

The Human Rights-based Approach and Psychiatric Nursing Practice

Individuals with mental health issues continue to face serious challenges in securing stable employment and housing. Depending on the country and context, they often encounter restrictions in exercising their civil and political rights, including meaningful participation in decision-making processes that directly affect their lives. Additionally, mental health services worldwide have been criticized for failing to uphold individuals' rights to self-determination and for lacking legal safeguards against involuntary and forced interventions with uncertain benefits. The United Nations (UN) has described these human rights deficiencies as a "global emergency" and an "unresolved crisis", emphasizing that the dominant biomedical model has confined mental health care to outdated and ineffective systems.^[1-3]

Although the concept of human rights may seem abstract, it forms the basis of every encounter between service users and providers in the daily practice of mental health care. As frontline caregivers, psychiatric nurses play a pivotal role in ensuring that mental health services are not only effective but also grounded in dignity, respect, and self-determination. They must integrate a human rights-based approach into all aspects of their practice by fostering therapeutic relationships, advocating for shared decision-making, and delivering biopsychosocial, person-centered care. Collaboration with individuals and their families is essential in developing a mental health service that respects autonomy and prioritizes recovery. Moreover, psychiatric nurses should actively contribute to eliminating human rights violations within mental health institutions.^[4]

Despite their critical role, nurses worldwide—regardless of whether they work in high-, middle-, or low-income countries—often find themselves participating in practices that violate human rights. Restrictive interventions such as seclusion, physical restraint, non-consensual medication, and coercive electroconvulsive therapy continue to be sanctioned under existing legal frameworks, despite the documented harm they inflict. Within hierarchical clinical structures, psychiatric nurses may feel powerless to challenge these practices, leading to a form of professional resignation known as the "ethics of self-preservation". In such environments, questioning established but unethical practices can carry significant social and professional risks.^[4]

To foster a more human-centered and rights-based mental health service, psychiatric nurses must develop the competence and confidence to advocate for change. They must actively voice concerns about human rights violations within their teams, units, and institutions, demonstrating professional courage in the face of systemic inertia.^[4] Effective advocacy requires proficiency in the language of ethics and human rights, as well as a firm grasp of legal frameworks such as the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and relevant national regulations. Psychiatric nurses must also refine their therapeutic communication skills, enabling them to engage in meaningful dialogues with service users, multidisciplinary teams, and policymakers to push for ethical and rights-based reforms.^[5]

Education plays a critical role in equipping psychiatric nurses with the tools needed to lead this transition. Curriculum development should focus on strengthening competencies in ethical reasoning, patient advocacy, trauma-informed care, and non-coercive interventions. As a positive example, the World Health Organization (WHO) has developed the "QualityRights" initiative,^[5] an online training program designed to support mental health professionals in adopting a more person-centered and human rights-respecting approach. Additionally, professional training programs must emphasize the importance of recovery-oriented and community-based mental health care that prioritizes individuals' autonomy and well-being.

In conclusion, psychiatric nurses must commit to providing care that is scientifically and evidence-based, yet also deeply rooted in ethics and human rights. Ending human rights violations in mental health systems requires nurses to raise awareness, challenge unethical practices, and uphold their professional and ethical responsibilities. By cultivating expertise in therapeutic interactions, advocacy, and ethical decision-making, psychiatric nurses can become key drivers of systemic change, ensuring that mental health care aligns with the principles of dignity, self-determination, and recovery.

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