

Frequent Visitors to School Nurses: Somatic Reasons for Visits and Common Interventions

We disclose the absence of personal financial relationships with commercial interests relevant to this educational activity within the past 12 months

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Background & Objective

The objective of this study was to examine interventions that school nurses use to assist frequent visitors in the health office and help them avoid absence by returning to the classroom.

Current literature describes a high prevalence of frequent visitors to the health office (Sweeney & Sweeney, 2000), with possibly millions of children affected across the US. Yet, information is scarce on effective interventions for school nurses to engage with students (Leaver, 2014).

Frequent Visitors

Five or more visits per year to the health office (Shannon, Bergren, Matthews, 2010)

Somatization

"The production of recurrent and multiple medical symptoms with no discernible organic cause" (Oxford Dictionary, 2017)

Method

We used a descriptive exploratory study design to assess interventions used in the school health office. A 10-question online survey with qualitative and quantitative questions was administered to public school nurses in the Metro-West region of Massachusetts, USA.

Results

170 nurses responded to the survey. Responses with fewer than 50% of questions completed were excluded. 158 responses were evaluated (Preschool: 14%, Elementary: 41%, Middle: 23%, High School: 22%). Respondents included an experienced cohort of school nurses, with 52% of respondents having 10+ years of experience. Nurses tending to preschoolers had the smallest share of students with somatization. The share of somatization was highest in nurses caring for high-school students.

Frequently Mentioned Symptoms (Counts)

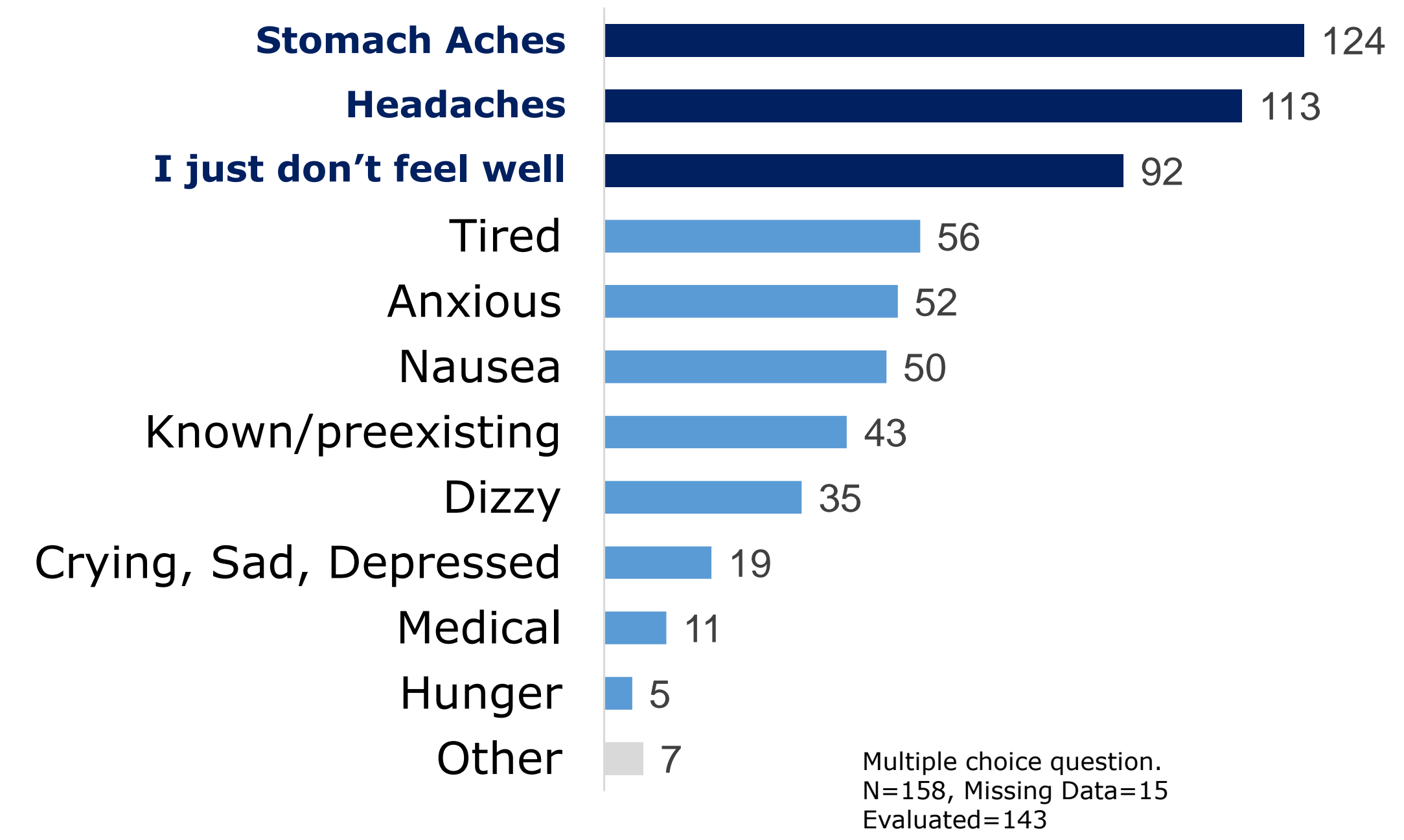


Figure 1: The most common symptoms of frequent visitors are unspecific, which is congruent with current research on somatization

Common Interventions (Counts)

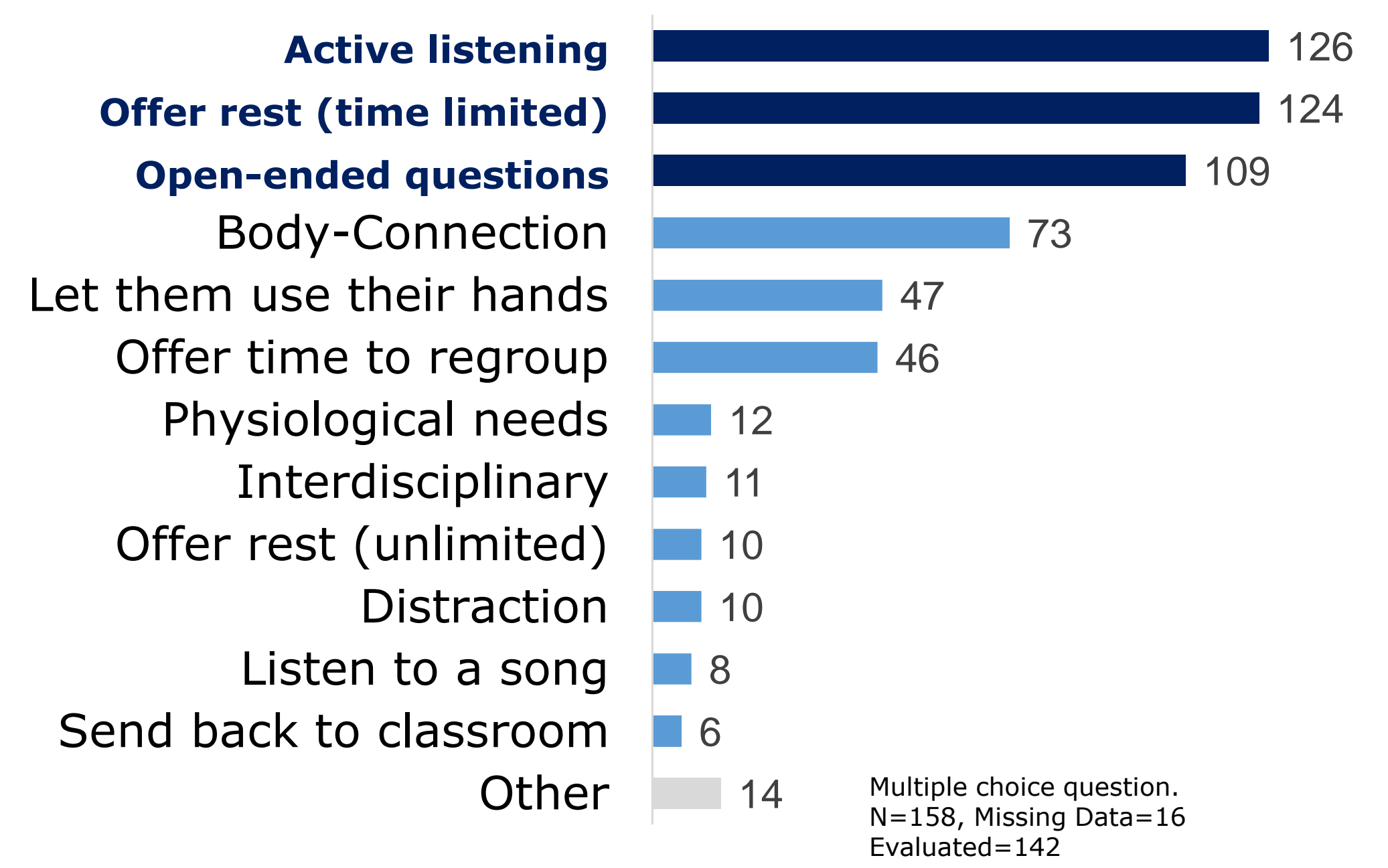


Figure 2: The top three interventions - after ruling out organic causes - were active listening, offering time-limited rest, and asking open-ended questions

Most Effective Interventions (Free-Text)

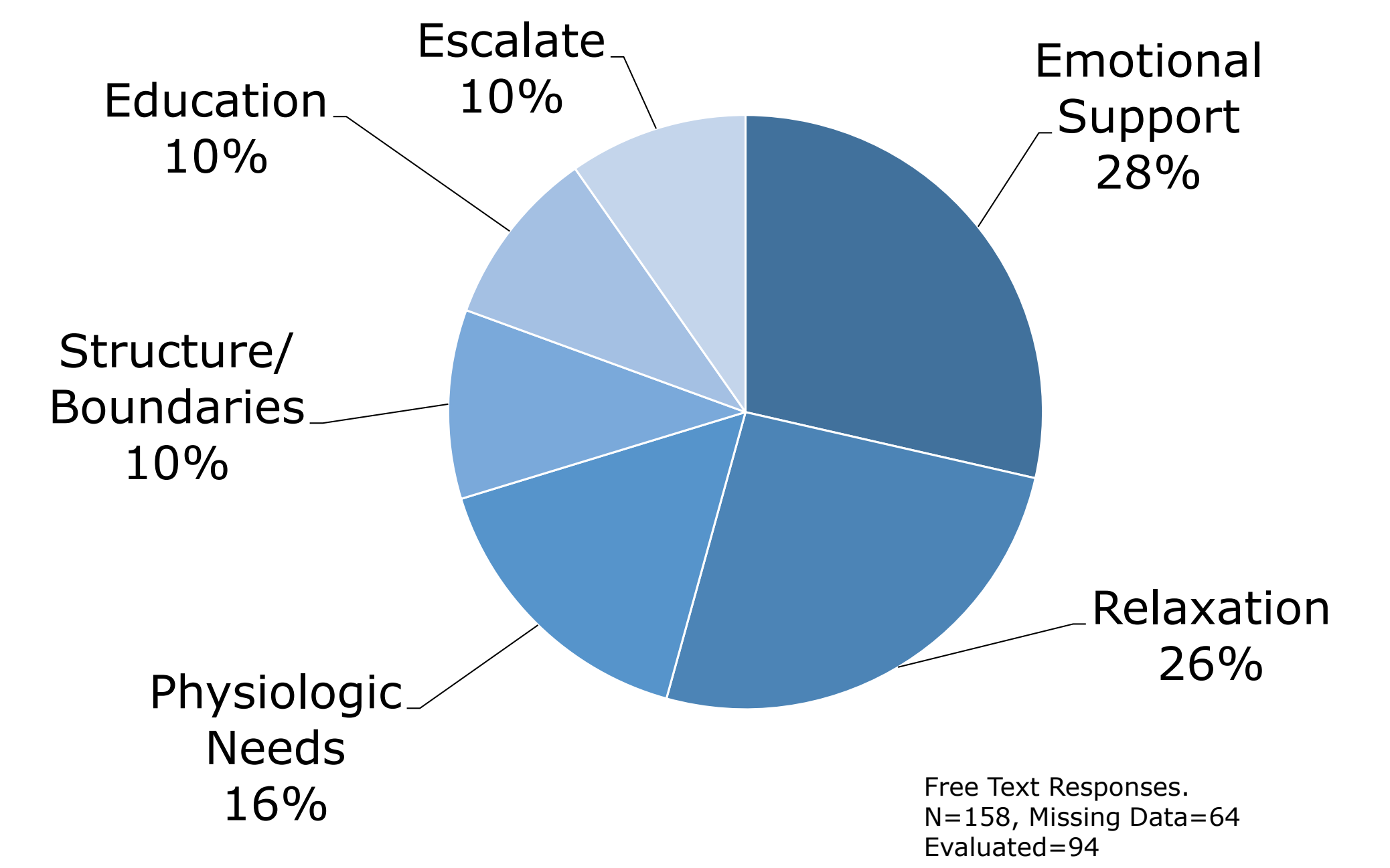


Figure 3: The most effective interventions, described by school nurses in their free-text responses, can be classified in 6 broader categories

Skills & Resources Nurses Wish They Had to Help Frequent Visitors (Counts)

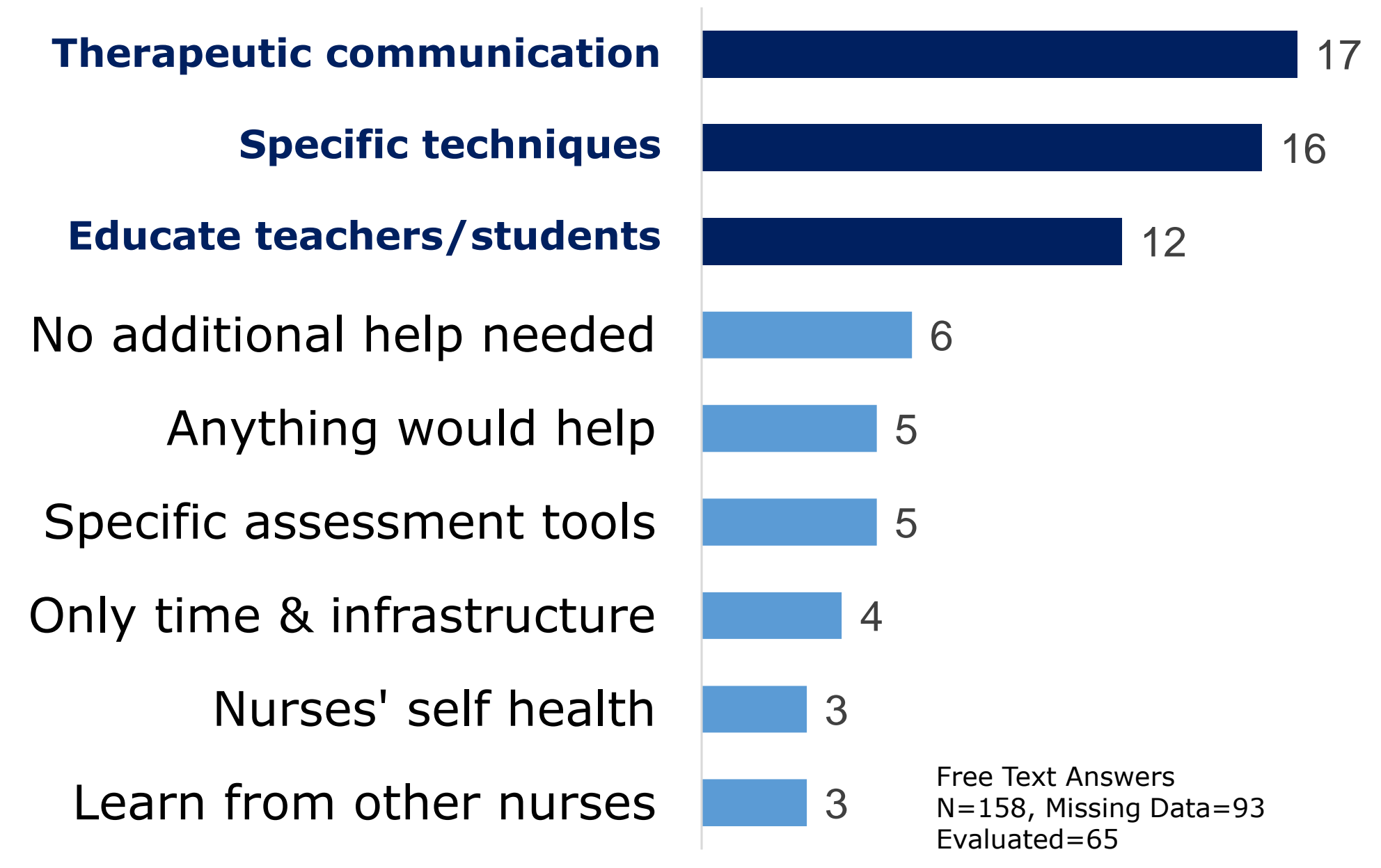


Figure 4: Nurses wished they had more training on therapeutic communication, which corresponds to the most effective intervention of emotional support (see Fig 3)

Conclusions & Discussion

- This study confirms that somatization is a frequent reason for visits to the health office in public schools, with greatest prevalence in high-school**
- School nurses use a range of interventions, foremost emotional support, relaxation, active listening, and offering time-limited rest**
- Nurses would like more training in therapeutic communication and specific tools for interventions**
- More research and an interdisciplinary approach is needed to fully understand the complexity of somatization in school-age children**
- Development of a standardized tool to evaluate frequent visitors would help streamline assessment, identify the underlying reason, and select a fitting intervention**
- The short-term target of interventions is to facilitate early return to the classroom**
- The long-term objective is to help students develop autonomous coping mechanisms**



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