I recently attended a healthy work environment conference sponsored by Sigma Theta Tau. Three days of sessions provided a wealth of information and opportunities to discuss specific aspects of our work environments and ways in which nurses are trying to improve the environments in which they practice. I found five central themes recurring over the 3-day span; clinical nurses can take ownership of these themes to improve their own practice environments.

Joy in the Profession

Many of the nurses I encounter in my role with AMSN describe their work in nursing as a calling. Nurses often describe entering the profession with a desire to help people gain or regain their physical and mental health to the highest level possible. However, the passion and joy in nursing can be diminished by the struggles within the practice environment. Donald M. Berwick, MD, MPP, CRCP, President Emeritus and Senior Fellow, Institute for Healthcare Improvement, stated, “The gifts of hope, confidence, and safety that health care should offer patients and families can only come from a workforce that feels hopeful, confident, and safe. Joy in work is an essential resource for the enterprise of healing” (Perlo et al., 2017, p. 4). How do we retain or regain that joy in nursing?

Reflecting on what led you to nursing and journaling this along with meaningful experiences is one way to retain the joy in nursing. I practice this daily by reflecting on three difficult things and three good things. I always start with the difficult things and reflect on what I can do differently the next time. This allows me to look at the positive side of the difficult thing and it provides me a chance to grow personally and professionally. Following this, I reflect on three good things that happened during that day: a hug from a patient, the ability to make a patient feel better by giving a backrub, or helping a student understand a new concept.

Recognition of the good works you and your team perform daily is another way to generate joy. In a recent study, recognition of good works was identified as the primary contributor to preventing burnout and promoting a healthy practice environment (Calabro, Dieckmann, Hansen, & Lee, 2019). Leaders can do this by providing real, focused, specific recognition to the nurse; for example, “I understand you identified a potential problem with a patient and intervened to prevent any complications. Great work, thank you for looking out for our patients!” This carries so much more weight than a member of the leadership team simply walking the halls of the unit and saying, “Great job everyone!” Of course, nurses at the point of care also can participate in authentic recognition of their team members. Consider having a designated bulletin board where team members can write thank you notes to each other. Take the time to acknowledge the work of your colleagues and thank them for being valued members of the team. Having a degree of control and a sense of importance of everyday work by actively participating in shared decision making on the unit is another way to retain the joy in nursing.

Communication

Findings from a study evaluating practice environments of critical care nurses indicated effective communication has a direct impact on job satisfaction, quality of care delivery, perceived effectiveness of the nurse manager, and nurses’ intent to remain in their current positions (Ulrich, Barden, Cassidy, & Varn-Davis, 2019). In describing the results of the study, Ulrich stated, “Nurses must be as proficient in communication skills as they are in clinical skills” (p. e4). Communication, similar to any other skill nurses use, takes time to develop. How often do you pay attention to the words you use? Pro-nursing language relays respect for the profession and your colleagues, and ultimately how you feel about your work as a nurse. This results in an environment that can have positive impact on patient and nurse outcomes (Cho & Han, 2018; Copanitsanou, Fotos, & Brokalaki, 2017). To find out more about pro-nurse language, visit the AMSN website and choose the practice resources and healthy practice environment tab (Academy of Medical-Surgical Nurses, 2019).

Building Personal Relationships

Associations between the practice environment and nurse relationships with other nurses, managers, and physicians are correlated directly, and affect job performance and productivity (Ulrich et al., 2019; Wei,
Sewell, Woody, & Rose, 2018). Unfortunately, incivility is common in the workplace. Reports of nurses experiencing as well as instigating workplace incivility can be found throughout the literature. The result is a deterioration of the practice environment. Personal relationships among nurses on the unit can be built by taking the time to understand the perspective of another, spending time outside of work with one another, and sharing common experiences or interests.

**Mindfulness**

Being mindful involves a choice in how you respond to a certain stimulus. You can choose to respond in a positive and thoughtful manner. Mindfulness also involves an awareness and engagement in the present, being open to experiences and the emotions involved in them (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2006). One way to practice mindfulness is to be aware of your breathing. Pause for a moment and concentrate on breathing. Inhale to a count of 4 and exhale slowly to a count of 8. Repeat this several times. You’ll notice the muscles gently softening and releasing the stress you are holding in your neck and shoulders.

**Resiliency**

We have all experienced massive changes in the healthcare system over the past couple of years which create a lot of stress for the nursing workforce who must manage patient care and electronic health records. Additionally, we know the acuity of our patients is increasing, and we are being asked consistently to do more with less. Occasionally, outcomes are less than favorable or errors in care delivery are made. Although we talk about a blameless system, it is hard for us not to carry the burden which ultimately impacts our practice and personal lives.

This is where resiliency has impact. It is defined in the literature as “the ability to face adverse situations, remain focused, and continue to be optimistic for the future” (Kester & Wei, 2018, p. 42). It is a key factor in preventing moral distress and burnout. Strategies to build personal resiliency include taking time for self-care, building and nurturing relationships with others, rehearsing responses to negative situations, and participating in workshops focusing on building resilience.

**Be the Change**

I encourage you to be the change you want to see in your own practice environment. Model the behaviors of a healthy practice environment with every encounter you have. Speak respectfully and with purpose, using pro-nursing language. Be kind to team members and students. Support your team before they reach the point in which they are struggling. Most importantly, take care of yourself!

Secondly, gather data. Look at turnover and injury data for your facility and/or unit. Are these in line with the national norms? Does this information present the kind of environment where you want to work? If not, then think creatively. What kind of changes could be made to improve the situation? Make a business case for the changes you desire by presenting the data along with possible solutions and support this with research. Once you have your information and a plan, approach a member of management or possibly human resources and ask for some time to present your concerns and suggestions. You can use any or all the resources contained in the reference list following this article to help make your case.

**A Strategic Priority**

A healthy practice environment has been the focus of AMSN for many years. In fact, it is our first strategic priority. AMSN will be conducting research with the help of medical-surgical nurses to evaluate our practice environments. Data obtained from the research will be used to develop new initiatives and tools to improve your own practice environments. You have a big role in the success of this research and our future initiatives. In the early spring, you will receive an invitation to participate in the study by completing a short survey. Our goal is to have more than 9,000 medical-surgical nurses participate and have representation from every state in the union as well as our international members! It’s an ambitious goal, but one I have faith we can accomplish together.

A healthy practice environment needs to be nurtured by the leaders and the nurses. Otherwise, it fails. The evidence indicates quality of patient care and job satisfaction of nurses improve when the practice environment is supportive and collaborative. Our patients deserve nothing less and neither do we.

Please write and let me know what you have done to improve your own practice environment. I would love to share these actions with our other members.

**REFERENCES**


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