

Professional Readiness: The Everyday Habits Behind Exceptional Care



Dr. Parker J. Brigance DNP, MHA, MBA, RN, FACHE, CEN, CCRN, CNE, NEA-BC, NI-BC, EMT-P



If there are two messages today's nurses hear repeatedly, they are that self-care matters and that nursing is more than just a job. While both statements are true, they can feel difficult to translate into action. What does prioritizing yourself actually look like amid twelve-hour shifts, family responsibilities, continuing education, and the everyday demands of life?

The answer may be simpler than we think. Exceptional nursing care often begins long before we arrive at the bedside. It starts with the everyday habits and routines that prepare us to be physically, mentally, and emotionally ready to care for others.

Fueling Clinical Performance

Every day, nurses make hundreds of decisions that influence patient outcomes. Clinical judgment requires energy, focus, and concentration. Skipping meals, relying on convenience foods, or becoming dehydrated can contribute to fatigue and decreased mental performance. While no nurse is perfect, intentionally fueling your

body with nutritious foods and adequate hydration helps ensure you are mentally prepared to deliver safe, high-quality care throughout the shift. Meal preparation is one of the simplest ways to support professional readiness. By planning meals ahead of time, nurses can reduce reliance on fast food, vending machines, and last-minute food delivery options that often become the default after a demanding shift. Having nutritious meals readily available supports consistent energy levels, healthier choices, and sustained performance throughout the week.

Protect Patient Safety Through Rest

Sleep is not simply about feeling rested; it is about protecting patient safety. Nurses routinely manage complex medication regimens, recognize subtle changes in patient condition, and respond to rapidly evolving situations. Adequate sleep supports critical thinking, situational awareness, communication, and sound clinical decision-making. Whether working days,

nights, or rotating schedules, protecting rest is one of the most important investments a nurse can make in professional readiness.

Reduce Cognitive Load

Many stressors that distract us at work begin outside of work. Running late, worrying about unfinished errands, or realizing an assignment is due tomorrow all consume valuable mental bandwidth. By planning meals, laundry, transportation, appointments, and other routine responsibilities in advance, nurses can reduce cognitive load and preserve mental energy for patient care. The fewer distractions we carry into the workplace, the more attention we can devote to our patients.

Stay Ahead of Your Commitments

Whether pursuing a degree, preparing for specialty certification, or balancing family obligations, unfinished responsibilities often follow us into the workplace. Proactive planning helps prevent competing priorities from becoming distractions. Creating a schedule, setting realistic goals, and staying organized allows nurses to focus on the task at hand. When we manage our commitments effectively, we create more capacity to be fully present for our patients and colleagues.

Sustain Excellence

Nursing is physically, mentally, and emotionally demanding. Exercise, hobbies, time with family, faith activities, and personal interests help build resilience and restore energy. These activities should not be viewed as luxuries, but rather as investments in long-term professional effectiveness. Sustaining excellence in nursing requires intentional effort outside of work

so that we can continue showing up as our best selves inside of work.

Create Space for Presence

Every nurse experiences personal challenges. Financial concerns, family responsibilities, relationship difficulties, and unexpected life events affect us all. While it is important to acknowledge and address these realities, our patients deserve our attention during the moments they entrust us with their care. Developing healthy coping strategies, utilizing support systems, and seeking assistance when needed can help us remain focused and engaged during critical interactions. Being fully present is one of the greatest gifts we can offer those we serve.

A Challenge for Every Nurse

Professional readiness is about more than arriving on time or completing required

education. It is the intentional preparation that allows us to think clearly, communicate effectively, respond confidently, and provide compassionate care when our patients need us most.

Every nurse's routine will look different. Some may prioritize exercise, others meal preparation, faith, family time, or structured planning. The specific routine matters less than the commitment to developing one.

I challenge you to identify one habit that will better prepare you for the responsibilities you carry each day. When nurses invest in their own readiness, patients experience safer care, stronger advocacy, and a higher-quality healthcare experience. Ultimately, developing routines that support your well-being allows your patients to experience the very best version of you. ■

Reference

American Nurses Association. (2023). *Healthy Nurse, Healthy Nation®*.

Parker Brigrance is a member of the ANA/FNA/ENA and serves as the Director of the Emergency Service Line at Baptist Health in Jacksonville, Florida. In his role at Baptist Health, he oversees the strategic growth of the ED service line. With over a decade of nursing experience, he is passionate about clinician development, improving healthcare quality, and enhancing the patient experience.

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