

Leading with self-empathy

Self-empathy can help leaders find meaning and purpose during difficult times.

By Stephanie Nolan, DNP, MBA, RN, CPAN, NEA-BC



NURSE LEADERS are responsible for bringing out the best in others, and empathy has long been identified as one of the most important leadership skills for engaging performance and driving results. It ranks at the top of the list for what nurse leaders must get right. However, if empathy is mission critical to leadership, shouldn't self-empathy be our first step?

Self-empathy involves connecting with and listening to ourselves. It allows us to observe our inner experiences and assess our current emotional and mental state without judgment and with pure openness. Self-empathy involves asking ourselves in the moment, "What am I feeling?" and "What do I need?" so that we can be kinder to ourselves and others.

Essentially, self-empathy leads us to create presence, enhances our self-awareness, and allows us to focus on ourselves in the moment. It requires us to notice and recognize what's happening within ourselves so we can respond not just appropriately but authentically. Not only is self-empathy vital to who we are as leaders, but it's also an important precursor to self-compassion and mindfulness.

The relentless COVID-19 pandemic continues to cause emotional and physical exhaus-

tion. Nurse leaders guide teams with steadfast agility and empathy, but we aren't immune to these negative effects. Profoundly altered as a profession, individually and collectively, we still find ways to integrate our experiences during the pandemic and feel joy and grief side-by-side.

We frequently hear that to be healthy and happy we must strike a balance and build healthy habits. Habits, we're told, are one thing in our control, where subtle changes and small shifts can still have an impact. As we continue to reimagine and reinvest in our lives, practicing and developing the habit of self-empathy allows us to instill peace during times of uncertainty.

Uncertainty is a natural part of life, but it still makes us uncomfortable. However, it also offers an upside by keeping us open to change and enabling us to learn, adapt, and persevere. We can't predict the future, but uncertainty activates hope, which is always available. When nothing is certain, anything is possible. Life will be just as it is despite our protests.

Caring for our minds with self-empathy helps us accept the present moment so that we can welcome change with joy. Self-empathy also expands our awareness so we can find meaning and purpose even during difficult times.

Nurse leaders remain fierce and strong, and our collective passion burns bright. At work and in our personal lives we must commit to harnessing emotional honesty and transparency to support our best, most authentic selves. This requires taking time to check-in with ourselves and to give generously with empathy to ourselves and our feelings. We also need to give ourselves credit—we deserve grace and kindness. Through the pandemic crisis and other challenges, we couldn't have gotten this far without nurse leaders.

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Stephanie Nolan is associate chief nursing officer at Little Company of Mary San Pedro, Providence St. Joseph Health in Los Angeles, California, and an American Nurses Association member.