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EVOLUTION OF A RELAXATION ROOM AS A RESILIENCE PROMOTING STRATEGY WITH UNDERGRADUATE NURSING STUDENTS

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INTRODUCTION

Nursing is a high-stress profession driven by acutely ill patients, poor staffing, lack of supplies, trauma, and workplace violence. These chronic stressors may lead to burnout, moral distress, anxiety, and poor patient outcomes. Historically, efforts have centered on the treatment of psychological harm, such as depression and anxiety, that occur from these stressors. Recently, the focus has shifted to prevention through wellness activities that nurses can employ to assist them in managing their stressors in a productive manner, before burnout and psychological harm occur (Cooper et al., 2020).

Interventions promoting nurse resilience have been primarily focused within the workplace (Cooper et al., 2020) and are not routinely incorporated into undergraduate nursing academic settings (Higgins et al., 2024). To address this educational gap, Badowski (2024) highlighted the importance of nurse educators providing students with self-care tools, and promoting well-being and resilience, before graduation and entry into the workforce. As educators, our goals are multi-faceted. First, we must graduate students who have developed clinical judgment skills and are ready to enter the workforce to provide optimal patient care. A second and equally important goal is to provide students with skills required to manage stress related to working in the healthcare field, and the skills to facilitate self-care and well-being while mitigating stress, anxiety, and depression (Sharpnack, 2023).

The purpose of this article is to describe the evolution of a relaxation room at one School of Nursing (SON) in the United States of America and provide an update on its development since the original research was conducted in 2022 and published in 2024 (Mahoney & Bussard, 2024).

BACKGROUND

High stress levels in undergraduate nursing students lead to health issues that the average college student does not face (Fadden et al., 2025; Walker et al., 2025). The higher levels of stress stem from academic rigor in class, lab, and clinical settings, which can result in psychological harm and decreased academic success (Stubin & Dahan, 2024), indicating that nursing students require support to promote well-being and resilience. In 2020, the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) recommended nursing academic programs transform a reactive

culture to one of prevention through resilience training with nursing students. Thereafter, the AACN published *The Essentials: Core Competencies for Professional Nursing Education* (2021) which reenvisioned competency-based education, through 10 domains, eight concepts, over 40 competencies, and 200 sub-competencies. Domain 10 is "Personal, Professional, and Leadership Development"; Competency 10.1 is "Demonstrate a commitment to personal health and well-being"; and Sub-competency 10.1a is "Demonstrate healthy, self-care behaviors that promote wellness and resiliency" (p. 56). The domain, competency, and sub-competency each demonstrate the 2020 call for action and should be incorporated throughout a nursing curriculum to ensure that educators are providing adequate training related to resilience prior to students transitioning into the workforce.

Resilience is defined as the ability to bounce back from adversity and reduce the stress associated with it (Fadden et al., 2025; Higgins et al., 2024). Characteristics of a resilient person include "social support, self-efficacy, work-life balance/self-care, humor, optimism, and being realistic" (Cooper et al., 2020, pp. 557, 565). Cooper et al. (2020) found that resilience is a trait that can be developed over time, which indicates that as nurse educators, we can assist students with building this important trait to prevent burnout and psychological harm. Liljestrand et al. (2023) stated that a resilience-promoting program, such as a relaxation room, meditation, and mindfulness activities, assists nursing students in developing effective coping skills necessary for academic and professional success.

Walker et al. (2025) detailed the development, implementation, and evaluation of a resilience room in an undergraduate nursing program. The space was developed after a student wellness needs assessment was completed. The room was named after a student who lost her life to suicide, and it was financially funded by her family. Students provided input into the development, including the purpose statement, usage guidelines, the location, and resources available within the room such as lighting, music, creative supplies, books, yoga mats, and mindful activities. The students and faculty integrated the room into the curriculum, promoted its use through social media, and provided incentives to further encourage use of the room. Evaluation of the space took place through an exit survey with responses indicating a decrease in stress.

Higgins et al. (2024) discussed implementing an online module within a nursing course to improve undergraduate student self-care. Students were educated on relationship building, exercise, rest, proper nutrition, spiritual health, humor, moments of gratitude, self-compassion, and self-kindness. Reflective activities showcased how students implemented self-care throughout the nursing course through journaling, physical activity, pet therapy, reading, crafts, meditation, spending time with family and friends, watching movies, and enjoying outdoor activities such as viewing a sunset.

Fadden et al. (2025) conducted a study to examine biofeedback as a method to help undergraduate nursing students lessen anxiety and stress, thus improving resilience. Although the researchers found that controlling the parasympathetic nervous system could help students improve well-being, these results were not statistically significant in this study. The authors recommended providing students with strategies to decrease stress and worry to positively impact their careers and patient outcomes.

Stubin and Dahan (2024) conducted a mixed-method study to identify undergraduate nursing student stressors and how faculty can improve student mental well-being. The authors identified themes consistent with previous studies related to nursing student burnout, stress, and anxiety. Two themes noted in the qualitative portion of the study indicated that students would like

faculty-provided stress-relieving activities that promote self-care. The authors also determined that faculty who provide students with emotional support help decrease their stress and anxiety. They recommended providing students with resilience training, such as mindfulness and relaxation activities.

Lastly, the National Academy of Medicine (2021) published frameworks to improve healthcare provider well-being. They stated that a culture of connection and commitment may improve the well-being of clinicians. Similarly, the American Nurses Association (n.d.) promotes resilience and provides accessible resources to assist students, nurses, leaders, and educators to recover from stressful situations.

IMPLEMENTATION OF A RELAXATION ROOM

The relaxation room at the SON was created in 2022 in response to growing concerns of burnout and attrition among nurses, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. For this new Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) program, the room provided an opportunity to develop an intentional, proactive approach to teach students about well-being and resilience. Nursing faculty recognized that simply providing mindfulness space without the proper training is like providing the equipment for a medical procedure without learning the necessary skills first. The faculty used an available office space to create a low-stimulus, tranquil environment as a designated safe zone to promote student relaxation. The location was strategically chosen within the SON, in a space situated away from faculty offices.

The development of the relaxation room was guided by published research and resources on various healthcare organizations' experiences with similar spaces (Aloufi et al., 2021; McDermott et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2023). The room incorporates low-stimulus and interactive elements, including dimmed lighting, white noise, a wall coloring poster, and stations for yoga, coffee, and essential oils, as well as an inspiration board and a book nook. Additionally, the space features a food and toiletry station and two chairs for resting to help meet students' basic physiological needs (Mahoney & Bussard, 2024).

Mahoney and Bussard (2024) previously reported on the development of the relaxation room. As part of this research, students received a two-hour lecture on stress management and resiliency training (SMART) during each semester of the four-semester BSN program. SMART is a mindfulness program that teaches participants how to develop stress management, coping mechanisms, and resiliency skills, along with self-care and well-being through relaxation response practices. SMART helps participants build strategies to improve clinical performance, optimize emotional and gut health, and reduce provider burnout (Harvard Medical School, n.d.). The primary researcher completed the Benson-Henry Institute (BHI) four-week instructor training course for healthcare providers. Each semester, the faculty member addressed a different component of the SMART training, building upon the information provided from the previous semesters. Following the lecture, students were encouraged to use the relaxation room for a 15- to 30-minute session and complete a post-survey describing their stress levels prior to and following the use of the room along with which elements they liked most and least about the space. The aim of this article is to discuss the evolution of the relaxation room since its inception in 2022. The authors aimed to identify if students were still using the room, how often they used it, what they liked about the room, and if anything needed to be revised. Additionally, we want to share lessons learned after four years of implementation of the relaxation room.

The relaxation room is a method of promoting resilience seamlessly and connects to the American Association of Colleges of Nursing's (AACN) Domain 10 of *The Essentials: Core Competencies for Professional Nursing Education* (2021). Self-care education along with strategies to promote well-being through relaxation could facilitate meeting competency 10.1 and sub-competency 10.1a. Faculty intentionally encourage students to enter the relaxation room during times of stress, anxiety, frustration, and fear, or when they simply need time to unwind. On multiple occasions, faculty have encountered students who were emotionally distraught in the hallway after an exam or skills lab check-off and guided them to the relaxation room. They have encouraged students to lie down on the seating and listen to the white noise, with dimmed lights. Faculty have frequently been thanked for the development of this room. One student, at their pinning ceremony speech, stated the following:

> In nursing, resilience isn't just a professional expectation. It's a personal attribute, too. We learn to steady our hands during crises, but also steady our hearts when things get tough. We've developed the ability to keep going, even when the going gets hard. We still show up for our patients, even on the days we feel stretched thin. But we also learned to pause, take a deep breath, and protect our own well-being, because resilience doesn't mean being unbreakable, it means acknowledging our limits and still choosing to keep going. (B. L. Slagle, personal communication, December 12, 2025)

This reflection provides an extraordinary example of how well the resilience intervention (relaxation room) has formed the thinking pattern of this student. Upon graduation, Slagle stated, "I appreciated the essential oils in the room. They were very calming to use. I also liked the lighting choice as it brought a sense of peace as well" (personal communication, December 14, 2025).

The AACN Domain 10 parallels Standard 5.6 of the 2024 *Nursing Education Programme Standards* from the Nursing Council of New Zealand, which states, "Ākonga/students are informed of, and have access to, pastoral, cultural, and/or personal wellbeing support services" (p. 15). Within this criterion, schools are expected to provide students with support services such as mental health counseling, stress management training, well-being activities, and resilience training. Thus, a relaxation room could serve as a practical strategy to help schools in New Zealand meet Standard 5.6.

EVOLUTION OF THE RELAXATION ROOM

Due to the overwhelmingly positive student feedback, faculty were able to move the relaxation room at the SON to a larger space, furnished with two couches, accent pillows, and a desk space where students can sit and study, if desired. Further adjustments, based on student feedback, included the addition of hot chocolate, coffee creamer, tea, and snacks. The relaxation room is now conveniently located adjacent to a study space featuring a large table and whiteboards, but a bit more proximal to the faculty office spaces due to limited availability of larger spaces. Students have continued to utilize the relaxation room, although it is no longer a requirement as one of their course assignments. Faculty often observe individual students or small groups in the relaxation room at a time. Thus, it appears that students are comfortable in the space either alone or with peers.

A locked dropbox for surveys is located at the exit of the relaxation room. This provides students with the opportunity to submit anonymous and voluntary feedback regarding the space. The original research for this project was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB number

Item	Excellent	Very good	Good
How was your first impression?	12 (75%)	2 (12.5%)	0
How would you rate the environment/items available?	9 (56.3%)	4 (25%)	0
Do you plan to utilize the relaxation room again this semester?*	10 (62.5%)	2 (12.5%)	1 (6.3%)

Table 1. Relaxation room survey responses.
*Excellent = yes, they will use the room, Very good = yes, they most likely will use the room, and Good = yes, they might use the room if they have time.

Item	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Would you be likely to recommend the relaxation room to another student?	0	0	0	0	1 (7.7%)	0	0	0	2 (15.3%)	10 (77%)

Table 2. Relaxation room survey responses: 1(not likely)-10 (most likely).

Item	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10+
How many times have you used the relaxation room this semester?	0	3 (30%)	1 (10%)	0	2 (20%)	1 (10%)	0	0	0	3 (30%)
How many times have you used the relaxation room in the past year?	2 (20%)	1 (10%)	2 (20%)	0	1 (10%)	0	0	1 (10%)	0	3 (30%)

Table 3. Relaxation room survey responses: 1-10+.

Please provide suggestions.
I would love to have more tea options at Keurig station.
Loved the dark lighting.
Maybe some spoons or forks for people who forget them.
Please get a box of tissues or napkins here.
None, but maybe some snacks and clean blankets for when it gets cold.
I have nothing, this place is perfect.
I love it here.
Good calming space.
None, this room is very relaxing and a nice resource.
Thank you all!
Love this!
More snacks please.
It's so amazing to study while being calm.
This is a nice resource.
This is such a great space to de-stress! Love it!
I think this is a lovely room. It's nice to unwind and get to vibe out sometimes. So, this is perfect for stressed students.
BSN 1 and I come every day. It is the best resource.
I always appreciate all of the snacks.

Table 4. Relaxation room survey responses: Comments.

1867044-4) at the University (Mahoney & Bussard, 2024). After completing the initial research, student feedback continued to be collected to facilitate ongoing improvements to the room. The data collected remains anonymous so students can feel safe when submitting their feedback. Survey responses are synthesized in the tables to highlight how students viewed the relaxation room. A total of 16 responses were collected in 2025 (see Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4).

Collaboration with Air Force and evolution of the relaxation room

In September 2025, a sergeant from the local Air Force division contacted the SON research department regarding the initial relaxation room research publication (Mahoney & Bussard, 2024) and expressed interest in touring the room. The sergeant indicated that they were interested in transforming a room located on the Air Force base into a relaxation room, as they have noted poor coping skills and high turnover among their military personnel. The sergeant and three superior officers toured the relaxation room in October 2025. Discussions included the comparison of their predominantly (approximately 80 percent) male personnel with the average (mean) age of 28 years old to that of the traditional nursing student population (Department of Defense, 2020). The primary researcher for the initial relaxation room study (Mahoney & Bussard, 2024) toured the room on the Air Force base, which is in a building that adjoins the hangar where jet operations occur, and maintenance is performed.

The sergeant described how jet engine tests occur intermittently, with noise levels exceeding 80 decibels (dBs) during that time (International Civil Aviation Organization [ICAO], 2022). Military personnel in the immediate area are required to wear ear protection. However, the sound does travel to all areas of the building, and this hearing protection equipment is often insufficient to mitigate the effects of the high frequency sound sources (ICAO, 2022). This noise pollution is detrimental to the physical and mental health of the individuals working in the immediate area and elsewhere on the base (ICAO, 2022). The sergeant provided a tour of the potential relaxation space, a 444-square-foot room that is located on the second level of the building, adjoined to the break room and adjacent to a large conference room. The room currently includes four round tables with chairs, a breastfeeding pod, a television, and two vending machines. Elements such as a tranquil wall mural and soundproof panels were discussed. One of the authors is in collaboration with the Air Force for the development of this space. Planning is in the early phases, with the sergeant receiving formal approval from their military leadership. They are currently working on the budget and renovation of the designated space.

CONCLUSION

The researchers encourage anyone who wishes to develop this type of space to garner support from administration to ensure that the room will be sufficient in size, in close proximity to the nursing faculty (School/College of Nursing), and adequately funded to maintain essential items, such as oils, tea, and new coloring pads. Replenishing the room with such supplies can become costly, depending on the volume of students. Nursing faculty provide donations to the room to help sustain the food and toiletry supplies. However, a small annual budget would be beneficial to support, maintain, and ensure the long-term sustainability of the space.

The researchers also suggest incorporating wellness education into the curriculum, beginning in the first semester of nursing courses. Students should be aware of the relaxation room early in their education, empowering them to use it multiple times throughout their academic

journey and providing them with ample opportunity to build resilience skills. The researchers recommend advertising the relaxation room in school newsletters or on school social media to remind students that the room is available to them. Another consideration is who will be responsible for maintaining the space. At times, students will leave waste, spill liquids, or forget personal items. One of the authors cleans, monitors, and restocks the room on a weekly basis. A recommendation is for a designated secondary staff member to help maintain the space.

The AACN (2021) specifically identifies the significant impact of resilience and well-being on a nurse's ability to care for themselves and others. Resilient nurses demonstrate workplace adaptability, which promotes well-being, decreases stress, and reduces psychological harm, allowing them to provide high-quality patient care (Cooper et al., 2020). In addition, resilient nurses experience increased job satisfaction and successful coping skills. Teaching techniques for resilience are crucial because they facilitate bedside nursing retention. Development of a relaxation room to promote resilience is a mechanism to assist undergraduate nursing students in learning how to prevent stress or alleviate stressors when they arise (Cooper et al., 2020).

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