



### *Mental Health and Wellness*

As nurses, who continually care for the physical, emotional and spiritual health of others, it is imperative that we attend to our own mental health and well-being. Mental health impacts every part of our daily functioning, from sleep and appetite to cognition and attention to our mood and even our behaviors and interactions with others.

One in every five or almost 44 million adults, in the United States suffers from a mental health condition significant enough to cause distress in their ability to function on a daily basis, according to Mental Health America (2017). About 10 million Americans live with a chronic and persistent serious mental illness, such as: schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, other psychotic disorders, bipolar disorder and even major depressive disorder (NIMH, 2015).

Fifty (50 percent) percent of all chronic mental illness has it start in early adolescence with 75 percent beginning prior to the age of 24 (NIMH, 2015). These facts stress the importance of incorporating not only knowledge about mental illness into our patient assessments across the life span, but also the need to monitor ourselves for symptoms which may impair our ability to be the best nurse possible.

Nurses and other healthcare professionals are no exception to these statistics. Unfortunately, and ironically, despite attempting to dispel the stigma of mental illness for our patients so they may receive adequate care, many healthcare professionals opt not to seek treatment due to their own views of the stigma of mental illness. Fear of being viewed as “weak or incompetent” or worse “deemed unable to practice,” is what keeps many healthcare professionals from seeking treatment for their own symptoms. Yet, we as nurses are only human and subject to the same cold symptoms, hypertension, diabetes, surgeries, fractures and other medical conditions as the rest of the population, why should mental health issues be any different?

We wouldn't think twice about seeking treatment for the flu, yet many suffer in silence with symptoms of depression, anxiety, mood fluctuations, substance use and abuse and even suicidality.

One way to begin to break down the barriers, is to begin the conversation, not only with our patients and their families, but also with our fellow nursing colleagues. Let's start the conversation and begin to dispel the stigma associated with mental illness in our patients, their families, our communities and our workplace.

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## **Mental Health and Its Impact on Nursing**

As we continue the discussion of mental health and wellness, I would like to focus our attention on how psychiatric illness impacts our overall quality of life as nurses and the quality of life of our patients. Societal and self-stigma are two of the main reasons that individuals with mental health conditions report diminished quality of life (Ayenalem, Tiruye & Muhammed, 2017). Nurses, as the largest healthcare workforce, are in a prime position to begin dispelling the stigma of mental illness and improving the quality of life for our patients (and ourselves).

According to Connell, O’Cathain and Brazier (2014), there are seven domains that are important to the quality of life for individuals suffering from mental illness:

1. Well-Being & Ill-Being
2. Relationships & a Sense of Belonging
3. Activity
4. Self-Perception
5. Control, Autonomy & Choice
6. Hope & Hopelessness
7. Physical Health

I would argue that these domains are not only important to the quality of life of those suffering from a psychiatric disorder but also that they are important for everyone’s quality of life in general.

As nurses, we utilize a holistic approach to treatment, which will incorporate all of these domains to assist our patients in their recovery from physical and mental illness. I would suggest that we, as nurses, initiate a movement to integrate the physical and mental facets of illness into overall health and well-being, thus eliminating the differentiation that we, and our patients, are of comprised of two distinct parts, those above the neck (i.e.: the brain and mental components) and those below the neck (i.e.: the body and physical components).

After all, “whole health begins with mental health” (APNA, 2017). As humans, we are one being, and we cannot differentiate physical and mental health if we are going to adequately care for ourselves and our patients and maximize overall quality of life.

In the eloquent words of Vince Sparks (2015), who frequently writes and blogs about the stigma of mental illness:

“The brain is our most complex organ. All the intricate chemical and electrical impulses associated with its function can break down. Mental illness is a brain disorder. Because of its complexity, research and medical treatments continue to evolve. Success rates rise as more is learned about genetics and the use of medications in treatment.”

Advances in technology and research have provided us with new and innovative treatments to improve overall health leading to improvements in quality of life. As healthcare professionals we no longer solely focus on improving the pathology of an illness but rather strive to assist our patients in achieving recovery, improving their well-being, increasing their ability to function socially and enhancing their quality of life.

Healthy Nurses, I challenge you to reduce the stigma of mental illness and view the disorders of the brain just as you would disorders of the stomach, heart or lungs. Incorporate the seven domains important to quality of life in each and every patient interaction, as it is a rare patient who does not present with anxiety related to a pending surgery/procedure or experience depression when presented with a terminal diagnosis. Reducing the stigma WILL begin the conversation and WILL improve quality of life and in turn improve the feelings of well-being we experience from seeing our patients improve!

Healthy Nurses, I also challenge you to incorporate the 7 domains of quality of life into your own daily life. We often neglect ourselves when caring for others on a daily basis and to be the best nurses we can be, we must also focus on our own quality of life and overall health and well-being.

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#### **Dealing with Anxiety and Burnout**

Nurses can only remain as the best by taking care of ourselves. Nurses tend to forget about self and concentrate on taking care of everyone else. Burnout occurs and then the blame game comes in. Burnout has been a favorite topic of mine. So let’s look at a main component of burnout - anxiety.

*“Anxiety is an uncomfortable feeling of apprehension which can be vague and/or tense. It occurs as a reaction to some threat that the person is experiencing” - Author Unknown*

Anxiety is one of the most important features in human behavior. It can be very distressing and unbearable, and difficult to deal with. One's ability to avoid, divert and relieve anxiety become extremely important. Where does it come from? It may result from frustration, insecurity, displeasure, feeling washed out and interpersonal differences. It becomes impedingly threatening and heightened when impulses are repressed.

Anxiety can affect performance, productivity, produce physiological and psychosomatic symptoms. It can be paralyzing. Here are some symptoms of anxiety which affects nurses the most:

- Inability to retain information
- Inability to concentrate or understand explanations
- Rapid breath and pulse
- Distress
- Poor eye contact
- Unable to focus
- Errors
- Not being in tune to what is happening with your patient

Your anxiety can put a patient's safety at risk. If you are having issues functioning as a nurse. Look at yourself, be truthful and get help, nurses must take care of their selves. We cannot afford to be walking around with anxiety. It is treatable. My Challenge to you - get help, stay healthy.

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## **Improving Your Mental Health**

To complete our month of learning about mental health, with the focus of quality of life, here are some different ideas that we can and should put into practice to improve our mental well-being. Just as we have discussed in detail the importance of mental illness being perceived as an actual illness, rather than “something wrong with us,” or something to be embarrassed about, or hidden, it is equally as important to be realistic about the treatment and effectiveness of our efforts to cope with them or heal (from) them.

Taking into consideration that elapsed time and consistent practice are necessary to achieve the expected outcome for any intervention, it is crucial that we do not forget this when assessing mental illness treatment. If we view our own (or others') mental illness(es) as a nursing diagnosis, and objectively create a care plan for ourselves (or others) with an intended time frame for re-evaluation, we are more likely to see positive results, be encouraged to continue moving forward and re-assess and alter the care plan as needed. Assessment, intervention, re-assessment and making adjustments as needed are essential to nursing practice, shape our decision making, and daily actions. Availability and encouragement are key to success.

Here are just a few of the many interventions to cope with mental illness and quiet the mind, for the purpose of being able to function more effectively for you and/or your patients:

### *Be mindful*

As nurses, we attempt to use holistic interventions prior to interventions involving medication or medical procedures. The easiest and most effective way to calm the mind, focus and understand ourselves and our mental illness(es) is to be mindful. It's also the simplest form of meditation. Meditation, as with anything else, becomes easier and more natural with practice. Start small, but be diligent with your practice, attempt to practice daily. As with our practice in nursing, it is very important to be nonjudgmental about what you are observing as you are practicing mindfulness. Try not to label sensations or observations good or bad, instead, if you catch yourself doing this, simply notice it and return to focus. Here are some examples of mindfulness practice that should be easy to include in your daily routine:

### *Be Mindful of Brushing Your Teeth*

We brush our teeth at least twice daily. How often do you appreciate, concentrate on, or consider this a memorable experience? How often do you brush your teeth on auto-pilot while thinking of the tasks you must complete during the day?

- Practice: Start by taking note of how your mouth feels prior to brushing your teeth. Did you just floss? Is your mouth moist or dry? Did you just wake up and have morning breath, or did you just have dessert and maybe still have a lingering taste of dark chocolate on your tongue? Next, as you place toothpaste on your toothbrush and begin, notice the feeling of the bristles on your gums. Just focus on the feeling of the mini massage you are giving your gums, in small circular patterns. How does it taste? Do you use cinnamon or mint toothpaste? Try to use five senses. Be aware of five senses. What are you looking at as you are brushing your teeth? Can you smell the toothpaste in your mouth, or a candle in your bathroom? Is the end of the toothbrush you are holding dry or wet? What is the texture of the toothpaste as you continue to brush? Does it remain the same or does it change? Are any parts of your mouth more sensitive than others? How do you feel when you brush your tongue? With what pressure are you brushing? Take a few minutes to actually focus on nothing else but brushing your teeth and refreshing your mouth.

### *Be Mindful of Driving Your Car*

How often have you driven from one place to another not remembering the ride there?

- Practice: Focus quietly on each movement you make starting from opening the door to your car. How does the door handle feel? Is it cold today? Dry or wet? Getting into your car and adjusting your mirrors, how comfortable are you in the seat? Are you slouching or leaning forward as you start your car? Pay attention to inserting your key into the keyhole and starting your car. Notice the sound your car makes when it turns on. Does the radio begin to play? As you depart, think about the placement of your

hands on the wheel. How does your wheel feel? What's the texture and temperature? Just notice. Notice the smell inside your car, do you have a fragrance or air freshener? Are your windows open? If so, notice the breeze on your face as you speed up and slow down. Take note of the temperature of the air coming into your car. Is it moving your hair, or does your hair stay in place? Is the air/heat on? How does it feel as it touches your skin and body? Where are you driving? Take in the scene in front of you, the lines on the road, the signs and lights lining your path. Just notice what is happening in the moment. Feel your feet on the pedals. Notice the shifting of pressure you put on one and then the other or be present when you are shifting gears. Continue this for the entire ride.

### *Be Mindful of Sitting in a Chair*

Yes! It can be that simple. How can you be mindful while sitting down, doing almost anything, or nothing at all?

- How does your body feel? Are you noticing any tension to one or more areas as you sit? Does your back ache? What part of your back is aching? What position are your legs in? Are they crossed, or planted on the floor? How do your feet feel? Focus on the sensation the bottom of your feet feel. Is the weight of your legs pressing them against the floor? Move your toes. Are you wearing socks? Are they fitted and sporty, or thick and warm? Are you wearing shoes or are you barefoot? Think about the tops of your feet and be mindful of what they are directly in contact with. Now think about your lower back. Is it arched? Are you touching the back of your seat? Readjust your body to make yourself more comfortable. How do your shoulders feel? Shrug forward and backwards three times, tense them three times, and push them down and back to relax your shoulders. Take a deep breath. Continue to focus on and take note of how your body is physically feeling. Move up to your face as you sit. Is your head tilted? Are you looking straight? Are your facial muscles relaxed or tense? Slowly, but mindfully, scan your body and posture in the chair. Do not judge yourself for sitting improperly, simply notice it and correct it. Do this for as long as you choose. Start with 2 minutes and build from there.

### *Be Mindful Drinking Your Hot Beverage*

How many nurses reading this drink coffee or tea?

- What temperature is the glass/cup/container you're holding? What texture is the outside of this beverage holder? Are you using something to prevent your hand from being too hot? Just notice. Now focus on the sight of the contents. What color is the liquid you are drinking? Are you moving and is the liquid moving back and forth, or is the container placed on a steady surface and not moving at all? Take a deep breath. Smell your drink. What does it smell like? Can you feel the heat on your nose or lips as you go in for a sniff? Now pick up the cup and take a sip. Notice the wet feeling of the liquid in your mouth. Be mindful of the taste of this drink. Consider the texture or the viscosity. Does the temperature feel different in your mouth than on your hands?

Continue to focus on the different aspects of this experience with your five senses. Try not to think of anything else. If you catch yourself drifting or judging the experience (good/bad), notice it and focus again on just being present and observing.

### *Be Grateful*

Writing down five things you are grateful for every evening reinforces enjoying what we have and not taking it for granted. Being thankful and recognizing what is in front of us, rather than seeking outside ourselves for people/things that will induce joy or well-being is much more effective (and convenient!).

- Practice: Take the time out of each day to be mindful of what you have and how it effects your life positively. By doing this, you are more likely to lift your mood and naturally be more satisfied. This is one format; however, you should adjust it as needed. I am grateful for \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.

### *Make Time for Non-Work-Related Activities*

Nursing is amazing. We are so lucky to have so much to receive and give at the same time. Nursing is an enjoyable and rewarding profession. However, do you take enough time to balance out your work with your rest? Do you take enough time to nurture your mental, emotional, physical and spiritual health?

We all can relate to how busy and, at times, overwhelming nursing (and life in general) can be. With experience, it gets easier, but we also begin to take on more advanced professional roles and responsibilities. We are constantly learning and putting what we know to use. All too often, we forget that although we feel as though we do not have enough time, we will benefit exponentially from taking the time to focus on our mental health.

More mistakes are made when we are not centered. Our thought process may be skewed or delayed if we are not in a good state of mind. As professionals, parents, children, volunteers, etc. we have many responsibilities to attend to. We must not forget our responsibility to ourselves and the role keeping our minds healthy plays/influences all our other life roles. We can only be our best selves when we are taking care of our own health.

Depending on your schedule, make sure to implement time for your mental well-being. Remember, it does not necessarily have to be an extravagant vacation, mental well-being can result from a warm shower with no distractions or worshipping one hour a week in the manner we choose. Mental well-being may be reached from an enjoyable read, or a walk in the park. Mental health is attained differently for each person. What do you require? Implement this into your personal care plan.

These practices along with countless others, can be used as tools to achieve mental well-being. Fortunately, as nurses, many sources are available to us for learning about and honing skills to nurture our mental health.

We also have a community of healthy nurses for support-- formed by us! If you feel the pressure of mental illness, please reach out, please seek treatment for your illness. Let's stand together and change the stigma of mental illness. Let's educate our fellow nurses and family members, and use our available resources. Good luck on your personal journeys to mental well-being.

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