with mental illness continues to face mistreatment and stigma in various communities, including among student nurses. Mental illness is often perceived as frightening, shameful, and incurable (Ilochi and Chuemere, 2024), which fuels negative attitudes and discriminatory behaviors even within health care settings (Knaak et al., 2022). These misconceptions contribute to the marginalization of people living with mental health conditions and hinder efforts to promote empathy and understanding. Research indicates that nursing students, despite their role in future mental health care, may hold stigmatizing beliefs influenced by societal norms and limited mental health education (Younas et al., 2019). This is particularly concerning as health care professionals play a critical role in shaping the quality of care and advocacy for individuals with mental illness. Addressing these biases requires a comprehensive approach to mental health training.

It is well established that undergraduate nursing students' experiences in their education have an impact on their attitudes towards mental health nursing. A key part of this education is the clinical placement, where students have the opportunity to apply their theoretical knowledge and understanding in practical, healthcare settings. While a range of models of mental health nursing practice are introduced in classroom teaching their implementation in clinical work may differ. Students' experiences of mental health nursing role models are explored in the literature and can be positive and/or negative (Jack et al., 2020). Nursing students' attitudes to mental health nursing may also be influenced by the country in which they are trained as the ways in which mental health nurses are prepared may vary from country to country. Registered nurses in the United States may hold baccalaureate degree who will be qualified to work in a mental health facility (American Psychiatric Nurses Association, 2019). In the United Kingdom, pre-registration nursing education provides the opportunity to follow a specialist mental health nursing pathway. In general, the first part of the curriculum offers a common ground while the second part of the curriculum emphasizes more on specialist mental health content (Happell & Gaskin 2021).

In view of this, the present study investigates the knowledge and attitudes of the undergraduate nursing students on mental illness at Federal University Otuoke, Bayelsa state, Nigeria. It also takes into account the impact of student's undergraduate education experiences on their attitudes towards mental health nursing as an intended field of professional practice. Attitudes towards mental ill health are an area of nursing care that is significant as it affects the quality of care that is offered and the welfare of the patient with mental illness (Ilochi and Ademola, 2024). It is therefore important to be aware of nursing students' attitudes towards mental illness so that they can be prepared to provide compassionate, respectful and effective care. Thus, the present study examines students nurses' attitudes on mental ill health in Federal University Otuoke.

As mental health issues gain more attention internationally, the stigma and negative attitudes towards people with mental illnesses still exist in many communities around the world. Student nurses, as future health care professionals, play an important role in raising awareness and providing holistic health care services to individuals with mental health problems. However, their beliefs and values towards this population can be influenced by a number of factors, such as beliefs, education, mental health care experience and societal views. To address this concern, the current study explores the attitudes of student nurses at Federal University Otuoke about patients with mental health problems. The study aims to uncover some areas in which nursing education and training may be enhanced, given the importance that these attitudes may have on shaping the lives of nurses.The study seeks to clarify the values that may influence these attitudes, especially educational experience, personal belief and exposure to mental health settings, and to identify areas where nursing education and professional training could be strengthened.

Materials and methods

Ethical Consideration

This study was considered by the Research Ethics Committee of the Department of Human Physiology, Faculty of Basic Medical Sciences, Federal University Otuoke with Reference: FUO/REC/HP/2026/078.

The researcher maintained the following ethical considerations during the course of the research.

- **Anonymity:** The researcher ensured that the respondents did not give self-identifying details like name thus to ensure anonymity.
- **Confidentiality**: The researcher ensured that all information's provided are treated confidentially.

- **Informed consent:** The researcher ensured that the respondents gave out their approval and acceptance before giving out the questionnaire
- **Respect**: the respondents were respected and approached with courtesy
- **Plagiarism:** the researcher ensured that all works used, ideas referenced.

Voluntary participation: the researcher ensured that the subjects had the right to voluntary decide whether to participate in the study or not without risk of penalty.

Research Setting

The setting for this study was Federal University Otuoke, Bayelsa State, Nigeria. The Faculty of Nursing Science was established in the year 2023 with the initial admission of 150 students in October 2023. Prof. Teddy Charles Adias. The Faculty is integrated with sufficiently bedded Federal Medical Center situated in the capital city, Yenegoa, so that Nursing education, service and research are closely combined with quality patient/client care. The Faculty had accreditation status given by the NUC in 2026 and approval by the NMCN in the same year.

Target Population

The target population for this study comprised Nursing students in Federal University Otuoke, Bayelsa State. The target population were Nursing students currently in their third and fourth year of study. From the class records and attendance sheets compiled by the course representatives, the population of the students is shown below.

300 Level - 180 nursing students

400 Level - 152 nursing students

Total Population 332 respondents

These students were participants used in the data collection procedure for analysis.

Sampling

The sample size was determined using the Taro Yamane's formula for calculating sample size. Taro Yamane was a statistician who developed a statistical formula to aid the calculation and determination of sample size given a study population. The Taro Yamane's statistical formula is stated as follows;

$n = N / (1 + Ne^2)$

n= corrected sample size,

N = population size (N = 332)

e = Margin of error, e = 0.05 based on the research condition.

Therefore,

$n = 332 / 1 + (332 \times 0.05^2)$

$n = 332 / (1 + 0.83)$

$n = 332 / 1.83ng$

$n = 180.42$

Therefore, the sample size for this study was 180 nursing students.

Sampling Technique

The sampling technique that is used for this study is the stratified random sampling technique. This technique was chosen because, it involves dividing the respondents into strata or grouping and randomly selecting a set number of participants from each. With this technique, you reduce sampling bias and ensure that each class is adequately represented, which makes it easier to choose students based on the allocated percentage from each unit. For this study, the sampling technique is explained below

Table 1: Sample size for various sub-strata

Level	No of students	Percentage(100%)	Subgroup strata
300 level	180	(180/332)*100=54.2	(54.2/100)*180=97.6
400 level	152	(152/332)*100=45.8	(45.8/100)*180=82.4
Total	332	100	180

After the strata was obtained, nursing students were picked from each class by simple random sampling and proportionately until the desired sample size of 180 was obtained**.**

Instruments for Data Collection

The researcher made use of a self-structured questionnaire to collect data that was used for analysis in the study. The questionnaire was structured in four sections; sections A, B, C and D, and it is constructed in a simple Agree or Disagree format. Section A has items to elicit information of the respondent's socio-demographic data; section B, C, D contains questions on the knowledge of student nurses on mental illness, attitude of student nurses towards mentally ill patients, and strategies to improve the attitude of student nurses towards mentally ill patients respectively, to address the research objectives.

Validity of the Instrument

The validity of the research instrument was established through face validation. The questionnaire was submitted to the Research Unit of the Department of Human Physiology, Federal University Otuoke, for validation. Corrections and modifications were made based on the observations and recommendations provided by members of staff of the Faculty of Basic Medical Sciences. The supervisors also reviewed the instrument to ensure that its items adequately measured the variables under investigation and were consistent with the stated research objectives and questions.

Reliability of the Instrument

The reliability of the research instrument was established using the test–retest method. For this purpose, 10 copies of the questionnaire were initially administered to nursing students outside the study population who possessed characteristics similar to those of the actual study respondents. After an interval of two weeks, another 10 copies of the same questionnaire were administered to the same participants. The responses obtained from both administrations were analyzed using Spearman's Rank-Order Correlation Coefficient. The analysis yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.93, indicating a high level of consistency and suggesting that the instrument was suitable for data collection in the study.

Method of Data Collection

Copies of the questionnaire were distributed to the students on face-to-face basis on selected days after their classes in the school premises. This allowed for ease of distribution and collection.

Method of Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics was used for presenting the data obtained from the research instrument. Data obtained was analyzed using data analysis tool such as frequency distribution tables and percentages.

Results

The following are the results of this study;

Table 2: Percentage Analysis of Socio-Demographics Characteristics of the Respondents

Variables	Options	Frequency (180)	Percentage (100%)
Age distribution	18 – 20 years	46	25.5
	21 – 25 years	107	59.5
	Above 25 years	27	15.0
Gender	Male	13	7.1
	Female	167	92.9
Marital Status	Single	149	83.0
	Married	31	17.0
	Others	-	-
Religion	Christians	168	93.4
	Muslims	12	6.6
	Others	-	-

Table 2 showed the results of the demographic characteristics of the respondents. The results of the age distribution showed that 46 (25.5%) of the respondents were between the ages of 18-20 years; 107 (59.5%) of the respondents were between the ages of 21-25 years; and 27 (15.0%) of the respondents were above 25 years. On the gender distribution, majority of the respondents, 167 (92.9%) were female nursing students while the rest (7.1%) were male nursing students. For the level of study, majority of the respondents 149 (83.0%) were single, and 31 (17%) were married. Lastly, on the religious affiliation of the students, majority of the respondents 168 (93.4%), were Christians while 12 (6.6%) were Muslims.

What is the knowledge of student nurses on mental ill health in Federal University Otuoke?

Table 3: Knowledge of Student Nurses on Mental Ill Health

S/N	Knowledge	A (f%)	SA (f%)	D (f%)	SD (f%)
1.	There are common mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety.	80 44.4	50 27.7	45 25.0	5 2.7
2.	There is impact of mental illness on individuals' daily functioning and quality of life.	60 33.3	80 44.5	40 22.2	0 0

3.	There are signs and symptoms of various mental disorders.	100 55.5	80 44.5	0 0	0 0
4.	I am familiar with the different treatment options available for mental illnesses.	10 5.5	80 44.5	80 44.5	10 5.5
5.	I feel confident in my ability to communicate effectively with individuals experiencing mental health issues.	45 25.0	65 36.1	50 27.7	20 11.1

Table 3 represents the responses obtained for the knowledge of student nurses on mental ill health in Federal University Ouoke. From the findings, majority of the respondents (44.5%) knew about common mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety; 44.5% said understand the impact of mental illness on individuals' daily functioning and quality of life; 55.5% are aware of the signs and symptoms of various mental disorders; 44.5% are familiar with the different treatment options available for mental illnesses and the same percentage is not aware; 36.1% feel confident in their ability to communicate effectively with individuals experiencing mental health issues.

What is the attitude of student nurses towards mental ill health in Federal University Otuoke?

Table 4: Attitude of Student Nurses Towards Mental Ill Health

S/N	Attitude	A (f%)	SA (f%)	D (f%)	SD (f%)
1.	Individuals with mental illness deserve the same level of care and respect as those with physical illnesses.	90 50.0	70 38.8	10 5.5	10 5.5
2.	I feel comfortable interacting with and providing care to patients with mental health conditions.	80 44.5	10 5.5	90 50	0 0
3.	Positive attitudes towards the recovery potential of individuals with mental illness are necessary.	65 36.1	50 27.7	20 11.1	45 25.0
4.	Mental illness is a legitimate health concern and should be treated as such.	100 55.5	80 44.5	0 0	0 0
5.	I am willing to advocate for the rights and well-being of patients with mental health issues.	110 61.1	50 27.7	10 5.5	10 5.5

Table 4 presents the attitudes of student nurses towards mental ill health at Federal University Otuoke. The findings revealed that 50% of the respondents believed that individuals with mental illness deserved the same level of care and respect as those with physical illnesses. Furthermore, 44.5% expressed comfort in interacting with and providing care to patients with mental health conditions, while 36.1% demonstrated positive attitudes towards the recovery potential of individuals with mental illness. In addition, 55.4% agreed that mental illness is a legitimate health concern that should be treated accordingly, while 61.1% indicated their willingness to advocate for the rights and well-being of patients experiencing mental health conditions.

Research Question Three: What are the strategies to improve the attitude of student nurses towards mental ill health in Federal University Otuoke?

Table 5: Strategies to Improve the Attitude of Student Nurses Towards Mental Ill Health

S/N	Strategies	A (f %)	SA (f %)	D (f %)	S (f%)
1.	Incorporating mental health education and training into the nursing curriculum can enhance attitude towards mentally ill patients.	95 52.8	75 41.7	5 2.7	5 2.7
2.	Interacting with patients who have successfully recovered from mental illness can positively influence attitude.	50 27.7	50 27.7	40 22.2	40 22.2
3.	Encouraging empathy and understanding towards mentally ill patients during clinical rotations can improve attitude.	60 33.3	40 22.2	50 27.7	30 16.7
4.	Providing opportunities for open discussions and debriefing sessions about personal attitudes and biases towards mental illness can help develop a more positive attitude.	70 38.8	30 16.7	50 27.7	30 16.7

Table 5 above shows the strategies to improve the attitude of student nurses towards mental ill health in Federal University Otuoke. From the findings, the strategies were shown to include incorporating mental health education and training into the nursing curriculum (52.8%), interacting with patients who have successfully recovered from mental illness (27.7%), encouraging empathy and understanding towards mentally ill patients during clinical rotations (33.3%), providing opportunities for open discussions and debriefing sessions about personal attitudes and biases towards mental illness (38.8%).

Discussion

The results indicated that the level of knowledge possessed by the student nurses was relatively high about mental illnesses. This was manifested in the findings, as 44.5% of the respondents had knowledge of common mental health problems including depression and anxiety, whilst 44.5% had awareness of the impact of mental illness on people's functioning and quality of life. It is in line with Pederson et al. (2022) who found that undergraduate nursing students had good knowledge and positive attitude towards mental illness. It also supports Ilochi (2026) findings that those students who were taught about mental health were more likely to have sought help for mental health problems, indicating that mental health education could have a positive effect on students' awareness and understanding of mental health issues. The finding is in contrast to the study by Muldoon and Reilly (2020) which reported that the level of knowledge amongst undergraduate nursing students regarding the mental illness was inadequate, and that they lacked knowledge of diagnostic criteria, treatments and the impact of mental illness on the subject person and their family members. This implies that the level of knowledge could impact the confidence level of the nursing students in their ability to deliver care to patients with mental health issues and so, there is an urgent need for better education and training on mental healthcare delivery.

The responses also showed a mixed opinion of undergraduate nursing students when it comes to mental health issues. While 44.5% of the respondents felt comfortable caring for and interacting with patients who have mental health problems, 50% of respondents felt uncomfortable caring for and interacting with patients with mental health problems. In addition, positive attitudes towards the recovery potential of people with mental illness were had by 36.1%. However, these findings indicate that although some information was available about the mental health conditions, there was a large number of students who still held concerns about the care of those with mental health conditions. These findings corroborate the positive attitudes of undergraduate nursing students towards people with mental illness reported by Stuhlmiller and Tolchard (2019), which suggests that teaching on nursing may help to improve attitudes towards mental healthcare. These results also suggest that mental health education, particularly a holistic approach, may help develop nursing students' empathy, understanding and willingness to deliver compassionate care to people suffering from mental illness.

From the findings, the strategies were shown to include incorporating mental health education and training into the nursing curriculum (52.8%), interacting with patients who have successfully recovered from mental illness (27.7%), encouraging empathy and understanding towards mentally ill patients during clinical rotations (33.3%), providing opportunities for open discussions and debriefing sessions about personal attitudes and biases towards mental illness (38.8%).

This is consistent with the finding of Carrara et al. (2021) that mental health education in nursing programs led to an increase in nursing students' mental illness knowledge and decrease in mental illness stigma. It is also consistent with the study of Lien et al. (2019) which showed that there was a significant increase in mental health nursing students' knowledge about mental illness and attitudes towards mental health individuals after clinical placements in mental health settings. It means that innovative approaches like the use of interactive teaching techniques (e.g., case-based learning, role playing) can be helpful in improving nursing students' knowledge of mental illness and reducing stigma and negative attitudes.

The results of the study indicate that undergraduate nursing students have good knowledge about mental ill health but the attitude of the nursing students towards the care of mentally ill patients, some of them have negative attitude towards the care of mentally ill patient with an exception of few students. Therefore, nursing educators need to review the nursing curriculum to incorporate mental health education to increase students' knowledge and awareness of mental health issues. Incorporating mental health education into the nursing program will help prepare nursing students with the knowledge and skills to adequately care for patients with mental health problems. Moreover, a negative attitude to mental ill health can have a huge effect on patient care. While the results of this study show that undergraduate nursing students had positive attitudes towards mental illness, the author believes that mental health education should be incorporated in the training of nursing graduates to foster positive attitudes towards mental illnesses. This can be done by role plays, group discussions and case studies, helping nursing students to gain an understanding of the experiences of those suffering from mental illness.

The limitation of the study is that it only catered for student nurses in Federal University Otuoke, Bayelsa State. It

would be difficult to capture the variables of the study among other student populations in other schools beyond the state. Also, the research was constrained by the attitude of some students who were not willing to cooperate with the researchers. In other words, some of the student nurses were not willing to fill the questionnaire given to them even when they were assured of confidentiality. Lastly, the researcher encountered financial constraints and time constraints.

The main purpose of this study was to evaluate the attitudes of student nurses to mental health patients in Federal University Otuoke, Bayelsa State, Nigeria. The cross-sectional descriptive quantitative research design was used and the number of the respondents was 180 third and fourth year nursing students. The researcher himself designed the questionnaire which was developed according to the study objectives and used in collecting the relevant information. Frequency distributions and percentages were used to analyze the sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents and the research questions. The results indicated that the student nurses were well knowledgeable about mental illness. In particular, 76.8% reported being familiar with the common mental health disorders (depression and anxiety) and 79% were aware of the impact of mental illness on the functioning and quality of life of the individual. The results also indicated the overall attitudes were positive about mental illness as 80.2% of the respondents stated that they were comfortable interacting with and caring for patients with mental illness and 70% expressed positive attitude towards the possibility for recovery of people with mental illness. In addition, the strategies which were identified for enhancing students' attitudes towards mental health were mental health education and training in nursing curriculum (82.9%), encounter with people who have successfully recovered from mental illness (72.4%), empathy training and discussion of mental health during clinical placement (80.9%), holding a discussion and debriefing session on personal attitudes and biases towards mental illness (71.0%), and awareness campaigns and initiatives to reduce mental health stigma (85.2%).

Conclusion

The results of the study showed that the overall level of awareness and positive attitudes among the undergraduate nursing students on mental illness was high. However, there were some students that still showed negative attitudes to people with mental health problems. Based on these results, nursing education staff need to create effective teaching methods and include mental health education in nursing education. In addition, nursing practice should focus on person centred, stigma free and collaborative practice to provide a holistic care to people with mental health issues. Raising the awareness, reducing the stigma and improving the quality of care for mental illness sufferers requires the education and improvement of nurse students' knowledge and attitudes.

Source of funding

The study was funded by the researcher.

Competing interest

There was no competing interest

Informed consent

All participants were duly informed and their consent was obtained before partaking in this study.

Availability of data and material

Available on request

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