Review Article:

Neuro-circadian Disruption and Occupational Health Resilience in Psychiatric Nursing: A Systematic Review of Sleep–Emotion–Stress Interconnections and Evidence-Based Interventions

Essam Eltantawy Elsayed[1]

Assistant Professor, Department of Nursing Faculty of Nursing, Hafr Albatin University, Hafr Albatin, Saudi Arabia.

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Corresponding author:

Essam Eltantawy Elsayed, Assistant Professor, Department of Nursing, Faculty of Nursing, Hafr Albatin University,Hafr Albatin, Saudi Arabia

Email: ialtantawi@uhb.edu.sa

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Abstract:

Psychiatric nursing is distinctively demanding, requiring high-intensity emotional labor, crisis intervention, and ethical decision-making amidst unpredictable clinical environments. The intersection of shift work, circadian misalignment, and occupational stress creates specific neurobiological and psychosocial vulnerabilities that threaten nurse well-being. This systematic review synthesizes evidence regarding the reciprocal relationships between sleep disturbance, emotional dysregulation, and occupational stress in psychiatric nurses and evaluates interventions designed to foster resilience. Following PRISMA 2020 guidelines, we searched PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, CINAHL, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar for studies published between January 2020 and March 2025. Eligibility criteria included peer-reviewed studies involving psychiatric or mental health nurses that addressed sleep, emotional regulation, or occupational stress. Quality was appraised using AMSTAR 2, Cochrane RoB 2, the Newcastle–Ottawa Scale, and CASP tools. The review included 89 studies representing over 45,000 nurses across 28 countries. Results indicated that 38.6% of participants suffered from poor sleep quality, while moderate burnout and secondary traumatic stress scores averaged 24.99 and 21.99, respectively. Data revealed a bidirectional relationship between sleep quality and emotion regulation, mediated significantly by occupational stress. Notably, night-shift work increased sleep disorder risk by 1.6-fold. Interventions such as bright-light therapy and mindfulness training improved sleep efficiency, whereas organizational-level programs demonstrated sustained burnout reduction. Neuro-circadian disruption, emotional dysregulation, and occupational stress constitute a reinforcing triad that degrades professional resilience. To sustain the psychiatric nursing workforce, it is critical to integrate circadian-informed scheduling with psychosocial support and mindfulness-based strategies.

Keywords:

Psychiatric nursing, Sleep disorders, Emotional regulation, Occupational stress, Resilience, Circadian rhythm.

Introduction:

Psychiatric nursing occupies a complex clinical landscape merging high acuity with intense emotional labor. Mental health nurses routinely navigate aggression, suicidality, and psychosis while maintaining a therapeutic alliance.[1] This psychological burden is exacerbated by structural stressors, including rotating shifts, staffing shortages, and the stigma associated with psychiatric care. Consequently, this workforce faces disproportionate risks for sleep disturbance, burnout, and secondary traumatic stress.[2] Despite these known risks, the "neuro-circadian" interplay between biological rhythm disruption and occupational stress remains under-researched in workforce wellness strategies.[3-5]

Operational Definitions: To ensure conceptual clarity, this review operationalizes the following core constructs: Burnout: A syndrome of chronic workplace stress defined by energy depletion, increased mental distance or cynicism regarding one's job, and reduced professional efficacy.[6] Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS): Distinct from burnout, STS refers to emotional duress mimicking PTSD symptoms, resulting specifically from sustained empathetic engagement with traumatized patients.[7] Emotional Dysregulation: The impairment in modulating affective states, often linked to stress-induced alterations in prefrontal-limbic neurobiology.[8] Resilience: Viewed here as a dynamic capacity for adaptation emerging from the interaction between individual coping mechanisms and organizational support, rather than a static personality trait.[9]

The Neuro-circadian Disruption Framework: The proposed "Neuro-circadian Disruption Framework" (see Figure 2 in Discussion) posits that occupational stress and circadian misalignment are not isolated variables but converging forces on shared neural systems. Specifically, the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis and prefrontal-limbic circuitry are compromised by recurrent night shifts and irregular sleep-wake cycles. This disruption alters melatonin and cortisol rhythms, diminishing executive control over emotional reactivity. Chronic sympathetic activation leads to sleep fragmentation, which further impairs the cognitive reserves necessary for empathy and vigilance—critical components of psychiatric care. Understanding these bidirectional sleep-emotion-stress interconnections is essential for designing interventions that align biological rhythms with professional demands.[10-13]

In psychiatric nursing, where sustained empathy and vigilance are essential, even subtle neuro-circadian imbalance may erode therapeutic engagement and heighten vulnerability to compassion fatigue. Understanding these physiological pathways

supports the design of resilience enhancing interventions that align biological rhythms with professional demands.[14]

Traditional wellness initiatives have emphasized individual coping and self-care[11]. Contemporary perspectives recognize occupational health resilience as a dynamic interaction between personal adaptability and organizational context.[15-17] Resilient psychiatric nursing systems are characterized by supportive leadership, fair scheduling, opportunities for debriefing, and environments that normalize rest and psychological recovery. A multilevel approach integrating individual mindfulness with systemic reforms offers the most sustainable protection against chronic stress and attrition.[18]

Objectives: This systematic review aimed to provide a comprehensive synthesis of the current evidence regarding the occupational health challenges faced by psychiatric nursing professionals. Specifically, the review sought to:

1. Synthesize evidence concerning the prevalence and the complex interrelationships between sleep disturbance, emotional dysregulation, and occupational stress.
2. Examine the underlying neurobiological mechanisms, such as HPA-axis activation and prefrontal-limbic imbalances, that link these domains.
3. Evaluate the efficacy of various individual-level and organizational-level interventions in mitigating these risks.
4. Identify critical methodological limitations and evidence gaps within the existing literature.
5. Formulate actionable, evidence-based recommendations for healthcare policy, nursing education, and clinical practice to foster long-term professional resilience.

Methods:

A systematic review was undertaken following the PRISMA 2020 statement.[19] The review protocol encompassed literature published between 2020 and 2025 to capture post-pandemic trends in mental health nursing.

Databases searched: PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, CINAHL, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar. Boolean strings combined terms for psychiatric nursing, sleep disturbance, emotion regulation, burnout, and occupational stress.

Eligibility Criteria

Inclusion: peer-reviewed English-language studies (2020–2025) involving psychiatric or mental-health nurses; quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods designs; ≥ 20 participants.

Exclusion: case reports, abstracts only, predatory journals, or studies unrelated to psychiatric settings.

Quality Appraisal: Quality and bias were assessed using AMSTAR 2, Cochrane

RoB 2, Newcastle–Ottawa Scale, and CASP tools.[20-23]

Data Synthesis: Given study heterogeneity, a narrative synthesis was undertaken following Popay et al., grouping findings by prevalence, mechanisms, interventions, and organizational influences.[24]

Results:

Study Selection: The search strategy yielded 976 records. Following the removal of duplicates and screening against eligibility criteria, 89 studies were selected for inclusion. These studies encompass data from approximately 45,000 psychiatric nurses across 28 countries. The detailed selection process, including reasons for exclusion, is presented in the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram (Figure 1).

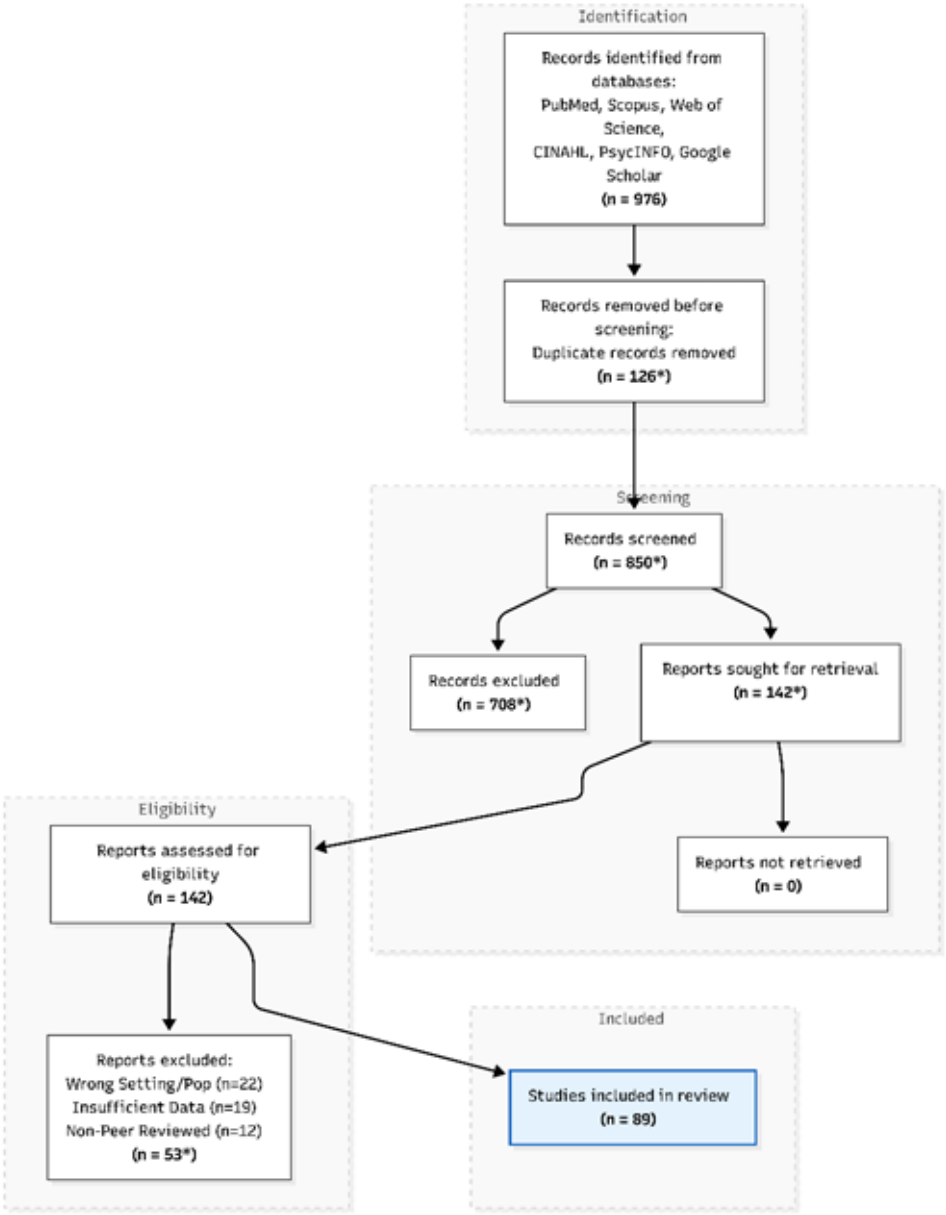


Figure 1: PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram Study.

Characteristics: A comprehensive summary of the included studies, spanning 28 countries and approximately 45,000 psychiatric nurses, is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of Included Studies.

Parameter	Range / Summary
Total studies reviewed	89
Countries represented	28
Total sample (psychiatric nurses)	≈ 45 000
Study designs	56 % cross-sectional, 22 % RCTs, 14 % qualitative, 8 % mixed methods
Main foci	Sleep quality, burnout, emotional regulation, occupational stress, interventions

Prevalence and Correlates: Large-scale surveys indicated that 38.6% of psychiatric nurses reported poor sleep quality. Mean scores indicated moderate levels of burnout (24.99) and secondary traumatic stress (21.99). During the COVID-19 pandemic, burnout prevalence ranged from 25% to 60%, with PTSD-like symptoms affecting up to 68% of staff.[25-31]

Neurobiological Mechanisms: Sleep fragmentation was found to impair prefrontal regulation of stress responses. Chronotype mismatch (e.g., morning types working night shifts) was a predictor for elevated cortisol and burnout.[32-37] Table 2 synthesizes the identified neurobiological pathways linking sleep loss to resilience outcomes.

Table 2: Neurobiological Mechanisms Linking Sleep and Resilience.

Mechanism	Evidence Summary	Representative References
HPA-axis dysregulation	Elevated evening cortisol, flattened diurnal rhythm	10, 11, 36
Melatonin suppression due to night work	Reduced secretion, delayed sleep onset	10, 12, 13
Prefrontal–limbic imbalance	Impaired emotion regulation, increased reactivity	32, 33
Inflammatory activation	↑ IL-6, TNF-α correlated with stress indices	37

Interventions

Individual Level: Interventions targeting the individual level primarily focused on biological regulation and psychological coping. Bright-light therapy was found to significantly improve sleep efficiency and alertness among nurses. Psychosocial interventions also proved effective;

mindfulness programs reduced burnout (Cohen's d = –0.58) and enhanced resilience, while cognitive-behavioral therapy for insomnia (CBT-I) yielded moderate to large effects on sleep latency and efficiency.[38-42]

Organizational Level: Structural reforms demonstrated substantial impacts on workforce well-being. Shift scheduling adjustments, specifically forward-rotating shifts, lowered sleep complaints by 35%, and limiting consecutive night shifts to a maximum of three was associated with improved recovery. Broader multi-component wellness programs produced large, sustained reductions in burnout. Furthermore, environmental measures, including the installation of circadian lighting, designated rest areas, and noise control protocols, were effective in enhancing alertness.[43-49]

A summary of effective multi-level interventions, ranging from individual bright-light therapy to organizational shift-rotation reforms, is detailed in Table 3.

Table 3: Summary of Effective Multi-Level Interventions.

Level	Intervention	Reported Outcome	Key References
Individual	Bright-light therapy	↑ Sleep efficiency, ↓ sleepiness	38, 39
Individual	Mindfulness-based training	↓ Burnout, ↑ resilience	40, 41
Individual	CBT-I (shift-adapted)	Improved sleep latency, mood	42
Organizational	Forward-rotating shifts, ≤ 3 nights	↓ Fatigue, ↑ recovery	43, 44
Organizational	Multi-component wellness programs	Sustained burnout reduction	45–47
Environmental	Circadian lighting, rest zones, noise control	↑ Alertness, ↓ errors	48–50

Technological Innovations: Emerging technologies offer novel avenues for supporting workforce resilience. Digital health platforms, wearable biometric sensors, and virtual reality (VR) mindfulness tools have demonstrated both feasibility and high acceptability among mental health staff. These innovations suggest a shift towards personalized, data-driven approaches to monitoring and managing occupational stress in real-time.[50-52]

International Context: Cross-national comparisons reveal significant systemic disparities in nurse well-being. Comparative research indicates that burnout rates are notably lower in Nordic healthcare systems, which are characterized by strictly regulated rest periods and mandated staffing ratios. Additionally, cultural orientation—specifically the distinction between

collectivist and individualist societal frameworks—was found to influence both the subjective perception of stress and the willingness to engage with resilience interventions.[53-56]

Discussion:

This review identifies that psychiatric nurses face an intertwined triad of disturbed sleep, emotional dysregulation, and occupational stress that heightens fatigue and burnout risk. While previous reviews have established high rates of burnout in general nursing populations (e.g., medical-surgical units), our findings highlight a vulnerability specific to psychiatric nursing: the bidirectional relationship between sleep fragmentation and the intense emotional labor required for crisis management. As hypothesized in the Neuro-circadian Disruption Framework, the bidirectional relationships between circadian rhythmicity, emotional processing, and occupational stress form a reinforcing cycle of vulnerability (Figure 2).

The Neuro-circadian Disruption Framework: Unlike general studies that often treat sleep and stress as separate variables, our synthesis supports the Neuro-circadian Disruption Framework. This model suggests that biological rhythm misalignment fundamentally erodes the cognitive reserves needed for emotional regulation. As illustrated in Figure 2, the relationships between circadian rhythmicity, emotional processing, and occupational stress form a self-perpetuating cycle of vulnerability.

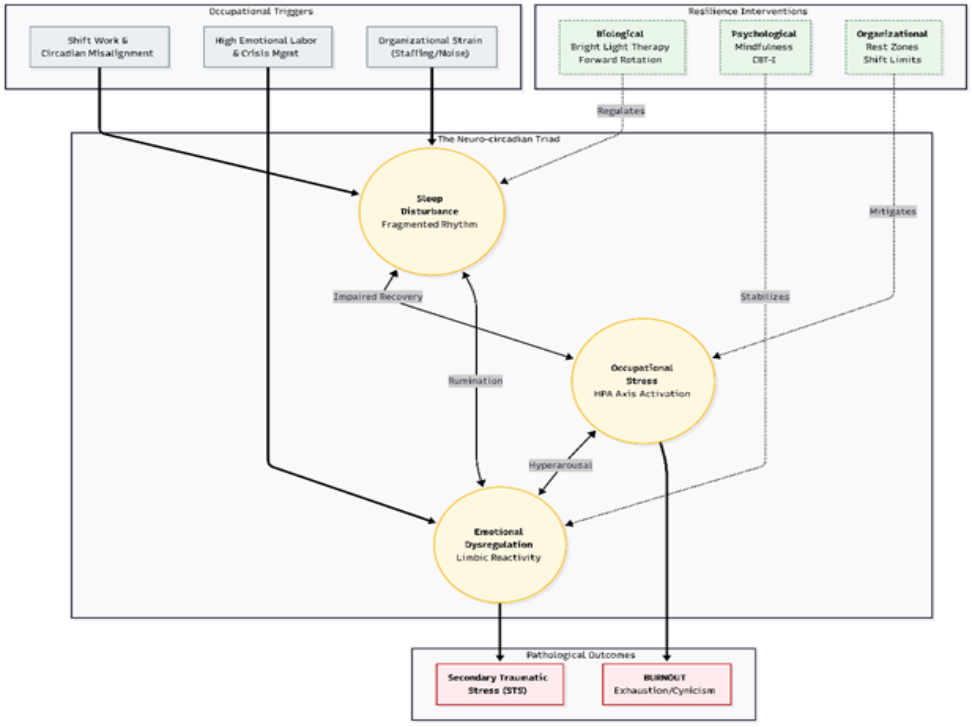


Figure 2: The Neuro-circadian Disruption Framework .

Our analysis confirms that neuro-circadian imbalance may erode therapeutic engagement, heightening vulnerability to compassion fatigue. This aligns with recent findings on workforce wellness but emphasizes that traditional initiatives focused solely on self-care are insufficient. Instead, evidence supports occupational health resilience as a dynamic interaction between personal adaptability and organizational context.[57-59]

Conclusions:

Neuro-circadian disruption, emotional dysregulation, and occupational stress constitute a self-perpetuating cycle that undermines psychiatric nurses' well-being and performance. Evidence supports a multilevel intervention model combining circadian aligned scheduling, mindfulness, cognitive behavioral approaches, and organizational reform. Sustaining this critical workforce demands urgent translation of neuroscientific and psychosocial knowledge into practice and policy. A culture that values recovery, emotional safety, and biological rhythm alignment is essential to safeguard the resilience of psychiatric nursing worldwide.

Implications for Practice: The findings of this review underscore the necessity of translating neuro-circadian principles into clinical operations. To mitigate biological rhythm disruption, healthcare administrators should implement circadian-informed scheduling practices, specifically utilize forward-rotating rosters and limit the number of consecutive night shifts. At the environmental level, psychiatric wards require redesigning to include dedicated rest spaces, low-noise zones, and adaptive lighting systems to support staff recovery. Furthermore, targeted interventions such as workplace bright-light therapy for nocturnal staff and scalable mindfulness or CBT-based programs should be made accessible to enhance individual resilience. Finally, to ensure early identification of at-risk staff, routine screening for sleep quality and occupational stress should be embedded into standard occupational health assessments.

Policy Implications: At the regulatory level, there is an urgent need to develop national occupational health standards specifically tailored to the unique demands of psychiatric nursing. Policymakers should enforce evidence-based regulations regarding rest periods and shift limits to prevent chronic fatigue. Additionally, to prepare the future workforce, educational bodies must integrate comprehensive content on resilience, sleep health, and stress management into both undergraduate nursing curricula and continuing education frameworks.

Research Gaps and Future Directions:

To advance the field beyond current cross-sectional associations, future investigations should employ longitudinal designs to establish causality between sleep disruption and emotional dysregulation. There is also a critical need for studies utilizing neurobiological biomarkers and implementation science to evaluate the long-term sustainability of interventions. Moreover, the integration of wearable sensors and ecological momentary assessment methods offers a promising avenue to clarify the precise temporal dynamics of sleep-stress interactions in real-world clinical settings.

Ethical Considerations: This review analyzed previously published data; ethical approval and informed consent were not required.

Funding: No specific funding was received for this study.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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