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## Exploring the Psychological Landscape of Clinical Exposure: A Phenomenological Exploration of Student Nurses' Challenges and Coping

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### ABSTRACT

Clinical exposure serves as a pivotal stage where nursing students transition from theoretical understanding to real-world practice, shaping their professional growth and identity. However, this experience often brings emotional and psychological challenges that test their resilience and highlight the need for supportive educational environments. The research used a qualitative phenomenological approach to understand the lived experiences of nursing students during clinical exposure, drawing on their personal reflections and narratives to examine how they navigate the challenges of clinical training. The results indicate that nursing students experience significant psychological, physical, and practical challenges during clinical exposure that affect their confidence and emotional stability. Despite these difficulties, students demonstrate adaptive coping strategies that support learning, resilience, and gradual adjustment to clinical demands. The findings highlight that the psychological landscape of clinical exposure is shaped by both persistent stressors and adaptive coping processes, emphasizing the need to view clinical learning as a balanced experience of challenge, support, and personal growth.

### INTRODUCTION

#### Background of the Study

Nursing education is built on a balance of theoretical knowledge and practical application, with classroom learning merging with real-world experience through clinical exposure. This stage marks a crucial transition from understanding nursing concepts to performing nursing care in actual healthcare settings. Through clinical placements, student nurses are allowed to apply their knowledge, develop essential clinical skills, and nurture the attitudes needed to deliver compassionate and competent care (Koukourikos *et al.*, 2021). Clinical exposure allows them to experience the dynamics of patient interaction, teamwork, and decision-making under supervision, shaping not only their professional growth but also their sense of responsibility and confidence. Moreover, clinical learning serves as a bridge between academic preparation and professional practice, reinforcing the holistic development of future nurses (Schmuke *et al.*, 2025).

Despite its value, clinical exposure also presents numerous challenges that can affect the psychological and emotional well-being of student nurses. Many experience heightened anxiety, stress, and self-doubt when confronted with unfamiliar hospital environments, critically ill patients, or complex clinical procedures. The demands of multitasking, adhering to professional standards, and meeting academic expectations can lead to mental and emotional strain (Li & Hasson, 2020; Araújo *et al.*, 2023). Moreover, the pressure to perform accurately under supervision and the fear of making mistakes can undermine confidence and hinder learning. These challenges often go beyond technical difficulties,

encompassing feelings of inadequacy, emotional fatigue, and uncertainty about their capabilities as future professionals (Panda *et al.*, 2021; Rogers & Franklin, 2021; Taja-on *et al.*, 2024). Understanding these struggles is essential in fostering supportive environments that enable nursing students to thrive during this critical phase of their education.

While existing literature acknowledges the stress and difficulties encountered during clinical exposure, there remains a lack of comprehensive understanding of the psychological landscape that student nurses navigate throughout this journey. Most studies focus on academic performance or skill acquisition, often overlooking the deeper emotional and cognitive processes shaping their experiences (McCarthy *et al.*, 2018; Bhurtun *et al.*, 2019; Kalyani *et al.*, 2019). Limited research has delved into how student nurses perceive, interpret, and cope with the complex realities of clinical learning, especially within the context of local nursing education systems. This empirical gap underscores the need to examine their lived experiences from a phenomenological perspective, allowing for a more differentiated exploration of how these challenges affect their mental resilience, motivation, and overall learning trajectory. Bridging this gap can inform more responsive and empathetic educational practices tailored to the unique needs of nursing students. Exploring the experiences of student nurses during clinical exposure is vital for understanding the interplay between academic learning and emotional adaptation. Gaining insight into their challenges and coping mechanisms can help educators, clinical instructors, and policymakers create strategies that promote mental well-being and

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professional growth. Such understanding supports the design of learning environments that not only enhance clinical competence but also nurture psychological resilience and confidence (Taja-on & Vergara, 2025). The study contributes to improving educational frameworks, fostering supportive mentorship, and building a more empathetic approach to nursing education by shedding light on how nursing students manage the demands of clinical training. In due course, recognizing their lived experiences ensures that future nurses are equipped not only with skills and knowledge but also with the emotional strength necessary for compassionate care.

This study aims to explore the challenges that nursing students encounter during their clinical exposure and the coping mechanisms they employ to adapt to these experiences. It seeks to understand their lived experiences in navigating the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral aspects of clinical practice, offering a deeper appreciation of how they balance personal well-being with professional expectations.

### Statement of the Problem

In the course of clinical training, student nurses are often confronted with experiences that test both their professional competence and emotional resilience. The transition from theoretical learning to hands-on practice exposes them to real-life situations that may cause stress, anxiety, and self-doubt. While these challenges are part of their professional formation, they can also affect their learning outcomes, motivation, and overall well-being if not properly understood and addressed. Given this, it is essential to explore the specific difficulties they encounter and the coping strategies they employ in navigating the demands of clinical exposure. Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What challenges do nursing students encounter during their clinical exposure?
2. How do nursing students cope with the challenges they experience during their clinical exposure?

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### The Role of Clinical Exposure in Nursing Education

Clinical exposure is widely recognized as a core component of nursing education, serving as the primary avenue through which students translate theoretical knowledge into practical skills. Through direct interaction with patients and healthcare teams, nursing students develop essential competencies such as clinical judgment, communication, and professional responsibility (Al-Ghareeb *et al.*, 2019; Hood & Copeland, 2021; Koukourikos *et al.*, 2021). The literature emphasizes that clinical experiences help students understand the realities of healthcare settings, bridging the gap between classroom learning and practice. These experiences not only enhance technical skills but also shape professional identity, ethical awareness, and confidence. As such, clinical exposure plays a vital role in preparing nursing students for the demands of professional practice while influencing their

overall learning and personal development (Aryuwat *et al.*, 2024; Schmuke *et al.*, 2025).

#### Psychological Challenges Faced by Student Nurses

Studies consistently show that clinical exposure can be a significant source of psychological strain for nursing students. The unfamiliar environment of hospitals, fear of making mistakes, close supervision, and responsibility for patient care often lead to stress, anxiety, and self-doubt (Al-Ghareeb *et al.*, 2019; Li & Hasson, 2020; Sönmez *et al.*, 2023). Students may experience emotional pressure when handling critical cases, interacting with patients and families, or adjusting to the expectations of clinical instructors and healthcare staff. These challenges can affect concentration, confidence, and overall learning, particularly during the early stages of clinical training (Araújo *et al.*, 2023).

Further literature highlights that prolonged exposure to stress without adequate support may contribute to emotional fatigue and decreased motivation among student nurses. Balancing academic requirements with clinical duties can intensify feelings of being overwhelmed, especially when students feel unprepared or unsupported (Kalyani *et al.*, 2019; Panda *et al.*, 2021; Dias *et al.*, 2024). These psychological challenges underscore the importance of understanding how nursing students experience and interpret clinical stressors. Exploring these experiences provides valuable insight into the emotional demands of clinical learning and highlights areas where educational support systems may be strengthened (Rogers & Franklin, 2021; Harvey *et al.*, 2022).

#### Coping Mechanisms and Resilience in Clinical Learning

Research indicates that nursing students employ various coping mechanisms to manage the challenges associated with clinical exposure. Common strategies include seeking guidance from instructors, peer support, self-study, and practicing clinical skills to build confidence (Bhurtun *et al.*, 2019; Loureiro *et al.*, 2024). Emotional regulation techniques such as staying calm, positive thinking, and reflection are also frequently noted in the literature (Kalyani *et al.*, 2019; Dias *et al.*, 2024). These coping strategies help students manage stress and maintain focus while navigating demanding clinical situations.

In addition, resilience is identified as a key factor that enables nursing students to adapt and persist despite difficulties. Studies suggest that resilience develops over time through repeated exposure to clinical experiences, supportive relationships, and personal reflection (McCarthy *et al.*, 2018; Aryuwat *et al.*, 2024; Luo *et al.*, 2025). Social support from peers and instructors, as well as personal beliefs and values, play an important role in strengthening students' ability to cope. Understanding these coping processes and resilience patterns provides a foundation for examining how student nurses respond to clinical challenges, reinforcing the need to explore their lived experiences in greater depth (Taja-on & Vergara, 2025).

### Conceptual Framework

The study is grounded on several interrelated theories and frameworks that provide a comprehensive understanding of the psychological experiences of student nurses in clinical settings. The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Biggs *et al.*, 2017) explains how individuals appraise stressful situations and use coping strategies to manage them, offering insight into how nursing students respond to the pressures of clinical exposure. The Novice to Expert Model (Thomas & Kellgren, 2017) complements this by framing their journey as a progression from dependence to autonomy, highlighting how experience and reflection contribute to competence development. Meanwhile, Experiential Learning Theory (Nurunnabi *et al.*, 2022) underscores the importance of learning through direct engagement, reflection, and application, an essential process in clinical education. These theoretical perspectives collectively shed light on how students learn, adapt, and grow through their encounters in real clinical environments.

Integrating these theories creates a multidimensional framework that reflects the dynamic nature of clinical learning. The Transactional Model provides the psychological lens for understanding stress and coping. At the same time, the Novice to Expert Model traces the developmental trajectory of nursing competence. Experiential Learning Theory situates these processes within experiential learning cycles, where reflection transforms experience into knowledge. The inclusion of the Philippine Nursing Act of 2002 (R.A. 9173) further grounds the framework in local policy, emphasizing the mandate to uphold high standards of nursing education and practice. Together, these frameworks interact to capture both the internal psychological processes and external structural factors influencing student nurses' experiences, ensuring that the study is both contextually relevant and theoretically grounded.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

#### Research Design and Locale

The study utilized a phenomenological qualitative research design (Pilarska, 2021) to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of student nurses during their clinical exposure. This approach was selected because it focuses on exploring how individuals perceive, interpret, and make sense of their experiences, allowing for an in-depth examination of their psychological and emotional landscapes. Through this design, the study sought to capture the essence of the challenges faced by student nurses and the coping strategies they employed in response to these experiences. The design enabled the researchers to engage with participants' narratives and uncover meaningful insights grounded in their personal reflections. Conducted at San Isidro College, this approach provided a context-specific understanding that reflects the realities of nursing education within the institution.

#### Sampling Method and Participants

The study employed purposive sampling (Campbell *et al.*, 2020) as its method of participant selection. This approach was deemed appropriate as it allowed the researchers to identify individuals who possessed specific characteristics relevant to the phenomenon being studied. In this case, participants were student nurses in their third year of the nursing program at San Isidro College, as they had already been exposed to clinical practice and could provide rich and informed perspectives on their experiences. The purposive nature of the sampling ensured that only those with direct involvement in clinical exposure were included, thereby enhancing the depth and relevance of the data collected.

The participants, as presented in Table 1, consisted of third-year nursing students enrolled at San Isidro College. These students were chosen because they had undergone

**Table 1:** Demographic profile of the third-year nursing student.

Participant	Sex	Age
Student Nurse 1	Female	21
Student Nurse 2	Female	20
Student Nurse 3	Female	20
Student Nurse 4	Male	21
Student Nurse 5	Female	22
Student Nurse 6	Female	20
Student Nurse 7	Male	21

clinical exposure, providing them with firsthand experience of the challenges and coping mechanisms associated with clinical training. Their stage in the program positioned them to reflect not only on their initial encounters with clinical environments but also on how their experiences evolved. The study was able to gather diverse yet relevant

perspectives that represent various levels of adjustment and learning within the clinical setting by focusing on this group. Their participation contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of how nursing students navigate the complexities of clinical practice.

### Data Gathering Procedure

Data were gathered using a researcher-designed interview questionnaire that elicited detailed accounts of participants' experiences, challenges, and coping strategies during their clinical exposure. The instrument was carefully developed to align with the study's purpose and to ensure that all relevant aspects of the phenomenon were explored. To establish content validity, the interview guide was reviewed by a panel of three experts in the field of nursing education and research. Their feedback was used to refine the questions, ensuring clarity, relevance, and appropriateness. The instrument achieved a Content Validity Index (CVI) of 0.970, indicating a high level of agreement among the experts regarding its suitability for the intended inquiry.

Data were gathered through face-to-face interviews conducted with the participants in a setting that allowed privacy and comfort. Each interview lasted approximately twenty to thirty minutes, providing sufficient time for participants to share their experiences in detail. Prior to the interview, the researchers clearly explained the nature of the inquiry, the flow of the interview, and the role of the participants in the data-gathering process. Participants were encouraged to speak openly and honestly, with the assurance that there were no right or wrong answers. All interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of the participants to ensure accuracy and completeness of the data.

Before the interviews commenced, informed consent forms were distributed and signed by the participants, confirming their willingness to take part in the data-gathering process. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without any consequences. This approach helped establish trust and transparency between the researchers and the participants, allowing for more meaningful and authentic responses. The consistent application of these procedures ensured that the data were collected in an ethical, respectful, and organized manner, contributing to the credibility and integrity of the study.

### Data Treatment

The data collected from the interviews were analyzed using Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2023). This method was chosen for its systematic approach to identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns within qualitative data. Through repeated reading and coding of the participants' responses, the researchers identified key themes that reflected the common challenges and coping strategies described by the student nurses. The process involved moving from initial codes to broader thematic categories, allowing the data to reveal meaningful insights grounded in the participants' lived experiences.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the key findings drawn from the student nurses' shared experiences and provides an integrated discussion of their meaning. The results are organized to reflect both the challenges encountered

during clinical exposure and the strategies used by nursing students to cope with these experiences, allowing a clear and balanced understanding of how clinical demands and adaptive responses are closely connected.

### Challenges Encountered by Nursing Students during their Clinical Exposure

The following section outlines the main difficulties faced by nursing students as they engage in real clinical settings. These challenges reflect the emotional, physical, and practical demands of clinical exposure and are presented across several areas that capture the strain, pressures, and expectations experienced by students during their clinical duties.

#### Psychological and Emotional Strain

This theme captures the internal pressures, stress, and emotional discomfort experienced by student nurses in the clinical setting.

#### Anxiety and Nervousness During Clinical Tasks

The findings show that anxiety and nervousness commonly emerged during the performance of clinical tasks, particularly in situations involving direct supervision and skill execution. The student nurses shared:

*"I feel pressured and mental blocked every time the instructor is watching me." (Student Nurses 1)*

*"...due to nervousness." (Student Nurses 4)*

Student nurses described experiences of mental blockage, pressure, and uneasiness while carrying out nursing responsibilities, indicating that the clinical setting can be emotionally demanding, especially during moments that require accuracy and confidence. These reactions suggest that students perceive clinical tasks as high-stakes situations, where fear of errors and evaluation may interfere with their ability to perform effectively. Such experiences reflect the early stages of professional development, where unfamiliar environments and limited experience heighten emotional responses during patient care.

The presence of anxiety and nervousness has important implications for learning and skill development. Emotional tension during clinical tasks may affect students' ability to think clearly, recall procedures, and respond appropriately to patient needs. However, these experiences also highlight critical moments where learning occurs through exposure and reflection. When properly guided and supported, these situations can serve as opportunities for growth, helping students gradually build confidence and competence (Al-Ghareeb *et al.*, 2019; Kalyani *et al.*, 2019; Sönmez *et al.*, 2023). Addressing emotional responses during clinical tasks is therefore essential in promoting safe practice, effective learning, and adherence to professional standards expected in clinical training.

#### Loss of Confidence and Focus

The results further indicate that psychological strain during clinical exposure can lead to reduced confidence

and difficulty maintaining focus. The student nurses shared:

*“Can’t focus on how to handle the situation of my PT.” (Student Nurses 4)*

*“It decreases my confidence.” (Student Nurses 7)*

Student nurses expressed challenges in concentrating on patient care tasks and managing situations effectively, suggesting that emotional stress may disrupt cognitive processing during clinical encounters. These experiences point to an internal struggle where self-doubt and pressure interfere with attention, decision-making, and task execution. Such responses are common during early clinical exposure, when students are still developing familiarity with clinical routines and expectations.

The loss of confidence and focus has implications for both learning outcomes and patient care. Difficulty concentrating may hinder students’ ability to apply knowledge accurately, potentially affecting their sense of readiness and professional identity. Over time, repeated exposure without adequate emotional support may reinforce self-doubt. Conversely, recognizing these challenges allows educators to provide appropriate guidance and structured experiences that support gradual skill mastery (Kalyani *et al.*, 2019; Panda *et al.*, 2021; Aryuwat *et al.*, 2024). Creating learning environments that acknowledge emotional difficulty can help students regain focus, strengthen confidence, and progress more steadily in clinical competence.

### **Stress from Unexpected or Critical Patient Conditions**

Student nurses also identified stress arising from unexpected and critical patient situations as a significant challenge during clinical exposure. The student nurses shared:

*“The time when our patient is willing to give up her child.” (Student Nurses 1)*

*“When one of my patients suddenly experienced high blood pressure.” (Student Nurses 2)*

Encounters involving sudden changes in patient condition or emotionally charged cases were described as overwhelming, particularly when students felt unprepared to respond. These experiences highlight the emotional intensity of real clinical environments, where unpredictable situations demand quick thinking and emotional control. For students still developing clinical judgment, such encounters can be particularly distressing. The impact of these stressful situations extends beyond immediate emotional reactions, influencing how students perceive their readiness for clinical practice. Exposure to critical cases without sufficient emotional processing may heighten stress and uncertainty. However, these experiences are also integral to clinical learning, as they expose students to the realities of patient care (Kalyani *et al.*, 2019; Hood & Copeland, 2021; Harvey *et al.*, 2022). With proper supervision and reflection, such situations can enhance learning by helping students develop emotional awareness, adaptability, and responsibility in handling complex clinical conditions.

Overall, the findings indicate that psychological and emotional strain is a prominent challenge during clinical exposure, manifesting through anxiety, loss of confidence, difficulty focusing, and stress from critical patient situations. These experiences reflect the emotional demands placed on students as they transition from theoretical learning to real patient care. The clinical environment requires not only technical skills but also emotional readiness, which students are still in the process of developing.

Taken together, these challenges highlight the need for clinical learning experiences that support both skill acquisition and emotional adjustment. Psychological strain, while challenging, plays a role in shaping professional growth when accompanied by guidance, reflection, and supportive supervision. Addressing emotional responses during clinical exposure is essential in helping students develop resilience, confidence, and safe nursing practice.

### **Financial and Logistical Difficulties**

This theme reflects challenges related to resources, transportation, and the cost of nursing education.

#### **Financial Strain Related to the Course**

The findings show that financial strain is a notable challenge encountered by students during their clinical exposure. The student nurses shared:

*“Financial and pressure.” (Student Nurses 5)*

*“Financial problems are of course a given because the course is very expensive.” (Student Nurses 6)*

Student nurses described the financial demands of the nursing program as a source of pressure, indicating that the cost of education adds to the stress experienced during clinical training. These financial concerns coexist with academic and clinical responsibilities, contributing to an increased emotional burden as students attempt to meet both educational and personal needs.

Financial strain may affect students’ focus and emotional well-being during clinical exposure. Worry over expenses can heighten stress levels, making it more difficult to fully engage in learning activities. These findings suggest that financial challenges are not separate from clinical experiences but are intertwined with students’ overall adjustment to training demands (Sonmez *et al.*, 2023; Smith *et al.*, 2025). Recognizing this concern is important in understanding the broader context that shapes students’ clinical experiences and capacity to cope with academic pressures.

#### **Transportation and Distance Issues**

Transportation and distance-related concerns also emerged as logistical challenges during clinical exposure.

A student nurse shared:

*“Travelling is one of my difficulties since I live in Malaybalay City and I was assigned at Maramag.” (Student Nurses 2)*

Student nurses described difficulties related to traveling long distances to assigned clinical areas, indicating that

physical distance adds strain to the demands of clinical training. Extended travel time may contribute to fatigue and stress, particularly when combined with early duty hours and academic requirements. These logistical challenges have implications for students' physical energy and emotional readiness during clinical duties. Travel-related stress may affect punctuality, alertness, and overall engagement in clinical activities (Sönmez *et al.*, 2023; Smith *et al.*, 2025). Understanding these concerns highlights the importance of considering placement logistics in clinical training, as such factors can influence students' ability to perform and learn effectively during clinical exposure.

The findings demonstrate that financial and logistical difficulties are significant challenges that shape students' clinical experiences. Financial pressure and transportation concerns add to the emotional and physical demands of clinical training, creating additional stress beyond academic and clinical tasks. These challenges reflect the broader realities faced by students as they balance education with limited resources.

Together, these difficulties emphasize that clinical exposure is influenced by factors beyond the clinical setting itself. Addressing financial and logistical concerns may help reduce unnecessary stress, allowing students to focus more fully on learning and patient care. Understanding these challenges provides a more comprehensive view of the factors that affect students' experiences during clinical exposure.

### Physical Fatigue and Workload Management

This theme focuses on exhaustion from balancing clinical duties, academic requirements, and personal responsibilities. Physical fatigue and difficulty managing workload were identified as key challenges during clinical exposure. The student nurses shared:

*"There is truly no sleep and a lot of workload. On top of that, there's the duty and doing the requirements. [sic]" (Student Nurses 5)*

*"Despite putting in so much effort into what you're doing, there are still mistakes/lapses... we were scolded during duty." (Student Nurses 6)*

Student nurses described experiences of limited rest, heavy academic demands, and continuous clinical responsibilities, indicating that physical exhaustion is a common concern. The combination of clinical duties and academic requirements contributes to fatigue, which may affect students' energy levels and performance. This level of fatigue has important implications for learning and well-being. Physical exhaustion can reduce concentration, increase the likelihood of errors, and heighten emotional stress during clinical duties (Kalyani *et al.*, 2019; Panda *et al.*, 2021; Dias *et al.*, 2024). These findings highlight the demanding nature of clinical training and the need for balanced workloads that allow students to recover physically while maintaining learning effectiveness.

### Interpersonal Challenges in the Clinical Environment

This theme addresses difficulties in interacting with

clients, families, and other health professionals.

### Dealing with Patients and Families

The findings show that engaging with patients and their families can be a source of psychological and emotional strain for nursing students during clinical exposure. A student nurse shared:

*"Difficulties I've encountered is when the mother is not participating." (Student Nurses 3)*

Difficulty arises particularly when patients or family members are uncooperative or unwilling to participate in care. Such situations place students in emotionally challenging positions, as they must balance clinical responsibilities with interpersonal sensitivity. These encounters highlight the complexity of patient-centered care, where students are required to manage not only technical tasks but also emotional and relational aspects of nursing practice.

These challenges have important implications for students' emotional adjustment and learning. Difficulty in managing patient and family interactions may increase stress and uncertainty, especially among students who are still developing communication skills and professional confidence. However, these experiences also form an essential part of clinical learning, as they expose students to real-life care situations that require patience, empathy, and adaptability (Kalyani *et al.*, 2019; Panda *et al.*, 2021; Aryuwat *et al.*, 2024). Addressing these challenges through guided support can help students gradually strengthen their interpersonal competence and emotional readiness in clinical practice.

### Interactions with Hospital Staff

The results further show that interactions with hospital staff contribute to psychological and emotional strain during clinical exposure. A student nurse shared:

*"Mental block, dealing with hospital workers." (Student Nurses 7)*

Students reported experiencing mental blocks when engaging with healthcare workers, suggesting feelings of intimidation, pressure, or uncertainty in professional communication. These interactions can be overwhelming for students who are still adjusting to the hierarchical and fast-paced nature of clinical environments. The implications of these findings point to the importance of supportive professional interactions in clinical settings. Difficulty communicating with hospital staff may affect students' confidence and ability to perform tasks effectively. Over time, repeated exposure to such interactions can either heighten anxiety or foster growth, depending on the level of guidance and support provided (Kalyani *et al.*, 2019; Panda *et al.*, 2021). Understanding these experiences emphasizes the need for structured mentorship and respectful collaboration to help students build confidence and professional identity.

Taken together, the findings under psychological and emotional strain reveal that nursing students experience multiple sources of emotional difficulty during clinical exposure. Anxiety, loss of focus, stress from critical patient

situations, and challenges in interpersonal interactions collectively shape their emotional responses to clinical learning. These experiences reflect the demanding nature of real clinical environments, where students are required to perform under pressure while still developing confidence and emotional control.

Overall, psychological and emotional strain emerges as a significant aspect of the clinical experience that influences learning, performance, and professional growth. While these challenges may temporarily hinder focus and confidence, they also serve as meaningful learning experiences when accompanied by guidance and reflection. Recognizing these emotional demands provides a clearer understanding of the realities faced by students during clinical exposure.

### **Clinical Competency Demands**

This theme highlights challenges related to skills, procedures, and clinical expectations.

### **Pressure During Procedure Execution**

The findings show that performing clinical procedures, particularly those requiring accuracy and independent decision-making, is a source of pressure for nursing students. A student nurse shared:

*“Yes, during a time where we are tasked with administering drugs and you need to calculate everything on your own.” (Student Nurses 5)*

Tasks such as medication administration place high responsibility on students, as errors can have serious consequences. This pressure reflects the weight of accountability students feel during clinical exposure, especially when they are still developing competence and confidence in their skills.

The implications of this pressure highlight the need for structured learning experiences that support skill development without overwhelming students. High-pressure situations may affect concentration and increase anxiety, but they also provide opportunities for learning through practice and supervision (Kalyani *et al.*, 2019; Panda *et al.*, 2021; Aryuwat *et al.*, 2024; Taja-on *et al.*, 2025). Addressing procedural pressure through guided practice can help students gradually gain confidence and competence, reinforcing safe and effective clinical performance.

### **Feeling Unprepared or Inadequate**

The results suggest that nursing students experience moments of feeling unprepared or inadequate during clinical exposure, particularly when faced with complex tasks or demanding situations. The student nurses shared:

*“Because of that, I truly feel that I am not meant for nursing.” (Student Nurses 6)*

*“Always, the day before our RLE duty.” (Student Nurses 7)*

These feelings reflect a gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world application, which is common during early clinical experiences. The sense of inadequacy contributes to emotional strain and may influence how students

perceive their readiness for clinical responsibilities. The presence of these feelings has implications for students' learning and self-confidence. Without adequate support, feelings of unpreparedness may lead to self-doubt and emotional distress. However, exposure to clinical challenges also allows students to identify areas for improvement and growth (Kalyani *et al.*, 2019; Panda *et al.*, 2021; Aryuwat *et al.*, 2024). Recognizing these experiences emphasizes the importance of supportive supervision and reflective learning in helping students transition toward greater competence and confidence.

Overall, the findings related to clinical competency demands show that nursing students face significant pressure in performing procedures and meeting clinical expectations. Feelings of stress, responsibility, and occasional inadequacy highlight the challenges of applying knowledge in real clinical settings. These demands reflect the complexity of clinical learning, where students must balance accuracy, confidence, and professional responsibility. These challenges underscore the gradual nature of skill development in nursing education. Clinical competency is built through repeated practice, guidance, and reflection. Understanding these demands helps clarify how students progress from initial uncertainty toward increased confidence and professional readiness during clinical exposure.

The findings reveal that nursing students encounter a wide range of challenges during clinical exposure, including psychological and emotional strain, financial and logistical difficulties, physical fatigue, interpersonal challenges, and clinical competency demands. These challenges do not occur in isolation but interact to shape students' overall clinical experience. Emotional stress, limited resources, heavy workloads, and complex clinical expectations collectively influence how students cope and perform in clinical settings.

Considering all factors, these challenges reflect the multifaceted nature of clinical learning. Clinical exposure requires students to adapt emotionally, physically, and professionally while navigating real healthcare environments. Understanding these interconnected challenges provides a comprehensive view of students' experiences and highlights the need for learning environments that support both competence development and emotional well-being during clinical training.

### **Coping Strategies by Nursing Student during their Clinical Exposure**

Alongside the challenges they face, nursing students also demonstrate active ways of managing and responding to the demands of clinical exposure. This section presents the strategies students use to cope with stress and pressure, highlighting how preparation, emotional control, social and spiritual support, and personal growth help them adjust and continue learning in the clinical environment.

### **Strengthening Knowledge and Skills**

This theme reflects how students cope by preparing academically and practicing their clinical skills.

### Reviewing Lessons and Practicing Procedures

The findings show that reviewing lessons and practicing procedures are commonly used strategies by nursing students to cope with challenges during clinical exposure.

The student nurses shared:

*“Study and practice.” (Student Nurses 1)*

*“Remembering or practicing the procedures and lessons before duty.” (Student Nurses 7)*

Students strengthen their preparedness by revisiting theoretical knowledge and rehearsing clinical skills before duty. This approach reflects an active effort to reduce uncertainty and increase familiarity with clinical tasks. By engaging in self-directed review and practice, students respond to clinical demands by reinforcing what they have learned in the classroom and skills laboratory.

This strategy supports students’ adjustment to clinical responsibilities by improving confidence and readiness. Consistent review and practice help students approach procedures with greater clarity and focus, which can lessen stress during actual performance (Bhurtun *et al.*, 2019; Dias *et al.*, 2024; Luo *et al.*, 2025). Over time, this coping strategy contributes to the gradual development of competence, allowing students to handle clinical tasks with increased assurance and reduced anxiety.

### Seeking Guidance from Clinical Instructors

The results indicate that seeking guidance from clinical instructors is a key coping strategy used by nursing students when facing uncertainty during clinical exposure.

The student nurses shared:

*“I did my best to manage the situation by doing nursing interventions and to ask help from clinical instructors.” (Student Nurses 2)*

*“I’ve usually composed myself and ask the CI if I’m unsure.” (Student Nurses 3)*

*“Always ask for help to our clinical instructors.” (Student Nurses 4)*

Students rely on instructors for clarification, reassurance, and confirmation of proper nursing interventions. This behavior shows an awareness of personal limitations and a willingness to seek professional support to ensure safe and appropriate patient care. The use of instructor guidance has important implications for student learning and confidence. By asking questions and requesting assistance, students are able to correct mistakes, strengthen understanding, and build trust in their clinical decisions (Bhurtun *et al.*, 2019; Kalyani *et al.*, 2019; Dias *et al.*, 2024). This supportive interaction helps students manage stress while fostering safe practice and professional growth during clinical exposure.

Overall, the findings under strengthening knowledge and skills highlight that nursing students cope with clinical challenges by actively improving their competence through preparation and guidance. Reviewing lessons, practicing procedures, and consulting instructors allow students to address gaps in knowledge and skill while maintaining patient safety. These strategies collectively support students’ transition toward greater clinical

confidence. Strengthening knowledge and skills enables students to face clinical demands with increased readiness and control, reducing stress and promoting effective learning during clinical exposure.

### Emotional Regulation and Positive Mindset

This theme captures strategies related to managing stress, calming themselves, and reframing their mindset.

#### Staying Calm and Thinking Positively

The findings show that staying calm and maintaining a positive mindset are important coping strategies used by nursing students during clinical exposure. The student nurses shared:

*“The best habit is to keep calm.” (Student Nurses 2)*

*“I usually just need to think positively and calm down.” (Student Nurses 5)*

Students manage stress by consciously calming themselves and focusing on positive thoughts when faced with challenging situations. This response reflects an effort to control emotional reactions and remain composed during clinical duties. The use of calmness and positive thinking helps students maintain focus and emotional balance. By regulating emotions, students are better able to think clearly and perform tasks effectively (Aryuwat *et al.*, 2024; Dias *et al.*, 2024). This coping strategy supports emotional stability, allowing students to manage stress without being overwhelmed during clinical exposure.

#### Deep Breathing and Self-Grounding

The results show that deep breathing and self-grounding are used by students to manage stress in clinical settings. A student nurse shared:

*“Deep breathing, then observing the surroundings.” (Student Nurses 6)*

Students rely on breathing techniques and awareness of their surroundings to regain composure during stressful moments. These practices indicate an immediate and practical approach to managing emotional tension during duty. The use of these techniques helps students regain control over their emotions and physical responses to stress. By grounding themselves, students are able to refocus and continue their tasks with improved calmness (Aryuwat *et al.*, 2024; Dias *et al.*, 2024; Taja-on & Vergara, 2025). This coping strategy contributes to emotional regulation and supports sustained engagement in clinical activities.

#### Self-Motivation and Confidence Building

The findings indicate that self-motivation and confidence building play a role in how students cope with clinical challenges. A student nurse shared:

*“Yes, I felt more confident.” (Student Nurses 1)*

*“The idea that the patient needs you is already very calming to the heart... so I won’t be overwhelmed by stress.” (Student Nurses 6)*

Students draw strength from recognizing their role and importance in patient care, which helps them feel more confident and emotionally steady. This internal

motivation supports a positive outlook during demanding situations. This sense of confidence has meaningful implications for coping during clinical exposure. When students feel motivated and assured of their role, stress becomes more manageable (Aryuwat *et al.*, 2024; Dias *et al.*, 2024; Taja-on & Vergara, 2025). Confidence supports emotional resilience and encourages students to engage more actively and responsibly in patient care.

Taken together, the findings under emotional regulation and positive mindset show that nursing students rely on both internal and practical strategies to manage stress. Staying calm, using breathing techniques, and building self-confidence help students maintain emotional balance during clinical exposure. These strategies collectively support students' ability to cope with emotional demands in clinical environments. Effective emotional regulation allows students to remain focused, composed, and engaged, contributing to both personal well-being and effective clinical learning.

### Seeking Social Support

This theme highlights how students rely on peers, friends, and groupmates to manage stress and stay grounded.

#### Talking with Groupmates

The findings show that talking with groupmates is a common coping strategy used by nursing students during clinical exposure. The student nurses shared:

*"Talk with groupmates... I collaborate with them because it is truly teamwork so the duty will go smoothly."* (Student Nurses 6)

*"Maybe, by chatting with my groupmates."* (Student Nurses 7)

Students rely on teamwork and collaboration to manage stress and ensure smoother clinical duties. Communicating with groupmates allows students to share responsibilities and support one another during challenging situations. This form of peer interaction helps reduce feelings of isolation and pressure. Working as a team promotes cooperation and shared understanding, which can improve both emotional comfort and task coordination (Dias *et al.*, 2024; Taja-on & Vergara, 2025). Peer support strengthens students' ability to cope with the demands of clinical exposure.

#### Reaching Out to Friends

The findings show that reaching out to friends is another way students cope with stress related to clinical exposure. A student nurse shared:

*"Yes, by chatting with my friends."* (Student Nurses 3)

Informal communication with friends provides an outlet for emotional release and connection outside the clinical environment. This interaction allows students to momentarily distance themselves from clinical stress. Such support helps students maintain emotional balance by offering comfort and reassurance (Dias *et al.*, 2024; Loureiro *et al.*, 2024; Taja-on & Vergara, 2025). Staying connected with friends provides a sense of normalcy and emotional relief, which can ease stress and support overall well-being during demanding clinical periods.

### Sharing Experiences and Opening Up

The results further indicate that sharing experiences and opening up to others is an important coping strategy for students. A student nurse shared:

*"Talk with the groupmates and open up lang jud. [sic]"* (Student Nurses 6)

Expressing thoughts and feelings with peers allows students to process their experiences and feel understood. This openness supports emotional expression in a safe and familiar setting. This coping strategy helps students manage emotional strain by reducing internal stress (Dias *et al.*, 2024; Loureiro *et al.*, 2024; Taja-on & Vergara, 2025). Sharing experiences fosters mutual understanding and emotional support, which strengthens resilience and promotes positive coping during clinical exposure.

Overall, the findings under seeking social support highlight the importance of interpersonal connections in coping with clinical challenges. Talking with groupmates, friends, and openly sharing experiences provides students with emotional and practical support. These social interactions help students manage stress, build resilience, and maintain emotional well-being. Seeking social support strengthens students' ability to cope with the demands of clinical exposure while fostering a sense of belonging and shared responsibility.

### Spiritual Coping

This theme reflects reliance on spiritual practices to manage stress and maintain emotional balance. The findings show that spiritual practices are used by nursing students as a way to cope with the emotional demands of clinical exposure. The student nurses shared:

*"Always pray to God."* (Student Nurses 2)

*"By praying and staying calm."* (Student Nurses 4)

*"Yes, by praying."* (Student Nurses 7)

Students turn to prayer to find calmness and reassurance when facing stressful situations during duty. This practice reflects a personal and internal coping approach that helps students manage fear, uncertainty, and pressure in the clinical setting while maintaining emotional balance. This coping strategy supports students by providing a sense of comfort and inner strength during challenging moments. Engaging in spiritual practices helps students remain composed and focused, which supports emotional stability and ethical conduct in patient care (Bhurtun *et al.*, 2019; Loureiro *et al.*, 2024; Taja-on & Vergara, 2025). Over time, this approach contributes to students' ability to manage stress while sustaining a sense of purpose and responsibility during clinical exposure.

### Adapting Through Experience and Personal Growth

This theme shows how coping evolves as students gain more exposure and maturity.

### Learning from Clinical Exposure Over Time

The results indicate that learning from clinical exposure over time is a key coping strategy used by nursing students. A student nurse shared:

*“Yes, over time I’ve learned a lot from hospital fields.” (Student Nurses 2)*

Students recognize that repeated exposure to hospital settings allows them to gain practical knowledge and familiarity with clinical routines. Through continuous engagement, students gradually understand expectations, improve decision-making, and adjust to the demands of patient care. This ongoing learning process helps students cope by transforming initial stress into meaningful experience. As students gain more exposure, they develop confidence and practical judgment, which reduces uncertainty and emotional strain (Bhurtun *et al.*, 2019; Aryuwat *et al.*, 2024; Dias *et al.*, 2024). Learning over time supports steady growth and prepares students to manage clinical challenges more effectively.

### Developing Resilience Despite Stress

The findings show that nursing students develop resilience despite ongoing stress during clinical exposure. A student nurse shared:

*“For a long time, it was really difficult... but I learned to always be positive despite the toxic duty environment.” (Student Nurses 6)*

Students acknowledge that clinical duties can be difficult and overwhelming, yet they learn to maintain a positive outlook even in demanding environments. This response reflects an adaptive coping process shaped by repeated exposure to stress. Developing resilience allows students to continue functioning despite pressure and fatigue. By choosing to remain positive, students strengthen their emotional endurance and ability to cope with challenging duties (Bhurtun *et al.*, 2019; Aryuwat *et al.*, 2024; Dias *et al.*, 2024). This resilience supports sustained engagement in clinical learning and contributes to personal growth over time.

### Situational Flexibility

The results reveal that situational flexibility is another coping strategy used by nursing students during clinical exposure. A student nurse shared:

*“Yes, it always depends on the situation.” (Student Nurses 5)*

Students recognize that their responses depend on the nature and intensity of the situation they encounter. This awareness shows an ability to adjust coping approaches based on immediate clinical demands. Situational flexibility allows students to respond appropriately to varying levels of stress. By adapting their reactions, students are able to manage challenges more effectively without relying on a single coping method. This flexibility supports better judgment and emotional control in dynamic clinical environments. Overall, the findings under adapting through experience and personal growth highlight that nursing students cope by learning, adjusting, and strengthening themselves over time (Aryuwat *et al.*, 2024; Dias *et al.*, 2024; Taja-on & Vergara, 2025). Gaining experience, developing resilience, and responding flexibly help students manage the demands of clinical exposure more effectively.

These strategies support long-term adjustment by

allowing students to transform stress into learning and personal development. Through experience, students become more confident, adaptable, and emotionally prepared to handle the responsibilities of clinical practice. The overall findings show that nursing students use a combination of coping strategies to manage challenges during clinical exposure. Strengthening knowledge and skills helps students feel prepared, while emotional regulation supports calm and focus. Seeking social support provides reassurance and shared understanding, while spiritual coping offers comfort and inner stability. Together, these strategies support students’ ability to adapt through experience and personal growth. By combining preparation, emotional control, social connection, spirituality, and learning over time, students manage stress in balanced ways. These coping approaches help students remain engaged, responsible, and resilient throughout their clinical exposure.

### CONCLUSIONS

The findings show that clinical exposure places nursing students in situations that demand emotional, physical, and cognitive adjustment. Students commonly experience psychological strain, including anxiety, pressure, loss of focus, and stress when dealing with patients, families, hospital staff, and unexpected clinical situations. These challenges are further shaped by financial and logistical concerns, physical fatigue, and the demands of performing procedures accurately and responsibly. Together, these experiences reflect how clinical exposure is not only a learning space but also a setting where students face real pressures that test their confidence and readiness.

At the same time, the results highlight that students do not remain passive in the face of these challenges. They actively employ coping strategies that include strengthening knowledge and skills, regulating emotions, seeking social and spiritual support, and learning through repeated exposure to clinical work. Over time, these strategies help students adjust to the demands of the clinical environment, manage stress more effectively, and develop a sense of confidence and resilience. The overall findings suggest that challenges and coping processes are closely linked, shaping how students grow and function during clinical exposure.

The study shows that clinical exposure is a complex experience that shapes both the emotional well-being and professional development of nursing students. The findings indicate that while students face multiple and overlapping challenges, they gradually develop ways to cope that support learning, emotional balance, and adaptation to clinical responsibilities. Through preparation, guidance, emotional control, social connection, spiritual practices, and experience-based learning, students navigate the pressures of clinical work and continue to develop as future professionals.

### Limitations of the Study

The study has several limitations that should be

acknowledged when interpreting the findings. The results were based on a small group of participants, which limits the scope of experiences represented and does not allow the findings to be generalized to all nursing students. The data relied on self-reported accounts gathered through interviews, which may have been influenced by personal perceptions, recall bias, or hesitation to fully express negative experiences. In addition, the study focused only on experiences during clinical exposure within a specific context, which means that differences across institutions, clinical settings, or levels of training were not explored. These limitations suggest that while the findings provide meaningful insights, they reflect a particular set of experiences rather than the full range of possible clinical realities.

### Recommendations

Based on the findings, it is recommended that nursing programs strengthen support systems during clinical exposure to help students manage psychological, emotional, and physical demands. Structured guidance from clinical instructors, opportunities for open communication, and activities that promote emotional regulation and peer support may help students cope more effectively with stress. Institutions may also consider reviewing clinical schedules, workload balance, and logistical concerns to reduce unnecessary strain. Providing spaces for reflection and discussion after clinical duties could further support learning and emotional well-being, allowing students to process their experiences in a healthy and productive way.

Future studies may expand on these findings by including a larger and more diverse group of nursing students from different institutions and clinical settings. Quantitative or mixed-method approaches could be used to examine the extent of psychological challenges and coping strategies across broader populations. Longitudinal studies may also be conducted to explore how coping strategies and emotional responses change over time as students gain more clinical experience. In addition, future research could focus on specific support interventions to determine which approaches are most effective in improving students' well-being and clinical learning experiences.

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