

Practice Directive

Performing a Psycho-social Intervention

College of Registered Nurses and
Midwives of Prince Edward Island

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Practice Directives set out requirements related to specific aspects of nursing practice and provide more information related to the Regulated Health Professions Act (RHPA), regulations, Standards of Practice, Code of Ethics, and other relevant legislation.

This practice directive will define the expectations for nurses as they relate to psycho-social interventions. A psycho-social intervention is a non-pharmacological maneuver that is intended to alter a client's reaction or environment in order to lessen the impact of a mental disorder (College of Registered Psychiatric Nurses of Manitoba, 2022).

In Prince Edward Island's RHPA, Registered Psychiatric Nurses (RPNs) and Nurse Practitioners (NPs) have the reserved activity (f) – “performing a psycho-social intervention with an expectation of modifying a substantial disorder of thought, mood, perception, orientation, or memory that grossly impairs judgment, behavior, the capacity to recognize reality or the ability to meet the ordinary demands of life” (Government of Prince Edward Island, 2023). Registered Nurses (RNs) do not have this reserved activity.

A substantial disorder seriously impairs the person's judgment, behavior, capacity to recognize reality or ability to meet the demands of everyday life (College of Nurses of Ontario, 2022).

This practice directive will discuss the types of psycho-social interventions that are considered to be a reserved activity and those that are not. This is dependent on the client's symptom severity, the expectation of psycho-social interventions and the depth of therapeutic relationship between the client and nurse. Discussing with a client about emotional, social, educational, or spiritual matters is not considered to be a reserved activity. As the degree of the client's symptom severity and the depth of the therapeutic relationship increases, the discussion then transitions toward a psycho-social intervention reserved activity (College of Registered Psychiatric Nurses of Manitoba, 2022).

Differences between RPNs and RNs

There are similarities between a RPN and a RN but there are also differences. The RN is educated in nursing and the RPN is educated in psychiatric nursing.

The RHPA defines psychiatric nursing as “the health profession in which a person applies specialized and evidence-based knowledge of psychiatric nursing theory and health and human sciences, skills and judgment in providing services to another person, including

- i. the promotion of mental health,
- ii. the prevention, management and treatment of mental illness or developmental challenges,
- iii. the assistance of individuals, families, groups and communities to achieve an optimal state of health, and
- iv. the research, education, management or administrative activities incidental to performing the services referred to in subclauses i to iii.

The RHPA defines nursing as “the health profession in which a person applies specialized and evidence-based knowledge of nursing theory and health and human sciences, skills and judgment in providing professional services to another person, including

- i. the promotion, maintenance and restoration of health, and
- ii. the prevention, treatment and palliation of illness and injury, primarily by

- a. assessing health status,
 - b. planning, implementing and evaluating interventions, and
 - c. coordinating health services, and
- iii. the research, education, management or administrative activities incidental to performing the services referred to in subclauses i to ii.

(Government of Prince Edward Island, 2025)

When is a psycho-social intervention not a reserved activity?

The psycho-social intervention is not considered to be a reserved activity when it carries low risk to the safety of clients and does not intend to treat an underlying condition or disorder. These can be performed by RNs, NPs, and RPNs.

Performing a psycho-social intervention for a client whose disorder is not substantial is not considered to be a reserved activity. The client does not exhibit symptoms that would grossly impair their ability to meet the ordinary demands of life. Judgment, behavior, mood, perception, orientation and memory are intact, and the client maintains insight and good judgment about the nature of their issues. In these situations, the nurse has no intent of treating an underlying condition. The nurse may counsel, guide and provide advice to the client through various lifestyle choices, phase of development, assisting with basic problem solving, promoting access to resources, educate about a disorder or illness, promote healthy living and to provide ongoing support (College of Registered Psychiatric Nurses of Manitoba, 2022).

There are some situations when the client may have a substantial disorder, but the nurse may be able to perform a psycho-social intervention and it is not a reserved activity. This is when there is no intent to treat an underlying condition. The focus is on assisting the client to function more resourcefully with the condition, not on treating the underlying disorder (Government of Alberta, 2014). As when a client does not have a substantial disorder the nurse may counsel, guide and provide advice to the client through various lifestyle choices and phases of development (College of Registered Psychiatric Nurses of Manitoba, 2022).

If the client's condition becomes more serious and unstable, the intervention can transition into a reserved activity. This is why nurses must remain aware at all times of the intervention they are providing, the depth and breadth of the relationship with the client, the acuity of the disorder, and the client's ability to cope. Collaboration with other health care providers is always recommended, especially when there is a risk of harm based on the intervention being provided and the nurse should be aware of when they need to refer to a more experienced health care professional (College of Registered Psychiatric Nurses of Manitoba, 2022).

When is a psycho-social intervention a reserved activity?

A psycho-social intervention is a reserved activity when the disorder is substantial, and the client is currently experiencing gross impairments. The psycho-social intervention is targeted to treat the grossly impaired substantial mental health disorder and not focused on assisting the client to function more resourcefully with the condition (Alberta College of Social Workers, 2025; Government of Alberta, 2014). Extensive psychiatric assessment and evaluation are required prior to initiating the psycho-social intervention

Only RPNs and NPs are able to perform this reserved activity; RNs are not.

What is required to perform a psycho-social intervention when it is a reserved activity?

- Be authorized by the RHPA to perform this reserved activity. Only RPNs and NPs are authorized; RNs are not.
- An established therapeutic nurse-client relationship.
- Have the appropriate knowledge and skill to perform the activity. The RPN and NP need to critically self-reflect to understand where there may be gaps in their own education, assess the needs of the population they serve, assess their own clinical experience, and take measures to address any gaps they identify. This may be done through continuing education, formal or informal education opportunities, and collaboration with other health care professionals. The RPN or NP must also have the appropriate clinical experience. This does not prevent newer nurses or recent graduates from performing a psycho-social intervention; however, the RPN or NP needs to critically self-reflect on their own clinical experience in providing services to the clients they work with in practice. For example, if the nurse was providing a psycho-social intervention to a child or adolescent, it would be expected they have the appropriate education and experience to treat a child or adolescent.
- Knowledge, skills and judgment to assess and understand when the disorder is substantial, severe, or grossly limits the client's ability to meet the ordinary demands of life
- Knowledge, skills and judgment to assess and understand what type of therapeutic intervention is appropriate and how to use it in the context of the treatment; and
- Collaboration with other regulated health professionals who are authorized to perform the reserved activity of a psycho-social intervention. RPNs and NPs are expected to make referrals to other regulated healthcare providers when the care required is beyond their scope of practice or expertise.

(College of Registered Psychiatric Nurses of Manitoba, 2022)

The Nurse – Client Relationship

At the core of nursing is the therapeutic nurse-client relationship between the client and the nurse. Nurses recognize that trust, respect and empathy must always be present in this established relationship as part of providing client-centered care. Nurses teach, support, or counsel clients and their families in many ways. While these interventions are provided in the context of the nurse-client relationship, the relationship is often time-limited or episodic in nature and does not meet the depth and breadth of the therapeutic relationship required to perform the reserved activity of a psycho-social intervention.

Conclusion

All nurses perform psycho-social interventions as part of their everyday practice. These interventions can be as simple as working with a client to promote lifestyle changes (eg: smoking cessation) or maybe as complex as exposure therapy for clients suffering from post-traumatic

stress disorder (PTSD). However, the point at which the psycho-social intervention becomes a reserved activity is when the nurse intends to treat, alter, modify or change an underlying condition and the client exhibits symptoms that would grossly impair their ability to meet the ordinary demands of life (College of Registered Psychiatric Nurses of Manitoba, 2022).

References

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