

Stress among Nurses and its Management

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Abstract

It remains a fact of life for nurses that we will frequently encounter situations at work that are physically and emotionally demanding. We also know that chronic exposure to stress can sometimes have very real and significant implications for our health and wellbeing. While there are a number of mechanisms already in place to assist nurses, such as occupational health and safety and employee assistance programs, it is also important that every nurse has the awareness and skills to take care of their own mental health needs. One of the most significant risks nurses are exposed to in their work is stress. This article highlights some of the signs and symptoms that indicate when stress might be becoming a problem. It offers some skills and strategies to assist you to overcome some of the pressures associated with nursing work.

Keywords: Stress among nurses; Management of stress; Occupational health.

Introduction

It is widely recognized that nurses, like many others in the caring professions, have mastered the art of anticipating and attending to the physical and emotional needs of others. Unfortunately, nurses tend to forget how to take care of themselves and each other. While there is no doubt that nursing is a wonderful career with many challenges and intensely rewarding experiences, it is also a fact that in their daily work nurses confront emotional and professional demands that are unimaginable to the wider community. Let's face it: spending your working life taking responsibility for the quality of people's lives and their deaths is a heavy burden, even for the broadest of shoulders. Nurses have a habit of putting the needs of our patients ahead of our own. The community regards us as tough, able to cope in all situations, resilient, always caring, loyal to our patients, dedicated, committed, the list goes on. These expectations are put on us by society, managers, organisations and sometimes ourselves.

How do we as nurses react to these demands, what choices do we have and how do we put ourselves first? In the same way as mental health issues have struggled to make it on the broader social agenda, they are also struggling to make it on the agenda at work. The profession has made a lot of progress in managing many of the physical risks associated with our work: we use safe lifting techniques; we have adopted universal precautions and many other practices to ensure our physical safety at work. Unfortunately, we haven't made the same level of progress where hazards to our mental health are concerned. One of the most significant risks nurses are exposed to in their work is stress.

Inevitably nurses find themselves in situations where the source of their stress is difficult to eliminate, like finding that extra nurse to cover the shift, stopping that extra patient turning up on the ward, or not having enough experienced staff rostered on the shift. Frustrating as it may be, there are some sources of stress that we have limited ability to change, and this can lead to people feeling stressed, anxious, angry and depressed.

What is Stress

Essentially, stress is the emotional and physical response you experience when you perceive an

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imbalance between demands placed on you and your resources at a time when coping is important. What this means is that you experience stress whenever you are faced with an event or situation that you perceive as challenging to your ability to cope. If you see the event or situation as only mildly challenging, you will probably feel only a little stress; however, if you perceive the situation or event as threatening or overwhelming your coping abilities, you will probably feel a lot of stress. Importantly, your perception of how negative an outcome could be will significantly determine what degree of stress you experience.

Sign and Symptom of Stress

- Tiredness, fatigue, disrupted sleep patterns.
- Increased pulse rate and blood pressure.
- Shallow, rapid respirations.
- Muscular tension.
- Loss of appetite, overeating, indigestion.
- Constipation, diarrhoea.
- Dry mouth.
- Excessive perspiration, clamminess.
- Nausea.
- Decreased libido.
- Nail-biting.
- Increased use of alcohol or other drugs.
- Irritability and impatience.
- Frequent worry and anxiety.
- Moodiness, feeling sad or upset.
- Loss of sense of humour.
- Poor concentration, memory lapses.
- Ambivalence.
- Feeling overwhelmed by even minor problems.

The below mentioned *relaxation techniques* are simple, effective and helpful in managing anxiety levels,

Slow breathing technique

This is useful if you start to over breath and when you are feeling the first signs of anxiety or stress. You are required to do the following:

1. Stop what you are doing and sit down.
2. Hold your breath and count to 10.
3. When you count to 10 breathe out and say the word “relax” to yourself in a calm soothing manner.
4. Breathe in and out through your mouth, focus on your breathing. Breathe in for 3 second and out for 3 seconds. Repeat saying “relax” to yourself every time you breathe out.
5. At the end of each minute hold your breath for 10 seconds and then continue the 6-second breathing cycle.
6. Continue doing this breathing cycle until all of your symptoms of over breathing are gone and you feel relaxed and back in control.

Occupational health & safety

Nurses confront a range of occupational health and safety (OHS) risks in their roles providing care and comfort to the sick and aged. While much has been done to identify and control the physical risks associated with nursing work, such as manual handling, ergonomics, chemical and biological hazards, we have been less successful in recognizing the very real psychological risks encountered by nurses. There is a growing recognition among employers and many employees that the effects of the workplace stress that many nurses experience may constitute a mental or psychological disorder due to exposure to risks in the workplace.

Recent research statistics indicate that stress is among the most common workplace hazards for nurses, along with manual handling injuries, physical injuries from acts of aggression or violence and the consequences of chemical exposures.

At workplace Employers are required to:

- ensure the health, safety and welfare at work of all employees, and
- ensure that people (other than employees) are not exposed to risks to their health and safety arising from the employer’s activities.

This means that employers must:

- ensure that the work environment is safe
- provide and maintain safe systems of work, e.g.

work conditions

- ensure that everything used at the workplace is safe when used properly, eg equipment, chemicals
- provide information, instruction and training
- establish and maintain effective consultation
- provide supervision sufficient to ensure safety
- provide adequate facilities for the welfare of employees, eg toilets, facilities for hand washing and meal rooms
- provide for the safety of patients, visitors, sub-contractors and others who visit or work in the workplace.

Ten things every Nurse must do....

Try to:

1. Keep things in perspective, prioritize
2. Share your worries with family and friends
3. Increased knowledge helps to alleviate fears – clear up any misconceptions and give yourself the tools and resources to cope.
4. Don't be too hard on yourself
5. Worry does not solve anything, try to confront your problems and make plans to solve them.
6. Set realistic goals
7. Exercise regularly and eat healthily

8. Practice relaxation techniques
9. Have fun with your family and friends, think positive and enjoy new experiences
10. Remember: it is normal to have setbacks – they can be overcome.

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