

## Spark the Students' Interest in Mental Health Education

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### ABSTRACT

Are you longing for your students to say, "Your class was the one class I looked forward to each Tuesday," or "You made the lecture so much fun." You may say that you teach mental health, and what you usually hear is, "I am not going into psych. I will not deal with mental health, so why do I need to study it?" With this attitude, it would seem to be impossible for students to love your class, but the first statements were said during an end-of-semester one-on-one evaluation for a mental health theory class. The students came into the first day of class thinking it would not be a beneficial class, but through the interactions with the professor and participating in the lecture, their attitudes changed, and they enjoyed learning about mental health. Some of the techniques used in that theory class will be shared in this article.

### Explain the "Why"

It is important to explain why you do what you do. Start the course by explaining to the students why they will not be sitting through a lecture; instead, they will perform activities or discuss topics with their peers. They will take an active role in their learning. Benjamin Franklin stated, "Tell me, and I forget. Teach me, and I remember. Involve me, and I learn" (Muse, 2025). Let the students know that you plan to involve them in their learning. You may need to remind them of this frequently throughout the semester.

### Hospital Wide Scenarios

It is important at the beginning of your class to dispel the misconception that any nurse can avoid caring for mental health clients. Forster, Coventry, & Daniel (2023) state that between 20% and 50% of inpatients globally have a secondary mental health diagnosis. This translates into one or two patients of a five-patient assignment most likely having a mental health diagnosis. Create scenarios of mental health clients in various hospital units. They can be the new mom who has not taken her prescriptions due to possible damage to her growing baby, the patient in ICU who overdosed on a medication or drug and needs

vigilant care while the levels are still toxic, the child admitted with an eating disorder whose electrolytes are at dangerous levels, or the grandma with dementia or traumatic brain injury who fell and broke her hip. Have the students place the various patients in the units where they may be found as an exercise, showing them why they need to engage in the mental health class for their future career. No matter where they work, they will encounter mental health clients.

### Have Them Discuss

Ask a question that has no right or wrong answer and have them discuss it with their peers. One question might be, "What does your church/synagogue/family say to someone who is depressed?" Everyone's answer can be different, and each one is valid from their experience. Have a few people share what they heard and discuss how what is said might help or hurt the person who is depressed. There are many more discussion questions that can be used, such as: (a) What do you say to a person who asks if their loved one went to hell because he completed suicide?, (b) How do you respond to violence against the nursing staff?, (c) Does anger occur because expectations are not met?, (d) What should you do if a little boy wants to be the mommy

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when playing house?, or (e) What are good actions to create a good sleep hygiene schedule?

For these discussions, you can group the students just with those who sit close to them, or you can be creative and help them get to know their cohort while discussing the question. Write from one to the number of students in your class on the whiteboard and have the students sign in on any number as they enter the class. Change the format each class period, so the students do not know if you will use vertical groups or horizontal groups for the discussions. Even if the students come into your class not knowing most of their peers, they will be interacting with each other and begin talking outside the classroom as well. They will be able to discuss the topics with peers outside of their friend group and will be more likely to hear differing ideas.

### Create a client

For the lecture on Personality Disorders (PD), give the students an open-note quiz that must be completed before class. This way, you know they have at least flipped through the material. In class, create 10 groups, one for each PD. Each group must write common symptoms, risk factors, and possible medications and treatments for their assigned PD on the whiteboard. Next, they must give a shift report on their "client." After all the groups have given their report, ask what they would be thinking or feeling if someone had just given them a report with all the negatives they have just heard. Remind them that stating just one good thing about a client, such as "She hugged her mother at visiting hours," "He made sure to help clean up after lunch," or "She was friendly to the new client," can change how the incoming nurse views the client.

### Videos

Use videos to help the students understand various diagnoses. A student who has dealt with an Eating Disorder (ED) stated that the students cannot understand what it feels like to have an ED when they were asked to role-play the client, family member, or healthcare provider. She recommended that watching videos created by clients with ED would be more worthwhile. Videos can be beneficial for the visual learners, not only for the ED lecture, but for many other mental health diagnoses as well. Embed the links to the videos in the student PowerPoint so the students can view them even if you do not have time to watch them during class.

### Games

Find games that drive your point home. The difficulties of communication and the reasons why therapeutic communication skills are important can be demonstrated using a form of Telestrations. Dialectic Behavior Therapy can be illustrated by using The Game of Real Life. Be sure to have questions to ask during the debriefing time that will help the students understand the purpose of the game and have them share how it should affect their care of the mental health client.

### Empathy Exercise

Learning that clients hear voices does not mean anything until the students hear the voices while trying to complete an assignment. Find an audio recording of audio hallucinations online and send the link to your students after you explain the exercise to them. The exercise should include about ten questions that are demographic or short-term memory exercises. After the questions, there should be an origami instruction sheet, simple math equations, and a paragraph on history with corresponding questions. Each student needs to find a friend or family member who is willing to help them with the project for about 20 minutes. Prepare an envelope with instructions for the family member or friend. Explain that they are to ask the student the questions and give them the three other parts of the assignment while the student is listening to the audio hallucinations.

Assign a written assignment where the student reflects on their physical and emotional reactions they experienced during the auditory hallucinations exercise, or Empathy Exercise. After they mention these reactions, ask the students what they have learned about interacting with a client who is experiencing auditory hallucinations. Through the experiences they encountered while completing the assignment, they will begin to see that having patience, being willing to repeat themselves, and offering to take a break and finish later might all be necessary and important actions.

### Fun Quiz Formats

Quizzes can show the instructor what the students have memorized but consider using a polling or competitive quiz platform to find out what the students know. The competitive nature of the quizzes encourages more students to be actively involved in answering questions than the normal way of asking questions in the classroom. It is possible to ask the question and then take time to explain the answer between each question. You may find that the students pay more attention since there will be another question asked, and they do not want to miss it.

### Summary

It is possible to make the mental health theory class an enjoyable class and still have the students learn the necessary material so they will want to care for mental health clients. They will learn compassion and become competent on deescalating aggressive actions, understanding why the clients' medications need to be continued, and knowing how to use therapeutic communication skills. Being competent in providing mental health care is vital for the self-confidence of the nurse and for a positive outcome for the mental health client.

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