

Combating stress

By Holly Carpenter, BSN, RN

Self-care and workplace solutions for nurses

NURSES KNOW STRESS—it seems like a defining characteristic of the profession. In a recent ANA Health Risk Appraisal survey of more than 10,000 RNs and nursing students, 82% identified stress as a top safety risk. Only 63% of the survey respondents reported usually or always receiving the emotional support they need, and 22% stated they had been diagnosed with anxiety by a healthcare provider.

What can stress do to the body? According to the National Institute of Mental Health, chronic stress can negatively impact your immune, digestive, and reproductive systems and disrupt sleep. Long-term stress has been linked to chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, hypertension, diabetes, depression, and anxiety.

Stress relievers

While there are many stress-relieving strategies, including exercise, music, art, exploring nature, prayer, meditation, yoga, vacation, unplugging from electronic devices, essential oils, massage, and self-hypnosis, most aren't feasible in the nurse's work routine. However, self-care, including proper sleep, health care, nutrition, physical activity, and positive work-life balance, as well as receiving emotional support from family, friends, coworkers, support groups, and faith communities, are stress relievers every nurse should pursue.

Employers' role

Employers play a big part in decreasing nurses' stress. Employers need to ensure that nurses have the appropriate education, training, tools, and comfort level in all tasks related to their positions. To provide a safe and respectful workplace, employers should promote a Just Culture environment. Optimal staffing, appropriate safety devices, safety policies and procedures, reasonable workloads, and employer recognition and appreciation of nurses also are needed to assist in the less-stress journey. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration offers additional recommendations: job

stress education, collaborative staff meetings, counseling, group therapy if appropriate, immediate action on workplace bullying and incivility, relaxation exercises, biofeedback, flexible scheduling, and employee assistance programs.

Environmental factors

Workplace design can reduce stress, too. As Yolanda Keys, DHA, MSN, RN, NEA-BC, EDAC, president of the Nursing Institute for Healthcare Design, explained, "Exposure to daylight and views of nature have been found to be effective in reducing stress in both patients and caregivers." Keys also noted a simple action item that nurses and employers can do right away: improve unit organization. "When nurses have to travel to several places to gather supplies, they're exposed to increased physical stress from walking and psychological stress because they're trying to remember multiple items and dealing with interruptions as they walk from place to place. Reducing steps by ensuring needed linens and supplies are in functional areas is an easy fix." Keys added, "Nurses also benefit from having a peaceful place to get away, even if it's just for 10 to 15 minutes." These spaces should be dedicated to nurses and not serve as impromptu meeting rooms used by everyone.

Finally, when you're under stress, ANA and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention remind everyone to avoid the use of drugs and alcohol and to recognize when further help is needed. If stress becomes too much or if you're contemplating suicide, contact your healthcare provider immediately and call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK. ★

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Selected references

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