

REVIEW PAPER

Self-Awareness as a Therapeutic Tool for Nurse/Client Relationship

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Abstract

Introduction: Self-awareness is a process of objective examination of oneself and is one of the important components in nurse-client relationship. Self-awareness is considered as an important tool to develop a therapeutic relationship with patients for therapeutic healing.

Objectives: The purpose of this paper was to review the literature to explore an in-depth understanding of the concept self-awareness and how it influences nurse client relationship. The paper further emphasized on the importance and how self-awareness can be developed.

Method: A comprehensive literature search was performed using specific keywords. Main focus of the literature search was about self-awareness and its relation with nursing care and therapeutic relationship in nursing. Literature mostly published in past 10 years was included, with exception to few landmark literatures in the field. In addition Johari Window was integrated as framework to understand the concept in a practical way.

Results: The review literature showed that self-awareness is an ongoing process and needs conscious efforts. It is important for nurses to know themselves well and it ultimately helps them to build a therapeutic environment of caring and healing. The paper further emphasized on the importance of self-awareness in professional life and also developed an in-depth analysis on how self-awareness can be developed. Many practical strategies were highlighted in the paper to develop self-awareness at individual and professional level.

Conclusion: In conclusion, self-awareness is considered as the therapeutic tool for nurse client relationship. The more the nurse will be self-aware the more a therapeutic environment for caring will be enhanced. Therefore, it is recommended that nursing curricula should include some aspects on development of self-awareness. There should also be some opportunity for professional nurses whereby they can get help and guidance to learn about self as a continuous learning process.

Key Words: Self-awareness, Therapeutic Relationship, Communication, Johari window and self-awareness, self-reflection. Nurse/client relationship

Introduction

Knowing about oneself is not an easy task; it is a painful and time consuming process. This process starts with conscious awareness and struggling for change through continuous efforts. There is no doubt that Self-awareness is one of the important components in nurse client relationship. Nurses spend most time with the patients than of any other health care professionals so self-awareness is

considered as an important tool to develop a therapeutic relationship with the client. According to Hildegard Peplau (As cited in Vandemark, 2006), "The central task of the basic professional school of nursing is viewed as the fullest development of the nurse as a person who is aware of how she functions in a situation" (p.606). So this very well emphasizes the importance of self-awareness in nursing education as well as in

nursing care. Therefore, the purpose of this review paper is to examine the aspects of self-awareness and get in depth understanding of this concept. In addition explore the practical implications of self-awareness in nursing profession. The author was also interested in looking for possibilities which could be helpful and practical to help nurses in developing self-awareness. For this purpose literature has been selected specifically which addresses self-awareness and therapeutic relationship for nurses. The specific focus in paper will be the concept of Self-awareness, its significance in nursing, and how self-awareness is developed. In addition Johari Window will be integrated as framework to understand the concept in a practical way.

Self-Awareness

Eckroth-Bucher (2010), defines the concept as “Self-awareness involves the cerebral exercise of introspection. This attribute reflects the cognitive exploration of own thoughts, feelings, beliefs,

values, behaviors, and the feedback from others.” (p. 297). Self-awareness is getting to know about one self as a person and the important things in life which influences us in different ways. It also includes the reflection on how our attitude and belief can influence others. If we get the awareness of our own life then we can understand another person better. The concept is further elaborated by the authors; self-awareness is the continuous process of understanding and knowing of one's own identity, beliefs, thoughts, traits, motivations, feeling and behavior and to recognize how they affect others in different ways. In addition, it involves objectively examining one’s personal beliefs, attitudes, strengths and limitations. (Boyd, 2005; Stuart and Laaia, 2005). Thus all these literatures support the idea of self-evaluation and realizing why you behave the way you do, it also gives the dimension to explore oneself in different context and the way others reaction towards you. Self-awareness to a greater extent gives satisfaction in life.

Fig: 1. The Johari Window: A graphical Model of Awareness in Interpersonal Relations (Luft, 1982)



Importance of self-awareness:

In general, self-awareness is important for personal growth; it helps an individual to manage self and to improve performance. It further helps in setting appropriate and realistic goals, and career and manage personal life stressors. But it first starts with the understanding and acknowledging of its importance in life. As Palmiere (2012), very well explains and justifies these points as:

Self-awareness is a core personality strength that can help us manage our businesses, our careers and our lives. When we lack self-awareness skills, we tend to make the same mistakes and encounter the same obstacles over and over again. But when we know where our unique strengths and limitation lie, we're better equipped to face challenges, solve problems, choose our battles, make decisions, and predict the outcomes of those decisions. (Para 1).

Furthermore, this process helps in analyzing the difference and similarities between individuals. This will further help in developing interpersonal relationship and direct our communication towards other's need.

Significance of self-awareness in nursing:

In the nursing literature, Self-awareness is always discussed and considered as the most important and essential aspect of a professional nurse. In addition, with the insight that, this will lead to competency in provision of high quality nursing care and finally greater satisfaction in client care. Further analysis of different literature shows that self-awareness is a dynamic and transformative process of self-reflection and change. Eventually, self-awareness is the use of self-assessment to analyze and guide behavior in a genuine way; which enables nurses to create an environment which helps in promoting interpersonal relationship with the patients. Thus it helps in recovery process by providing therapeutic environment (Eckroth-Bucher, 2010). Moreover, going through the process of self-awareness and then using it in a healthy way is important. Infact it is a first step towards taking better care of yourself and it also helps in becoming resilient. Furthermore, it helps in engaging in healthy behaviors and ultimately helps in becoming better

nurses and leads to better client care. Some people have very good understanding and evaluation of their feelings and emotions but for some it needs time and conscious effort to develop self-awareness. It is really crucial that one should listen to the inner dialogue to have more self-awareness of the needs and behaviors. Then finally recognizing the unhealthy behavior and justifying them and changing them into healthier ones. (Gessler and Ferron, 2012 p. 41).

To support the significance of self-awareness in nursing profession, Scheick (2011) further claims that "Nursing students and nurses bring not only caring to their wounded clients but also at times their own unresolved personal stress. Especially without mindful awareness, projection of the nurse's unacknowledged emotional encumbrances (counter transference) threatens the effectiveness of nurse-client relationship" (p.114).

Looking at the literature evidences, it is really important that as nurses we should have the understanding of our verbal and non-verbal gestures. We should learn how to react and manage different situations rather than avoiding them. Being a nurse we care for our patients from different sociocultural background and different value systems. So, appreciating and acknowledging these differences will help us in developing therapeutic alliance which will lead to healthy therapeutic relationship.

Therapeutic communication is important and critical skill in nursing practice. The importance of therapeutic communication can never be underestimated in nursing. This is the only skill which helps nurses in caring for the patients in a holistic manner. Through this process the nurses can interact with their client and provide a therapeutic environment of caring and healing. Row (1999) further emphasized the importance as "Communication is a key skill of modern nursing practice, yet often it is an area in which nurses' fail. Self-awareness exercises can help us to improve our communication skills and enhance healthcare delivery" (p. 37). Self-awareness is considered as the key aspect for therapeutic communication skills. Nurses self-awareness can help direct the communication towards the needs

of the patient thus creating a therapeutic environment for care.

To further elaborate the concept, self-awareness is to know about own self, who you are? It is important for nurses to understand their own attitude, behavior and values because they are always in interaction with people who are unique and not necessarily have same characteristics. So to provide holistic care to our patients it's important to understand the similarities and differences in every individual. We are dealing with people so we should know what our motives are and how our emotions and reaction can affect others. As without knowing our own self how can we ensure the care and priorities of others? The literature also supports this view that the nurse must examine personal feelings, actions and reactions. The process of self-awareness compels nurses to examine their own value positions so these biases and prejudices are not projected on to others and so nurses do not reject others who do not share similar values. (Eckroth-Bucher, 2001). Thus by effective use the self as a tool 'nurses must possess knowledge of their personal response patterns, strengths and limitations (Eckroth-Bucher, 2001; Stuart and Laaia, 2005).

In specific to mental health, knowing thyself is a basic principle of psychiatric nursing. The process of self-awareness is important because nurses' psychological state influences the way patients' information is analysed. The process of personal introspection adds dimension to the nurse-client relationship and is pertinent to understanding client responses, thus enabling the nurse to explore these issues with their client. As if we are not aware of our reactions then we might endanger the nurse-client relationship. The author mentions that "Unconscious body language, uncontrolled emotions and lack of insight are potentially harmful" (Winson, 2007, p. 59). And this quote gives very well the significance of self-awareness in nursing so that we are able to provide holistic care and work for the wellbeing of our patients and their families.

Practical strategies for development of self-awareness

As in this article self-awareness and why it is important was discussed, and now the focus will be

on certain ways which one can adopt to promote individual self-awareness. Improving self-awareness on personal and professional level is important for success, professional growth and quality patient care. Nurses are there all the time for taking care of their patients and it is important that to help others you need to first know yourself. For nurses, self-awareness needs efforts with rational approach and reflection. It's important that they are aware of their own needs and how they influence themselves and others. The literature identifies some practical ways which can be utilized to become self-aware are asking for feedback from genuine person, reflection on one's own actions, journal writing, talking to a mentor or friend, practicing mindfulness and meditation. (Gessler and Ferron, 2012).

Further review of literature gives certain strategies which can be easily adopted to better understanding of self includes "Keeping a reflective diary, learning about body language and using models of reflection" (Winson, 2007, p.59). Self-awareness is an ongoing process which needs continuous self-evaluation and conscious effort. There could be many ways to improve self-awareness as discussed above; but one of the very common strategies in nursing is reflection. It is always important to reflect on our experiences and appreciate the positives and learn from our weaknesses. So reflections give the opportunity to look back and analyze practices for further development. Keeping portfolios for individual achievements and skill is another strategy which can be utilized. This gives insight to professional development and to identify need for further work. (Jack and Smith, 2007). Psychodrama techniques are important educational strategies which nurses can use to develop or improve self-awareness in patient care setting. These sessions can be helpful in identifying problems in therapeutic relationship and finally through feedback and suggestion can be improved. In addition, through this technique the nurses can also see role models and incorporate those learning into their communication and relationship in patient care. The authors further found out through their research that the psychodrama technique helped the nurses to understand themselves well, it gave the opportunity to discover the viewpoints of others

and finally to make the association between their own feelings and thoughts and those of their patients. (Oflaz et al, 2011). Psychodrama can be an effective teaching strategy in addressing the communication problems that arise in nursing.

Johari Window model and Self-Awareness

In addition, in this review article, Johari window by Luft and Ingham, 1955, (As cited in Luft, 1982) will be integrated to know about self-awareness and the ways to improve self-awareness. (See Fig: 1).

This model has total four quadrants (Open, blind, hidden and unknown) and each quadrant gives different information about self. The open area means that we know and others also know about us, whereas the blind mean that people know about us but we do not have the awareness of that particular characteristic. Hidden means we know but others do not know about us and finally the unknown is something which no one knows including us. The more wide the open quadrant, the more self-aware the person will be. So it's better that to talk to people about self and get feedback from colleagues and friends to decrease the hidden, blind and unknown quadrants. This is also at times a painful process, as one has to do self-disclosure/exposure and listen to people feedback which is not always easy to accept specially the areas for improvement. To decrease hidden area, one needs to expose or do self-disclosure and ultimately will increase the open area. To decrease the blind area one needs information about self and that's called feedback from others. To decrease unknown quadrant, it needs both self-disclosure and feedback. It is important that if the person wants to change, it needs voluntary effort, forced intervention always lead to failure. The individual readiness is important to develop self-awareness and to change some behaviors and characteristics. (Jack and Smith, 2007; Luft, 1982; Rowe, 1999).

Based on the Johari model Miller and Jack (2008) recommended a framework. In this frame work they have given three practical stages for change and those are Now, Transition and Regroup stage. It is very helpful framework especially for novice nurses who have some problems or difficulty in communication or therapeutic relationship. By identifying those gaps, in Now stage, it gives the

insight and it may need help from colleagues. After knowing the aspect to have more developmental need then the individual can find resources or ways to work on that limitation or need in the Transition phase. Finally, in the last stage it is Regroup phase where the change has already occurred and in this phase it may have helped the individual in reducing the hidden or unknown areas and we can find interesting things about self. It may also be a painful process as it is not easy to let go of individual weaknesses but one needs to be more receptive to change and to be a better person and a better professional nurse to understand self and others. To achieve this we need mentors and support group for encouragement and motivation. This framework can be very well integrated in nursing curricula especially in Psychiatry to teach nursing students about bringing change in self and becoming more self-aware. Moreover, also in the practical life where by mentorship program may help in this process. (Jack and Miller, 2008).

In conclusion, self-awareness is considered as the therapeutic tool for nurse client relationship. The more the nurse will be self-aware the more the therapeutic environment for caring will be enhanced. Moreover, self-awareness also helps in personal success and management. Reviewing different literature gives the insight that for a professional nurse self-awareness is the prime and vital concept. Therefore, it is recommended that nursing curricula should include some aspects on development of self-awareness which for instance could be some exercises throughout the program. Also, in practice setup as this exercise is not of a one day job but it takes time and continuous effort. There should also be some opportunity for professional nurses whereby they can get help and guidance to learn about self as continues learning process.

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