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This essay was for the class “Professional Nursing Issues,” as taught by Prof. Deb Shelestak. The assignment was to write an essay about a scholarly nurse leader, including a discussion of works published by the subject.

Abstract

Grand theorist, Betty Neuman, Ph.D., RN, was one of the first to advocate preventative healthcare for individuals, family, and community. Her holistic approach encompassed the person as an entire system, with layers of defense against stressors that would ultimately lead to disease, if proper coping mechanisms were not in place to offset the disturbance. Her interventions are centered on preventative measures. Dr. Neuman is still advancing her theory through several venues, including publishing articles and hosting symposiums through her Neuman Systems Model Trustees Group, Inc.

Introduction

Betty Neuman was born in 1924 and attended the then Peoples Hospital School of Nursing, in Akron, Ohio, where she received her RN diploma in 1947. After finishing school, Ms. Neuman relocated to California, where she continually added to her experience and education. She held positions of increasing responsibility, starting at hospitals as staff and eventually head nurse. Outside of the hospital arena she was a school nurse and an industrial nurse. Eventually, she became an instructor in medical surgery, critical care, and communicable diseases. In 1957, she graduated from the University of California with a double major in psychology and public health (Heyman, Wolfe, 2000). She continued on to receive her master’s degree in mental and public health consultation in 1966, and a doctorate in clinical psychology in 1985. At the age of seventy-four, Betty Neuman was granted an honorary doctorate from Grand Valley State University, in Allendale, Michigan (Heyman, Wolfe, 2000).

History

The Neuman Systems Model was developed by Betty Neuman, Ph.D., RN, in 1970, in response to her students at the University of California. They wanted a common framework of nursing to apply to specific nursing problems. Neuman was ahead of her time in developing a model that was based on the concepts of stress and reaction to stress (Potter, Perry, 2005). She unified several theories into the Neuman Systems Model: the Systems Theory, Selye Stress Theory, and Gestalt Theory. The Systems Theory, as defined by Lars Skyttner, “is a set of interacting units or elements that form an integrated whole intended to perform some function” (Skyttner, 1996). Hans Selye labeled stress as a syndrome in 1935, and saw it as a universal explanation for human behavior in industrial society. Based on Seyle, physiologists today use stress as a unifying
concept to understand the interaction of organic life with the environment (Viner, 1999). “According to the founder of Gestalt Theory, Max Wertheimer, the gestalt is an organized unity where the part processes are determined by the nature of the whole” (Rolf, 2006), or more simply, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Neuman’s integration ultimately generated a grand theory, which, according to Blais “is broad and complex and tends to be very general; grand theories are abstract but may provide insights useful for practice” (Potter, Perry, 2005, pp. 67).

The Neuman Systems Model

The Neuman Systems Model centers on the wellness of a person’s system relative to stressors from the environment, and how the individual reacts to those stressors. According to Neuman (1995), the client is described as an open system comprised of five interrelated core elements: the physiological, psychological, sociocultural, spiritual and developmental (August, 2000). She theorized that departure from health with any of these systems was caused by the progressive advance of stress through several layers of defense. The environment can penetrate these layers of defense in one of four ways:

1. Internal: something within the organism causes distress.
2. External Interpersonal: an environmental stressor caused by another person (family member, etc.).
3. External Extrapersonal: an environmental stressor caused by situations (finances, work, etc.).
4. Created: stressors that are manifested toward oneself (low-self esteem).

An individual’s inner strength plays a major role in combating these stressors. Neuman theorized that if the individual had proper coping mechanisms to deal with stress many diseases could be prevented or halted.

Neuman’s focus for intervention is based on maintaining a strong system utilizing preventative levels (Blais, Hayes, Koziar, 2006). “Nursing care provides primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention in relation to the identified strengths and weaknesses” (Chitty, 2005). Primary prevention aims at taking action to eliminate the stressor before it can cause disease. Although the disease has not manifested, the risks of developing the disease are known. Secondary prevention is post-symptomatic. It aims at reducing the effects of the manifestation while simultaneously increasing resistance to it. Tertiary prevention is when the disease has subsided. It represents a return to health, or a recuperation period following illness.

Published Work

Betty Neuman has published several works throughout the years, including a book The Neuman Systems Model, in 1995. Another publication, an article titled “Leadership-Scholarship Integration: Using the Neuman Systems Model,” advocates a unification of leadership and scholarship, which basically partners healthcare organizations and research.

In her most recent publication, Neuman carries her grand theory into the future by stressing collaboration among healthcare professionals to enhance delivery of care. The April 2007 issue of Nursing Science Quarterly addresses how the Neuman systems model will be applied as the 21st century progresses.

Conclusion

Ms. Betty Neuman sums up her theory best with the following quote:

The system perspective provides a universal language linking parts and wholes into a unifying framework. The concept of client wholeness, the goal of optimal
health and utilization of primary prevention strategies to maintain wellness, and popular thinking in the lay literature all catapulted the Neuman Systems Model into acceptance by the nursing profession. These same values are very much alive in today’s world. If anything, there is more emphasis on holistic health and holistic nursing today than there was 37 years ago (Neuman, 2007, pp. 111). The holistic Neuman perspective will remain adaptive and relevant to changing healthcare needs up to and including the year 2050. (Neuman, 2007, pp. 112).

Neuman’s process integrates both theory and science. The Neuman Systems Model takes into regard the patient’s mental image of needs, while simultaneously striving for collaboration between healthcare providers. It strives for the mutual goal of applying a holistic approach to the system of the patient in preventing stress and thus maintaining or attaining wellness.

When traveling through the lush countryside of Virginia, it is difficult for the eye to settle on any one single thing to admire, whether it is the rolling hills, manicured farms, marshy beaches or the vibrant flora seeping through every crack and crevice. Perhaps no place embodies this sense of lushness more than the historical section of Williamsburg, where reconstruction began almost a hundred years ago in an attempt to recapture the spirit of life during the American colonial era. While not a large area, being only about a mile long and less than half that wide, it is so full of details that seeing all of it is difficult for any traveler, regardless of allotted time.

Very little of this restored section of the town is left empty without serving a purpose of some kind; each nook and cranny is manicured, planted, carved, or a variation or combination thereof. Even the alleyways are made decorative.

Betty Neuman: A Theorist
References


