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Cultivating Mental Health and Wellness among Nursing Students: A Student Wellness Initiative at the University of Michigan School of Nursing

Acknowledging the Challenge

Nursing education—including nurse anesthesia education—is stressful and may be harmful to your health! Consider some of the sources: competitive admissions, demanding academics, taxing clinical rotations, high-stakes testing, preparing for board examinations. Add to these the myriad obstacles already present in college life, including the transition from adolescence to young adulthood. Students face increased freedoms, risks, responsibilities, and social pressures at a time when decision-making capacities are not yet fully developed. This stakes are high for this vulnerable population. In nurse anesthesia education, experienced RNs move from expert to novice as they learn how to administer high-quality anesthesia care. Potential consequences include poor sleep and nutrition, lack of exercise, inadequate social support, anxiety, depression, substance use, eating disorders, sexual assault, self-harm, and suicide.

On college campuses across the country, increased emphasis is rightly being placed on the critical importance of mental health and wellness among our students, before problems arise, or become serious or insurmountable. This article describes some of the approaches the University of Michigan (U-M) and the School of Nursing (UMSN) use, with hopes of contributing to a growing conversation.

Defining Mental Health and Wellness

Consistent with the holistic, bio-psycho-social-spiritual perspective that defines nursing, mental health can influence all other aspects of our lives, for good or ill. The World Health Organization (WHO) has defined mental health as “a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community.”¹

The AANA defines wellness as “a positive state of the mind, body, and spirit reflecting a balance of effective adaptation, resilience, and coping mechanisms in personal and professional environments that enhance quality of life.”² Rooted in positive psychology, Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs illustrates that, when other basic needs are met, humans aspire to self-actualization, i.e., realizing personal potential, self-fulfillment, seeking personal growth and peak experiences, a desire “to become everything one is capable of becoming.”³ In conjunction with the Healthy Nurse, Healthy Nation™ Grand Challenge, the American Nurses Association (ANA) defines a healthy nurse, and encourages the 3.6 million registered nurses in the United States to practice and model these behaviors (see Box).⁴

The ANA defines a healthy nurse as one who actively focuses on creating and maintaining a balance and synergy of physical, intellectual, emotional, social, spiritual, personal and professional wellbeing. A healthy nurse lives life to the fullest capacity, across the wellness/illness continuum, as they become stronger role models, advocates, and educators, personally, for their families, their communities and work environments, and ultimately to their patients.

On Campus

Cultural change is more likely to occur when certain values and ideals are openly expressed—and acted upon—at multiple levels throughout a complex social system, such as a university. For years, and in some cases decades, U-M has offered a broad array of resources to promote mental health and wellness among students. Here are just a few examples:

- Founded in 1986, the Sexual Assault Prevention and Awareness Center (SAPAC) “provides free and confidential crisis intervention, advocacy, and

support for survivors of sexual assault, intimate partner violence, stalking and sexual harassment for...students, faculty and staff” (www.sapac.umich.edu).

- Supported by the University of Michigan Depression Center (www.depressioncenter.org), Campus Mind Works helps “students who have been diagnosed with a mental health disorder, as well as students who are looking for strategies to maintain positive mental health—to help all students to stay healthy and get the most out of their college experience.” Throughout the academic year, Campus Mind Works offers professionally facilitated Drop-In Wellness Groups. Recent topics have included Mindfulness Strategies to Reduce Stress, Winter Blues and Depression, Anxiety and Procrastination, and Embracing Failure (www.campusmindworks.org).
- With the motto, “Because life happens,” the Wolverine Support Network (WSN) is a recognized student organization that “empowers...students to create inclusive community and support each other’s identity, mental well-being, and day-to-day lives through peer-facilitated groups and bi-weekly community events” (www.umichwsn.org).
- The mission of the Collegiate Recovery Program (CRP) is to provide “a supportive community where students in recovery can achieve academic success while enjoying a genuine college experience, free from alcohol and other drugs.” CRP is a recovery support service, not a clinical treatment program. Members benefit from connections with other recovering students; involvement in fun, sober events, on and off-campus; recovery support and accountability; and opportunities to be of service (www.uhs.umich.edu/recovery).

At the School of Nursing: Students Speak, and Leaders Listen

Only a small percentage of people who could benefit from treatment for mental health and substance use disorders actually receive it. A multitude of factors influence whether or not someone will seek and accept help, or engage in other health-promoting behaviors. Common barriers include time, money, effort, perceived need, access, and stigma—both internal and external. The need for a new culture and sense of community became increasingly evident at the School of Nursing.

In 2016, Hassan “Hass” Abbas—then a junior nursing student and a member of Nursing Student Government (NSG)—approached Bonnie Hagerty, PhD, RN, associate dean of Undergraduate Studies, indicating that the school could and should do more to promote mental health among nursing students. As Hagerty described, “I heard multiple students talking about stress, about not getting enough sleep, about drinking, about not having enough time to eat well.”

A survey was conducted by a newly formed Student Wellness Initiative (SWI). Among respondents, 78 percent of nursing students reported having experienced stress, 57 percent a sense of being



Zeineb Selmane, nursing student and president of Nursing Student Government at the University of Michigan School of Nursing, participates in the Love Yourself event.

overwhelmed, 51 percent anxiousness, and 50 percent sleep deprivation—most or all

of the time during the previous academic year. Fully 92 percent agreed with the statement, “It would be helpful for the School of Nursing to increase its influence on the mental health and wellness of the its students.” Dr. Hagerty added, “We have to do something, because students are not taking good care of themselves, and they need to be in good health.”

To help foster wellness at the School of Nursing, Rebecca “Becky” Maley was named Student Success Coordinator at UMSN in 2017. Maley, a nurse herself, serves as a liaison between students, faculty, and staff. In cooperation with student organizations at UMSN, a number of special events have been held. “We want students to know, ‘We want you to be happy and well.’” With the start of the new academic year, Welcome Week included student-led mindfulness sessions, yoga on the lawn, and healthy food choices. Students later organized a “pop-up” pancake breakfast and, most recently, a Love Yourself event (see photo above). Referring to her many collaborators at the School of Nursing, Maley smiled, nodded, and noted, “I feel like we’re a great team!”

Nursing Student Government and the Student Wellness Initiative also hosted a dinner, and asked this author to conduct a “Student Substance Use Seminar.” Alcohol and other substance use by nurses and nursing students places patients, the public, and healthcare providers themselves at risk for serious injury or death. Consistent with a joint position statement, “Substance Use Among Nurses and Nursing Students,”⁵ issued by the Emergency Nurses Association (ENA) and the International Nurses Society on Addictions (IntNSA)—and endorsed by ANA, AANA, and other nursing organizations—UMSN supports an alternative-to-discipline (ATD) approach to the treatment of nursing students with substance use and related disorders.

As part of a campus-wide Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiative, Rushika Patel, PhD, was appointed Chief Inclusion Officer at UMSN in 2017. DEI representatives are now embedded at every school and college at the University of Michigan. When asked what she considered to be a leading priority, Patel thoughtfully replied, “Making sure that students, faculty, and staff from non-majority, underrepresented groups are given access to the resources that they need in order to thrive...When that happens, we all benefit.”

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Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) has long played an important role in fostering the emotional well-being of students at the University of Michigan, “through counseling and psychotherapy, preventive and educational programming, consultation and outreach” (www.caps.umich.edu).

In 2017, Kristen Adams, PhD, became a staff embedded psychologist at the School of Nursing. With extensive previous experience in university counseling, Adams described nursing students, in particular, as “high-achieving, successful, and ambitious, and that can have detrimental effects.” In addition to individual sessions, and other special events, Adams has been facilitating drop-in support groups. “I’ve been really pleasantly surprised that a number of students have expressed appreciation for having an embedded counselor,” indicating that this has had a “destigmatizing” effect on help-seeking. “There is more of an openness, wanting to be proactive and preventative...I am happy and proud and glad to be part of this.”

Looking Ahead

The health of all nursing professions—and the nation—depends on the well-being of our nursing students. Now is the time to explore creative approaches, and to build an evidence base to better inform our decisions and actions. It is no longer good enough for students to survive nursing and nurse anesthesia school. Instead, it is our

shared responsibility to help create a climate in which our students can truly thrive.

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