

Psychological Distress and Coping Behaviors among Nursing Students Exposed to the Oncology Clinical Learning Environment

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Abstract

Introduction: Nursing students in oncology clinical environments face significant psychological distress due to exposure to critical illness, patient suffering, and emotional challenges. Understanding their coping behaviors is essential to enhance their well-being and clinical performance. This study helps identify stressors and effective coping strategies to improve mental health support. Addressing these issues can lead to better educational and healthcare outcomes. **Methodology:** Quantitative research approach with Descriptive correlational research design was used to assess Psychological Distress and Coping Behaviors among Nursing Students exposed to Oncology Clinical Environment at a selected Nursing College in Chennai. Eighty Six B.Sc (N) II & III Year students who were exposed to Oncology Clinical Learning Environment were selected by non-probability convenience sampling technique. Data were collected using Background Characteristics of Nursing students, Kessler Psychological distress scale and Brief cope (PTLDS) to collect data by Google Forms which was sent through Whatsapp to Nursing Students. Collected Data was analyzed and interpreted with Descriptive and Inferential statistics. **Results:** Mean and SD of psychological distress was 24.64 ± 8.03 and coping behavior was 67.29 ± 12.28 , where majority of the Nursing students (91%) used Problem Focused Coping. There was a strong positive correlation between psychological distress and coping behavior $r = 0.901$ at $p < 0.001$. Only Medium of Instruction in Schooling had significant association with psychological distress and coping behavior at $p < 0.05$. **Conclusion:** Targeted mental health interventions and resilience training are essential to support Nursing Students well-being and academic success.

Keywords: *Psychological Distress, Coping Behavior, Oncology Clinical Environment.*

Introduction

Nursing students undergoing clinical training, especially in high-stress areas like oncology, are highly vulnerable to psychological distress due to exposure to critically ill and dying patients. Recent studies show that students commonly experience **anxiety, emotional burden, and moral distress**, which can negatively affect their learning and professional development (Zhu et al., 2025; Nabirye et al., 2025). Clinical placements further contribute to stress through **heavy workload, lack of experience, and fear of errors** (Li et al., 2024). Evidence indicates that many students experience **moderate to high stress levels**, particularly in intensive and oncology-related settings (Alkouri et al., 2025).

Coping strategies such as **problem-solving, emotional regulation and social support** are essential in reducing distress and improving resilience among nursing students (Kieu et al., 2026). Effective coping is associated with better psychological outcomes, whereas poor coping increases the risk of burnout and mental health problems (Xu et al., 2026).

Need for the Study

Recent research highlights that a significant proportion of nursing students are at risk of **psychological distress, depression, and anxiety during clinical placements** (Xu et al., 2026). Although students use coping strategies, these are often **insufficient to manage high clinical stress**, particularly in emotionally demanding areas like oncology (Abaribe et al., 2025). Studies also emphasize that **unmanaged distress can affect academic performance, clinical competence, and future professional retention** (Alsararate & Ahmed, 2025). Moreover, interventions targeting coping skills have been shown to **significantly reduce distress and improve student well-being** (Ko et al., 2025). However, there is limited research in the **local context (Chennai/India)** regarding psychological distress and coping behaviors among nursing students in oncology settings. Therefore, this study is necessary to assess distress levels and coping strategies to develop **targeted support systems and mental health interventions** for nursing students.

Statement of the Problem

A descriptive correlational study to assess and correlate psychological distress and coping behaviors, and to determine their association with selected background characteristics, among B.Sc. (Nursing) II and III year students exposed to the oncology clinical learning environment at a selected Nursing College in Chennai, Chennai.

Objectives of the Study

- To assess the Psychological Distress and Coping Behaviors among Nursing Students.
- To correlate the Psychological Distress and Coping Behaviors among Nursing Students.
- To associate the Psychological Distress and Coping Behaviors with their selected Background Characteristics.

Research Hypotheses

H₁ There is a significant correlation between Psychological Distress and Coping Behaviors among Nursing Students.

H₂ There is a significant association between Psychological Distress and Coping Behaviors with their selected Background characteristics of Nursing Students.

Review of Literature

Sharma et al (2020) measured the psychological distress and role of coping styles to mediate the stress level among the baccalaureate nursing students during the COVID-19 pandemic at a nursing college attached to a tertiary care teaching hospital, North India. Researchers found that Corona virus pandemic causes significant distress among nursing students. Students were able to manage stress using acceptance and religious/spiritual coping strategies. During the pandemic, stress management to support mental health is highly recommended.

Toqan et al (2020) examined sources of stress-related and coping behaviors during first clinical training among nursing students in the Arab American University. The study confirmed that students perceived moderate levels of stress in their first clinical training, and the most common sources of stress were taking care of the patients and teachers and nursing staff. However, the main coping behavior was problem-solving.

Cheng et al (2023) examined the levels of stress and corresponding stressors, particularly those predicting psychological distress, among nursing students over their 5 years of study in Hong Kong. This study suggests that the year of study is a significant predictor of stress levels among nursing students, especially during the first and senior years due to heavy academic workload. Psychological distress was observed among nursing students, and those who worked more part-time jobs tended to report higher levels of distress. The junior year was associated

with higher levels of distress related to financial and time-related stress, while academic and personal problems were more prevalent during the senior year.

Research methodology

After obtaining formal permission from the Institutional Ethical Committee, a quantitative research approach with a descriptive correlational research design was used to assess the psychological distress and coping behaviors among nursing students exposed to the oncology clinical environment over a four-week period at a selected Nursing College in Chennai. Eighty six Nursing students were selected by non-probability convenience sampling technique. Data was collected through Google Forms which was sent through Whatsapp to Nursing Students. Collected Data was analyzed and interpreted with Descriptive and Inferential statistics.

Tools of the study

Section A: Background Characteristics: Consists of age in years, Gender, religion, Academic performance n previous year, Year of study, Medium of Instruction in schooling and Native

Section B: The Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) is a widely used 10-item self-report instrument designed to assess psychological distress. Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (none of the time) to 5 (all of the time), with total scores ranging from 10 to 50, where higher scores indicate greater levels of distress. The scoring interpretation is categorized as follows: scores of 10–20 indicate no psychological distress, 21–24 indicate mild distress, 25–29 indicate moderate distress, and 30–50 indicate severe psychological distress. The tool demonstrates strong psychometric properties, with high internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.84 to 0.93) and good test–retest reliability. Content validity of the instrument was established through expert evaluation

Section C: The Brief COPE (PTLDS) is a self-report instrument consisting of 28 items used to assess coping behaviors. Each item is rated on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 4 (doing a lot). The total obtainable score ranges from 28 to 112, with higher scores indicating greater coping behaviors among nursing students. The tool has demonstrated acceptable reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values generally ranging from 0.70 to 0.90 across its subscales, and good test–retest reliability. Content validity was established through expert review.

Coping Behavior	No. of Items	Items	Obtainable score	Scoring Interpretation
Problem-Focused Coping	8	2, 7, 10, 12, 14, 17, 23, 25	8 -32	High score indicates psychological strength, grit, a practical approach to problem solving
Emotion-Focused Coping	12	5, 9, 13, 15, 18, 20, 21, 22, 24, 26, 27, 28	12- 48	High score indicates coping strategies that are aiming to regulate emotions associated with the stressful situation.
Avoidant Coping	8	1, 3, 4, 6, 8, 11, 16, 19	8-32	High score indicates physical or cognitive efforts to disengage from the stressor

Results:

Study revealed that Majority of the Nursing Students 31(36%) were belong to 20 yrs of age with the mean age of 19.2 , majority of them 50(58%) were Females, About 47(55%) of them were Studying B.Sc (N) III year,

majority of them 40(46%) follows Hindu religion, Majority of them 54(63%) scored First class in Previous Year of Study, 55(64%) of them studied English Medium in Schooling and 99% of them were from Tamil Nadu.

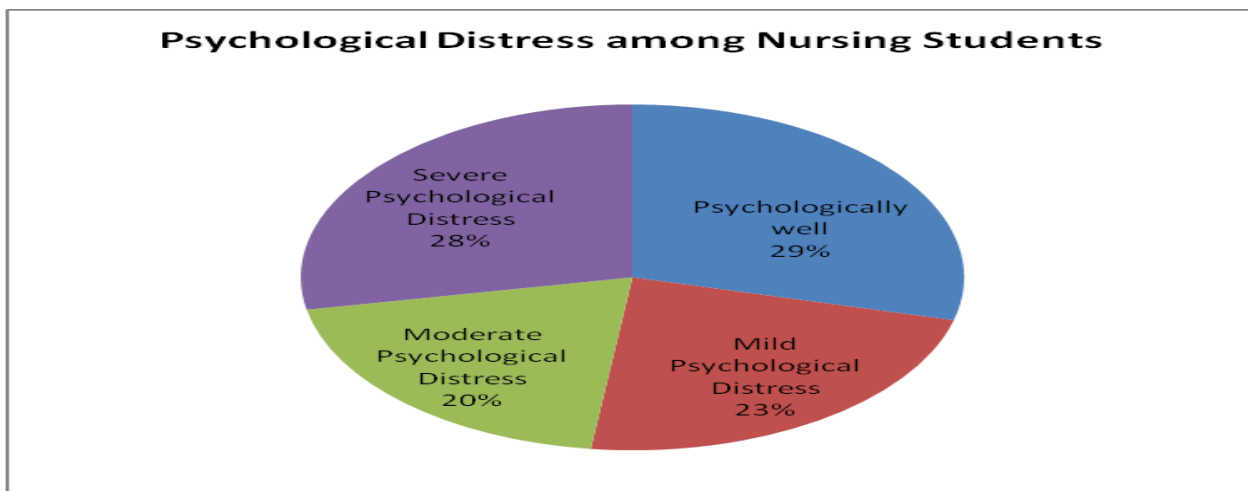


Fig 1: Percentage Distribution of Psychological Distress among Nursing Students.

Table 1: Mean, Percentage and SD of Psychological Distress and Coping Behavior.

N=86

S.No	Variables	No of item	Obtainable score	Mean (%)	SD
1	Psychological Distress	10	10-50	24.64(50%)	8.03
2	Coping Behavior -Global	28	28-112	67.29(60%)	12.28
3	Problem-Focused Coping	8	8 -32	29.21(91%)	3.72
4	Emotion-Focused Coping	12	12- 48	38.42(80%)	2.38
5	Avoidant Coping	8	8-32	27.34(84%)	2.24

Table 1 revealed that Mean and SD of psychological distress was 24.64 ± 8.03 and coping behavior was 67.29 ± 12.28 . Majority of the Nursing students (91%) used problem Focused coping Current study is consistent with the study done by Sayed et al (2024) which focused Stress and Coping Strategies among Nursing Students at College of Nursing, ABHA, King Khalid University. The study's findings show that 64.1% of nursing students experienced moderate levels of academic stress. The coping strategies that nursing students utilized the most frequently were problem solving and staying optimistic, while avoidance was the least common. Consequently, given these results, it is advised that the nursing curriculum include instruction in constructive coping mechanisms before clinical rotations.

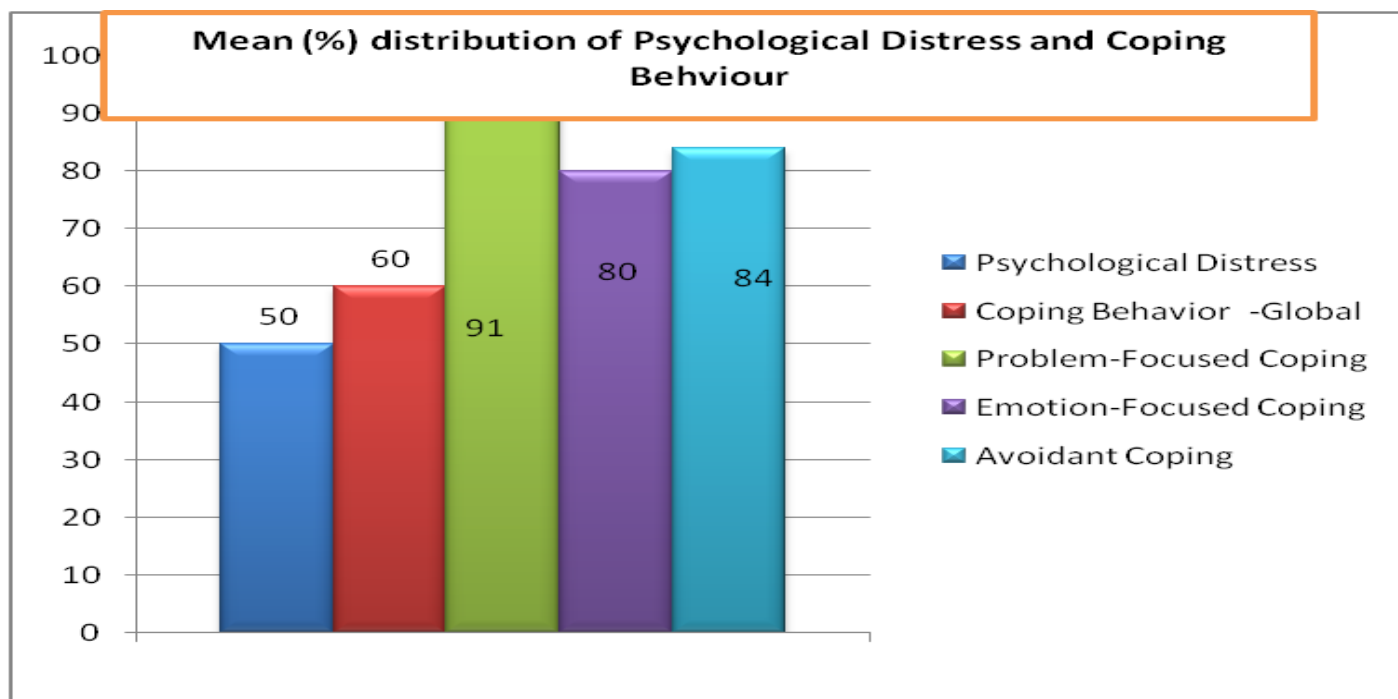


Fig : 2 Mean (%) distribution of Psychological Distress and Coping Behavior

Table 2: Correlation of Psychological Distress and Coping Behavior among Nursing Students N=86

Variables	Mean	SD	'r' Value
Psychological Distress	25	8.03	r=0.901***
Coping Behavior	67	12.28	

P<0.001

There was a strong positive correlation between psychological distress and coping behavior $r = 0.901$ at $p < 0.001$. Zafra et al (2020) investigated the correlation between perceived stress and coping strategies used by nursing students during their clinical training. Results are consistent with the current study, which revealed that there was a significant relationship between the total amount of perceived stress and the following domains of the coping behaviors - problem solving, self-criticism, wishful thinking social support, cognitive restructuring and social withdrawal.

Only Medium of Instruction alone in Schooling had significant association between psychological distress and coping behavior at $p < 0.05$.

Recommendations

- Structured psychological counseling services and regular screening for distress should be implemented
- Stress management techniques and coping skills training should be incorporated into the nursing curriculum
- Strengthening clinical mentorship and active faculty supervision is essential to guide students in managing emotionally challenging situations in oncology settings.
- Encouraging peer support systems can help reduce psychological burden among students.
- Further research with larger samples and diverse settings is recommended to improve generalizability of findings

Conclusion

Study findings emphasize the need for resilience training, mental health support, and structured orientation programs to better prepare nursing students for high-stress clinical settings. Implementing targeted interventions can enhance students' psychological well-being, improve coping strategies, and ultimately contribute to their professional development and patient care effectiveness.

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