

STAYING MENTALLY HEALTHY

We all know that nursing is a highly stressful profession. Unfortunately, while nurses, like many in the caring professions, have mastered the art of caring for the physical and emotional needs of others, they tend to forget how to care for themselves and each other.

In their daily work nurses confront many challenges and intensely rewarding experiences, but they are also constantly confronting huge emotional and professional demands. So, this, together with the tendency to put patients first, and the constant attempt to meet the expectations of society, managers, institutions, and even themselves, places nurses in a high risk category for physical and mental ill-health due to the ongoing exposure to stress. And, while significant progress has been made in managing physical risks associated with their work, unfortunately the same level of progress has not been made where risks to our mental health are concerned.

Inevitably nurses do find that some sources of stress are difficult to eliminate. However, with a raised awareness of some of the signs and symptoms that indicate where stress might become a problem, and through attaining some skills and strategies to assist with overcoming some of the pressures, nurses will be better equipped to avoid the seriously negative impacts of stress.

Following are some proven ways of managing stress:

- Learn to challenge thoughts and assumptions as this can change the way you think and feel about situations. With the high level of day-to-day pressure faced by many nurses it is easy to fall into unhelpful (negative) thinking patterns. The trick is to recognise these patterns and work towards changing them.
- Build relaxation techniques into your day and practise regularly to improve these skills that can control your emotions and improve your physical well being.
- If you notice stress symptoms talk to someone, even talking to a friend can be beneficial and can reduce the length of a stress response ¹.
- Take advantage of the Employee Assistance Program, if your institution has one. If you were feeling unwell you would go to a GP, so if you notice symptoms of stress access the EAP.

For more information the following resources are helpful:

The NSW Nurses' Association offers a free publication, the Nurses Stress Management Booklet

<http://www.nswnurses.asn.au/infopages/5696.html>

Davis, M., Eshelman, E.R., and McKay, M 2008, The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook, New Harbinger Publications, Oakland.

Williams, C 2010, Overcoming Anxiety, Stress and Panic, A Five Areas Approach, Hodder Arnold, London.

Karen Mace is a Registered Nurse, Educator and Qualified Counsellor with her own counselling practice, Healing Place Ministries.

¹ Davis, M., Eshelman, E.R., and McKay, M 2008, The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook, New Harbinger Publications, Oakland, p.10.