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A qualitative research exploring clinical nurses' experience with nurse employee assistance program promoted by hospitals in China

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Abstract

Background The shortage of nurses and the prevalence of psychological issues pose significant challenges in the healthcare industry. To address these concerns, hospitals have implemented various effective mental health prevention and assistance programs for nurses. Nurse Employee Assistance Programs (NEAPs) are among the most popular psychological support initiatives for healthcare professionals. This qualitative research aims to provide a comprehensive description of the experiences, attitudes, and evaluations of nurses participating in NEAPs, to establish strategies for better implementation of these programs.

Methods This study adopted an explorative and descriptive qualitative design involving 15 Chinese nurses. A purpose sampling method was used to recruit clinical nurses who participated in nurse EAPs of their hospitals. Data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis.

Results A total of four themes were identified: (i) the aims of participating in NEAPs; (ii) personal growth and changes following NEAP participation; (iii) the most impactful activities within NEAPs; and (iv) recommendations for improving NEAPs. The primary motivation for nurses to participate in NEAPs was the need to alleviate stress and seek solutions to problems. Feedback from nurses in NEAPs positively influenced their thinking from various perspectives and enhanced effective communication with patients. These participants suggested additional themes regarding NEAPs and advocated for their broader adoption among clinical nurses.

Conclusions This study is the first to explore the experiences of Chinese nurses participating in NEAPs. The findings reveal that these nurses developed effective coping strategies through their involvement in NEAPs, underscoring the potential benefits of such programs in enhancing professional resilience and well-being. Furthermore, there is a clear need to improve the themes of NEAPs and to promote their broader adoption among clinical nurses.

Clinical trial number Not applicable.

Keywords NEAPs, Clinical nurses, Qualitative research, Mental health, Pressure

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Introduction

The global nursing workforce faces escalating psychological stressors due to aging populations, shifting disease burdens, and public health crises [1]. Epidemiological data from 23 provinces and 5 autonomous regions in China indicate prevalence rates of anxiety, depressive symptoms, and burnout among clinical nurses at 31%, 48%, and 69% respectively [2]. These conditions threaten patient safety via increased medical errors and exacerbate nursing shortages driven by high turnover rates [3, 4]. Such evidence underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions to safeguard nurses' mental well-being.

Globally, Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) have gained recognition as effective human resource strategies to enhance employee well-being [5]. Between 2010 and 2019, over 24,000 EAPs were delivered across 28 countries through external vendors and internal programs [6]. Workplace counseling through EAPs correlates with improvements in presenteeism, absenteeism, workplace distress, and job satisfaction [7]. Nurse Employee Assistance Programs (NEAPs), as profession-specific adaptations of EAPs, must address nurses' unique occupational challenges. Unlike generic EAPs, NEAPs require specialized strategies to mitigate stressors such as emotional labor from patient interactions, circadian rhythm disruptions due to shift work, and exposure to biological hazards and workplace violence [8]. These unique demands require NEAPs to incorporate trauma-informed counseling and flexible scheduling support, distinguishing them from general EAPs that predominantly focus on work-life balance. NEAPs are among the most widely recognized psychological support systems for healthcare professionals [9], with nurses demonstrating willingness to engage in these programs [7]. Current hospital-based NEAP implementations, including peer support initiatives and formal mentoring [10, 11], have shown efficacy in reducing anxiety, depression, and burnout while enhancing job satisfaction and care quality [12, 13].

The implementation of NEAPs diverges markedly between Western and Chinese contexts, due to cultural values and institutional structural factors [14]. In Western healthcare systems, NEAPs often prioritize individualized psychotherapy and union-led individualistic rights advocacy. Chinese trade unions focus predominantly on hospital productivity and welfare rather than employee rights advocacy. In Chinese hospitals, NEAPs are mostly dominated by national policies, emphasizing collective resilience through group activities and integration with traditional family values. And in the implementation of NEAPs, Chinese NEAPs predominantly adopt in-house or hybrid models managed by hospitals, with limited involvement of external professional teams [14].

Despite over two decades of EAPs development in China, the implementation remains limited, with only

10% of organizations adopting such programs [15]. In the medical field, although the Chinese Hospital EAP Alliance was established in 2016 to promote EAPs adoption in Chinese hospitals [16], NEAPs remain underutilized with 85.4% of nurses reporting no prior awareness of EAPs, and only 28.6% of those aware have participated [17, 18]. These findings highlight systemic barriers to engagement, necessitating further exploration of contextual challenges. Moreover, existing literature lacks robust evidence on nurses' firsthand experiences with NEAPs, particularly within the Chinese socio-cultural framework.

To address this gap, this qualitative study investigates Chinese nurses' experiences with NEAPs through four objectives: (1) identifying motivations for participation; (2) evaluating perceived personal growth/changes post-intervention; (3) assessing the effectiveness of program components; (4) soliciting recommendations for improvement. By synthesizing participants' perspectives, this study aims to propose strategies for optimizing NEAPs in alignment with the Chinese cultural context and the demands of the nursing profession.

Methods

Study design and participants

This study adopted a descriptive qualitative study to investigate and understand the experience of participating in NEAPs from the views of clinical nurses, providing an overview of the effectiveness of NEAPs in China. All the process in our study was guided by Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) [19]. This design is well-suited for studying an area where little is known. It allows for the exploration of participants' subjective experiences and perceptions of NEAPs, which cannot be captured by validated scales. We applied Colaizzi's seven-step method to extract, organize, and analyze the data. Colaizzi's strategy was an effective way to identify important statements from the transcribed data and create meaningful interpretations. Compared to other methods, such as Braun & Clarke's thematic analysis, Colaizzi's seven-step method focuses more on the deeper "essence" of experiences rather than patterns in data and has been shown to be rigorous and robust [20].

Setting and participants

The research sites were selected from the seven tertiary hospitals in China that have been sponsored by the same Chinese internal EAP service company (WeGo Management School) since 2019. We employed a purposeful snowball sampling method to recruit our participants. This project is supported by the Talent Exchange Service Center of the National Health Commission. The researchers contacted WeGo Management School and obtained the list of directors from pilot hospitals

currently implementing NEAPs in China. We sent interview invitations to nurses who met the inclusion criteria.

The purpose and significance of the study were communicated to the NEAPs directors at these pilot hospitals. Participants for this study were recommended by the NEAPs directors at the pilot hospitals. Some participants were introduced to our research after previous interviewees from the same hospital. The inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) Nurses who participated in any form of NEAPs; (2) Nurses who were permanently assigned to a specific department, and not undergoing rotations; (3) Nurses who were fluent in Mandarin-speaking. We excluded those who refused inform consent, or had cognitive impairments or severe psychological distress, or could not clearly remember their NEAPs experiences. We invited eligible nurses for interviews, but some withdrew from the study due to unclear recollection of their experiences with NEAPs, while other invited nurses declined participation citing limited understanding of NEAPs. The final sample size was determined when no new information emerged during interviews [21].

NEAPs

The NEAPs were initiated by the Talent Exchange Service Center of the National Health Commission to enhance nurses' sense of belonging and achievement, boost their enthusiasm for work, and improve the quality of nursing services. The WeGo Management School, designated as a partner by the Talent Exchange Service Center, is responsible for delivering a 6-month project-based training program for NEAPs service personnel selected by experimental hospitals. The training covers topics including implementation strategies, themes, communication skills, and crisis management. Upon

successful completion of the program, NEAP service personnel become eligible to commence their duties at their hospitals. Due to variations in schedules between the WeGo Management School and the hospitals, the timing of NEAP service personnel receive their course certificates differs, leading to varying start times for the NEAPs across hospitals.

The NEAPs team consists of 8 to 16 service personnel, depending on the number of clinical nurses in the selected hospital. The team typically includes nurses certified in national psychological counseling, psychiatrists, and administrative personnel specializing in social welfare. The overall project adopted a Chinese internal NEAPs service provider and includes three components: compulsory course, Balint group, and reading club. The NEAPs program offers services to all nurses within the selected hospital from the Talent Exchange Service Center of the National Health Commission. NEAPs will be scheduled based on the NEAPs implementation timeline in each selected hospital. Nurses interested in participating in any of NEAPs must register at least three days in advance by submitting their selected program and preferred participation time to the designated NEAPs email within the hospital.

The compulsory courses, led by NEAPs service personnel, focus on enhancing nurses' physical and mental well-being. The sessions include thematic content analysis, case-based group discussions, and group presentations. Each session accommodates up to 30–40 participants, divided into four to six groups for discussion and engagement (Table 1; Fig. 1).

Members of the reading club are permitted to select any book from the designated reading list. Each book is allocated a reading period of two weeks. A one-hour

Table 1 Standardized schedules for NEAP

Component	Items/ Book	Duration/1 lesson (45 min)
Compulsory course	Relief from work-related stress	3 lessons
	Effective interpersonal communication	3 lessons
	Maintenance and management of family relationships	3 lessons
	Growing Pains: Children's Education	3 lessons
The Balint group	The challenging nurse-patient relationship	2 lessons
	Events that have provoked strong emotional reactions in the past	3 lessons
	Patients who evoke a sense of helplessness among healthcare professionals	3 lessons
	Instances of discomfort from nurse leaders	2 lessons
	Escalated conflicts among colleagues (nurses/doctors)	2 lessons
The reading club	Intimate Relationships by Rowland S. Miller	1-1.5 lessons
	Nonviolent Communication by Marshall B. Rosenberg	
	Stress management for wellness by Walt Schafer	
	Feeling good: the new mood therapy by David Burns	
	The Inner Game of Tennis by Timothy Gallwey	
	A coach's guide to powerful asking skill by Tony Stoltzfus	
	Psychology and Life by Richard J. Gerrig	
	Managing Stress: Principles and Strategies for Health and Well-Being by Brian Luke Seaward	

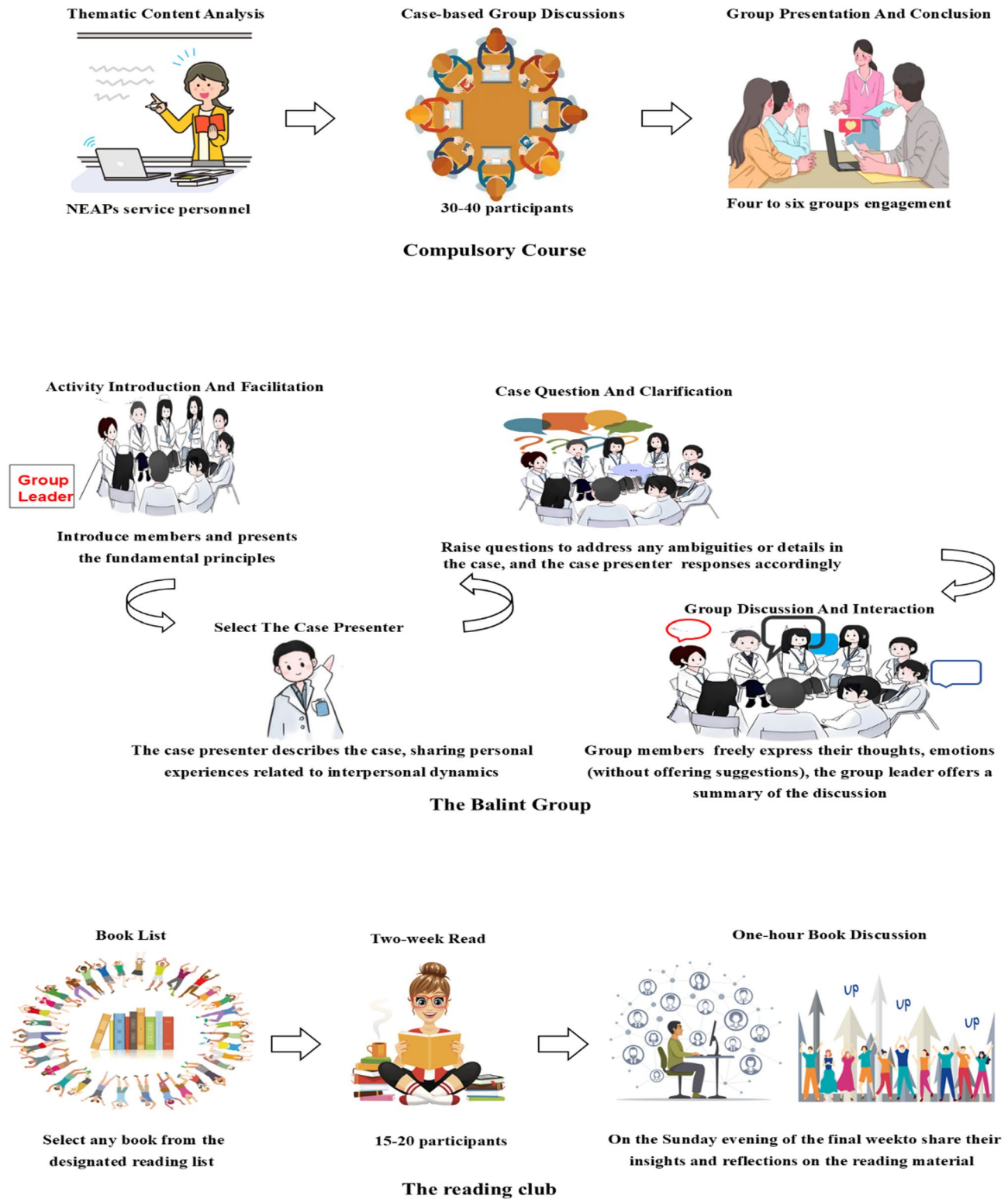


Fig. 1 The Process of NEAPs

discussion session will be held on the final Sunday evening, where participants are encouraged to share their insights and reflections (Table 1; Fig. 1).

The Balint group comprises five structured sessions, each featuring case presenters selected based on pre-defined objectives and thematic focus areas. Through facilitated discussions, role-playing exercises, and reflective feedback sessions, participants are encouraged to share their experiences, emotions, and perspectives, fostering deeper interpersonal understanding and professional insight (Table 1; Fig. 1).

Data collection process

In-depth and semi-structured interviews were conducted from January to March 2023 among clinical nurses participating NEAPs. The research team consists of four clinical nurses with master's degrees, two clinical nursing specialists who focus on mental health care, and one nursing expert researching qualitative study. Two pretest interviews and two discussions were performed with the research team and the final version of the interview outline was validated (Table 2). During the interview, the following dimensions were covered in the interview outline: experience of participating NEAPs, Attitude towards NEAPs, and Evaluation of NEAPs.

Before conducting interviews, each potential participant would receive an email attached to a file that explains the research aim, research procedure, research informed consent statement. The sociodemographic characteristics of each participant including gender, age, education, professional titles, hospital work experience, and the location of the hospital were collected. All participants in our study were guaranteed privacy and confidentiality. The face-to-face online interviews were individually conducted via WeChat or Tencent Meeting, with two members of the research team who received qualitative research courses (L. T and SY. L). SY. L hold the whole interviews and L.T was responsible

for recording, and taking notes. All the interviews lasted from 46 min to 73 min. The interview would cease until no more new information emerged.

Data analysis

The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbally by two researchers (YJ. W and SY. Y). Following Colaizzi's 7-step method, we used the NVivo 12.0 software to analyze and integrate the data. First, two researchers carefully listened to all audio recordings and repeatedly read the transcripts to develop an initial understanding of the research subjects. Second, we extracted significant statements related to our study's aim from all transcripts. Third, meaning units were formulated by summarizing, extracting, and coding the extracted data from recurring information. Fourth, all meaning units were assembled into clusters of themes after identifying common concepts and gathering coded perspectives. Fifth, each theme was described with detailed and non-exhaustive statements. Sixth, we consolidated similar thematic prototypes and their descriptions through iterative comparisons, extracting analogous ideas, and constructing concise and cohesive phrases known as themes. We then compared all similar themes to synthesize a fundamental structure of the phenomenon. Finally, we returned the developed thematic structure to the participants for verification to ensure the accuracy of the results. Each interview was transcribed in full within 24 h of completion. To ensure reliability among coders, the coders compared their initial codes and discussed any discrepancies until agreement was reached. The research team were then reviewed the final codes to check for accuracy and consistency. Interview transcripts were returned to participants for their comments and/or corrections to verify the content's accuracy. All data were securely stored in the researcher's locked office and protected by password-encrypted computer files to ensure confidentiality. Data saturation was reached when no new themes emerged from the meaningful data extracted during the analysis. We ultimately recruited fifteen nurses, all of whom provided informed consent and voluntarily participated in this study.

Rigour

We implemented multiple strategies to uphold the rigor of this study. The researchers conducting data collection during interviews had no prior interaction with the participants and recorded their statements, expressions, and tone. Data analysis was independently performed by two experienced qualitative researchers (YJ. W and SY. Y), with any discrepancies resolved by a third investigator (SY. L). The interpretation of each participant's responses was obtained through repeated analysis of marked units. Furthermore, researchers engaged in self-reflexivity using

Table 2 Interview outline

Section	Guiding questions
A	Experience of participating NEAPs
B	Attitude towards NEAPs
C	Evaluation of NEAPs

1. What motivates you to participate in NEAPs?
2. How do NEAPs help you with solving your problem in terms of some services such as Balint Groups, and the reading club?
3. Have you ever gained any improvements after participating NEAPs?
4. Which form of NEAPs is most impressive or helpful? Could you give more details?
1. When you encounter difficulties next time, would you request for NEAPs?
2. Is it necessary to popularize NEAPs in China in the future? Could you share your opinions?
1. Do you think any contents should be added to the NEAPs?
2. Are there any suggestions for NEAPs?

Table 3 Characteristics of the participants

Number	Gender	Age	Marital status	Hospital location	Start of participating in NEAPs	Year of ward experience
1	Female	34	Married	Jiangsu	2019	11
2	Female	39	Married	Jiangsu	2018	14
3	Female	35	Married	Jiangsu	2019	11
4	Female	41	Married	Henan	2019	17
5	Female	28	Single	Henan	2020	3
6	Female	35	Married	Hunan	2019	10
7	Female	32	Single	Hunan	2020	10
8	Female	48	Married	Zhejiang	2019	28
9	Female	33	Married	Zhejiang	2020	13
10	Female	48	Married	Heilongjiang	2020	30
11	Female	46	Married	Heilongjiang	2019	28
12	Female	32	Married	Jiangsu	2020	10
13	Female	29	Single	Jiangsu	2021	7
14	Female	55	Married	Hubei	2021	36
15	Male	42	Married	Zhejiang	2021	20

Table 4 Clinical nurses' experience of participating in NEAPs in China

Themes	Subthemes
The aim of participating in NEAPs	Need for releasing pressure Request for solving problems Interested in psychology
Personal growth/changes after participating in NEAPs	Thinking from various perspectives Effective communication with patients
The most impression activity form of NEAPs	Reading club Balint group
Recommendations for NEAPs improvements	Enrich more themes of NEAPs Popularize NEAPs for more clinical nurses Venue support from hospitals

notes in NVivo 12.0 software to mitigate the impact of preconceptions.

Ethical considerations

The ethical approval of this study was obtained from the Medical Ethics Committee of the research site (TJ-IRB20230385). Before all the interviews, all participants were informed of the study aim, study details, and voluntary participation verbally or literately and signed an electronic consent form through WeChat or email.

Results

A total of 15 clinical nurses from seven tertiary hospitals in China which experimenting NEAPs currently were enrolled in our study. The working year of these participants (one male and fourteen female) ranged from 3 years to 36 years. Four domain themes and related sub-themes emerged from interviews with nurses experiencing NEAP (Tables 3 and 4).

The aim of participating in NEAPs

The aim of participating in NEAPs varies from nurse to nurse and includes three subthemes: “need for releasing

pressure”, “request for solving problems”, and “interested in psychology.”

Need for releasing pressure

Most nurses claimed that NEAPs were good opportunities to tell about their pressure from overwhelmed workload, complicated family relationships, confused career planning because they felt comfortable and safe in that situation. One participant stated, “*It is happy to find people who have the same pressure from work, family in NEAPs, you can speak out what you undergo and finally someone can understand you.*” (N2) Another expressed, “*NEAPs are free for me to complain the difficulties I met recently, the terrible future I have, the intense relationship with my boyfriend. More importantly, nobody judges what you said is wrong or right.*” (N7).

Request for solving problems

The majority of nurses believed that they could seek help from psychological counselors and peers from NEAPs. Participants described that they gained power and enlightenment from Balint groups, psychological counseling, and solution-focused brief therapy. One participant pointed out, “*I used to be troubled by sleep disorder frequently, but when I join the Balint groups members in this group tell me how they solve it. I am deeply influenced by their attitude towards life. I try to exercise more against anxiety about night shifts and find it surprisingly worked.*” (N15).

The NEAPs would offer some psychological counseling such as mindfulness-based stress reduction, and Sandplay therapy rather than psychotherapy for nurses who need mental support. In addition, the psychological counselor and psychologist in NEAPs also conduct overall psychological assessments and recommend suitable programs for nurses requesting to solve problems.

One participant stated, *"There are a lot of themes including work-family balance, career development, intimate relationship establishment in NEAPs. I can participate in the themes what I want to solve."* (N4) Another nurse said, *"Depression and failure to work always haunt me as a postpartum nurse returning to work. At that time, my head nurse encouraged me to join the NEAPs, and maybe someone there could guide me to be out of the dilemma."* (N12).

Interested in psychology

With heavy disease burden and work overload, patients and nurses are experiencing increased pressure. Some participants were gratified that the NEAPs equipped them with the basic knowledge of psychology to provide mental care for their colleagues and patients. One nurse said: *"It is few opportunities for me to get access to psychology especially since the national psychological counselor exam has been canceled since 2017. When I hear that some psychological counselors are in NEAPs, I sign up for it at once. I wish that I could learn something and apply these therapies to my cancer patients."* (N11) Another nurse mentioned a story about the starfish, *"Although what I learn from NEAPs is not enough to work as an expert to help my colleagues and patients. Like the boy who saves the starfish at the seaside, people laugh at him that what he does is in vain because he can not save all the starfish. But the boy says firmly, 'Yes, I know, but every time I save a starfish, throw it into the ocean, this starfish cares and its fate changes.' No matter how much I gain from NEAPs, as long as I am willing to help, there will be at least one person being happy because of my efforts."* (N6).

Personal growth/changes after participating in NEAPs

The personal growth/changes after participating in NEAPs describe the characteristics of participants influenced by NEAPs, which mainly manifested as self-cognition, and behavior patterns. It comprised three sub-themes: thinking from various perspectives, effective communication with patients.

Thinking from various perspectives

From NEAPs, participants improved their awareness of self-reflection and learned to think from different cultures and backgrounds. At each Balint group activity, one person is encouraged to share his/her problems related to the theme, members and the mentor in this group would assist the person in analyzing the nature of the problem. One nurse said, *"Something bad has hurt me for many years and is like a needle stabbing my heart. When I share this terrible memory in the Balint group, almost all members and the mentor comfort me and would recreate the scene to simulate the conflict while I am just the*

bystander in that situation. They teach me there are many ways to solve a problem, depending on where you look at it." (N10) Following the principle of thinking from various perspectives in NEAPs, some participants reported that they more easily maintained stable moods towards a wide range of patients. One nurse stated, *"Since I participate in NEAPs, my world has started to change that I find more approaches, more ideas to solve problems. Besides, switching thinking also brings me a very different emotion."* (N3). The aim of NEAPs in China mainly focuses on the control of negative thinking among nurses and improvements in physical, and emotional well-being. Most participants stated that they gained power from the NEAPs and used positive thinking to cope with stressful events more effectively. Nurses with frequent positive thinking would show a positive attitude towards life, increasing joy of life across the lifespan. One nurse said, *"Faced with all kinds of patients, I become more sensitive to my family when they feel uncomfortable because one relative of mine was diagnosed with cancer. I am afraid that one day my family will all pass away and only me live in the world. So I decide to attend NEAPs to change my bad emotions. I begin to try meditation, mindfulness thinking, and yoga to isolate those negative emotions after work. And on days off I would do something I love such as cooking, painting, and running to enjoy every day"* (N9) Another nurse emphasized that, *"I recognize the essential role of nurse to myself, patients after experiencing NEAPs. As a nurse manager, the intensive workload and shortage of labor made me tired and doubtful about my career future. The mentors from NEAPs helped me recall the smiles of recovery patients, the mutual help from my colleagues, and the praise from physicians."* (N10).

Effective communication with patients

Before NEAPs were introduced, nurses often experienced fatigue from communicating with difficult patients. The content of communication in NEAPs is very rich, making nurses easy to absorb and put into practice. Some participants described that a series of lectures and practical sessions gave them insight into successful nursing decision making, nursing care, disease education, and risk prevention. One nurse expressed, *"I gradually overcome my worry of causing conflicts and started giving detailed health education with elderly patients."* (N5) Another nurse said, *"As a nurse with over 20 years of work experience, I used the same way to talk with each patient. But when I take the communication training from NEAPs, I learn to improve my communication skills in expressing empathy and eliciting patient expectations, and concerns."* (N8).

The most impression activity in NEAPs

Participants were impressed by many activity forms of NEAPs, but the most frequently mentioned activity forms from all interviews were reading club and Balint group.

Reading club

Reading club is an online activity of NEAPs in that the mentor divides the whole book into several sections and assigns these sections to different participants, all the participants would read their sections at the stipulated time and share their opinions in reading club. Most participants enjoy discussions about the book's morals. One nurse stated, *"I prefer reading club. The mentor in the reading club would recommend a reading list covering psychology, communication, intimacy, etc., which encourages me to read and take notes of something I am interested in. The sharing moments in the reading club gave me a new perception of this book and draw inspiration from each other."* (N14).

Balint group

Almost every participant who joined the Balint group claimed that the theme of Balint group could integrate common problems into multiple solutions and enable self-improvement. Some nurses stated that the Balint group with a specific theme was usually held in the hospital once a week, participants could select some themes that they were in demand such as stress management, work-family balance, and interpersonal relationships. One nurse said, *"It is happy to sit there with all group members and the mentor, like a family. About the specific themes, sometimes I could benefit from others' experiences and my opinions could help them in the Balint group. In that group, I am proud that I gradually achieved self-growth and self-value."* (N13).

Recommendations for NEAPs improvements

The recommendations for NEAPs improvements theme consisted of three sub-themes including enriching more themes of NEAPs, popularizing NEAPs for more clinical nurses, and venue support from hospitals.

Enrich more themes of NEAPs

The themes of NEAPs mainly focus on stress management, effective communication, mindfulness meditation, interpersonal relationships which are extracted from literature review and society surveys about nurses. Some nurses wished that more themes designed for nurses of different ages could be added to the NEAPs. Nurses raising children need more instructions to get along with adolescents, while young nurses seek some approaches to broaden their career development. One nurse said, *"To be honest, I like the themes of NEAPs but more are related to*

my work. Except for troubles from work, I am also dealing with some family issues, particularly how to raise my child." (N12) Another nurse stated, *"The theme of NEAPs could combine more clinical cases with career development. Some theories seem more unrealistic and difficult to understand especially for us with less than 10-year work experience. We know the traditional career planning, but we are at a time of fast development in technology. There may be something new career path for clinical nurses that we want to know."* (N15).

Popularize NEAPs for more clinical nurses

Most nurses after participating in NEAPs believed that more clinical nurses should get involved in these programs and recognize themselves because some nurses said they did not know NEAPs until they were referred to these programs. Some nurses reported that they were recommended to this program by their head nurse because they were too busy to notice the notification on the office automation platform. One nurse said, *"I almost spend the whole day time on my hospital work. I seldom notice the notification on my Office Automation Platform."* (N6) Another nurse claimed, *"Even though some nurses know NEAPs, they still do not believe the programs could help them solve problems due to the privacy and professionalism."* (N9).

Venue support from hospitals

Some participants in this study advocated that a private room is necessary for Chinese NEAPs. A few hospitals in China would provide the auditorium as a venue setting, however, this place is not suitable to perform Balint groups, and team-building activities without facilities. One participant took an example: *"The nurses with mental problems are usually sensitive. The larger the room is, the more unsafety they feel."* (N9) Some nurses participating in NEAPs complained that some assistance services of NEAPs were temporarily canceled because the venue was occupied for academic conferences. One nurse stated, *"There was usually once a week that we are informed that the activities are put off because of venue. We feel sorry about the fact as we ask for a special day leave to participate...(sign...)"* (N1).

Discussion

This qualitative study included 15 clinical nurses who have once sought help from NEAP services, and most of them considered NEAP as an effective way to improve mental health. Nurses in this study shared their personal experiences and reported the most valuable activity in NEAPs. Although the NEAPs services had a positive impact on nurses' pressure, problem-solving solutions, and self-promotion, some directions were also proposed for delivering optimal NEAPs services in China.

The aim of participating in NEAPs

In China, occupational stress is a major mental problem among nurses, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Chinese nurses were exposed to long work shifts, infection risk, and isolation loneliness [22]. In accordance with previous studies, NEAPs in our study were applied as psychosocial interventions to decrease the negative effect of stress on nurses, which are generated from EAPs. Interventions from EAP are targeted at structuring work demands to reduce pressure and improve work-life balance [23, 24]. The analysis of more than 24,000 total cases demonstrated that the impact of EAP in the workplace was found to enhance work presenteeism, work enthusiasm, and life satisfaction [22]. Similar positive outcomes of NEAP were proven in studies on nurses that NEAPs allowed nurses to decrease stress levels and improve overall well-being in individual counseling, Balint group, art music group, and pet therapy [5]. In addition, our study shed light on this difference from other studies on EAP and pointed out that self-enhancement of psychology is nurses' intention to participate in NEAPs, which is rarely reported in other research. As a growing demand for mental health services among patients, it is crucial to update the spiritual care competency of nurses including relevant training or programs.

Personal growth/changes after participating in NEAPs

We found personal changes after participating in NEAPs could be summarized into thinking perspective and communication skills. Some participants firmly noted that engaging in NEAPs could reduce their negative emotions and improve their attitudes towards lives. The purpose of EAPs establishment is to improve employee psychological health and well-being, highlighting the need, benefit, and value of rehabilitating employees rather than replacing them [25]. Previous studies have shown that EAPs helped employees adapt to their work with necessary work-related requirements, address mental health and wellness, and improve self-performance [5]. Other researchers also examined the benefits of EAP and reported that clients show significant improvements in emotional well-being after EAP intervention [26, 27]. A large-scale study on EAPs illustrates that workplace EAPs use is associated with increased work engagement, life satisfaction, and less negative emotion [28]. TSAI et al. identified EAPs positively moderated the relationship between COVID-19 induced stress and family work conflict by evoking employees' sense of self-source [29]. The feedback from participating in EAPs enabled employees to gain insights into their values towards life, difficulties, and work, which supports employees in achieving self-growth and self-recognition.

The most impression activity form of NEAPs

Nurses in this study participated in various activities such as Balint group, reading club, and group lectures according to their own needs. Nurses regarded Balint group as one of the most impressive activities. Balint group can provide nurses with different perspectives to help nurses understand their current difficulties, ease interpersonal conflicts in life and work, reduce psychological pressure, and improve nurses' empathy, communication skills, and emotional intelligence [30]. Reading clubs are considered to be another useful service. Reading psychology-related books together and sharing post-reading insights can help nurses open their minds. However, some nurses interviewed said that many of the books currently read are English translations, and there are cultural differences, resulting in certain difficulties in understanding. Differing from NEAPs in China, international EAPs offer a wider range of activities, such as webinars and workshops focused on well-being and mental health, as well as sponsored counseling services [22]. In some corporations, these services are also made available to employees' family members to help address family or relationship issues [6]. Additionally, supervisors are encouraged to participate in workplace mediation, facilitation, and counseling in order to contribute to the development of organizational policies and procedures [31].

Our participants mentioned that some services from NEAPs such as Balint group and reading club provided coaching to manage their negative emotions and critical thinking of workplace problems. According to previous research, when EAP counseling is provided with adherence to basic quality standards, the results are usually positive [32]. However, at present, the standards for the application of EAP in Chinese nurses, like how to carry out the service, what kind of service content should be implemented, and how to evaluate the service effect, have not yet been formed.

Recommendations for NEAPs improvements

NEAPs provide valuable support for nurses' well-being [5, 33], but their utilization is often hindered by barriers such as limited awareness, time constraints, restricted access, and fears of job-related consequences [34, 35]. This study highlights key areas for improvement in nurse-specific NEAPs from personal, nurse administrators and hospital aspects.

Due to heavy workloads and frequent shifts, many nurses tend to neglect their cognitive and emotional needs, often disregarding available psychological support resources [35]. One study reported that 59% of nurses expressed skepticism regarding the confidentiality of counseling services, fearing that breaches in privacy could lead to professional bias or even the revocation of their licenses [28]. To overcome these barriers, increasing

awareness among clinical nurses about the availability and benefits of NEAPs is essential. Informational materials such as posters and promotional videos should be prominently displayed on the hospital's office automation system, computer screensavers, and notification bars to enhance visibility and reduce stigma. Furthermore, an annual psychological assessment should serve as an initial screening tool to identify nurses who may benefit from NEAPs. Based on the assessment results, nurse administrators can encourage those at high risk of psychological distress to participate in NEAPs, with the goal of promoting emotional well-being and alleviating stress. Participation may be further incentivized through hospital-organized outdoor excursions, which provide opportunities for nature engagement and relaxed NEAP-related activities—such as Balint groups—thereby supporting mental health in a more informal setting.

NEAPs should address nursing-specific challenges such as compassion fatigue, burnout, shift-related endocrine disorders, and depression resulting from adverse patient care outcomes. Tailoring program themes to these issues is essential for reducing stress and improving nurses' mental health. Furthermore, holidays such as Nurses' Day, Teachers' Day, International Women's Day, Mother's Day, and Father's Day can be leveraged to demonstrate institutional care and appreciation. Psychological intervention modules aligned with these themes can enhance communication among nurses, provide insights for the development of future NEAPs topics, and offer a natural platform for emotional expression—thereby reducing discomfort or stigma associated with participation in counseling sessions. Encouraging nurse administrators to engage in NEAPs can further promote the program's value, improve their understanding of workplace stressors, and contribute to the creation of a supportive, “magnetic” hospital environment. Additionally, the implementation of confidentiality agreements for participants can help address concerns regarding privacy and trust.

Previous research has shown that EAPs in the corporate sector typically categorize expenditures into fixed costs—such as venue rental, trainer fees, and event organization expenses—and variable costs, including employee salaries and training-related expenditures. The associated benefits are generally assessed using indicators such as employee productivity, performance, and efficiency. In contrast, Chinese hospitals operate as public-sector institutions, where the contributions of nursing staff may not be fully captured by traditional economic performance metrics. The implementation of NEAPs in China often depends on supplementary funding sources, including hospital union allocations, research grants aimed at promoting healthcare worker well-being, or voluntary faculty contributions. This financial dependency

limits the scope, thematic diversity, and logistical execution of NEAPs.

However, the 2021 policy document *Opinions on Promoting the High-Quality Development of Public Hospitals*, issued by the General Office of the State Council, emphasizes the importance of cultivating a high-quality organizational culture in public hospitals, prioritizing the physical and mental health of healthcare workers, and supporting the development of young medical professionals [36]. As a result, there has been a strategic shift toward enhancing the motivation, initiative, and creativity of healthcare staff.

Additionally, the *14th Five-Year Plan for Health Talent Development*, released by the National Health Commission in 2022, underscores the need to strengthen talent service capacity, optimize workforce structures, and improve talent management systems [37]. The plan also highlights occupational health monitoring and supervisory mechanisms as priority areas, thereby creating new opportunities for the reform and advancement of NEAP management.

Strength and limitation

This study's strengths lie in the significant positive feedback received from NEAP participants and related services. Nevertheless, the study has some limitations. First, the research subjects were exclusively selected from specific hospitals in China, which may constrain the generalizability of the findings. Second, the proposed management measures might not be applicable to broader populations without considering cultural differences. Third, the explanations from results might be participants were almost female because the proportion of male nurses in China only accounts for 3%. Besides, men rarely seek assistance when encountering stress or obstacles to prove brave and resolute. Despite these limitations, the study offers restricted valuable insights into nursing management practices. Future research should broaden the sample scope, employ mixed-methods integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches, and aim to produce more robust and generalizable results.

Conclusion

This qualitative study provides novel insights into the experiences of Chinese nurses engaging in NEAPs, highlighting their transformative potential in mitigating workplace stress and fostering professional resilience. The findings underscore that participation in NEAPs not only equips nurses with practical coping strategies to address psychological and occupational challenges but also enhances their communication skills, emotional well-being, and capacity for reflective practice. As a pioneering effort to investigate NEAP experiences among nurses in China, emphasizing the cultural and contextual

relevance of tailored mental health support in high-stress healthcare environments. The most frequently mentioned activity forms from all participants were the reading club and Balint group. While the positive outcomes reported by participants advocate for the expanded implementation of NEAPs across clinical settings, the study also reveals opportunities for program optimization, including diversifying intervention themes, integrating peer support mechanisms, and ensuring accessibility for a broader nurse population. Future research should prioritize longitudinal comparative analyses among different hospitals and cross-cultural evaluations to verify the universality of existing findings, explore the long-term sustainability of the results, and build scalable and evidence-based practice models for the well-being of nurses in global healthcare systems. Addressing these priorities will be essential to strengthening workforce retention and aligning institutional support with the complex psychosocial needs of frontline healthcare professionals.

Implications for NEAPs

In 2023, the National Health Commission and the National Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicine jointly launched the *Action Plan for Further Improving Nursing Services (2023–2025)*, which mandates medical institutions to reduce nurses' workloads and safeguard their legal rights [38]. However, variations in industry characteristics, organizational size, institutional culture, and budgetary constraints have hindered the effective implementation of NEAPs across China. Moreover, current policies lack clear definitions regarding the responsibilities of relevant departments tasked with implementing NEAPs within hospitals.

The International Employee Assistance Professionals Association, a globally recognized authority in the field, has established standardized EAP practices widely regarded as the most authoritative implementation guidelines. These provide valuable scientific and operational guidance for China. To advance the development of NEAPs, national policies should be further refined, with dedicated funding and research grants allocated to support program implementation. Hospitals should be encouraged to prioritize the training of career counselors and designate full-time staff to manage NEAPs effectively. Furthermore, enforcement mechanisms—such as annual reporting and periodic audits—should be strengthened to ensure policy compliance and program success.

Strengthening the leadership of Chinese hospital Party Committees and labor unions is critical to overseeing the physical and mental health of medical personnel. Hospital leaders, particularly those affiliated with Party Committees or labor unions, should be directly involved in managing nurses' well-being, supported by project teams responsible for implementing national policies and guidelines. Additionally, the promotional framework should be enhanced

by clarifying the roles of EAP health management teams, assigning dedicated personnel, and establishing systems for regular supervision, assessment, and evaluation of NEAPs effectiveness.

The limited professional qualifications of NEAPs service providers in China have impeded the adoption of international EAP models and best practices. It is recommended that the government take a more proactive role in fostering the development of NEAPs management institutions, leveraging their expertise to address the healthcare sector's specific needs. From an academic perspective, further research is needed to define professional qualifications and competency standards for NEAPs practitioners in Chinese hospitals. Existing training curricula should be improved by integrating practical exercises and supervisory components throughout the training process. Strengthening faculty evaluations and certification standards will be essential to ensure the continued advancement of NEAPs training tailored to the unique needs of China's healthcare system. Finally, integrating nurse mental and physical health management into continuing medical education—alongside EAP training—is essential. This initiative would not only enhance the overall competence of healthcare professionals but also support the development of a qualified workforce for the future expansion of NEAPs.

Author contributions

L. T and SY. Y were involved in the study design and performed data extraction. L. T, SY. Y and YJ. W collected the data. SY. Y and MF. Y contributed to the conceptualization of the study. L. T, JY. F and SY. Y drafted the manuscript, and Y. L revised it. All authors have approved the final version of the manuscript for publication.

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Data availability

The authors will supply the relevant data in response to reasonable requests.

Declarations

Ethical approval

The research followed the International Conference on Harmonization-Good Clinical Practice (ICH-GCP) and the Declaration of Helsinki. Ethical approval was obtained by the Medical Ethics Committee of Tongji Hospital affiliated with Tongji Medical College, Huazhong University of Science and Technology (TJ-IRB20230385).

Informed consent

Participants recruited in our research were informed and consensual. The purpose and process of this research were informed to all participants by e-mail or voice-call. All informed consent was acquired by electronic informed consent or recorded verbal informed consent. All informed consent materials could be available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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