

The Effect of the Empathy Enabling Program on the Nurses' Empathy and Nurse-Parent Communication in the Newborn Intensive Care Unit

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Background

The main roles of nurses are not only to inform about the disease and treatment of the patient but also to establish an effective therapeutic relationship to address concerns, and provide empathy, comfort, and support. This issue is very prominent in newborn intensive care units (NICUs) and doubles the importance of empathetic communication between nurses and parents and promoting empathy skills in nurses working in NICUs.

Aims

The aim of this study was to investigate the effect of empathy-enabling programs on nurses' empathy and nurse-parent communication from the perspective of nurses.

Methods

This cluster randomized trial (CRT) study was performed with the participation of 64 nurses working in NICUs by convenience sampling method. The participants in both groups completed a three-part pre-test questionnaire: a) demographic, b) empathy and c) nurse-parent communication. The intervention was held as online training sessions in the BigBlueButton. The empathy-enabling program was in the form of two-hour interactive lectures on the topic of empathy and empathetic communication skills, in addition to videos, video clips, readings, and practicing scenarios. Discussions were conducted for the intervention group and the control group did not receive any training. Finally, participants in both groups completed the post-tests questionnaires again immediately and one month after the intervention. Data were then analyzed using an independent t-test, repeated measures analysis of variance, and Pearson correlation coefficient test using SPSS software version 16.

Results

The results of the independent t-test showed that the mean score of nurse-parent empathy before and immediately after the intervention in the two groups was not statistically significant, but one month after the intervention this difference in the two groups of control (100.96 ± 13.31) and intervention

(110.08 ± 15.07) was statistically significant ($P = 0.018$). Also, the results of the analysis of variance with repeated measures did not show a statistically significant difference in the empathy score of the control group during different times, but for the mean nurse-parent empathy score during different times in the intervention group, this difference was significant ($P = 0.032$). In addition, the results of the independent t-test revealed that the mean score of nurse-parent communication before, immediately and one month after the intervention was not significantly different between the control and intervention groups. Also, the results of the analysis of variance with repeated measures during different times did not show a statistically significant difference for the intervention group in terms of nurse-parent communication score. However, the results of the Pearson correlation coefficient test showed a significant positive linear relationship between NICU nurses' empathy scores and nurse-parent communication scores, at three times ($P < 0.001$, $R = 0.779$).

Relevance to NIDCAP

The NIDCAP model of care is one of the current priorities of the Neonatal Health Office in the Ministry of Health in Iran and many other countries that emphasize the increasing presence of parents in NICUs and support for them by staff. Parents are one of the essential components of the NIDCAP model and need empathetic communication.

Conclusion:

Based on the findings, the importance of teaching empathetic communication and the role of empathy in nurse-parent communication, should be more prominent. As the importance of the presence and support of parents in NICUs implementing the NIDCAP model of care, researchers are recommending the use of practical methods to recognize empathetic communication challenges and teach empathy to nurses despite the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic crisis and the subsequent possible challenges in nurse-parent communication. Also, the authors recommend that empathetic communication skills should be included in formal and informal training programs for nurses and nursing students working in newborn intensive care units.