ORIGINAL

# Meanings of Mental Health in Nursing Students

## Significados de Salud Mental en estudiantes de enfermería

Laura María Almeida Rueda[1] ✉, Maria Andreina Pulido Montes[1] ✉

[1]Universidad Cooperativa de Colombia, Santander, Bucaramanga, Colombia.

**Corresponding Author:** Laura María Almeida Rueda ✉

## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** the meanings are constructed from culture and according to them individuals carry out their actions in the world, being mental health one of the fields of action of nursing professionals, it is essential to address these meanings in nursing students that according to these will provide mental health care to the individual, family and communities.
**Objective:** to understand the meanings in mental health that nursing students of a Colombian University have.
**Method:** qualitative study, with an ethnographic approach, with information gathering techniques such as semi-structured interviews, observations recorded in the field diary, the analysis was qualitative of ethnographic type based on the dense description posed by Cliffort Geertz.
**Results:** Interviews with 11 nursing students, recorded and transcribed, under descriptive, axial and selective coding process, with saturation of categories, thus ceasing the field work, the dense description is obtained obtaining findings such as those that raise the current article of Mental Health meanings from the individual-behavioral, social and biological, from the psychiatric, mental and from a positive and healthy perspective.
**Conclusion:** positive mental health is present in the meanings that nursing students give to mental health.

**Keywords:** Mental Health; Ethnography; Health; Mental Disorders.

## RESUMEN

**Introducción:** los significados son construidos desde la cultura y de acuerdo a ellos los individuos llevan a cabo sus actuaciones en el mundo, siendo la salud mental uno de los campos de acción de los profesionales de enfermería, es fundamental abordar estos significados en estudiantes de enfermería que de acuerdo a estos brindaran los cuidados en salud mental al individuo, familia y comunidades.
**Objetivo:** comprender los significados en salud mental que tienen los estudiantes de enfermería de una Universidad Colombiana.
**Método:** estudio cualitativo, con un enfoque etnográfico, con técnicas de recolección de información como entrevista semiestructurada, observaciones consignadas en diario de campo, el análisis fue cualitativo de tipo etnográfico basado en la descripción densa que plantea Cliffort Geertz.
**Resultados:** entrevistas a 11 estudiantes de enfermería, grabadas y transcritas, bajo proceso de codificación descriptiva, axial y selectiva, con saturación de categorías, cesando así el trabajo de campo, se realiza la descripción densa obteniendo hallazgos como los que suscitan el actual artículo de Significados en Salud Mental desde lo individual-conductual, social y biológico, desde lo psiquiátrico, mental y desde una perspectiva positiva y saludable.
**Conclusión:** la salud mental positiva está presente en los significados que los estudiantes de enfermería le otorgan a la salud mental.

## INTRODUCTION

Various authors define mental health, giving rise to theoretical perspectives that can confuse individuals' assessments of their cultural background. Meanings shape human actions, so meanings in mental health are constructed from the beginning of a person's existence and in academia, where they are either reinforced or lost according to the learning acquired by students and the education of teachers, who contribute by guiding the skills determined in each discipline.

In the case of the nursing profession, ongoing training is necessary for teachers to make them competent to apply and transmit knowledge, which provides tools to achieve mental health in society and reduce morbidity and mortality or suicide rates.[1,2,3,4]

This research points to one of the objectives of the 2013-2020 comprehensive action plan on mental health, objective 4, 'Strengthen information systems, scientific data and research on mental health,' which contributes to the understanding of the meanings of mental health that are finally being understood by future nursing professionals.[5,6,7,8]

One of the principles of the National Mental Health Policy of 7 November 2018 is to 'use the best possible evidence from research for the development and implementation of public policies', as this study provides a detailed description of the phenomenon of interest, which is a growing concern in this area.[9,10,11,12]

Nursing professionals focus their care on aspects of healing from a biomedical and hospital perspective,[1,13,14,15] which distorts mental health and distances it from a healthy concept of the individual, family, and communities, causing gaps in the health care provided by nursing professionals. Accordingly, the objective of this study, 'To understand the meanings of mental health among nursing students at a Colombian university,' is necessary and relevant.

## METHOD

Qualitative study with an ethnographic approach. The population was nursing students at a Colombian university enrolled in the 2017–2018 academic year. The inclusion criteria were students enrolled in the nursing programme at a Colombian university based in Bucaramanga, aged 18 years or older. Exclusion criteria: Those who did not answer the questions asked in the interviews due to mental or total hearing impairment.

Information collection techniques such as semi-structured interviews and observations recorded in a field diary were used. A previous framework guided both the interviews and the observations. These interviews sought to obtain descriptions of the world experienced by the interviewees, achieving interpretations of meaning (Giraldo and González, 2013).

Sampling was theoretical, following Taylor and Bodgan (1994), where key informants intentionally determined selection. The information was analysed ethnographically, according to the principles of thick description developed by Clifford Geertz in 2003. An analytical reflection was carried out on the data obtained. Each interview was transcribed and coded using Microsoft Word or Excel. The data was selected and reduced, guided by the study's objectives. The information was organised and categorised by defining explanatory categories in which relevant meanings were grouped, and initial maps were designed to understand the phenomenon. Finally, the categories were regrouped to form networks, resulting in explanatory maps representing the meaning of mental health for nursing students.

## RESULTS

For the participants in this study, mental health is seen from a perspective that triggers personal and shared feelings. They also refer to their mental health status, which confronts them with special situations. They also state that mental health is reflected in their future lives and in the things that have happened to them, and that it is very complex and challenging to determine for oneself. Therefore, it is necessary to have people who are knowledgeable about the subject and qualified in this critical area. They relate mental health to general health, based on their definitions in this graph, which has been consolidated and constructed from the detailed description:

Some of their contributions in the area of positive mental health are:

'Psychological and emotional well-being and the beliefs and cultures that a person has about seeing the world' (EE01-cod01)

'That perspective that each person has and develops and how it is maintained at a stable level.' (EE01-cod02)

Mental health 'is how you feel, in terms of what...can affect your daily life and whether or not this can... affect people's health' (EE11-cod16)

Harmony and attitude (EE03-cod13)

'It is the development that each individual has in their behaviour in the community or in a social relationship in which they move, whether at work, at school or in their family environment.' (EE02- cod01)

Fundamental basis for human beings (EE02- cod02)

Behaviours that provide parameters for analysing a person (EE02- cod03)

'It's how I feel mentally at that moment. If I find any psychological disturbance, I think that's what it is for me' (EE05- cod05)

'Mental health...understands everything that has to do with the mind but can also affect physical health' (EE11- cod17)

'Being mentally stable, or within my normal mental parameters' (EE05- cod06)

'Coordination between what I think, act or do' (EE09- cod04)

'Thinking according to the situations that arise...being able to respond to all the situations that the environment presents us with' (EE04- cod06)

'Mental health...is like the way a person encompasses everything they think, in an emotional way' (EE11- cod15)

Immunosuppression due to emotional state (EE03- cod15)

'It's in your diet and all that, it's a protective factor, because if I eat well, I live well' (EE03- cod28)

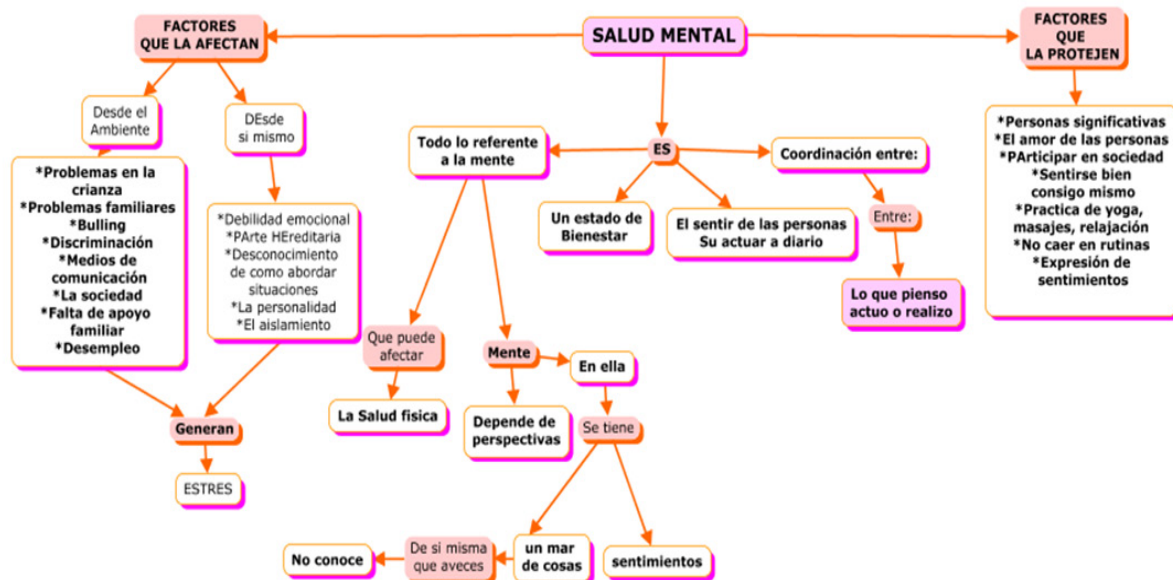There are mental problems that are not disorders (EE02- cod60)



**Figure 1.** Meanings of mental health among nursing students

## Feelings about mental health

Nursing students have feelings about their experiences with mental health and the conditions in which they have developed, so they make statements about aspects that they believe to be true, which they express openly and with which most of the significant people in their lives agree. Some of these shared feelings are:

'Human beings or university students... no, let's call them human beings in general, have the misconception that mental health means being crazy, and that is wrong' (EE02- cod54).

'Find ways to redefine that word so that students don't think "going to a psychologist means I'm crazy"... even though they know that's not true, because they know it, because we've studied it, we've learned it' (EE01- cod81)

No one is truly mentally stable (EE01- cod17)

There is a lack of understanding of the concept of mental health to express it (EE02- cod56)

Personal mental health

When addressing the definitions and meanings they give to mental health, participants express how, from a personal point of view, they reflect or do not reflect this mental health that is so desired in some cases by themselves and which they consider fundamental for socialisation and their life in general. Some of their statements are:

'Mental health can be affected by upbringing' (EE01- cod04)

'Mental health is ingrained in me and my life' (EE01- cod07)

'In terms of mental health, I have always undervalued myself a lot' (EE01- cod41)
'I repress many things in myself' (EE01- cod48)

## DISCUSSION

The participants in this study refer to their own meanings of mental health, similar to those developed by Calderón in 2001, who states that 'mental health refers to positive lifestyles and values that legitimise and sustain levels of humanity, trust, security and a sense of control over one's destiny', coinciding with the feeling of control over one's destiny, which they express as knowing what one is doing. [16,17,18,19]

It is also noteworthy that in the current research, mental health is perceived as a state of harmony of the person, which coincides with the World Health Organisation,[16] which defines mental health as 'the basis for the well-being and effective functioning of an individual and a community'. [17,18,19,20]

For this study, as Rodríguez[21] states, 2015 the avoidance strategies that are part of coping are helpful insofar as they reduce stress and prevent anxiety, allowing for a gradual recognition of the threat. [22,23,24,25] This leads us to believe that the more certain emotions are avoided, the better one's mental health will be, while other authors, such as Goleman, affirm that emotions are necessary but that managing them is fundamental to individuals' quality of life. [26,27]

## CONCLUSIONS

The approach to mental health meanings among nursing students leads to a description of positive mental health, which many authors consider a concept separate from mental health in general. However, from the perspective of the principal investigator, positive mental health is included within mental health in general.

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**CONFLICT OF INTEREST**
The author declares that she has no conflict of interest.

**AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION**
*Conceptualization:* Laura María Almeida Rueda, Maria Andreina Pulido Montes.
*Data curation:* Laura María Almeida Rueda, Maria Andreina Pulido Montes.
*Formal analysis:* Laura María Almeida Rueda, Maria Andreina Pulido Montes.
*Research:* Laura María Almeida Rueda, Maria Andreina Pulido Montes.
*Methodology:* Laura María Almeida Rueda, Maria Andreina Pulido Montes.
*Project management:* Laura María Almeida Rueda, Maria Andreina Pulido Montes.
*Resources:* Laura María Almeida Rueda, Maria Andreina Pulido Montes.
*Software:* Laura María Almeida Rueda, Maria Andreina Pulido Montes.
*Supervision:* Laura María Almeida Rueda, Maria Andreina Pulido Montes.
*Validation:* Laura María Almeida Rueda, Maria Andreina Pulido Montes.
*Visualisation:* Laura María Almeida Rueda, Maria Andreina Pulido Montes.
*Writing – revision and editing:* Laura María Almeida Rueda, Maria Andreina Pulido Montes.