

Strengths-based Stress and Burnout Prevention for Nurse Leaders

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With the ongoing changes in health care, stress and burnout will continue to be major risk factors for nurses in leadership

roles. A high level of self-awareness and understanding of your own strengths can be a powerful strategy to promote your own resiliency and that of your staff.

Stress and burnout are major issues impacting the healthcare workforce. In the recent Institute of Healthcare Improvement (IHI) white paper, *IHI Framework for Improving Joy at Work*, it was noted that if burnout in health care were described in clinical or public health terms, it might well be called an epidemic.¹ The numbers are alarming. A 2015 study found over 50% of physicians report symptoms of burnout.² Up to

83% of critical care nurses have at least one classic sign of burnout. Turnover is up, and morale is down among both staff and their leaders. Research indicates that reasons for burnout fall into four major categories:³

1. Personal characteristics
2. Organizational factors
3. Quality of working relationships

4. Exposure to end-of-life issues

As a syndrome, burnout is characterized by exhaustion, reduced effectiveness, self-esteem, increased cynicism, and most concerning, disengagement from work.

Staff and leader burnout in the healthcare sector undermines the quality of care, customer service, an organization's productivity, patient satisfaction, and patient safety. It leads to lower levels of staff engagement, which correlate with lower patient experience and productivity and an increased risk of workplace accidents. These all significantly affect the financial vitality of an organization. The impact on patient care is even more concerning. Lower levels of staff engagement are linked with lower-quality patient care and a higher potential for medical errors. Burnout also impacts the empathy of providers—a crucial component of effective and patient-centered care.¹

The reduction of stress and burnout has become a leadership imperative in health care. In addition to improving work environments using the frameworks such as that developed by IHI, there are many stress prevention and resiliency interventions that have been designed to prevent burnout.¹ One intervention widely used in other business sectors, but less common in healthcare environments, is the promotion of strengths-based culture to reduce stress and prevent burnout. The purpose of this article is to describe a strengths-based approach for nurse leaders to reduce stress and prevent burnout.

THE STRENGTHS MOVEMENT

The strengths movement is built on a positive psychology model directed toward helping individuals discover and capitalize on their strengths and talents rather than on fixing weaknesses.⁴ Gallup CliftonStrengths is a 177-question online assessment developed by Dr. Donald Clifton, who is considered the Father of Strengths Psychology.⁵ In his book, *Soar With Your Strengths*, Clifton wrote that, “the study of strengths leads to an understanding of the difference between good and great.” He also noted that burnout is usually produced by the resistance experienced when doing what you're not good at. Burnout rarely occurs when you pursue a strength.⁶

Along with researchers at Gallup, Clifton discovered that an individual's greatest opportunity for success both in work and life is building on what are described as your natural talents or strengths.⁷ Clifton created a language of the 34 most common strengths or talent themes.⁴ Our strengths represent our innate power and potential. Using one's strengths, there are many different ways of successfully achieving the same outcome, including individual stress management and promotion of one's own resiliency.

The research on the relationship between strengths-based cultures and staff engagement is compelling. More than 18,000,000 individuals globally have taken the CliftonStrengths assessment. Using their strength finders and employee engagement data, Gallup analysis reveals that people who use their strengths daily are 3 times more likely to report an excellent quality of life, are 8% more productive, and 6 times more likely

to be engaged in their jobs. According to Gallup, the effects on organizations, which implemented strengths-based management practices, have resulted in the following outcomes: 3% to 7% higher customer engagement, 6% to 16% less turnover in low turnover organizations, 26% to 72% less turnover in high turnover organizations, and a 9% to 15% increase in employee engagement.⁸ Many companies have made strengths-based coaching part of the foundation of their talent development due to strong return on investment findings.

IMPACT ON INDIVIDUAL LEADERS—A COACHING EXAMPLE

As a Gallup Certified Coach, I use CliftonStrengths when coaching clients to increase their resiliency. A recent client was Karen, a nurse leader in a health care environment. Becoming a nurse leader was not just a career choice for Karen, it was a calling. She was quite successful—or so she thought. Several personal and health-related events in 2017 led her to recognize that she should reflect more on her life. She realized she experienced personal burnout and decided to step back from her leadership position. She also sought coaching to enhance her resiliency prior to taking the next steps in her career.

Karen took the CliftonStrengths assessment prior to our first coaching session. Her top 5 talent themes were:

1. Learner
2. Intellection
3. Deliberative
4. Input
5. Analytic

These talent themes are unique to Karen and explained some of the feelings she had about her work. The likelihood that any two individuals would have the top 5 strengths in the same order is 1 in 33 million, providing evidence of our uniqueness.⁴ Karen always felt that she needed to change something in her life because she perceived herself as being so different from her coworkers and peers. She wanted to be more like them and completely ignored the power and beauty of her own uniqueness. She performed very well until her body made her stop. During our coaching session, we discussed why everyone needs to feed their talents in order to be successful, happy, and healthy. One's talents explain how humans can recharge their batteries and develop resiliency. Being aware of what you need to do to be successful and happy is the key to resiliency. It is interesting that the new IHI framework includes appreciative inquiry designed to also tap into individual strengths or bright spots by asking the question, “When we are at our best, what does that look like?”¹

Stressful situations will occur, and applying the talents you possess to navigate during rocky times can be a very powerful tool. When you are aware of your strengths, you are more in control of what is happening and you are able to recover very quickly and get back on track. Not using your talents is equivalent to ignoring your basic needs. Resiliency is then almost impossible, and your body faces a much harder challenge recovering.

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