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Stress and what it does to the human body is not a new subject for nurses. It's part of the curriculum in nursing school. But even though nurses know a great deal about it, putting that knowledge into practice is sometimes another matter. The fact is the nursing profession breeds stressful situations. According to a survey by the American Nurses Association, three out of four nurses cited the effects of stress and overwork as a top health concern. Another study showed that working 12 hour shifts, very common in nursing, has adverse effects of stress and burnout. Some of these effects pose safety concerns for patients as well as nurses.

Stress can take a toll on a nurse with their shortness of attention, which will impact the patient care. Lack of concentration will impact what they're reading on the computer or how they're listening to the patient.

Let's review stress. Physically, it's our body's way of responding to pressure from the outside world. It can come from anything that makes us nervous, angry, or anxious. Stress causes a surge of hormones to be released by the adrenal gland, including adrenaline, cortisol, and norepinephrine. These help boost energy and strength, a good thing if we're in danger. It's what we need in a fight or flight situation. Nurses fight all the time for their rights and as advocates for patient rights. Flight is also important if coping with a combative and violent patient.

But this boost of energy isn't good if stress is a response to something emotional, and there's no outlet for it. If we bottle up the stress, it festers and has an increasingly negative impact in all areas of our life, at work and home, and our health and emotional well-being.

One can be experiencing stress and not know it. Sometimes taking a blood pressure will help you to know what's going on. Sometimes other people can notice that you are under stress, because you are not behaving quite the same way. You are not yourself, as a lot of people might say. Or someone who may know you well, they'll say, is everything OK? When somebody asks you that, there is a preoccupation. And one may not be aware of that.

There are many common factors that create stress in our lives. There are relationship pressures, especially during times of separation or divorce, health issues, whether our own or those of a loved one, can induce feelings of anxiety, as can financial worries and work related problems.

We all have lots of different stressors. And stress can impact every aspect, every area of our lives. We all have a stress barometer that we walk around that we have with us all the time, and we may start our day low on the stress barometer, but as the day goes on, it grows and grows and grows.

Stress affects everyone differently. Some people are naturally more prone to stress based on their background, living situation, and role in the workplace. A lack of control over job responsibilities is one of the biggest causes of stress at work. It can lead to feelings of blame and resentment.

Having a lack of control or feeling helpless in this situation is definitely one of the things that can bring on more stress. Anytime you're working within a hierarchy, it's difficult, because there will be parts of your power that are given over that you've given over to someone else. So that can be stressful in and of itself. People will want you to do things that you might not like, or you might not understand why they want you to do them, but that's part of the job. So that's always stressful.

Once stress has taken its grip, the symptoms are pretty obvious. These include hostility and defensiveness, feelings of failure and worthlessness, cynicism, mood swings, anxiety about health, a lack of enthusiasm or energy, pessimism, isolation, and depression.
Well, there are lots of ways that stress can negatively affect a nurse in work. Primarily, you could lose your job either by acting out with too much stress if you're more irritable or aggressive or if you start not going to work as a result of stress by wanting to avoid stress.

Stress can lead to a number of destructive coping techniques such as alcohol, drugs, and overeating. Learning to manage stress is critical. Or it can lead to more chronic or harmful conditions.

Nursing is an extremely rewarding profession that involves caring and healing. At the same time, it is ripe for stress due to its unique nature. Common stressors in nursing include coping with difficult patients, patient family demands, the emotional impact of death and dying, conflicts with other staff, a lack of support and resources, increased responsibility, concerns about treatment and patient care, worry about having adequate technical knowledge and skills, a constant review of policies and required documentation, and working long shifts or night shifts.

The bottom line on stress is you're feeling out of control. So anything can stress you, the time, the fact that you don't have enough time. Time is out of your control. What's in your control is prioritizing, delegating, things that you can do. So the question is asking yourself, what can I do?

Nurses are always asked to take on increasing responsibilities, including shifts, additional workloads, and extra patients. Some of these tasks can be satisfied. But trying to do too much work in too little time can be very stressful. This is especially true of personality types who find it hard to say no.

So much of what we-- what a nurse does is make decisions in the moment. Understand what's going on. Observe. This was Florence Nightingale's first charge to us is observe how things are happening, why they're happening, and then finding strategies for dealing with that.

Nurses must also navigate constant changes with new policies and procedures in constant flux. This can lead to feelings of uncertainty about job duties or responsibilities, another stress trigger.

If we can look at the changes that are constantly asked of nurses, the technology is really one of the primary things that's driving it. Quality improvement is driving it, as well as patient satisfaction is driving these stressors for people and trying to get the nurses to do their best. And they are supposed to be good at everything, the best at everything. And it is pretty difficult task that one person is asked to.

Change is constant in health care, changing the way you do health care. So change is something that could stress you, because it's out of your hands. It's out of your control.

Another stress factor is poor communication. Nurses must talk to many health care providers to manage a patient's care and often in busy, noisy situations.

There are multiple things that are demanded of a nurse within a very, very short time. For example, a nurse is waiting on a phone call that's on hold, some family member that wants to talk. It might be a nurse, another nurse, who is asking questions about her patients or his patients. There's a doctor who's on the phone or standing there and asking questions about this particular patient. There's a chaplain there or a social worker. The pager that they carry is probably going off or the phone that's been given by the institution is going off. And so these are all the distractions.

Nightshifts can be especially challenging these night owls often face exhaustion, as it can be hard to sleep during sunny daylight hours and with neighborhood noise distractions. Nurses on the night shift are also at odds with everyone else's schedule, making it challenging to balance personal responsibilities and routines.

Night shift sleep cycles don't match the circadian rhythm your brain sets according to light and dark cues. It can feel like having constant jet lag. Sleep deprivation results in a lack of melatonin in your body. This can be linked to countless health issues such as cancers, hypertension, and memory loss.
According to the Journal of the National Cancer Institute, a study on the effects of night work on a nurse's health showed some startling results. The night shift worker tended to develop more unhealthy habits like smoking, high doses of caffeine, and overeating unhealthy food. Women who worked on the night shift for 15 years had a 35% increased risk of developing colorectal cancer than daytime shift workers.

Stress doesn't just affect our bodies. There can be negative consequences that affect our work and careers. Stress makes us distracted and numb. This results in a reduced quality of patient care, a lack of concentration, and an inability to make decisions. Obviously, this leads to a potential for harmful mistakes and negative effects on workplace culture and job security. It also damages reputations in the way that others perceive us.

Mistakes and errors, nurse medical errors are largely due to stressful situations where nurses or others may be under a lot of stress and pressure.

The nursing profession is one of the most rewarding yet one of the most stressful careers. It's critical to recognize the warning signs of stress so that it can be addressed and managed before it's too late.

Stress has a negative impact on our bodies. If it isn't dealt with, it can become chronic and lead to all sorts of health disorders, a challenge for nurses who spend most of their time on their feet. Common physical results include fatigue, headaches, back and shoulder pain, chest pain, stomachaches, elevated blood pressure, and panic attacks. High cortisol levels due to stress can lead to trouble sleeping and insomnia.

Sometimes at night, when we finally are just done with the day, we get to lay our heads down on the pillow. And then our body's ready to turn off. But our mind just is going at five million miles an hour. And of course, it's going to cause you problems getting to sleep. Sometimes those thoughts are going to pop up and wake you up during the night, tossing and turning, just a very restless sleep. And so the next day, you're not going to wake up feeling refreshed. You're still going to be faced with those stressors.

The cortisol release for fight or flight energy can cause vascular changes that result in a tension headache or migraine. Stress also causes muscle tension, which can worsen headaches or result in back and shoulder pain. Muscle tightness around the chest area and rib cage can also produce chest pain. Stress also affects our intestinal tract, resulting in stomach pain and bowel discomfort.

Stressful situations temporarily raise blood pressure by constricting vessels and speeding up your heart rate. Chronic stress may lead to more permanent changes in blood pressure. So it needs to be managed.

A panic attack is a sudden feeling of acute and disabling anxiety. It induces feelings of intense fear. And symptoms include palpitations, sweating, trembling or shaking, and a shortness of breath. There can be serious consequences to prolonged stress such as an increased risk of stroke or heart attack and a weakened immune system. An American Heart Association study concluded that higher levels of stress were associated with a significantly increased risk of stroke in middle aged and older adults.

Long term stress also lowers the immunity in otherwise healthy adults, making them vulnerable to infection and disease. This is a real concern for nurses surrounded by sick patients.

The stress gets into your muscles and ligaments. And this is frequently what happens with fibromyalgia and chronic fatigue and things that are autoimmune conditions as a freeze response. And if you freeze long enough without releasing that stress, it becomes stuck. And you get pain, physical pain, stiffness, inability to move.

Stress also leads to behavior that plays a negative role on our health such as over or undereating, smoking, alcohol or drug abuse, and social isolation. All these coping behaviors can add more damage to our bodies.

Using drugs or substances or alcohol to try to deal or manage the stress, these can be effective. But they're also addictive frequently. And so, sometimes people get into a downward spiral in terms of the ways that they're using to manage the stress.
The good news is that all of these physical symptoms are manageable if the underlying stress is addressed.

Stress adds negative aspects to personal relationships, both physically and emotionally. Bringing home insecurities, anger, irritability, and anxiety stirs up conflict that can escalate if good communication isn't there.

Because your heart is so involved as a nurse, and because nursing is a relationship profession, your relationships at home may affect how you are at work. If things are disruptive, if you're having difficulty with your spouse or the children, or if you've got somebody in your family who's sick, this may impact how effective, how open and available you are in your professional situation. In the same way, it goes in the other direction.

A strain on relationships easily happens when we don't separate our work and personal lives. With all of the stressors of nursing, never mind the long shifts, it's too easy to bring the baggage of work into your personal life and vent your frustrations on those closest to you.

Most people have a travel time that they will either coming to work or going home. Spend that time as a time out time where learn to let go of what happened today so that you can give the best when you get home. And the issues at home, resolve those. Think that one through. Work with somebody on the way back to work. And say, I'm going to deal with this at a next appropriate time. And now I'm ready to go to work. Let me set myself in a work mindset.

Stress can also lower your sex drive and get in the way of intimacy. Stress increases levels of cortisol, which suppresses sex hormones. Stress can also result in weight gain. This may lead to a negative body image, which can also affect relationships if you're embarrassed about how you look.

Really wreaks havoc with intimacy, because intimacy is about being vulnerable and allowing that other person to be with you in a very connected way. Stress interferes with that totally.

Stress can make us question our relationships, especially when frustrations and conflicts arise. No one wants to be around people who fly off the handle or completely shut down in communication. And no one wants to be that person either.

There are some people that are really drawn to drama. And they will talk in the most dramatic ways about normal life situations.

Avoiding conflicts in personal relationships requires good communication and understanding, positive support, and a positive self-image.

Probably the main thing is to say, this is a stressful job. And I'm going to feel stress in it. And that's natural. Sometimes we think of stress as a bad thing or a negative thing. And that winds up making people more stressed out. So if you just acknowledge that the stress I'm feeling is normal, the stress of being in a hierarchy is very difficult. There's another word for stress that we use sometimes in business. It's called fear. It can be scary dealing with other people. It can be scary dealing with people that are dying or very sick. All these things bring stress.

Stress can impact how others perceive us in the workplace, including supervisors, peers, patients, and family members.

Some common behaviors related to stress include cynicism, paranoia, depression, jealousy, and resentment. Any of these behaviors can lead to very strained interactions at work. Outbursts or complete withdrawal can also isolate you from your peers, making stress even more difficult to cope with.

Is the nurse aware that he or she is having outbursts? Sometimes people don't realize, this is a workplace and a professional place. And home is different. You can do whatever you want to do at home. But there are some guidelines and behavior expectations of people when you are in your uniform.
Stress can lead to disruptive behaviors and vice versa. A breakdown in communication and collaboration threatens the safety of both patients and staff.

Disruptive behavior can include the use of threatening or abusive language, degrading or humiliating someone in front of others, negative, nonverbal communication such as rolling eyes in disgust, refusing to help others, and intimidation or bullying. These behaviors may be a consequence of stress or result in it.

Too often, folks turn to drugs or medication or alcohol as way to help the adrenaline system to calm down a little bit. Short term, that apparently can be a good thing. But so often, it turns into long term use and addiction. And especially with nurses, this is a great way to lose your license, probably the best way to lose your license is to develop a natural addiction because you were trying to deal with something difficult.

While we can't control others at work, we can control our own behavior in response to stressful events or negative people, whether patients or our fellow nurses.

It's important to develop a strong support system with coworkers. Build trust. Communicate well. Take breaks to avoid burnout. Set realistic workload expectations. Remain organized. And avoid negative people, especially those that evoke more stress.

It's really important to have a really nice, supportive work environment with people that you like. And if you're in one of those situations where you don't like who you're working with, do everything you can to get transferred or to find a different situation, because there are no techniques to-- that can overcome not liking who you're working with.

Since stress has so many negative effects on the body and mind, exercise and nutrition are critical for managing it. But sometimes, that's easier said than done.

Number one, it has to be a priority. You have to build time into your schedule. So it can be done. But yes, it does require work. And it does require effort.

Staying physically fit will give you the energy you need for work.

Balancing work and home gives more meaning to your life, especially if you take time for hobbies or activities you enjoy. This will naturally make you more positive in other aspects of your life.

Proper diet and nutrition is something you can control both at home and at work.

Most work sites have a cafeteria. And if they don't have a cafeteria, they might be located near a food community where you can eat out. And yes, you can get healthy choices available at most restaurants. But again, it takes some effort. You can also pack your lunch, which is my personal thing I like to do, simply because then you're in control of what your choices are every day.

Countless studies have shown the benefits of exercise. Being active boosts feel good endorphins and goes a long way toward stress management. Exercise helps put you in a meditative mood, focused on your bodies wellbeing. And this is a great distraction from stress.

Physical activity releases daily tension and helps you focus on tasks with more calm and clarity. It also improves your mood by increasing self-confidence while lowering symptoms of depression and anxiety.

It makes you feel accomplished. It makes you feel proud. It makes you feel like you've succeeded.

Activity also improves sleep, a common stress-related issue. Finding time to exercise takes some planning. You need to set realistic goals and schedule regular exercise into your week. Taking classes or exercising with a friend or significant other can help with motivation.
Sometimes, you do things more for other people than you do for yourself. So you don't want to disappoint them. So you might not want to go to the exercise class. But knowing that, oh gosh, if I don't go, she won't go. I better go. That kind of thing.

Many studies have also shown the benefits of good nutrition on stress. The opposite is true of a poor diet.

Cortisol is a hormone released in times of stress. Studies have linked it to cravings for sugar and fat. If someone has a high body mass index, they're even more susceptible to cravings.

Overeating due to stress can lead to obesity, heart disease, and cancer.

If people eat bad, even for a week, with no exercise, I've seen it in me personally, because I had lab-- basically, I had lab tests done at the end of that week. And my liver enzymes were already compromised in just one week of eating badly and not exercising. So it happens fairly quickly, especially when you get into middle age.

In addition to cravings, a poor diet can lead to fatigue, poor concentration, irritability, and restlessness.

It's important to fuel our bodies with stress-busting nutrients. They help us kick up our metabolism for the energy we need all day. Planning meals can help you stay on track.

Consider packing healthy snacks and lunches for work and only keeping healthy options available at home. It's very important to limit fat and sugar intake. Avoiding alcohol and nicotine has also been shown to greatly reduce stress.

All of these things will have an effect, maybe a good effect for a few minutes, but then it'll have a counter effect. And that's where it starts to deteriorate the body.

Developing good communication skills can significantly help to avoid stressful misunderstandings and false assumptions. It also reduces feelings of resentment and tension.

Good communication involves listening, open mindedness, and humility when we have to admit mistakes.

Communicating well has many benefits beyond stress reduction.

It improves trust, better understanding and cooperation, and more effective teamwork and problem solving.

If you're stressed at work, it can help to communicate with senior nurses who may have gone through similar situations. Their wisdom and tips can be invaluable. Sharing feelings informally with coworkers also helps lift the problems off your chest while gaining advice and encouragement.

The more you can be human, and share your vulnerability with someone else, and learn from what they have experienced, and find your own solutions, the better nurse you can be to others.

If communicating your feelings with coworkers is uncomfortable or awkward, speak with a professional health counselor. Most employee assistance programs offer such options.

Professional help can be useful if you experience traumatic stress, if you're having flashbacks, if you are obsessing about the situation.

Assertiveness can also help to control stress and improve your coping skills. Being assertive doesn't mean being aggressive.

Aggressive communication comes across as bullying and a complete disregard of other people's opinions. Others will perceive you in a negative light and may resent or even avoid you.
Being assertive doesn't come naturally to everyone. It can be far easier to be passive and go with the flow. But passive communication often results in messages not being heard or the perception that your voice isn't as important as others.

A passive communication style can lead to more stress and feelings of resentment, anger, and victimization.

Passive communication is not honest communication. It's not the truth. It's holding back. Or it's saying something that you think someone else might want to hear but isn't exactly what you meant to say. We can't solve problems without being honest and truthful. Now that doesn't mean being rude and offensive. It simply means being assertive.

Assertiveness is a self-esteem booster and can earn you respect from others. This helps with stress if your normal habit is to take on too many responsibilities or if you have a hard time saying no.

Most of us in the helping profession, that's who we're here to help. We're not here to lead. And it comes difficult, I think, for some people, I would say most people, to be assertive and to say, "Well, this is what I think ought to be done." In the nursing profession, the expectation in a setting is that they are to take orders from someone else such as a physician.

Being assertive has many benefits beyond stress reduction. It helps with self-confidence and self-esteem, creates healthier and more honest work relationships, and improves job satisfaction.

Some of the benefits of assertive communication is people know that you have thought things through or felt things through.

Relaxation is another great stress buster. Just 10 minutes of quiet time can have a big impact.

Deep relaxation has the opposite effect of the fight or flight stress response. It allows the body to experience a decrease in heart rate, respiration, blood pressure, and muscle tension. Other benefits include a reduction in anxiety, increased energy, improved concentration, and increased self-confidence.

When you're relaxed, information comes to you that you haven't thought of before. The real benefit is your body is available. And your mind is available. And your emotions are available. Everything's available to you when you're relaxed.

Relaxation techniques take patience and practice to be used effectively in stressful times.

Helpful relaxation techniques include deep breathing, visualization, meditation, and progressive muscle relaxation.

Stress can result in increased breathing rate. Deep breathing allows you to take in fuller, slower breaths that reflect a relaxed state. Deep breaths have a tremendous calming effect and can be done any time to reduce stress.

Visualization involves using imagery to immerse us into a pleasant environment, such as a tropical beach or mountaintop, and paying attention to sights, sounds, smells and tactile sensations.

Positive self-talk also helps. Too often, we fill our own heads with negative self-talk.

I don't know what I'm doing. I'm going to get fired, I'm too fat, and so forth. It's important to stop that when it happens and replace the negative thoughts with positive ones.

You don't underscore the gift that you have. And when you underscore those, obviously, we let the other negative or the not so well developed side of us take a better hold of us.
Mindfulness practice is a popular way to reduce stress. It's typically a mental exercise that involves a concentration on one's breathing or repetition of a mantra.

Some popular types of mindfulness include prayer, transcendental meditation, zen meditation, and Buddhist meditation.

Progressive muscle relaxation is a technique for tensing and releasing different muscle groups to relieve stress. By repeating this simple action, you learn to recognize the difference between tense and relaxed muscles. This helps to induce relaxation at the first signs of muscular tensions that accompany stress.

The goal in any type of meditation is to quiet the mind and free the body from stress through the use of quiet contemplation and reflection.

Nurses certainly know about stress and often have to help their patients manage it. But nursing is by nature stressful. And sometimes, it's easier said than done to take care of one's self. Stress is the body's way of responding to outside pressures and can be brought on by many factors.

Common ones include relationship conflicts, health issues, financial worries, and problems at work.

It's important to recognize symptoms of stress in order to manage it.

Symptoms include hostility and defensiveness, feelings of failure and worthlessness, cynicism, mood swings, health anxiety, lack of enthusiasm or energy, pessimism, isolation, and depression. Common stressors in the nursing industry include coping with difficult patients, patient family demands, the emotional impact of death and dying, conflicts with other staff, a lack of support and resources, increased responsibilities, concerns about treatment and patient care, worry about having adequate technical knowledge and skills, and working long shifts or night shifts.

Stress can have a very negative impact on work, including a reduced quality of patient care, a lack of concentration, and an inability to make decisions. Obviously, this leads to a potential for harmful mistakes and negative effects on workplace culture and job security. It also damages the way others perceive us.

Common physical results of stress include insomnia and fatigue, headaches, back and shoulder pain, chest pain, stomachaches, elevated blood pressure, and panic attack.

There can be serious dangers to prolonged stress such as increased risk of stroke, heart attack, and weakened immune system. Stress adds negative aspects to personal relationships both physically and emotionally.

Avoiding conflicts in personal relationships requires good communication and understanding, positive support, and a positive self-image.

Stress can impact how others perceive you in the workplace, including supervisors, peers, patients, and family members.

Some common behaviors related to stress include cynicism, paranoia, depression, jealousy, and resentment. Any of these behaviors can lead to very strained interactions. To combat stress in the workplace, it's important to develop a strong support system with coworkers. Build trust, communicate well, take breaks to avoid burnout, set realistic workload expectations, remain organized, and avoid negative people, especially those that evoke more stress.

Since stress has so many negative effects on the body and mind, exercise and nutrition are critical for managing it. But sometimes, that's easier said than done.

Physical activity releases daily tensions and helps refocus on tasks with more calm and clarity. Many studies have also shown the benefits of good nutrition on stress. The opposite is true of a poor diet, which can lead to obesity, heart disease, and cancer.
Developing good communication skills can significantly help to avoid stressful misunderstandings and false assumptions. Communicating well has many benefits beyond stress reduction.

It improves trusts, better understanding and cooperation, and more effective teamwork and problem solving.

Assertiveness can also help you control stress while improving your coping skills.

Being assertive has many benefits beyond stress reduction. It helps with self-confidence and self-esteem, creates healthier and more honest work relationships, and results in greater job satisfaction.

Relaxation is another great stress buster. Deep relaxation has the opposite effect of the fight or flight stress response.

It allows the body to experience a decrease in heart rate, respiration, blood pressure, and muscle tension. Other benefits include a reduction in anxiety increased energy, improved concentration, and increased self-confidence. Recognizing stress factors and managing them through diet, exercise, good communication, and relaxation techniques can help you keep your cool.

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