Investigating the Effects of Compassion Training on Emotional Regulation Among Nursing Professionals

Peyton Fisher, Camila Barnes, Reed Watson

1 Introduction

The nursing profession represents one of the most emotionally demanding occupations in contemporary healthcare systems. Nursing professionals routinely encounter situations that require sophisticated emotional regulation skills, including managing patient suffering, navigating complex interpersonal dynamics, and maintaining professional composure during medical emergencies. The capacity for effective emotional regulation has emerged as a critical factor in nursing performance, job satisfaction, and career longevity. Traditional approaches to supporting nursing staff have typically focused on stress reduction techniques and resilience building, yet these interventions often fail to address the core emotional challenges inherent in caregiving roles.

This research introduces a novel approach to enhancing emotional regulation through structured compassion training. While compassion has long been recognized as a fundamental aspect of nursing practice, its systematic development as a means to improve emotional regulation represents an innovative direction in healthcare workforce support. The theoretical foundation for this approach draws from recent advances in contemplative neuroscience, which suggest that compassion practices may strengthen neural circuits involved in emotion regulation and increase psychological flexibility.

Our investigation addresses several critical gaps in the existing literature. First, while

numerous studies have examined burnout and stress in nursing populations, few have specifically targeted the development of emotional regulation skills through compassion-based interventions. Second, existing compassion training programs have primarily focused on general populations or mental health professionals, with limited adaptation to the unique contextual demands of nursing practice. Third, this study employs a comprehensive assessment protocol that integrates self-report measures with physiological indicators of stress regulation, providing a more nuanced understanding of intervention effects.

The primary research questions guiding this investigation are: How does participation in a structured compassion training program affect nursing professionals' capacity for emotional regulation? What specific aspects of emotional regulation are most responsive to compassion-focused intervention? To what extent do improvements in emotional regulation mediate changes in burnout and job satisfaction? Through addressing these questions, this research aims to contribute both theoretical insights and practical applications for supporting nursing professionals in their emotionally challenging work.

2 Methodology

2.1 Participants and Setting

The study employed a quasi-experimental design with repeated measures, recruiting 145 registered nurses from three urban academic medical centers. Participants were required to have at least one year of clinical nursing experience and to be currently working in direct patient care roles. The sample consisted of 78

Recruitment occurred through hospital newsletters, departmental meetings, and professional networking events. Interested nurses completed screening questionnaires to ensure they met inclusion criteria and provided informed consent. The study protocol received approval from the institutional review boards of all participating institutions.

2.2 Compassion Training Intervention

The compassion training program was developed specifically for this study, integrating elements from established contemplative practices with content tailored to nursing contexts. The 12-week intervention consisted of weekly 90-minute group sessions supplemented by daily 15-minute individual practices. The program was structured around four core modules:

The first module focused on foundational mindfulness skills, emphasizing present-moment awareness and non-judgmental observation of emotional experiences. Nurses learned to recognize early signs of emotional distress and develop metacognitive awareness of their emotional patterns. The second module introduced specific compassion practices, beginning with self-compassion and gradually extending to compassion for patients, colleagues, and challenging interpersonal situations.

The third module addressed cognitive aspects of emotional regulation, teaching participants to identify and reframe maladaptive thought patterns that contribute to emotional dysregulation. This included techniques for recognizing automatic negative thoughts about patient care situations and developing more balanced perspectives. The fourth module integrated somatic awareness practices, helping nurses recognize bodily sensations associated with different emotional states and use breath and body awareness to regulate emotional responses.

Each session included psychoeducation, guided practices, group discussions, and real-world application exercises. Participants received a manual with weekly readings and practice guidelines, as well as access to audio recordings of guided practices. The intervention was facilitated by instructors with extensive training in both contemplative practices and healthcare education.

2.3 Measures and Assessment

Data collection occurred at three time points: baseline (pre-intervention), immediately post-intervention, and three-month follow-up. The primary outcome measure was emotional regu-

lation, assessed using the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS), which measures six dimensions of emotional regulation: nonacceptance of emotional responses, difficulties engaging in goal-directed behavior, impulse control difficulties, lack of emotional awareness, limited access to emotion regulation strategies, and lack of emotional clarity.

Secondary measures included the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) to assess emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment; the Professional Quality of Life Scale (ProQOL) to measure compassion satisfaction and fatigue; and the Self-Compassion Scale (SCS) to evaluate changes in self-compassion. Additionally, physiological measures of heart rate variability (HRV) were collected during a standardized stress induction task to provide objective indicators of stress regulation capacity.

Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with a randomly selected subset of 25 participants at the post-intervention assessment. Interviews explored participants' experiences with the training, perceived changes in emotional regulation, and application of skills in clinical practice.

2.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using mixed-effects models to account for repeated measurements and potential clustering effects within hospitals. Primary analyses examined changes in emotional regulation scores across the three assessment points, with secondary analyses exploring relationships between emotional regulation changes and other outcome variables. Mediation analyses tested whether improvements in emotional regulation accounted for changes in burnout and compassion satisfaction. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns in participants' experiences and perceived benefits of the training.

3 Results

3.1 Emotional Regulation Outcomes

Analysis of the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale revealed significant improvements across multiple domains following the compassion training intervention. Total DERS scores decreased significantly from baseline to post-intervention ($F(2, 288) = 24.37$, p ¡ 0.001), with maintained improvements at the three-month follow-up. The most substantial changes were observed in the impulse control and strategies subscales, suggesting that participants developed enhanced capacity to manage emotional impulses and employ effective regulation strategies in challenging situations.

Notably, improvements in emotional awareness emerged more gradually, with significant changes primarily evident at the follow-up assessment rather than immediately post-intervention. This pattern suggests that developing awareness of emotional states may require longer-term practice integration. Participants also demonstrated significant reductions in nonacceptance of emotional responses, indicating greater willingness to acknowledge and work with difficult emotions rather than avoiding or suppressing them.

3.2 Burnout and Professional Quality of Life

The compassion training intervention produced significant reductions in burnout symptoms as measured by the Maslach Burnout Inventory. Emotional exhaustion scores decreased by 32

On the Professional Quality of Life Scale, compassion satisfaction scores increased significantly following the intervention, while burnout and secondary traumatic stress scores decreased. Mediation analyses indicated that improvements in emotional regulation partially accounted for changes in burnout symptoms, supporting the proposed mechanism whereby compassion training enhances emotion regulation capacity, which in turn reduces vulnerability to burnout.

3.3 Physiological and Qualitative Findings

Heart rate variability measurements during the stress induction task revealed significant improvements in physiological regulation following the compassion training. Participants showed enhanced HRV recovery following stress exposure, suggesting improved autonomic nervous system regulation. These physiological changes correlated with self-reported improvements in emotional regulation, providing convergent evidence for the intervention's effects.

Qualitative analysis of participant interviews revealed several themes regarding the impact of compassion training on emotional regulation. Many nurses described developing a "greater space" between emotional triggers and their responses, allowing for more deliberate choice in how to express emotions in clinical situations. Participants frequently reported increased awareness of their emotional states earlier in the arousal process, enabling more effective regulation before emotions became overwhelming.

Several nurses described how compassion practices helped them reframe challenging patient interactions, reducing feelings of frustration or personal offense. One participant noted, "Instead of taking difficult patient behavior personally, I started seeing it as their suffering, which helped me stay calm and compassionate." Others described how self-compassion practices helped them recover more quickly from emotionally charged incidents without carrying residual stress into subsequent patient interactions.

3.4 Retention and Practice Effects

Analysis of practice adherence revealed that participants who completed more than 80

4 Conclusion

This study provides compelling evidence that structured compassion training can significantly enhance emotional regulation capabilities among nursing professionals. The findings

demonstrate that a targeted intervention integrating mindfulness, compassion practices, cognitive restructuring, and somatic awareness can produce meaningful improvements in how nurses recognize, understand, and manage their emotional experiences in high-stress clinical environments.

The novel contribution of this research lies in its demonstration that compassion development serves not only as an ethical foundation for nursing practice but as a practical means of strengthening emotional regulation capacity. Unlike traditional stress management approaches that often focus on symptom reduction, compassion training appears to build positive emotional capacities that support resilience and professional satisfaction. The improvements in impulse control and strategic application of emotion regulation strategies are particularly significant given the demanding nature of nursing work, where inappropriate emotional expression can have serious consequences for patient care and professional relationships.

The mediation effects observed between emotional regulation improvements and reduced burnout suggest a potential mechanism through which compassion training supports nurse wellbeing. By enhancing capacity to manage the intense emotional demands of clinical work, nurses may experience less emotional exhaustion and maintain greater engagement with their professional roles. The maintenance of benefits at three-month follow-up indicates that the skills developed through compassion training may have lasting effects, though longer-term follow-up studies are needed to confirm durability.

Several limitations warrant consideration. The quasi-experimental design limits causal inferences, though the multiple assessment points and convergence between self-report and physiological measures strengthen confidence in the findings. The sample, while diverse in clinical specialty, was drawn from urban academic medical centers, and generalization to other settings requires further investigation. Future research should explore optimal dosage and delivery formats for compassion training, as well as potential moderators of treatment response.

This research has important implications for nursing education and professional development. Incorporating compassion training into nursing curricula and continuing education programs may provide nurses with essential skills for managing the emotional challenges of their work. Healthcare organizations might consider such training as part of comprehensive staff support initiatives aimed at reducing burnout and improving retention.

In conclusion, compassion training represents a promising approach to enhancing emotional regulation in nursing professionals. By developing specific capacities for working with difficult emotions and extending compassion to self and others, nurses may build sustainable approaches to managing the emotional demands of their vital work. Future research should continue to refine compassion-based interventions and explore their potential benefits across diverse healthcare contexts and professional groups.

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