

# SelfCare for HealthCare

## *The Best Way to Care for Patients Is to Care for Ourselves*

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In these challenging times, health care leaders struggle with work compression, doing the same amount of work in fewer hours. Often torn between the needs of administration and those of their staff, nurse leaders are experiencing stress, burnout, and health issues at rates equal to those they manage. They expect their staff to deliver comprehensive, compassionate patient care to improve outcomes, satisfaction and engagement scores, and reimbursements. Yet, wise nurse leaders know that caregivers cannot meet those expectations if they are physically, mentally, or spiritually exhausted.



With increasing demands on time, energy, and resources, health care professionals are experiencing burnout at increasingly higher rates, and staff turnover continues to rise. Burnout leads to lower levels of staff engagement, patient experience, and productivity, and an increased risk of workplace accidents. Lower levels of staff engagement are linked with lower-quality patient care, including safety. Burnout also limits a providers' empathy, a crucial component of effective person-centered care.<sup>1</sup> Yet barely one-third (35%) of U.S. hospital workers said that current wellness programs encourage a healthier lifestyle.<sup>2</sup>

As leaders work long hours, tirelessly meeting the needs of their staff, they frequently neglect their own. To be fortified to manage effectively, we must nurture our own bodies, minds, and spirits every day.

The need for these practices is evidenced in [Table 1](#), identifying symptoms of stress and compassion fatigue.

Numerous studies suggest that work-related stress fuels burnout and job dissatisfaction among health care professionals.<sup>3</sup>

Drawing from my decades of work with nurses and nurse leaders, I offer easily implemented tools for restorative self-

care. This article shares strategies for balance of body, mind, and spirit, offering self-care for health care.

### PHYSICAL BALANCE (BODY)

#### Diet

We would never deprive nutrition or fluids to someone we care for, yet we often unconsciously rob ourselves. Keeping a dietary log for a week alerts us to our current eating patterns and allows us to change our diets accordingly.

Although evidence proves the importance of drinking 5 to 6 glasses of water a day, we too rarely consume that quantity. Seventy-five percent of Americans are chronically dehydrated, causing daytime fatigue, memory impairment, difficulty focusing, headaches, nausea, and poor metabolism.<sup>4</sup>

**Table 1.** Symptoms of Stress and Compassion Fatigue

Physical	Mental	Spiritual
Appetite changes	Forgetfulness	Emptiness
Headaches	Poor concentration	Loss of meaning
Fatigue	Dull senses	Doubt
Poor sleeping	Lethargy	Martyrdom
Frequent illnesses	Boredom	Loss of direction
Digestive problems	Low productivity	Cynicism
Pounding heart	Negative attitude	Apathy
Teeth grinding	Anxiety	Abandonment
Rash	The “blues”	Worry
Restlessness	Mood swings	Isolation
Foot-tapping	Anger	Distrust
Finger drumming	Bad dreams	“No one cares”
Nail biting	Irritability	
Smoking	Crying spells	
Increased alcohol intake	Nervous laughter	
	Loss of loving feeling	

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To get the recommended amount of water daily, fill a water container to consume throughout the day. Think about fluid balance, just as we do for patients. Applying what we know about fluid input and output for patients to our own bodies seems simple, but it is often ignored or underprioritized by us due to workload, inattentiveness, and even our own beliefs about self-sacrifice.

### Sleep

Health care givers and leaders are becoming more and more sleep deprived, yet studies prove the human body requires 7 to 9 hours of sleep in a 24-hour period.<sup>5</sup>

Adequate sleep is important for mental focus, reaction time, attitude, learning, memory, decision-making, prioritizing, accuracy, conflict resolution, and communication, all key qualities health care givers need to deliver safe, compassionate patient care. Geiger-Brown and Trinkoff,<sup>6</sup> who studied the impact of 12-hour shifts, reported that nurses sleep only 5.5 hours on average between 12-hour tours, even though a minimum of 7 hours is recommended for full engagement.

Insufficient sleep has been associated with cognitive problems, reduced job performance, decreased motivation, and increased safety risks. Several studies have shown that failure to get adequate sleep contributes to medical errors.<sup>7</sup>

When sleep is inadequate, health deteriorates, resulting in lowered glucose tolerance, impaired thyroid function, fatigue, increased heart rate, decreased strength, increased blood pressure, stomach and bowel problems, pain, depleted immune systems, and increased fatty deposits. Sleep problems contribute to obesity, and obesity contributes to sleep problems.<sup>8</sup>

In today's world of 24/7 connectedness, new issues have emerged that lure people away from sleep. Television, computers, and electronic devices have shifted from the family room and office into the bedroom, encouraging people to

watch 1 more late-night show, or respond to another text or 2. In my experience, many health care leaders report checking e-mail after midnight in fear of missing something and feeling compelled to respond immediately.

Adequate sleep is an investment in our well-being. It's a choice. Turn off technology, turn off electricity, and get the recommended 7 to 9 hours of slumber.

### Exercise

In our over-scheduled lives, it's often challenging to set aside time for exercise. Yet research is showing that we don't necessarily need a personal trainer or gym membership. A study of 334,161 European men and women showed that as little as 20 minutes of brisk walking a day could prevent us from dying prematurely.<sup>9</sup>

Exercise not only lowers the risk of heart attacks, diabetes, bone cancer, osteoporosis, arthritis, backaches, high blood pressure, depression, and stress,<sup>10</sup> but it also releases endorphins in our brains and increases happiness, too.

Be creative in finding ways to incorporate exercise into your daily activities. Park in the farthest corner of the parking lot. Make time to take the stairs. Have walking meetings. Take advantage of the exercise opportunities your employer provides.

### MENTAL BALANCE (MIND)

Most self-care programs focus on nurturing our bodies with less attention to our minds and spirits, yet our physical well-being is dependent on our mental well-being.

Eighteen percent of nurses, twice the rate of the general adult U.S. population, have elevated depression symptoms.<sup>11</sup> To care for our minds, it's crucial to take time throughout the day for mental rest. One of the best and easiest tools is simply breathing.

## Breathing and Relaxation

Deep relaxation breathing is one of the most effective mental balance tools. This breathing technique relieves stress and tension, and releases endorphins.

As a childbirth educator for 13 years, I taught moms to breathe slowly, deeply, and easily to reduce stress and pain in labor. The same principles apply as we “labor” through life.

When laboring women get too stressed, they experience increased adrenaline, which shuts down the release of oxytocin and delays the delivery. Too much adrenaline results in longer harder labors for moms...and for us. Breathing and relaxing decreases adrenaline output and allows all our organs and body parts to work at their best.

For 3 minutes, several times a day, during stressful times or otherwise, breathe slowly in through your nose 1-2-3-4, then out through your mouth 1-2-3-4, repeatedly.

We schedule so many activities into our days, we must also schedule relaxation. Close your door. Take a break. Breathe deeply, and relax.

## Laughter

A proverb says, “Laughter is good medicine, but a broken spirit dries the bones.” Sometimes the demands of working in health care can nearly dry our bones.

I’ve been privileged to read thousands of true stories from health care givers when I authored 3 editions of the *Chicken Soup for the Soul for Nurses* series. Time and time again, they shared how laughter helped them through their toughest times.

Humor is one of the most effective self-care strategies. Laughter lowers blood pressure and heart rate, improves lung capacity, massages internal organs, increases memory and alertness, reduces pain, improves digestion, and lowers the stress hormones.<sup>12</sup>

Loma Linda University proved that laughter decreases the stress hormones epinephrine, norepinephrine, and cortisol, and improves immune function.<sup>13</sup> Laughter has also been proven to reduce pain.<sup>14</sup> It offers psychological benefits, brings us into the moment, helps us transcend our problems, connects us closer to people, and helps us think more clearly.

Even smiling releases endorphins and serotonin, which boost our immune systems and lower blood pressure.<sup>15</sup>

Add humor to every agenda. Create laughter bulletin boards at work. Bring joy to your workplace.

## Positive Thinking

There is tremendous power in positive thinking. Dr. Norman Vincent Peale<sup>16</sup> wrote a book by that title, proving that we get what we expect in life. We bring to fruition our thoughts and visualization. We see this in our workplaces every day. Negative thinkers have negative contagious behaviors, resulting in negative outcomes.

It’s said that the average person has 40 thousand thoughts per day, of which 80% are negative. Every time we have a negative thought, our brain releases negative chemicals that make our bodies feel bad. When we combine positive thinking with positive visualization, remarkable changes occur.

Our bodies and minds don’t distinguish the difference between visualization and experience; they react as if both are real. Most of us have awoken from nightmares, sweating, our hearts racing. Although the scary event didn’t happen physically, our bodies responded as though it had. This phenomenon can work to our benefit, too. Recall your most successful moment and live it out again, visualizing it with all 5 senses. You can reclaim the same feelings again as your body releases the same chemicals as when you experienced it.

The growing field of psychoneuroimmunology proves that our brains can literally be “rewired” with positive thinking. Some neurological connections are strengthened, whereas others are replaced. New thoughts and images stimulate new pathways and, when constantly repeated, have a great impact on behavior.

Our minds are like computers: we have sovereign control over the input.

Write your list of your personal positive affirmations. Create a vision board with words and pictures of things you want to achieve...personal goals, career plans, family desires, things to nurture your mind, body and spirit. Post these where you can see them...and achieve them, improving your health, happiness, and workplace.

## Forgiveness

After my presentations, audience members whisper 2 things to me consistently. “Thank you for talking about faith,” and “Thank you for teaching the power of forgiveness.”

Forgiveness seems to be a universal chord in the hearts of people. There is an innate hunger to let go of the suffering and to learn how to release it.

We waste a lot of our energy, our health, and even our lives when we fail to forgive. People who won’t forgive have more illnesses, lower immune system function, and increased heart disease.<sup>17</sup> Those suffering from chronic low back pain found that anger, affective pain, and sensory pain were all lower after forgiving.<sup>18</sup>

A widely accepted definition of forgiveness is to pardon, to release from further punishment. Ourselves included.

The first step in healing is to forgive ourselves, for any past mistakes, indiscretions, or regretted decisions. What we did then was based on who we were and what we knew then. It’s not who we are today.

Next, we must forgive somebody else, no matter how horrific the offense. Refusing to forgive doesn’t hurt the offender, it only hurts us. Why would we give someone who wounded us so deeply the power to continue to harm us with sleepless nights, upset stomachs, high blood pressure, and headaches? We must forgive them, whether we think they deserve it or not, we do.

Forgiveness is an empowering choice. So, starting today, besides yourself, who are you going to forgive?

## SPIRITUAL BALANCE (SPIRIT)

Creating a spiritual balance is as crucial as mental and physical. Most medical schools today are tapping into ancient theories of holistic medicine, a healing of mind, body, and

spirit. The American Medical Association requires medical schools to teach students to inquire about a patient's religion. Ninety percent have courses on spirituality and health. No wonder 92% of patients say that spirituality is important in their coping and healing.<sup>19</sup>

Studies describing the association between prayer, faith, spirituality, and medicine are increasing.<sup>20</sup> Yet a study examining nurses' perception of competence in providing spiritual care showed that whereas communication had the most favorable perception, improving the quality of spiritual care had the least favorable.<sup>21</sup>

In delivering care, nurses must recognize the importance of spirituality in the lives of patients, families, and loved ones, as well as in their own lives. All undergo tremendous stress and suffering. Spirituality offers a way to understand suffering and to cope with illness. By addressing spiritual issues of patients, loved ones, and ourselves, we can create more holistic and compassionate systems of care.

To nurture our patients' spiritual health, we must first nurture our own. Polls estimate that over 92% of Americans believe in God.<sup>22</sup> If you are among that majority, I encourage you to be in touch with the Higher Power you believe in every day. Even if it is just for 15 minutes, take time for prayer, meditation, or reflection. So often we choose a way of life that best suits our bodies; let's create one that also nurtures our spirits.

## SUMMARY

Self-care is no longer a "soft" skill, but a culture shift, critical for transforming patient care and outcomes today. Hospitals that have implemented the year-long SelfCare for HealthCare program have noted, not only a 13% increase in retention, but also a 20% increase in engagement, a 39% decrease in those considering leaving their positions, and a 42% increase in agreeing their leadership cares about them.

Evidence of the importance of caring for mind, body, and spirit was proven in a descriptive study exploring the self-care practices of nurses in a rural hospital setting. In the findings, the most prevalent self-care practices by nurses were humor, laughter, music, spirituality, prayer, healthy nutrition, walking, and healthy sleep habits.<sup>23</sup>

The duty of nurse leaders is to be proactive, rather than reactive, to the stress nurses are facing. There are clear links between staff well-being and the 3 dimensions of service quality: patient safety, patient experience, and the effectiveness of patient care. When staff support services were proactive and prioritized, staff health, well-being, and performance were enhanced, patient care improved, staff retention was higher, and sickness absence was lower. Nurse leaders are fundamental to creating a workplace climate that enhances staff well-being and delivers quality patient care.<sup>24</sup>

When staff participate together in wellness programs, engagement increases. Employees who feel that they are personally cared for by their organization and that managers have higher levels of commitment, are more conscious about responsibilities, have greater involvement in the organization, and are more innovative.<sup>25</sup>

Every 1% increase in hospital employee engagement correlates with a 0.33-point increase in the facility's Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems (HCAHPS) overall hospital rating. HCAHPS scores lead to a boost or reduction in a hospital's Medicare reimbursement and can sway patients' decisions in selecting a provider.

Also, a 1% increase in hospital employee engagement is tied to a 0.41-point increase in patient safety grades. Engaged employees are 3 times as likely as disengaged employees to earn top performance marks. Disengaged staff are twice as likely to leave their organization within 12 months of an engagement survey.<sup>26</sup>

Clearly, self-care is the best way to care for our staff, our patients...and ourselves.

As leaders we are always role modeling. By nurturing our own bodies, minds, and spirits, we will create cultures of caring for ourselves and those we lead and serve. NL

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