

# EXPLORING THE CONCEPT OF COMPASSION IN NURSING: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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## Statement of the Problem

The concept of compassion is important to study in order for nurses to fully understand how to meet the expectations of today's healthcare consumer for compassionate care (Grabber & Mitcham, 2004; Nelson & Watson, 2012; Suliman et al., 2009). The need for further study on the concept of compassion as a descriptor of nursing is identified in multiple studies (Cote, Pepin, Ricardo & D'Aoust, 2006; Davison & Williams, 2009; Dunn, 2009a; Kret 2011; Schantz, 2007, and Von Dietze & Ord, 2000). Compassion should be more fully understood from the experienced nurse's perspective (Schantz, 2007). An increased understanding of compassion and how it is demonstrated as compassionate caring in nursing will lead to better insight into the profession of nursing, thus potentially supporting new ways of educating, managing and retaining nurses and ultimately meeting the healthcare consumer's expectations (Bradshaw, 2009; Straughair, 2012).

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore the stories shared by registered nurses of their perceptions and descriptions of experiences providing compassionate care in their practice

## Significance of the Study

Schantz (2007) determined the term compassion was not clearly defined in nursing scholarship nor consistently demonstrated, or even considered in daily nursing practice. Perry (2009) identified the need for further research to identify how compassion is demonstrated in nursing practice in order to understand more fully how to educate and reinforce compassionate practice by nurses. The concept of compassion as the main trait of nursing validates that nurses must fully understand compassion in order to decrease compassion fatigue (Ayock & Boyle, 2009; Hooper, et al., 2010; Sprang et al., 2007). The ability to utilize nursing theories, social theories, and philosophies to fully understand compassion may aid nurses in finding fulfillment and meaning in their profession.

## Research Question

How do experienced nurses perceive and describe their experiences of providing compassionate care in their nursing practice?

## ABSTRACT

Nursing practice in the 21<sup>st</sup> century focuses on the use of evidence to support best nursing practice, as well as creating a caring environment for nurses and the communities they serve. Studies have been conducted on caring and compassion in nursing practice. The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore how experienced registered nurses perceive and describe their experiences of compassion in their practice. The goal of the research is to add to the understanding of the phenomenon of compassion in the profession of nursing. A qualitative phenomenological research study was utilized to advance the reflective, human nature of nursing. The specific concept of compassion was studied through the use of semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. A purposeful sample of six experienced registered nurses was studied. Two categories were identified consisting of five themes. The first category described the lived experience of compassion with the themes selfless giving and being truly present in the moment identified. The second category described how giving compassionate care made the nurse feel. The themes listed under this category are: provide a sense of fulfillment, care of self and frustrating when can't give compassionate care. The knowledge gained from this study increased the understanding of compassion as a descriptor of the art of nursing as well as added to the science of nursing. Recommendations for future research include further study of the identified themes by conducting large scale quantitative and mixed method studies with representative samples of all specialties of nursing. Recommendations for practice include incorporating the themes into applications for staff nurses, nurse educators and nurse leaders.

## Themes/Description

Theme	Description
<b>Research sub-question 1: What are the lived experiences of nurses providing compassionate care?</b>	
It is selfless giving	Identify another's needs and give without judging. Giving to others. Make things better. Meeting them where they are at. Looking out for another. Don't need thanks.
It is being truly present in the moment	Listening. Being with. Quiet. Focus on them. Bond with.
<b>Research sub-question 2: How giving compassionate care makes nurses feel</b>	
Provides a sense of fulfillment	Internal fulfillment and satisfaction. Feel valued. Gives a sense of purpose. Affirmed. Love. Accomplishment.
Must take care of self	Must take care of self in order to be compassionate. Prayer. Rest. Support. Education. Must want to be there.
Frustrating when can't give	Depressed. Burned out. Not what I went into nursing for.

## STORIES

*Had a young 30 year old man with back pain – he was a mechanic and it turned out he had multiple Myeloma. I try to make patients feel comfortable so when I went in the room I started talking and asked him what he liked to be called and he said "Call me B" so I said well then you can just call me T. From then on we bonded. We couldn't help him and he got worse and he was moved to ICU. I went to see in ICU (sometimes I felt that maybe I went a little to far – that it was to personal. The ICU nurse could have told me I couldn't see him but she showed me compassion and let me go in and see him and she gave me private time with him. He said "T you came" It meant so much to him that I came to see him when he wasn't even on my floor. My mom always said I was the one that would take care of the kid down the street. I think you have to want to care to be a nurse and I think that compassion is part of who we are. You have to have the heart to be a nurse.*

*"I remember caring for a patient and I was with her when the doctor came in and I knew it wasn't going to be good news. I just sat down on the bed beside the patient. I stayed after the doctor left and just asked her what she was thinking. She started talking about her fears and I just listened and held her hand. I stayed with her until she felt better. She just needed someone to be there, with her for a while."*

*"Your heart hurts when someone leaves or dies. Breaks your heart. Cared for a mother who had twins and one twin died at birth and the other one lived. Ached for the parents. Call the mother every year on the twins birthday – its is ones day to celebrate yet the other died on the same day. Have been calling her every year for over 18 years".*

*"I think sometime you can wear yourself out if you don't know how to recharge yourself or if you are in intense situations continuously. "Education helps you provide compassionate care by helping you see the patient as a whole. Holistic care promotes compassion."*

*"I need quiet time –when I am prayed up-I have spent time praying, I am more able to be compassionate. When I am focused on my patients I am compassionate. When I don't take the time to ask God to be with me I am not as open to being compassionate".*

## Theoretical Framework

Theoretical frameworks provide the connections between the research questions to the theoretical constructs (Brown, 2012). Connecting a study to a theory provides importance to the study. The results of the study may support or provide a connection to the theory. Dossey's theory on integral nursing was the theoretical framework chosen for this study (Dossey & Keegan, 2013). Dossey's theory on integral nursing offers nurses the opportunity to reflect on what their purpose and their passions are, as well as how they live them in their practice (Dossey & Keegan, 2013). Dossey's theory of integral nursing promotes the importance of qualitative and quantitative research in nursing. The integral nursing theory supports cultural and interpretive experiences expanding the nurses' consciousness while increasing nursing's knowledge base. Healing is the center core concept of the theory. Healing is defined as mental, emotional, social, physical and spiritual balance. The theory of integral nursing explores how nurses can understand and be more aware of their wholeness and healing capacities and their ability to provide compassionate care. The theory of integral nursing encourages the nurse to reflect on their practice. The integral nurse recognizes that being with is as important as the doing to or doing for another person. Dossey's theory of integral nursing which has healing as the core concept provides an interconnection between others which supports the concept of compassion

## Demographic Characteristics

### Gender

Female (6/6)  
Male (0)

### Age

1 (26-30 years)  
1 (35-39 years)  
1 (45-49 years)  
3 (50-55 years)

### Length of time in profession

1 (5-9 years)  
2 (10-15 years)  
2 (16-20 years)  
1 (25-29 years)

### Area if nursing currently working in

School nursing (1)  
Military (1)  
Management (1)  
Education (3)

## Methodology

Purposeful sampling

Inclusion criteria

- \* Minimum of five years of nursing experience
- \* Graduate nursing student at a Christian university

Semi-structured interview

Verbatim transcription of taped interviews by the researcher

Verification of transcription accuracy by each participant

Demographic data obtained at initial interview

Initial descriptive analysis completed

Analysis using modified version van Kaam method completed

Researcher analyzed texts of interviews

Triangulating analyst reviewed clustered meaning units.

Discussions with triangulating analyst lead to determination of themes

## Discussion/Conclusions

### Limitations

All participants were female  
Transferability will only be established with further testing in more varied settings, among nurses who differ educationally and have different spiritual beliefs  
Openness of the participants to share experiences  
Experience of the researcher

### Implications for Practice

Increased understanding of the concept of compassion may lead to:  
Increased nurse professional fulfillment  
Increased nurse retention in profession  
New methods/styles for leadership to improve nurse and patient satisfaction  
New methods/pedagogy for education that stress the importance of demonstrating and role modeling compassion for student nurses.

### Recommendations for Future Research

Increased understanding of the concept of compassion may lead to:  
Increased nurse professional fulfillment  
Increased nurse retention in profession  
New methods/styles for leadership to improve nurse and patient satisfaction  
New methods/pedagogy for education that stress the importance of demonstrating and role modeling compassion for student nurses.

## References:

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