Caring for patients is vital and fulfilling work that offers nurse anesthetists and other healthcare providers immense satisfaction and rewards. It is work that is built on an enduring relationship between science and art, a connection where the mind and hand come together.

It is also an occupation in which environmental stressors, personal expectations, and daily work demands may overwhelm practitioners, leading to burnout, exhaustion, and loss of interest in one’s work. Too often, these symptoms are left dangerously unmanaged.

Stress is not a modern phenomenon. Life has always been complex and stressful. Ongoing research acknowledges the effects that financial stresses, relationship stresses, job-related stress, health issues, and emotional stress have on today’s populations. Healthcare professionals report similar stressors. Nurses and physicians report levels of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a perceived lack of achievement. The literature also cites multiple examples of workplace stress and burnout experienced by nurses at all stages of their careers.

Although often considered as something to be avoided, stress can actually be beneficial to us. A certain amount of stress motivates us to act or is protective. Excessive stress, however, is debilitating and results in distress, a key causal factor in a variety of conditions including heart disease, sleep disturbances, fatigue, and errors in cognition and task performance.

Distress is unique to each of us, one person may respond in significantly different ways than others. In general, the response depends upon the specific demands of the situation, combined with personality traits, habits, and coping ability. However, research has shown that stress may too often lead to uncontrollable levels of emotional exhaustion, poor interpersonal engagement with patients and colleagues, and a missing sense of control.

As healthcare providers we have a strong tendency to do what we believe someone else may need or want from us. We feel guilty about not being able to “work the extra shift,” or, take care of the “emergency case.” We feel responsible for making certain things are “done right.” We often feel as if we are being selfish if we establish ourselves and our needs as priorities, thereby sacrificing or postponing our own self-care. We have immense difficulty in saying “no.”

Positive Selfishness

Traditionally the word art was used to refer to any skill or mastery. As nurses, we have certainly mastered the art of providing patient care. As nurse anesthetists we have the skill to integrate the art and science of administering anesthesia. We must now embrace the art of selfishness and self-care.

“Selfishness” can be a misunderstood word. By definition, selfishness means excessive, exclusive concern with oneself, or seeking one’s own advantage, pleasure, or well-being without regard for others. Certainly not something anyone should recommend, encourage, nor seek to become, and not in the best interest of patients or society.

On the other hand, positive selfishness stems from the idea that if something benefits one person, it is likely to benefit others. Do we care enough about ourselves and our patients to actively avoid stress and burnout?

Care of yourself requires a commitment to self-awareness, integrity, and honesty, focusing toward your own benefit without harming other individuals. Looking after one’s own self-interest means going after what is best for you, but with a complete understanding and openness of the motivation for your actions. When questioned, most of us will admit that we do have some responsibility to take care of ourselves.

It is very easy for healthcare providers to neglect caring for themselves. The seeds of burnout take root early in our careers with feelings of guilt if we do not adhere to a mindless dedication to long work hours and self-sacrifice. Further, certain personality traits may enhance the risk of burnout as nurse anesthetists sometimes tend to be a compulsive group, filled with an intense sense of responsibility, involvement, and availability.

Compulsiveness is a character trait found in many physicians and nurses, and although it may be adaptive in getting them through the demands of training, it can also have an enormous detrimental impact on their professional, personal, and family lives. The compulsive traits of guilt feelings and an exaggerated sense of responsibility encompass
feelings of ‘not doing enough,’ inability to set limits, and guilt feelings over a healthy pursuit of pleasure and relaxation.

Studies indicate the most common factors leading to burnout appear to be the magnitude of workload and a perceived loss of control over the work environment. Burnout is significantly more common among physicians in mid-career than among those who are older. Women physicians have a somewhat higher incidence of burnout than men.

Burnout is associated with poor job performance and with health problems ranging from headaches and fatigue to hypertension, anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and heart attacks. One of the most serious consequences of burnout is substance abuse. One study notes that 10 percent to 14 percent of healthcare providers will develop this tendency at some time in their careers. Access to pharmaceuticals, high levels of stress, personality factors, chronic fatigue, self-treatment of pain, family history, and pre-existing emotional problems are primary risk factors for all healthcare professionals.

Healthcare organizations have a vital stake in preventing burnout. Ultimately, by failing to care for ourselves, we undermine our ability to do our work. Research suggests that provider dissatisfaction has doubled in the past few decades, and the nursing and medical professions recognize that providers who are at risk for stress and burnout threaten the sustainability of the workforce. There is also growing awareness of the importance of ensuring the credibility and competency of the professions.

The Meaning of Self-Care
As with most things in life, self-care means different things to different people. Generally, it involves taking personal responsibility for ensuring the maintenance of health and well-being. By taking proper care of our bodies and minds, we can keep in optimum shape for handling stress. Studies have shown that people who neglect their own needs and forget to nurture themselves are at danger of deeper levels of unhappiness, feelings of resentment, burnout, and depression.

The manner in which we care for ourselves depends to a certain extent on our personal interests, needs, and circumstances. The literature contains recommendations to prevent burnout and/or care for ourselves. Most suggest the development of a self-care plan that can keep you well, functioning, and ready for life’s challenges. Activities that promote feelings of well-being that can recharge and revitalize involve:

- Learning to say no without feeling guilty;
- Learning to relax and arrange quiet time for yourself;
- Talking to friends;
- Exercising;
- Introducing variety in your daily routine;
- Managing your time;
- Watching your habits and being mindful of how your actions will impact yourself and others;
- Developing outside interests;
- Looking after your own needs;
- If you need help, asking for it.

Burnout is a real issue among healthcare providers, but it is not without its warning signs. We can avoid it by being selfish about caring for ourselves. One key issue is the fact that many of us come to work when we are ill, when we know we should not. This type of behavior affects on our work/life balance and can play a role in developing burnout.

Self-care is a choice to assume responsibility for the quality of our lives. It begins with a conscious decision to shape a healthy lifestyle. Achieving a harmonious balance between our work responsibilities and our personal life requires ongoing attention and action. Developing the art of selfishness means commitment to wellness, including self-responsibility, exercise and fitness, nutrition, stress management, critical thinking, meaning and purpose or spirituality, emotional intelligence, humor and play, and effective relationships. Taking better care of ourselves will contribute to high levels of well-being and satisfaction, more importantly, it is a positive component in caring for our patients.

Resources

