“Psychiatric/mental health nursing” or “psychiatric-mental health nursing”? 

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COMMENTS, CRITIQUE, AND INSPIRATION

“Psychiatric/Mental Health Nursing” or “Psychiatric-Mental Health Nursing”?

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What is the correct way to represent our specialty in writing? Is it “Psychiatric/mental health nursing” or “psychiatric-mental health nursing”? When I have discussed this issue with colleagues, their responses have been varied—some use the slash and others use the hyphen. I have used both the slash and the hyphen at various times, but why? I have not had a rational, well thought out reason for choosing one instead of the other. Is one way better? In this column, I reason this through and suggest a “final” answer to this question. I believe that this is important because of the power of language to shape our thinking and understanding. For the purpose of this column, I will assume that we should keep both “psychiatric” and “mental health” in our specialty’s title, for now, although I think that this could be debatable.

Let me start with a review of grammar and punctuation related to the phrases “psychiatric/mental health nursing” and “psychiatric-mental health nursing.” The only visible difference in the two phrases is the punctuation—the slash or the hyphen. The slash, or virgule, is punctuation that is used between two alternatives, to represent “or” or “and/or.” The slash may also represent “and,” for example, “Minneapolis/St. Paul” (Word FAQs, n.d.). Some writers suggest writing out the missing words in the place of a slash that “is hard on the eye” (Trask, 1997, para. 4). According to Lynch (2008), author of The English Language: A User’s Guide, “slashes are far too common, and almost always betray a lazy thinker: by yoking two words together with a slash, the writer tells us the words are related, but he or she doesn’t know how.” (para. 42) Lynch suggests using “and” or “or” in place of the slash. When we write out “psychiatric/mental health nursing” do we mean “psychiatric or mental health nursing” or “psychiatric and mental health nursing”? I suppose that it could be either/or.

According to The Oxford Compact English Dictionary (Soanes, 2003), a hyphen is “used to join words to indicate that they have a combined meaning or that they are grammatically linked.” (para. 2) Its origin is from the Greek word “huphen,” which means “together.” When we use a hyphen in the phrase to describe our specialty we are saying that “psychiatric” and “mental health” is together (or related) but different in some way or ways. Do “psychiatric” and “mental health,” when used together, have a combined meaning that is different from either one when used alone? According to The Blue Book of Grammar and Punctuation (Straus, 2008), one should “hyphenate between two or more adjectives when they come before a noun and act as a single idea.” (para. 4) This rule about when to hyphenate between nouns supports the use of a hyphen in “psychiatric-mental health nursing” because “nursing” is a noun and since “psychiatric” and “mental health” are adjectives, which are used together to modify the noun “nursing.” (“Mental health” is not an adjective; however, when it is used before a noun that it modifies [“nursing”], it is used as one.)

A review of how our nursing associations, specialty organizations, and scholarly journals refer to our specialty—“psychiatric/mental health nursing” or “psychiatric-mental health nursing” or other—reveals no one, common way. The American Psychiatric Nurses Association’s (APNA) website uses “psychiatric mental health nursing”—no punctuation in the phrase—in its byline and some text on the home page (APNA, 2010), however, other text on the home page refers to “psychiatric nursing” and “psychiatric-mental health nursing.” (para. 1) The International Society of Psychiatric-Mental Health Nurses (ISPN, 2010) uses a hyphen in the name of the organization and in most of the website content. The certification for our specialty on the American Nurses Association’s American Nurses Credentialing Center’s (ANCC) website, is “psychiatric & mental health nursing” (ANCC, 2010). However, the
certification review manuals that are advertised on the ANCC website, use the hyphenated version—“psychiatric-mental health nursing.” A sample review of the name of our journals reveals equal differences in how our specialty is represented—Issues in Mental Health Nursing, Archives of Psychiatric Nursing, Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing, International Journal of Mental Health Nursing, Journal of Psychosocial Nursing and Mental Health Services, Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing, Perspectives in Psychiatric Care, and the Journal of the American Psychiatric Nurses Association. (I am not suggesting that we rename our specialty organizations or our journals.)

Do these various descriptive forms affect our understanding of our specialty? “Psychiatric” (or psychiatry) and “mental health” have distinctly different meanings. “Psychiatry” is a medical specialty concerned with “the prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of mental, addictive, and emotional disorders such as schizophrenia and other psychotic disorders, mood disorders, anxiety disorders, substance-related disorders, sexual and gender identity disorders, and adjustment disorders” (American Medical Association, 2010, para. 9). More simply put, psychiatry is a “branch of medicine that deals with mental, emotional, or behavioral disorders” (Merriam-Webster, 2010, para. 6). “Mental health,” as defined by the World Health Organization (2007), is “a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stress of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community” (p. 1).

After my brief review of grammar, punctuation, definitions, and some current uses of ways our specialty is represented, and my belief that language is important because it affects how we and others view our specialty, my conclusions are that we should continue to use both “psychiatric” and “mental health” to name our specialty, since our specialty includes both basic and advanced practice roles, and because the use of both terms gives a wider, more comprehensive view of what psychiatric and mental health nurses do. I propose that we should link these words with either an “and” or a hyphen – “psychiatric and mental health nursing” or “psychiatric-mental health nursing.”

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**REFERENCES**


