

Refueling the Heart: Emotional Intelligence and Self-Care in Nursing

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Let's face it: nursing is not for the faint of heart. Between 12-hour shifts, alarm fatigue, endless charting, and the occasional family member who thinks you're their personal concierge, nurses are asked to give a lot. And then give more. So, where do we go to refill the tank? Enter the dynamic duo: emotional intelligence and self-care—not just feel-good buzzwords, but critical survival skills that may potentially be the only formula to move from surviving to thriving for today's nurse.

At its core, emotional intelligence is the ability to recognize, understand, and manage our emotions and the emotions of others (Goleman, 1998). Think of it as the internal GPS that keeps us from flat-out yelling in the supply room when someone takes the last pair of medium gloves—again. Daniel Goleman's framework breaks EI into five components: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills (Chung et al., 2023). Practicing EI not only makes us better colleagues—it helps us protect our mental health. Provision 1 of the ANA Code of Ethics emphasizes the importance of respect for every person, which includes acknowledging our own needs and limitations as nurses

(American Nurses Association [ANA], 2025).

Self-care isn't always a spa day or hot yoga. Sometimes it's saying no to an extra shift, microwaving leftovers instead of surviving on graham crackers from the break room or peeing before the urge becomes a medical emergency. Sleep, nutrition, and physical activity improve cognitive function, mood, and immunity (Bhattacharya et al., 2024). Nurses must channel self-regulation and remember that rest is not lazy—it's a radical act of preservation. Provision 5 of the ANA Code tells us nurses owe "the same duties to self as to others" (ANA, 2025). You can't pour from an empty cup, no matter how sturdy your stethoscope is.

Burnout isn't just about exhaustion—it's about losing the spark that brought us into nursing in the first place. Add in bullying, incivility, and workplace violence, and suddenly we're not just tired—we're emotionally threadbare. Here's where empathy, self-compassion, and social skills kick in. The emotionally intelligent nurse doesn't just vent in the breakroom; they advocate for better conditions, recognize when a colleague is floundering, and step

in—without judgment. Provision 6 challenges us to maintain a healthy work environment (ANA, 2025). Let's start by not normalizing verbal abuse and passive-aggressive Post-it notes.

Nurses are natural comedians. You have to be. When your patient tells you they just pooped in the bed again and smiles like it's a prize, you laugh, or you cry. Choosing laughter is emotional resilience in action. EI doesn't mean bottling everything up or pretending to be zen when you're not. It's knowing when to step back, when to speak up, and when to grab that second cookie in the break room—because, yes, you deserve it.

No one survives nursing in isolation. Mentorship, community, and belonging matter. Whether it's a five-minute check-in with a colleague or a monthly peer support circle, connection helps us stay grounded. Provision 2 reminds us of our commitment to the patient, but our patients need nurses who are whole (ANA, 2025). And wholeness comes from being seen, supported, and occasionally, sent home early.

Solutions worth trying, include micro-mindfulness, like two-minute breathing breaks between patients, laughter rounds, a buddy system for meals and hydration, and exiting the martyr mentality. These aren't indulgences, they're sustainability strategies. Micro practices can be seamlessly woven into your day: take a 10-to-30-second intentional breath while preparing medication, checking that IV pump that will not stop beeping, performing hand hygiene when entering a patient's room, or during the brief moment you sit down to chart. These pauses don't slow down care they preserve the caregiver. While it might feel unrealistic to carve out moments of calm amidst the chaos, it's

entirely possible and, frankly, necessary. Embedding micro-moments of intentional pause into your workflow is one way to soothe your nervous system and reset. That kind of self-awareness—knowing when to breathe, reset, and regulate—isn't just self-care. It's self-preservation.

Provision 9 speaks to our professional responsibility to improve healthcare environments (ANA, 2025). Emotional intelligence and self-care are not indulgent—they're revolutionary. By modeling boundary-setting and emotional regulation, we quietly shift the narrative:

wellness and professionalism are not opposites—they're dance partners.

Nursing is sacred, but it's also sweaty, sticky, and stressful. We don't need more platitudes, we need practical, emotionally intelligent strategies that allow us to thrive...and maybe a nap? To every nurse who teaches for three hours straight, works a 12-hour shift, or leads a team while juggling countless tasks and patient outcomes—yet still finds the time to comfort a student or colleague with a kind word—your work matters! Protect it. Nurture it, and when all else fails, provide self-compassion! ■

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