Ability of Identifying Mental Health Disorders and Attitudes toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help in Nursing Students

Seong Eun Kim RN PhD¹, Eun Ju Lim RN PhD², Jun Hee Noh RN PhD³

¹,³Assistant Professor, Department of Nursing Woosuk University, Wanju-Gun, Jeollabuk-Do, Korea, ²Assistant Professor, Red Cross College of Nursing, Chung-Ang University, Seoul, Korea

Abstract. The objectives of this study were to examine differences in attitude toward seeking professional help according to the ability of identifying mental health problems. Those with the ability of identifying schizophrenia (t = 2.164, p = 0.031) and post-traumatic stress disorder (t = 3.354, p = 0.001) had a more positive attitude toward seeking professional help than others. However, no difference was observed in the attitude toward seeking professional help between those with the ability of identifying depressive symptoms and those without such ability. This study suggested the directions of nursing education to enhance nurses’ mental health literacy.

Keywords: mental health literacy, attitude toward seeking professional psychological help, nursing students

1. Introduction

Like other chronic diseases, if mental health problems are treated adequately by mental health professionals at early stage, favorable prognosis can be expected by preventing chronicity and reducing pains. However, ordinary people usually seek help from ordinary health care workers, counselors, family, or friends rather than from mental health professionals. They have negative opinions on antipsychotic drugs. They tend to solve problems through stress control method such as exercise, meditation, and moderate drinking. Therefore, it is very important to survey people’s attitude and behavior toward seeking help from professionals [1][2][3].

Among various groups of health care workers, nurses spend the longest time with patients in clinical practices. In the field of community mental health, nurses particularly play significant roles in early detection and treatment of diseases, patients’ recovery, etc. Thus, nursing students who will perform such roles after
graduation need to be educated so that they are equipped with the ability to identify mental health problems accurately and guide patients to professional treatment. The first critical step is to know nursing students’ ability in identifying depression and their attitude toward seeking professional help. Therefore, the objectives of this study were to determine the differences in attitude toward seeking professional help according to the ability of identifying mental health problems. This will provide basic information for setting the directions for education and strategies to prevent mental health problems and apply early interventions in the future.

2. Methods

- Design: This study was conducted as a descriptive survey to understand nursing students’ ability of identifying mental health problems and their attitudes toward seeking professional help. In addition, differences in attitude toward seeking professional help according to the ability to identify mental health problems were determined.

- Data collection and participants: Participants in this study were nursing students from a university in South Korea. All participants were informed about the purposes and methods of the study. They gave written consent to participation in this research. Considering the possibility of dropouts, 330 questionnaires were distributed to participants. A total of 313 questionnaires were returned. Therefore, the response rate was 94.8%. Of the recovered questionnaires, 12 were inadequately answered and excluded from the study. Therefore, 301 questionnaires were used in data analyses. Data were collected from October to November of 2012.

- Measurements

  Recognition of Disorders. Three vignettes used in this study were based on pre-established vignettes developed by Jorm et al.[1]. The vignettes presented a person who either met the diagnostic criteria for schizophrenia as case I, or for major depression as case II, or for post-traumatic stress disorder as case III according to DSM-IV (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th Edition) and ICD (International Classification of Diseases)-10. Following the three vignettes, participants were given questions to determine their ability in recognizing mental disorder. After being presented with those vignettes, respondents were asked open-ended questions: “Do you think there is a problem?” and “If your answer is yes, what is the problem?” The first question was answered ‘Yes’ or ‘No’. The following question was an open question. It was asked only when the answer to the first question was ‘Yes’. To the second question, if the respondent answered ‘schizophrenia’ for the first case, ‘depression’ for the second case, and ‘post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)’ for the third case, the respondent was considered to have answered the questions correct.

  Attitudes toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help. Attitude toward seeking professional help was measured with the Attitudes toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help Scale (ATSPPHS) developed by Fisher and Turne [4]. This scale
consisted of 29 questions, including 8 on the recognition of the need of help, 5 on tolerance of stigma, 7 on interpersonal relationships (open-ended questions), and 9 on confidence in mental health professionals. Each question was answered on a 4-point Likert scale, with point of 1 representing ‘Not at all’ while point of 4 representing ‘Absolutely yes’. Higher score indicated a positive attitude toward seeking professional help for mental and psychological problems. The reliability (Cronbach’s α) of the scale was 0.78 in this study.

Data analysis: Data were analyzed with SPSS for Windows version 22.0 (IBM Corporation, Armonk, NY, USA). For attitude toward seeking professional help, descriptive statistical analysis was conducted. Difference in attitude toward seeking professional help according to the ability of identifying mental health problems was analyzed through independent-sample t-test.

3. Results

3.1. Subjects’ attitude toward seeking professional help

The average score of attitude toward seeking professional psychological help was 2.81, ranging from 2.17 to 3.69. The mean scores of sub-factors recognition of personal need for professional psychological help, tolerance of stigma associated with psychiatric help, interpersonal openness regarding one’s problems, and confidence in the mental health professionals were 2.70, 2.63, 2.71, and 3.08, respectively.

3.2. Difference in attitude toward seeking professional help according to the ability of identifying mental health problems

Difference in attitude toward seeking professional help according to the ability of identifying mental health problems is shown in Table 1. Attitude toward seeking professional help was significantly different between those subjects who had the ability of identifying schizophrenia (t = 2.164, p = 0.031) or PTSD (t =3.354, p = 0.001) and those who did have the ability. However, the difference in attitude toward seeking professional help between those who had the ability of identifying depressive symptoms and those who did not have that ability was not significant (t =1.771, p = 0.078, Table 1). Therefore, those who had the ability to identify schizophrenia and PTSD had a more positive attitude toward seeking professional help than those who did not have that ability.

4. Conclusions

Those who recognized schizophrenia and PTSD showed a statistically significant positive attitude toward seeking professional help than those who did not. However,
the attitude toward seeking professional help between those who had the ability of identifying depression and those who did not have that ability was not significantly different. According to a study on Korean people’s mental health literacy, those who have depression prefer friends and family rather than mental health professionals for their depression, while those who have schizophrenia or PTSD prefer mental health professionals and counseling to solve their problems [5]. This suggests that the tendency that those subjects might consider depression symptoms as emotional changes rather than mental health problems, emphasizing the necessity of mental health education for the public.

Table 1. Identification of psychiatric mental health problems (N=301)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identification</th>
<th>Attitude toward seeking professional help</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean ± SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schizophrenia</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2.90 ± 0.25</td>
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<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>2.79 ± 0.28</td>
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<tr>
<td>Depression disorder</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2.84 ± 0.29</td>
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<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>2.78 ± 0.27</td>
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<tr>
<td>PTSD</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2.88 ± 0.27</td>
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<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>2.77 ± 0.28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. Suggestions

This study is meaningful in that it can suggest the directions for nursing education to enhance nursing students’ mental health literacy. Particularly, this study found that nursing students’ recognition of mental health problems was different from their ability of identifying those problems. Therefore, it is important to develop strategies to promote integrated thinking so that students can interpret and apply theoretical knowledge to appropriate situations.

References
