



The pandemic and early career nurses

Find support, shape the profession via input, action.

DURING the peaks and valleys of the now 15-month COVID-19 pandemic, nurses remain the bedrock of competent care, enlightened public health activities, and credible education efforts. In this unprecedented time, nurses in all care settings—from academic medical centers and mass vaccination sites to critical access hospitals and long-term care facilities—have faced many common challenges. To the more than 110,000 who chronicled their experiences in the Pulse on the Nation's Nurses COVID-19 Survey Series (nursingworld.org/covid-19-survey-series-results) conducted by the American Nurses Foundation (the Foundation), I offer my heartfelt thanks. Your responses have been crucial in helping the American Nurses Association (ANA) and the Foundation understand these impacts and plan and advocate effectively on behalf of the nation's 4.2 million RNs.

Respondents identified many shared experiences, but early career nurses reported some particular pressure points. Across three of the seven surveys, nurses age 34 or younger relayed more pronounced concerns than others about the pandemic's toll on their well-being. Most in the One Year COVID-19 Impact Assessment Survey reported feeling exhausted (81%), overwhelmed (71%), or anxious and unable to relax (65%). In contrast, nurses 55 or older described some strains on their mental health, but less than half said they felt exhausted (47%), overwhelmed (37%), or anxious and unable to relax (30%).

Notably, 12% of nurses 34 or younger (versus 2% of those 55 or older) reported that they haven't sought professional mental health resources because they don't know where to access support. Adding to their personal stressors, nurses 34 or younger report more financial effects of the pandemic than those 55-plus.

I'm personally disheartened that as many as 13% of early career respondents said they were thinking of leaving the nursing profession within 6 months, driven largely by their feelings about the negative effects of work and inadequate staffing on their well-being.

The survey findings highlighted here underscore an urgency to make nursing practice more satisfying for our early career colleagues—not only during the pandemic but also over the long-term. The involvement of early career nurses in ANA and our constituent and state nurses associations matters greatly in realizing this, with up to 25% of newly minted nurses leaving their first position within 1 year and a cresting wave of retirements propelling a workforce shortage.

Mentorship, I believe, is an essential ingredient in nurturing professional success and happiness. The guiding influence of seasoned nurses certainly sustained me as I started my professional journey. Especially in this prolonged stressful event, calming gestures of support from veteran nurses could help early career nurses tap into the knowledge, skills, and resiliency they possess and build confidence. Nurses seeking insights and advice from those more experienced might consider enrolling in the ANA Mentorship Program.

Greater knowledge also can build confidence. To support RNs during the pandemic and throughout their careers, ANA and the Foundation have developed more than 50 videos in the COVID-19 Video Education Series—some as short as 5 minutes—available to members and non-members. Additionally, I encourage all nurses to explore the free mental health tools through the Well-Being Initiative (nursingworld.org/thewellbeinginitiative) launched by the Foundation. ANA members have provided crucial input and guidance in developing and evolving these and other resources.

Active participation by all of us—especially those starting their careers—is vital in championing each other and shaping the profession at this moment of crisis and well into the future.



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