From De-escalation to Effective Communication: The Crucial Role of Mental Health Education for Nurses

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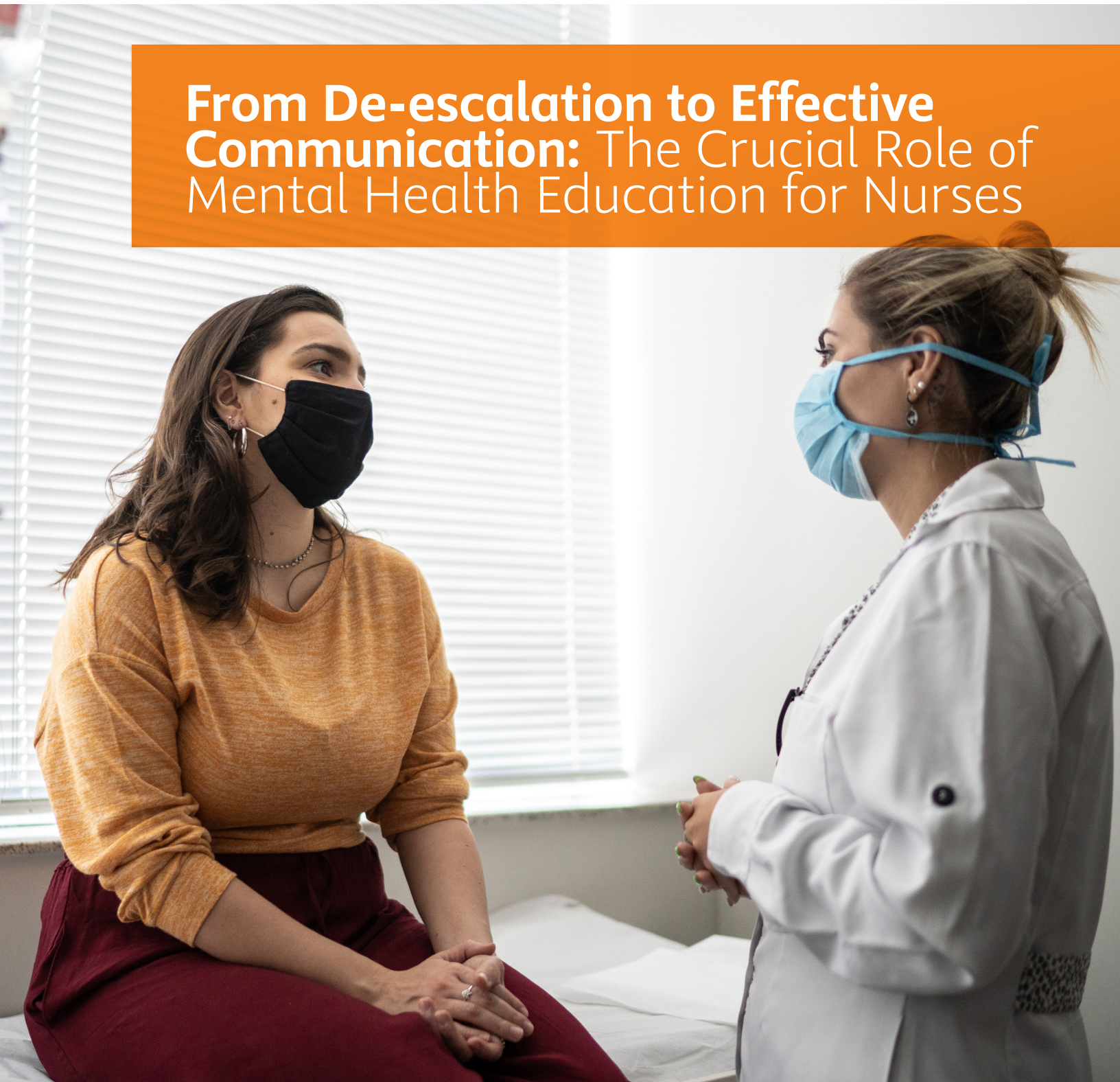
Over the last few years, there has been a significant and ongoing surge in mental health-related treatment— recent data shows an 18% post-pandemic increase.[1] In some areas of the US, in-person and virtual mental health visits have grown 100% since the start of the pandemic.[2] Yet, unfortunately, over 27 million individuals experiencing mental illness are going untreated.[3]

As a result, nurses face heightened pressure to quickly assess, treat, and often de-escalate situations with patients suffering from mental illness, including those who default to using the emergency department for primary care services. As many clinicians feel unprepared for such situations, this has become a pressing concern for healthcare organizations. In response, evidence-based mental health education for nurses is now an urgent priority.
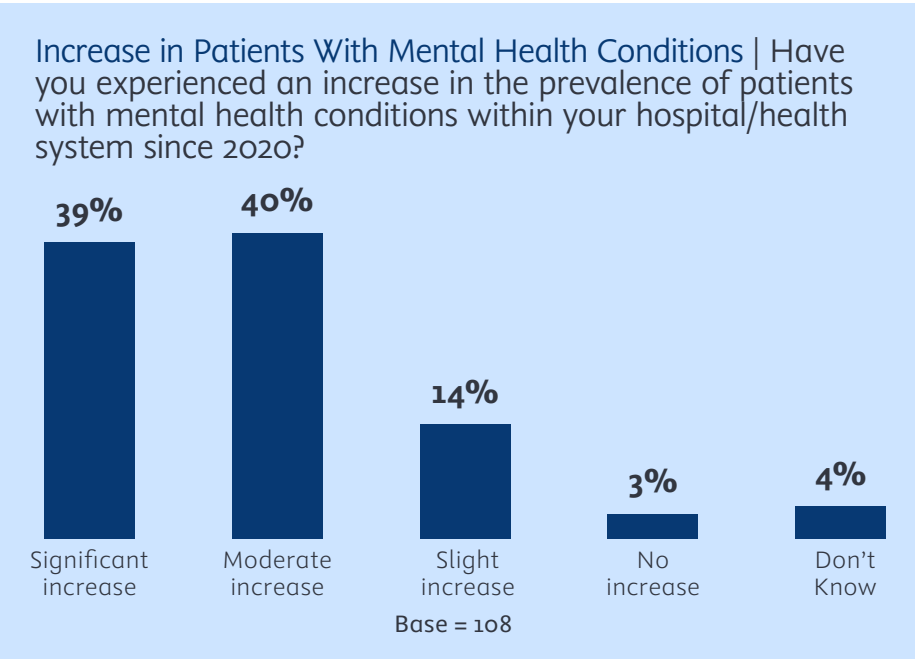
Addressing the growing need for mental health education in nursing

A 2023 HealthLeaders mental health survey, supported by Elsevier, reveals heavy leadership concerns over nurses' lack of readiness to care for the influx of patients with mental health conditions. Almost half of the 108 respondents were clinical leaders from hospitals and health systems, with 79% stating their organizations are experiencing a moderate to significant increase in the prevalence of patients with mental health conditions since 2020.

Tammy Purcell, MSN, RNC-OB
Clinical Nurse Executive
Elsevier

Clinical Nurse Executive for Elsevier, Tammy Purcell, MSN, RNC-OB, emphasizes the critical need for comprehensive, evidence-based, interactive nursing education that specifically addresses handling psychiatric emergencies and mental health. "The simple fact is, mental health issues are all around us, and we need to be more aware. Regardless of the care being provided or even the patient care setting, nurses must consider mental health in every single patient interaction. Being better prepared to recognize and de-escalate mental health crises provides healthier and safer environments for both patients and nurses," she says.

Increase in Patients With Mental Health Conditions | Have you experienced an increase in the prevalence of patients with mental health conditions within your hospital/health system since 2020?

| Significant increase	Moderate increase	Slight increase	No increase	Don't Know
39%	40%	14%	3%	4%

Base = 108

In fact, less than one-third of respondents feel their staff are very prepared to manage patients with mental health conditions. Healthcare organizations cited the following top three reasons they want clinical staff prepared to treat patients with mental health conditions:
1. worries over the physical safety of staff (88%)
2. worries over the physical safety of patients (83%)
3. the need to prevent and de-escalate on-site psychiatric emergencies (70%).

Purcell explains that healthcare organizations have been overwhelmed with the covid pandemic and growing staffing challenges alongside other priorities, such as annual competencies, orientation, onboarding, and regulatory requirements. "However, we can't say an organization is somewhat prepared to treat mental health conditions," she says. "They have to be very prepared for any patient who walks in, and it has to be a priority for orientation and annual competency." She says with effective and trusted education, training, and resources, nurses can effectively manage potential crises, provide quality care, and enhance patient outcomes for this vulnerable population.

Preparation for Patients With Mental Health Conditions | Overall, how prepared are clinical staff within your organization to manage patients with mental health conditions?

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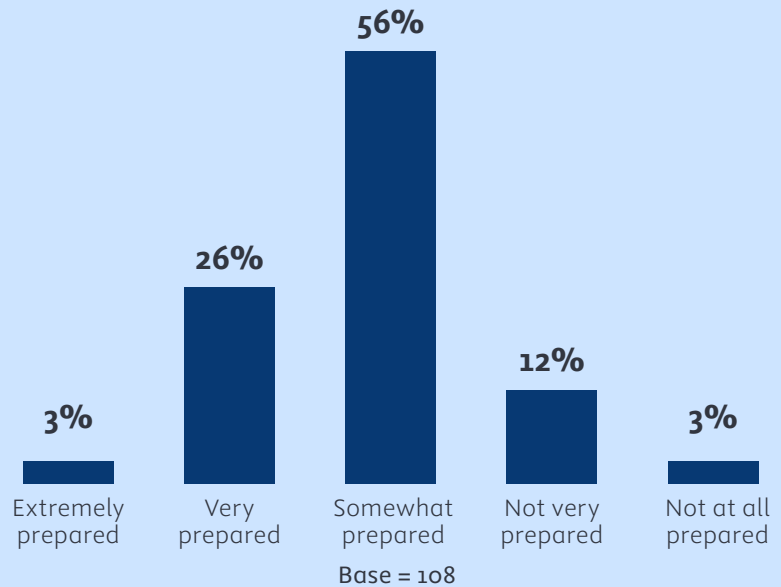
Recognizing mental health symptoms and diagnoses

Mental health is a crucial aspect of overall wellness, but recognizing when someone is battling a mental illness can be a challenge. Even those without an official diagnosis can struggle with mental health symptoms. Providers may also not be aware they are caring for patients who have been previously diagnosed and are being treated for mental health conditions.

Mental illness increases the risk for other health conditions, including stroke, type 2 diabetes, and heart conditions.[4] As cases rise, it is crucial to consider mental health conditions in terms of a primary and secondary diagnosis. Purcell states, "We need to pay more attention to that secondary diagnosis. We're often missing the fact that patients have an underlying mental health condition when they come in for a primary diagnosis, which can lead to us not holistically caring for the patient." If a patient presents with a mental health condition as a secondary diagnosis that gets overlooked, this can induce safety concerns for patients and staff in certain situations, she notes. To provide the best possible care to all patients, clinicians must discover recent or long-term changes in a patient's behavioral, cognitive, or emotional functioning. By educating themselves on evidence-based practices, nurses can recognize mental health symptoms and integrate their knowledge into all patient-care interactions.

The power of education

Whether nurses are first encountering patients in triage or the ED, they must trust and feel confident in what they've learned through their education and training to keep themselves and patients safe. The importance of being confident and competent in de-escalating patients in crisis and communicating effectively cannot be understated.

The survey respondents say the types of content most helpful in educating clinical staff to care for patients with mental health conditions include information on the de-escalation of patients in crisis (86%), patient communication techniques (80%), and managing handoffs to other care providers (56%). Purcell says the results align with what clinical leaders have been reporting for years. "De-escalation of patients in crisis is a top priority because if you can't de-escalate the situation, something tragic can happen to your staff or patients. So, your team must be educated, efficient, and able to count on one another to handle that situation."
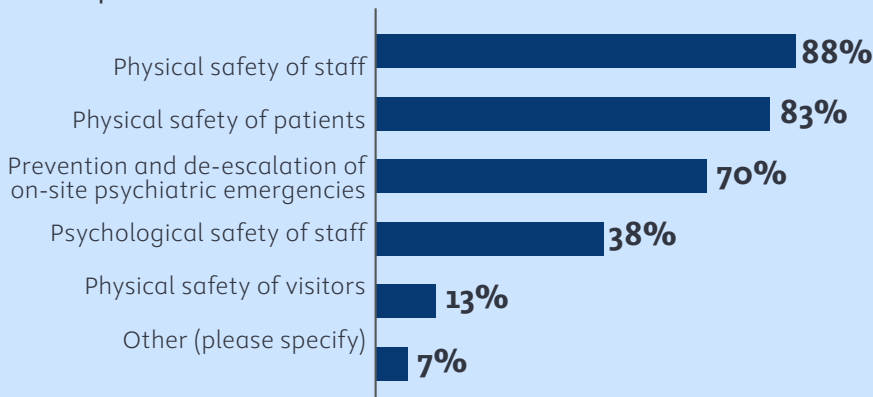
Innovative approaches to mental health education

To build competency and trust among nurses, healthcare organizations must offer evidence-based education and training for mental health in a variety of formats, according to Purcell. "We must provide in-depth training so that they can quickly identify mental and behavioral health conditions when and where they arise." She says there has been much more openness to changing the style of education to meet learners' needs in recent years. "We have changed how we approach education since the pandemic," she says, adding that Elsevier's solutions follow the latest guidelines, research, and evidence. "We continue to evolve with the most pressing trends in clinical education and patient care."

Today, there are more educational options to meet learners where they are, including:
- Virtual education
- Simulation training
- Immersive and interactive learning
- Just-in-time learning
- Standardized live patients
- Flipping the classroom
- In-person classes
- Mentoring
- Shadowing

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>
> —Tammy Purcell, MSN, RNC-OB, Clinical Nurse Executive, Elsevier

Blended learning programs (81%), virtual learning courses (65%), in-person education (62%), and simulation-based learning (61%) are the preferred methods for educating clinicians on mental health conditions, according to survey respondents. Immersive learning and simulation-based training are becoming more popular as they allow users to practice and apply their clinical reasoning skills through interactions with realistic, virtual patients. This type of learning helps

Top Three Reasons for Preparing Clinical Staff | What are the top three reasons for preparing your clinical staff to treat patients with mental health conditions?

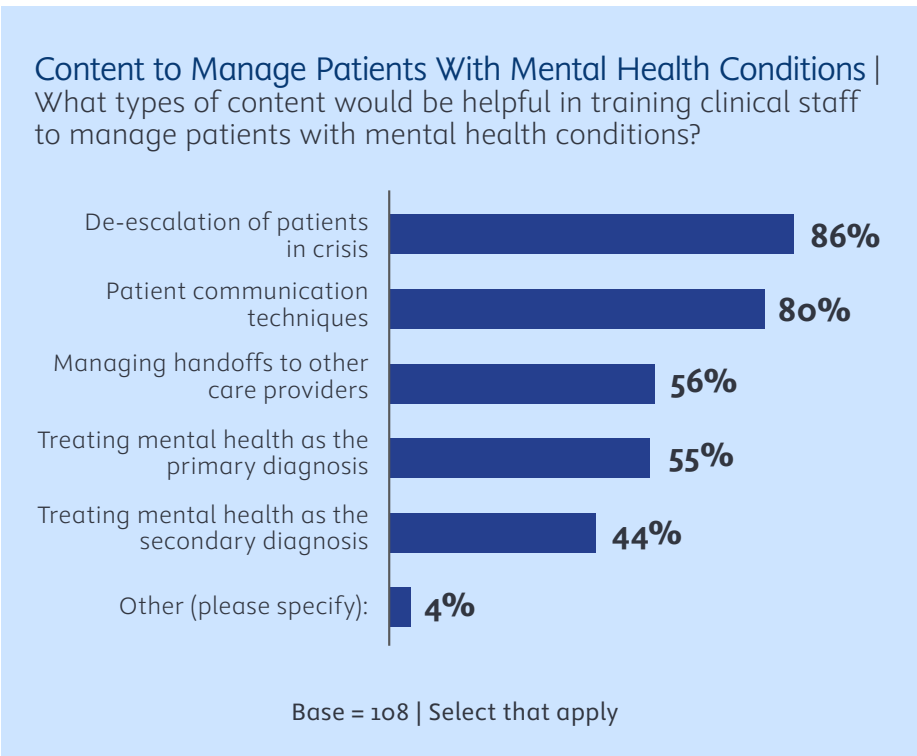| Reason	Percentage
Physical safety of staff	88%
Physical safety of patients	83%
Prevention and de-escalation of on-site psychiatric emergencies	70%
Psychological safety of staff	38%
Physical safety of visitors	13%
Other (please specify)	7%

Base = 108 | Select top three

nurses perform a mental status assessment while strengthening therapeutic communication, clinical reasoning, and critical thinking skills.

With simulation-based training, learners can observe how patients dress, communicate, and behave, including any physical or verbal cues that may indicate their condition. "After seeing this, it's easier for learners to recognize a patient experiencing mental health symptoms," says Purcell. In school, nursing students often lack sufficient clinical experience caring for patients with mental health conditions, which can lead to anxiety and uncertainty as a novice nurse, she adds. "It's important for them to learn and test their knowledge in a safe environment before encountering this vulnerable patient population."

Providing mental health support for nurses themselves is also essential, Purcell adds. If staff feel overworked or undervalued, it doesn't matter what education or resources they have available. "We've heard from many clinical leaders on the importance of debriefing sessions after a challenging patient encounter, so nurses can understand if they applied what they had learned, what could have been done differently, and if it felt safe. These sessions are an important part of caring for this patient population and the nurses who provide their care," she says.
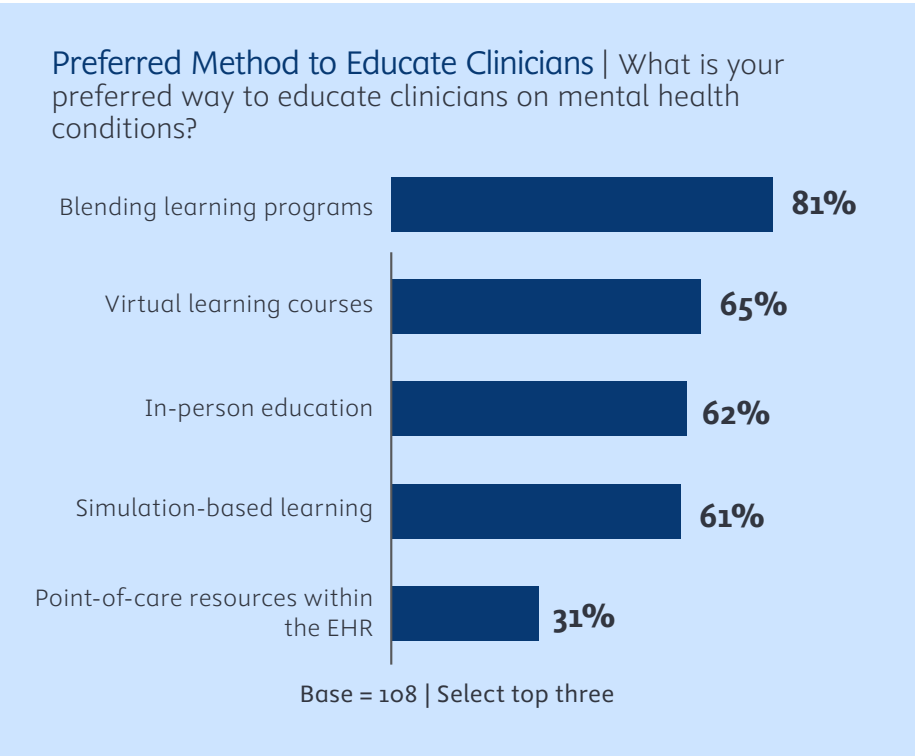
"We can't say an organization is somewhat prepared to treat mental health conditions. They have to be very prepared for any patient who walks in, and it has to be a priority for orientation and annual competency."

—Tammy Purcell, MSN, RNC-OB, Clinical Nurse Executive, Elsevier

Content to Manage Patients With Mental Health Conditions |
What types of content would be helpful in training clinical staff to manage patients with mental health conditions?

De-escalation of patients in crisis	86%
Patient communication techniques	80%
Managing handoffs to other care providers	56%
Treating mental health as the primary diagnosis	55%
Treating mental health as the secondary diagnosis	44%
Other (please specify):	4%

Base = 108 | Select that apply

Striving for empathetic and holistic care

Empathy plays a vital role in caring for patients in mental healthcare. Compassion takes many forms, from respecting patients' wishes to acknowledging their cultural preferences. Additionally, a nurse's clinical competence and confidence can provide a sense of calm and reassurance to anxious patients, especially those on the brink of a psychiatric emergency. As nurses prioritize staff and patient safety, they must set limits, encourage patient cooperation, and provide a comfortable environment in

Preferred Method to Educate Clinicians | What is your preferred way to educate clinicians on mental health conditions?

Blending learning programs	81%
Virtual learning courses	65%
In-person education	62%
Simulation-based learning	61%
Point-of-care resources within the EHR	31%

Base = 108 | Select top three

stressful situations when treating a patient experiencing a mental health crisis.

Healthcare organizations are also adopting holistic clinical approaches to mental and behavioral health to improve care quality and empathy. This includes taking a full-picture view of patients and their experiences, offering trauma-informed care, utilizing more peer specialists in the ED, and providing additional integrated community support. First responders are also receiving more comprehensive training in de-escalation strategies.

Unlocking the potential of nurses

As the mental health crisis in the US continues to escalate, equipping nurses with the skills and knowledge to provide high quality care to all patients is crucial. With evidence-based education available across skill levels, specialties, and preferred learning formats, every nurse can develop the competency and confidence to assess and treat patients with mental health conditions. ■

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[1] https://www.trillianthealth.com/behavioral-health-trends-shaping-the-health-economy

[2] "Mental Health Visits Doubled Since Start of Pandemic, Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts Data Reveals." Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts, November 30, 2022.

[3] Adult Ranking 2022. Mental Health America. https://mhanational.org/issues/2022/mental-health-america-adult-data

[4] About Mental Health. CDC. https://www.cdc.gov/mentalhealth/learn/index.htm