

Using Behaviour Change Theories and Models in Nursing Research and Practice

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Sleet and Dellinger (2020) distinguish between “nursing theory” and “behavioural theory” in that the former primarily focuses on patient care while the latter focuses on patient behaviour change. They posit that the application of behavioural theory is instrumental in advancing nursing research and practice. Nurses can benefit from a thorough understanding of theoretical perspectives related to health-behaviour change. Behaviour change theory can provide a conceptual context for understanding patient behaviour, guide research on the determinants of health behaviour and health service delivery and offer alternative approaches to nursing practice that may improve the effectiveness of patient care.

The nursing literature provides many examples of nurses developing new theories, modifying existing ones, and tailoring applications to new and emerging health problems in nursing research (Alligood 2017). Behavioural theories that are being applied to community health nursing with increasing frequency include the theory of planned behaviour, social cognitive theory or social learning theory, diffusion of innovation theory and the theory of reasoned action. Behavioural models that are widely applied in nursing research and practice include the social–ecological model, the PRECEDE/PROCEED model, the social capital model, the transtheoretical model (stages of change), the health belief model and Pender’s health promotion model, to name but a few. Many of these models and theories can be used when developing nursing interventions designed to change behaviour (Hilliard, Riekert, and Ockene 2018; Murdaugh, Parsons, and Pender 2019).

Smith and Liehr (2018) describe about 13 middle-range theories ready for application to nursing practice. These include the theories of uncertainty in illness, meaning, bureaucratic caring, self-transcendence, symptom management, unpleasant symptoms, self-efficacy, transitions, self-reliance, cultural marginality, moral reckoning, self-care of chronic illness and the story theory.

The use of behavioural theory in nursing can be an important tool for effective research and practice and contribute in important ways to improving research capacity in nursing (Chen et al. 2019). Given the enormous role behaviour plays in premature morbidity and mortality, public health nurse practitioners and researchers can benefit by broadening the use of theory in the design and implementation of interventions for individuals and the public, using behaviour change theories as their guide (Sleet and Dellinger 2020).

As the Africa Journal of Nursing and Midwifery transitions from being a capacity building publication to becoming a journal of choice for high quality research in nursing and disciplines of related health sciences, nurse researchers can elevate the quality of their research and behaviour change interventions by anchoring them on the tried and tested behaviour change theories and models.

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