

Reclaiming the Nurse Within: Self-Care as an Ethical Imperative

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When Caring Starts to Cost Too Much

I still remember sitting in my car after a long 12-hour shift, hands on the steering wheel, wondering how something I loved so much could leave me feeling so empty. My exhaustion did not come from caring about my patients, my colleagues, or my profession. It came from trying to give my best in a system that does not always make that possible. Most nurses understand that feeling.

When Exhaustion Becomes the Norm

Burnout, moral distress, and emotional exhaustion have become so common that many of us barely name them anymore. We call it “part of the job.” The normalization of exhaustion signals a deeper problem, not with nurses but with the conditions in which they are expected to work. Even when organizations recognize the problem, their responses frequently remain limited to surface-level solutions such as a wellness email, a resilience workshop, or a meditation app. These efforts may be well-intended, but they overlook the daily stress nurses carry as they work to meet zero-harm expectations in environments that do not always provide the staffing or resources to support them. That normalization comes at a cost, not only to nurses’ health but to patient safety and the future of our profession.

Self-Care as an Ethical Responsibility

For a long time, I believed self-care was something you squeezed in after everything else was done, after your shift, after your family, after your responsibilities. What I have learned, both as a nurse and as a coach, is that self-care is not optional. It is ethical. Provision 5.1 of

the Code of Ethics for Nurses affirms that nurses have a duty to care for their own health and safety and that there is no ethical obligation to sacrifice personal well-being for the benefit of others (American Nurses Association, 2025). The health and safety of nurses and patients are deeply intertwined. When nurses are chronically fatigued, emotionally strained, or working in unsafe conditions, both professional performance and personal well-being suffer.

The Human Cost of Chronic Depletion

When nurses are chronically depleted, it affects how we think, how we connect, and how we advocate. Fatigue clouds judgment. Moral distress erodes compassion. Over time, the very qualities that brought us into nursing, empathy, dedication, and presence, begin to wear thin.

Burnout is not a personal failure. It is driven by systemic factors like workload, staffing shortages, lack of control, and unhealthy organizational cultures (National Academy of Medicine, 2021; Shah et al., 2021). Asking nurses to be more resilient without changing the environment simply places the burden back on them.

Strengthening Nurses to Strengthen the System

This is where approaches like nurse coaching matter. Nurse coaching is not about fixing nurses. It is about strengthening and supporting them. It creates space for nurses to reconnect with who they are beneath the exhaustion, to clarify boundaries, and to remember why their work matters. Just as importantly, it helps rebuild the energy and confidence nurses need to speak up, lead, and participate in meaningful organizational change. Research shows that professional support interventions, including coaching and leadership development, can improve well-being and strengthen job satisfaction (Boamah et al., 2022; Wei et al., 2020).

A Future Worth Protecting

Reclaiming the nurse within does not come from slogans or one-time wellness efforts. It comes from honest conversations, real support, and systems that allow nurses to practice with dignity. Nurses are not disposable or interchangeable. When nurses are truly cared for, the future of nursing is protected. ■

References online

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