



## Fueling the Spark

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I recently attended an interprofessional summit focusing on the promotion of resilience and well-being in health care. According to information released by the National Academy of Medicine (2018), an estimated 43% of nurses experience high emotional exhaustion, one of the dimensions of burnout, which also includes cynicism and a decreasing sense of professional and personal accomplishment (Bridgeman, Bridgeman, & Barone, 2018; Ochentel, Humphrey, & Pfeifer, 2018).

Emotional exhaustion has been described as a feeling of physical depletion and an inability to provide the physical and mental effort (often at high levels) required to accomplish your job. Feelings of apathy are common, along with an increasing sense of frustration (Bridgeman et al., 2018). As the result of work-related stress, shortages of staffing and other resources, and the sense of having to do more with less, emotional exhaustion among nursing staff can lead to high turnover rates for facilities as well as exact a personal toll for the nurse (Viotti & Converso, 2016).

### Effects of Emotional Fatigue

A consequence of caring for high-acuity patients with short staffing, the threat of burnout is real and something I experienced firsthand. I found myself sleeping poorly and becoming short-tempered at home. I began to question my choice of profession; I still loved the patient care aspect but there was something missing. I felt I didn't have the time to provide the type of care I wanted. The joy in the comradery with other nurses on the unit seemed diminished. The environment had a negative undercurrent to it; no matter how hard I tried to lift others up, nothing seemed to work. What's more, others' negativity seemed to impact my outlook as well.

My own actions probably contributed to my feelings of emotional exhaustion and the dimming of the profession's allure. I frequently volunteered for extra shifts to make extra cash and to have the opportunity to increase my experience and knowledge. I didn't realize at the time how this would have a negative impact on my ability to rebound after code or near-code situations, or how it would impact my relationship with family and friends.

A recent survey by Kronos, Inc. (2017), noted 85% of participating nurses reported emotional fatigue while 63% stated they were currently experiencing manifestations of burnout. Burnout impacts up to 70% of nurses at one point or another during their careers (Bridgeman et al., 2018), involving everything from emotional shut-down to manifestations of physical and psychological illnesses. The long-term effects can include heart disease, metabolic syndrome, and depression. Burnout also results in poor patient safety outcomes, increased medical errors (Bridgeman et al., 2018), and hospital-acquired infections (Colindres et al., 2018).

### Building Resilience

Counteracting burnout and building personal resilience involves taking care of yourself, making time for regular rest periods to restore yourself physically and spiritually; taking part in general strengthening exercises; and finding a coach or mentor to provide occupational support. This three-pronged approach promotes faster recovery following a stressful event and decreases the risk of burnout (Ochentel et al., 2018).

The literature is full of recommendations to build nurse resilience and prevent burnout. Strategies that appear consistently include awareness through formal education programs; provision of formal (e.g., The Daisy Foundation™ which recognizes nurses for compassionate and extraordinary care) and informal social support (e.g., by the nurse manager or members of the nursing team); and recognition and change of the factors that promote burnout (Adriaenssens, DeGucht, & Maes, 2015; Kelly, Runge, & Spencer, 2015; Viotti & Converso, 2016).

Nurses also can employ many strategies on their own to combat burnout and build resilience. For example, they can engage in regular rest periods, taking a 3-5 minute break by walking outside and engaging in mindfulness practices. Physical activity releases GABA which improves mood while mindfulness activities prevent emotional exhaustion (Rushton, Batcheller, Schroeder, & Donohue, 2015). Taking in a change of scenery, especially walking outside, can help change perspective. I have found it also improves problem solving. Even when I can't get away to walk outside or do the steps in

my building, I often can find a quiet place and practice deep-breathing and mindfulness activities that help me recognize and let go of muscle tension and stress.

Mindfulness is the act of being present in the moment. It involves "a practice of self" (Watson, 1997, p. 51). A number of techniques can be used to engage in mindfulness, including meditation, breathing exercises, yoga, engaging in art, or listening to music. While this may seem simple enough to do, we nurses often have difficulty disengaging our minds from thinking about the next task to be addressed, the needs of a certain patient, or the myriad of things that need to be done at home. We have conditioned ourselves to multi-task yet this is completely contrary to mindfulness practices. According to Sitzman and Watson (2014), "mindfulness practice is meant to help unify mind, body, heart, and spirit with what is happening right now rather than what has been or what may be" (p. 25).

Another important factor in building resilience involves developing a sense of spiritual well-being. In this instance, spirituality can refer to whatever beliefs and values give you a sense of purpose. Reflect on why you entered the profession of nursing to help feel connected to something bigger than yourself. This is especially important to help mitigate feelings of moral distress or during difficult days at work. Having a sense of spiritual well-being can help you navigate the emotional impact from traumatic events and stressful work assignments, especially if this is combined with healthy activities (e.g., exercise, adequate sleep, healthy eating).

Because situations that are challenging both clinically and morally most likely will continue throughout our nursing careers, we must enable ourselves and our colleagues to respond to situations in ways that protect against burnout and to practice methods of building resilience. Education programs cannot be one and done; they must be ongoing and consistent. Practicing good sleeping habits only during time off does not erase the sleep deficit many of us carry. Taking time to be mindful of our practice and values, and establishing reachable goals pertaining to our professional lives, is one way to ensure personal resilience. Watching out for each other and ourselves for the manifestations and warning signs of burnout, and working to resolve these issues on our units and among our team members, can decrease the number of nurses experiencing one or more of the dimensions of burnout.

### Maintaining the Spark

Many (many) years ago, during my pinning ceremony, the graduating nurse candidates lit a candle on a replica of the Nightingale lamp. I was excited about my work as a nurse and passionate about learning all I could. That initial spark of passion has remained, although at times it has burned less brightly. There was a time when I was fearful I had lost that spark altogether. Luckily, I had a wise mentor who helped me through the challenges. She taught me the importance of being

self-compassionate, of doing something kind for myself every day. This act of self-love and caring makes personal well-being a priority. When we do this, we are better able to care for others and meet daily challenges while minimizing the negative impact any challenges may have.

I encourage you to take that first step, commit to an action and do it. This prevents feelings of being trapped and makes the stressors in life more manageable. Author and life coach Tony Robbins (n.d.) stated, "Understanding how to find the magic moments in your daily life is critical. If you subscribe to the philosophy that says, 'My vacation will free me from burnout,' then you're waiting for a few days out of the year to make up for the many days of stress. Instead, you have to be able to take mini-vacations on a daily basis."

AMSN will be beside you along the way and we will continue to work to ensure your spark will not be lost. Through networking on the HUB and at the annual convention, articles in our publications, poster and podium presentations, research, and (soon) podcasts, AMSN strives to help you maintain your spark. Please feel free to e-mail me now and let me know what you do to provide self-care. How do you fuel your spark? [MSN](#)

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