

Building personal resilience

Develop skills to overcome daily challenges and prepare for the future.

By Teresa M. Stephens, PhD, MSN, RN, CNE

AS A NEW RN, I was excited, hopeful, and passionate about entering the nursing workforce. I had performed well in my undergraduate program and I chose a job that took me away from my home, living alone for the first time. But it didn't take long to realize that the world of nursing wasn't what I experienced as a student. In fact, the realities of the profession hit hard during those first few months. I didn't receive subtle hints of a radically different culture, but rather, overt messages from

that the toxicity I left behind was present in my new workplace, too. One day, a young physician I had come to know and trust told me that I needed to "stop caring so much" or I'd "never survive." I reflected on this for several days and realized that I wasn't willing to sacrifice my personal values, morals, or ethics to just survive. In fact, I took it as a challenge and vowed to prove him (and others) wrong. I promised myself that I would one day make a difference for other new nurses

so that they wouldn't have to join the ranks of the distressed, cynical, and burned out.

That moment, over 30 years ago, was the beginning of my journey of self-reflection, personal transformation, and a commitment to help others claim their joy, unabashedly demonstrate compassion in all encounters, and have the courage to stand up and speak out against workplace injustice.

Why resilience?

Most of my career has been spent exploring the experiences of nursing students, new graduate nurses, and nursing professionals to learn how we can improve their ability to navigate the profession and healthcare environment. Through this process, I've come to focus my work on resilience, beginning with increasing personal resilience to survive and thrive as a professional nurse.

Resilience is a hot topic. It's widely defined and broadly described, but most agree that it's a positive attribute that's valuable during and after adversity, crisis, or transition. You may be familiar with an older description of resilience: The ability to bounce back, typically from a negative life event, so that you return to a previous state of being. However, most definitions now focus on positive growth or enhanced development that occurs in an individual, team, or system because of difficulties, rather than in spite of them. In other words, a positive change occurs as a result of adversity, leading us to



nurses at all levels, loudly welcoming me to the "real world." I left the job after 1 year because of the cumulative effects of transition stress, loneliness, incivility, and my own immature coping skills.

I returned home and took a job where I was sure I'd be welcomed with open arms because I'd worked there and spent many clinical hours as a student. I loved the work I was doing and believed I was making a difference in our patients' lives, but I soon realized

that the toxicity I left behind was present in my new workplace, too. One day, a young physician I had come to know and trust told me that I needed to "stop caring so much" or I'd "never survive." I reflected on this for several days and realized that I wasn't willing to sacrifice my personal values, morals, or ethics to just survive. In fact, I took it as a challenge and vowed to prove him (and others) wrong. I promised myself that I would one day make a difference for other new nurses

develop knowledge, skills, or attitudes that improve our ability to withstand future challenges, usually accompanied by an enhanced state of well-being.

Personal resilience, however, is not a panacea for all of the stressors and challenges we face. Bigger issues (including organizational climate and ineffective leadership) can lead to moral distress, burnout, and other negative outcomes, including nurse suicide. (See *The consequences of moral distress and burnout*.) These problems are pervasive within healthcare and are too big to place on individuals' shoulders. They require moral courage and collective action through the development of resilient teams.

Developing personal resilience

Personal resilience can be defined as an individual's use of personal protective factors (PPF) to navigate stressful situations or perceived adverse events to effectively cope and reach a higher level of well-being, while enhancing the ability to face future challenges. PPFs are behaviors or characteristics (coping skills)—such as hope, faith, optimism, self-awareness, flexibility, humor, social support, and perseverance—that help buffer the negative effects of stress. (See *What are your PPFs?*) Developing and enhancing our PPFs strengthens our efforts to successfully handle adversity and improve well-being. Resilience often results in personal growth that wouldn't have occurred without the adversity.

My desire to fully understand the concept of personal resilience led me to working with Holocaust survivors. These individuals have graciously welcomed me into their lives to share their stories of survival during one of history's darkest times. I'm grateful for their willingness to share the details of their lives in the ghettos and concentration camps and their experiences after the war. These individuals can be considered highly resilient because they demonstrate behaviors and attitudes that provide examples of the PPFs we want to develop in ourselves. These survivors' stories may be extreme examples of tragedy and adversity, but they can teach us how to change our own responses to stress and challenges.

The 4Ps of resilience

PPFs are our tools for facing adversity, so to strengthen our efforts, we want to develop and enhance those we lack. I like to use the example of stretching a thin rubber band as far as possible. When stretched to its maximum, the rubber band will break. However, when we add multiple rubber bands together, we're able to stretch them farther without breaking. The more PPFs we possess, the better prepared we are to handle life's challenges.

Through my research with Holocaust survivors and nurses, I've categorized the PPFs into four main themes:



The consequences of moral distress and burnout

Moral distress and burnout are common among nurses.

Moral distress occurs when we're expected to act in ways that go against our personal values, beliefs, morals, or ethics. Most frequently, these expectations come from rules, regulations, or authority figures that force us to choose between doing what's right and complying with the expectations of our role or job. When we're forced to choose policies over people, rules over relationships, and the corporate bottom line over compassion, we experience moral distress, which contributes to:

- burnout
- attrition
- negative health outcomes.

Burnout is characterized by cynicism, emotional exhaustion, and a lack of commitment to work. It's been identified as a public health crisis that dramatically reduces the quality and safety of patient care. The effects of burnout have been linked to increased:

- medical errors
- mortality rates
- medical malpractice
- healthcare-associated infections.

Burnout also can lead to decreased:

- patient satisfaction scores
- interprofessional teamwork
- nurses' job satisfaction
- employee effort and productivity.

The costs of burnout aren't restricted to the organization, but also impact many clinicians' personal lives, resulting in increased incidences of depression, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation.

What are your PPFs?

Personal protective factors (PPFs) are coping skills that help defend us against the effects of stress. Use this self-assessment to learn what PPFs you may need to strengthen or enhance.

PPF	Description and questions to consider
Competence	The knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to successfully perform a job or task. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do you feel you possess knowledge, skills, physical ability, and/or attitudes necessary to achieve your goals?
Faith/spirituality	A belief in God or a higher power that provides comfort, hope, and strength during times of stress or adversity. Faith and spirituality can promote/enhance other PPFs, such as optimism, hope, and effective coping. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do you believe in God or a higher power who provides comfort or peace during times of trouble?
Flexibility	A willingness to change. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are you adaptable to change? Are you cooperative, agreeable, and/or tolerant? How do you respond when someone asks you to do something extra or change your plans? Are you able to adapt to changes in your expectations or plans, even when they're important to you?
Hope	Belief that something better is possible. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do you believe you can attain certain goals? Do you believe things are possible either through your actions or through factors not under your control?
Humor	Prevents us from taking things so seriously, enhances our coping abilities, and reduces the intensity of our emotional reaction to stress. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are you able to laugh at yourself?
Meaning in life	The ability to recognize a "purpose" or "meaning" in your experiences and the ability to identify your "why." <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do you strive to find meaning in your experiences? Do you feel you have a specific purpose in life? Are your decisions and actions guided by this purpose? Do you recognize that you have a responsibility to share your knowledge and skills with others? Do you seek to help others by sharing what you've learned through life experiences?
Optimism	Positive outlook and/or favorable belief about a future outcome. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do you try to keep things in perspective to see the best and/or possibilities for improvement in every situation? Do you expect more good things to happen than bad?
Perseverance	Not easily discouraged by failure or barriers to success. You recognize the importance of continuing your efforts, especially if the outcome is related to your priorities or purpose. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do you feel that you can overcome life's circumstances or barriers and successfully achieve your goals?
Positive emotions	Approachable and supportive of others. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do you try to see the positive in most situations, even those that are disappointing? Do you avoid gossip and complaining?
Self-awareness	The ability to know yourself, monitor your emotions, and regulate your responses to others and situations. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are you aware of your own strengths and limitations? Do you carefully consider your responses to stressful situations? Are you open to considering others' views and/or criticisms? Do you seek ways to improve and learn from perceived failures? Are you willing to consider alternative points of view? Do you recognize risky behaviors or those that may negatively affect your health?
Self-efficacy	Confidence in your ability to perform a specific task in a particular situation. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do you believe you can achieve a desired goal if you "do what it takes"? Do you make the effort to "do what it takes" to achieve your goals?
Self-esteem/confidence	A positive belief in your own self-worth or value. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do you feel you're a person of worth? Do you recognize your good qualities and your growth in knowledge and skills? Are you able to recognize the areas in your life where you've shown improvement, development, or achievement?
Social support	Family, friends, or others to whom you can turn to in times of need. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do you feel you can rely on others to provide support for you? Are you close to your family? Do you have a strong and positive social support network beyond your family? Is there at least one caring adult in your life who provides you with the support you need?

Build resilience with the 4Ps

The 4Ps—priorities, purpose, perspective, and personal responsibility—are key to building resilience.

4Ps	Related PPFs	Self-assessment
Priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competence • Faith/spirituality • Humor • Optimism • Self-awareness • Social support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What matters to you? • How do you define “doing what is right”? • Does the way you spend your time and energy accurately reflect your priorities? If not, what’s taking their place?
Purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Faith/spirituality • Flexibility • Hope • Meaning in life • Optimism • Perseverance • Self-awareness • Self-esteem/confidence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why are you here? • Do you believe there’s a reason for everything that happens to you? • Do you seek to learn from failure, disappointment, or “bad” experiences?
Perspective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Faith/spirituality • Flexibility • Hope • Humor • Optimism • Perseverance • Positive emotions • Self-awareness • Self-efficacy • Social support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you strive to see the “bigger picture” when you’re faced with a difficult situation? • How do you remain informed? • Who/what do you consult before making decisions?
Personal responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competence • Flexibility • Optimism • Perseverance • Self-awareness • Self-efficacy • Self-esteem/confidence • Social support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you believe you’re accountable for your actions? • Do you consider the effects of your behavior on others when choosing your response to a situation? • Are you willing to “change your mind” or admit your mistakes for the good of your team or colleagues?

priorities, purpose, perspective, and personal responsibility (4Ps). Increasing personal resilience isn’t linear; rather, it’s a complex, dynamic developmental process that ebbs and flows depending on our life experiences, environment, personal health, and current emotional state. For this reason, I encourage you to approach this as a lifelong learning adventure. (See *Build resilience with the 4Ps.*)

Priorities. *What matters to you and why? What would you say are your top five priorities in life? Does the way you spend your time and energy accurately reflect these priorities?* For many, the answer to the last question is “no.” We frequently sacrifice our true priorities because of other demands on our time, especially those that are work-related. Unfortunately, if left unchecked, this can become routine, leaving us with a life that has little

time for what truly matters to us. It’s no wonder many nurses suffer from moral distress and burnout. Our primary sources of joy are missing from our lives. Awareness is the first step in reclaiming our priorities. Identifying them and recognizing the need to put them back into your routine is a big first step to increasing personal resilience.

Our priorities typically are based on our personal values, morals, and professional ethics. They aren’t related to our work/profession but include the people or things that matter most to us, such as our families, friends, and faith. Frequently, we sacrifice these to school or work, leaving us feeling empty, depressed, bitter, or angry. Resilient individuals tend to place great importance on what truly matters to them. We can follow their lead by strategically and intentionally devot-



Build a resilience plan

Use this tool to develop a plan for resilience that will help you overcome daily challenges and prepare you for what's to come.

Who am I?	Why am I here?	What do I need?	How will I do this?
Priorities (list your top 5)	Purpose	Goals	Actions
Examples: 1. Faith/spirituality 2. Family 3. Personal health 4. Job 5. Community service	Example: Big why: To positively influence and show love toward those I encounter.	Examples: Increase time spent in contemplation Increase quality time I spend each day with spouse and children Improve diet and exercise to lose 10 lbs Better manage work time to be more productive Prioritize volunteer and service commitments	Examples: Schedule 10 minutes twice a day to engage in contemplation. Put aside cell phone and other devices between 6 and 9 PM each evening. Schedule 30 to 45 minutes for walking each evening. Delegate tasks when appropriate. Choose two volunteer commitments and eliminate those that don't contribute to my personal and professional goals.

ing time and energy to our personal priorities. This requires a dedicated focus and commitment to letting go of some of the “noise” or extras that consume our thoughts, energy, and time. You can begin your journey to increased personal resilience by committing to devote time each day to what truly matters to you.

Purpose. Purpose goes hand-in-hand with our priorities, and highly resilient people recognize the meaning (purpose) in their experiences. Your purpose may be something big and overarching in your life that drives most of your behaviors—your “calling.” Not everyone identifies the big purpose, but we can all learn to recognize the meaning that exists in our struggles. Many people refer to this as “finding my why”: *Why am I here? What am I supposed to learn from this? How can this experience help others?*

Purpose also is helpful when making decisions, especially related to our jobs: *Who can benefit from my experiences or what I love to do? How can I use my talents and skills to help someone else? Can I fulfill my purpose here?*

Perspective. An informed perspective, especially in times of distress, is critical to resilience. Frequently, we

make poor decisions out of an emotional reaction that leads us into further despair. These reactions typically are based on limited information and a narrow perspective. To increase your resilience, strive for an informed perspective that's broad, diverse, and grounded in evidence. An informed perspective allows you to see the bigger picture, which enhances your decision-making abilities and avoids emotional reactions that may not be based on fact.

Specific steps to improve your perspective include seeking evidence through peer-reviewed resources, making sure you have a diverse network of peer support inside and outside of your organization, and taking time to pause and reflect before choosing a response. Developing an informed perspective requires humility, flexibility, a growth mindset, and self-awareness to recognize the learning and growth opportunities in perceived failures.

Personal responsibility. As nurses, we're responsible for maintaining our own personal health and sense of well-being. In fact, Provision 5 of the *Code of Ethics for Nurses with Interpretive Statements* specifically addresses this responsibility: “The nurse owes the same

duties to self as to others, including the responsibility to promote health and safety, preserve wholeness of character and integrity, maintain competence, and continue personal and professional growth.” Recognizing our humanity and imperfection is a sign of maturity and personal growth that strengthens our ability to acknowledge failure and increase our competence through teamwork, collaboration, and networking.

Personal responsibility also is about our ability to demonstrate moral courage in advocating for our patients, our colleagues, and ourselves. Moral courage is an antidote to moral distress, but it may require a collective approach—a team effort to face the fears that come with standing up and speaking out.

Putting it all together

Begin building resilience by identifying strategies that you can immediately begin to use in your daily life to strengthen your 4Ps. Complete a personal plan for increased resilience and then find an accountability partner who will commit to joining you. (See *Build a resilience plan*.) Personal resilience will serve you well when facing the expected challenges of healthcare, including death and dying, rapid change, and compassion fatigue. It also will enhance your overall well-being and ability to face future challenges. ★

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