Holistic Modalities & Self-Care: Hope for the Prevention and Recovery of Professional Burnout

by MARIA PEREZ, MSN, RNC-OB, LHRM

Nurses are experiencing work-stress levels beyond the capacity of a normal human tolerance. They are complaining of burning out in the workplace and wanting to leave the profession. Some nurses find another job in health care while others leave the profession all together. Feeling powerless influences what happens to overstressed nurses, and one of the ways they can be helped is by preventing burnout. Ultimately, the goal is to prevent nurses from leaving the profession by helping them manage their stress using holistic modalities to raise their self-awareness and connectedness. Nurses are becoming aware of nontraditional, supportive modalities, such as aromatherapy, Reiki, Therapeutic Touch, massage therapy, and many others. These therapies offer nurses an opportunity to render care by addressing not only their own physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual well-being, but also that of their patients. Empowering nurses to use holistic modalities could prevent burnout, therefore, reducing turnover rates in hospital facilities and improving patient care.
Understanding Burnout
Burnout syndrome involves a stressful job in health care where emotional exhaustion (depletion of energy), depersonalization (unfeeling and impersonal response), and a reduction in personal satisfaction from work (lack of sense of accomplishment) are the symptoms (Organopoulou, Tsrioni, Malliarou, Alikari, & Zyga, 2014). Nurses tend to burn out due to the unrealistic demands and expectations of themselves which cause irrational thinking; therefore, burnout continues (Balevre, Cassells, & Buzaienu, 2012). This vicious cycle of burnout takes on a life of its own, which leads nurses to desperation.

According to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (2009), work burnout is prevalent among high-risk jobs due to overworking the employees. Nurses are experiencing work-related burnout due to budget cuts and the continual demand of a heavier workload, which are causing tension and extreme stress in their work environments. In turn, the inability to manage stress leads to burnout. Nurses are struggling with job stress, feeling drained, unappreciated, disconnected, and unable to cope with everyday problems, which are known precursors to burnout (Freudenberger, 1975, Leiter & Maslach, 2009). Socialized to care for others and not themselves, nurses also struggle with balancing work and family. Stress consumes the enthusiasm of new nurses to the point where their motivation and spirits are broken (Balevre et al., 2012).

Fortunately, holistic treatment modalities are emerging as beneficial to the reduction of stress. Once nurses achieve control over their stress response, they feel in control and empowerment occurs. Providing nurses with a basic understanding of holistic modalities can potentiate the restoration of harmony and balance to their lives.

Restoring Harmony:
Theoretical Perspectives Related to Burnout
Martha Rogers believed that there are energy fields fundamental to living and non-living things which are in constant change. Howard Butcher’s (1993) Theory of Kaleidoscoping in Life’s Turbulence, derived from Rogers’ Science of Unitary Human Beings and chaos theory, views crisis as life process – irregular, unpredictable, and always changing. Identifying these mutual patterns helps cultivate purpose and can transform “turbulent life events into opportunities for growth, self-actualization, creativity, and harmony” (Butcher, 1993, p.190). Recovering harmony from a turbulent event is achieving a sense of courage, balance, calm, and resilience in the art of kaleidoscoping, (Butcher & Malinski, 2015). Rogers placed great emphasis on teaching nurses modalities that are non-invasive and holistic, such as massage, storytelling, journaling, and movement to promote health and strengthen the human energy field (Butcher & Malinski, 2015).

Jean Watson’s theory of Human Caring suggests that to ensure caring and healing for others, the nurse needs to care for his or herself. Watson (2015) believed that intentional caring-healing modalities for the nurse would enhance his or her caring for patients. She writes, “The caring-healing modalities within the context of transpersonal caring/caritas consciousness potentiates harmony, wholeness, and unity of being by releasing some of the disharmony, the blocked energy that interferes with the natural healing process” (Watson, 2015, p. 327). Watson believed that using methods such as yoga, meditation, communication with nature, and prayer, just to name a few, are modalities used to achieve healing (Fontaine, 2015). These theories create a conceptual framework for the use of holistic modalities to restore harmony and wholeness to nurses who are recovering from burnout and help them better manage work-related stress.

The Role of Relationships
Healthcare professionals often work with people who are under stress, which can be emotionally draining and a risk factor for burnout (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Freudenberger (1975) clearly observed and documented that the helping professionals exhaust themselves attempting to solve crises for other people on a regular basis, which can lead to serious implications in patient care. Nurses tend to make more errors or act less caring or compassionate when they have reached intolerable stress levels.

Furthermore, empirical findings have indicated that workplace conditions, such as burnout, increasing patient-to-nurse ratio, and psychological and physical stress contribute to nursing dissatisfaction and high turnover rates that add to the shortage of nurses (Vitale, 2009). Deterioration can cause a reduction in the quality of care and affect job turnover, absenteeism, and low morale (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). A new bedside RN can cost a facility upwards of $58,400 (NSI Nursing Solutions, 2016). There is an infinite amount of work left to be done in this area.

Holistic Modalities for Nurses
Using holistic modalities to raise nurses’ self-awareness, self-healing, and connectedness can help them manage stress and prevent them from leaving the profession due to burnout (Vitale, 2009). Even in 1975, holistic modalities were being recommended to help prevent burnout. Freudenberger (1975), recommended that to prevent burnout, workers should take a mental and emotional break through the use of physical exercise, meditation, or yoga. Integrating holistic modalities, such as aromatherapy, acupuncture, massage, pet therapy, music therapy, yoga, biofeedback, energy work, meditation, self-hypnosis, and guided imagery, to name a few, may help

continued on page 22
reduce anxiety, restore health and balance, and offer nurses a sense of purpose and meaning in their work. For example, Touch Therapy and Reiki are inexpensive and noninvasive; they help reduce stress, pain, musculoskeletal conditions, depression, and anxiety, and produce relaxation and healing (Vitale, 2009). Nurses can use the conceptual framework of relaxation or stress reduction to achieve and identify measures of these holistic treatments.

There is existing literature to suggest that use of holistic practices may reduce nurse burnout, but it is limited. Several studies address specifics of complementary and alternative medicine in relationship to treating nurse burnout (see box at right). These studies support further investigation into nursing burnout and the effects of holistic modalities to reduce stress.

Balevre et al.’s (2012) findings suggest that nurses need to change their thinking patterns to prevent burnout. Nurses are self-sacrificing which leads to increased stress levels. In Organopoulou et al.’s (2014) study, burnout was more evident in the nursing profession. Cuneo, et al. (2011), demonstrates how the body is connected to the nurse’s energy field and how this affects work environment or the nurse’s personal life. Vitale (2009) specifically addressed holistic therapies for improvement of stress management for well-being in nurses and patients. She encouraged health care to advocate for holistic therapies in the workplace. Research indicates that Reiki and/or Healing Touch are effective in reducing work-related stress, which supports the need for a qualitative phenomenology study of nurses’ lived experiences with burnout and holistic modalities.

**Looking to the Future**

Research needs to be conducted on the effectiveness of each of the holistic therapies through nurses’ lived experiences with burnout. Phenomenology gives rise to the

---

**What Does the Research Show?**

Literature searches on burnout on CINAHL produced 18,203 articles. Narrowing the search to peer-reviewed works related to nursing produced 254 articles. MEDLINE with the same inclusion produced 82 articles and ProQuest produced 192 dissertations. The following is a sampling of research on the use of holistic modalities for self-care and preventing burnout in nurses.

- Vitale (2009) observed that Reiki keeps nurses balanced, centered, and grounded which reduced their stress levels and anxieties, prevented burnout, and led to healing. This phenomenological study also concluded that:
  - self-Reiki is useful for stress management, especially during the workday.
  - being a self-healer in holistic nursing helps nurses de-stress and generates focus.
  - educators need to incorporate practices in holistic nursing into curricula.

- Tang, Tegeler, Larrimore, Cowgill, and Kemper (2010) conducted a quasi-experimental study that measured the stress of nurse leaders in an academic health center after a treatment period of Healing Touch. The nurse leaders self-reported significant improvement in depression, stress, anxiety, relaxation, well-being, and sleep after completing Healing Touch training.

- Cuneo, et al. (2011) demonstrated that educating nurses in Reiki decreased work-related stress after three weeks, including significant improvement in sleep, relaxation, calmness, peacefulness, and feeling of warm/hot.

- Balevre, Cassells, and Buzaiianu (2012) reported a significant correlation between maladaptive thinking patterns and nurses’ burnout thoughts and burnout behaviors. Highlights of this quantitative replication study include the following findings:
  - Nurses with specialty certification are less likely to have thoughts focused on failure and feelings of inadequacy, which may help protect them from burnout.
  - Nurses who work during the day can exhibit the maladaptive thinking of the self-sacrificing pattern that leads to burnout.
  - Regular stress management programs can provide nurses with the tools they need to diminish irrational beliefs that lead to professional burnout.

- Organopoulou, Tsironi, Malliarou, Alikari, and Zyga (2014) found that a low level of education seems to have a positive correlation with the phenomenon of burnout along with high levels of anxiety. Interesting findings of this survey study include:
  - a correlation between gender and anxiety; women have more anxiety than men.
  - higher levels of anxiety and greater burnout among nurses than physicians.
  - lower levels of depersonalization among physicians than nurses.
possibility of new meaning emerging from people’s lived experiences by revisiting turbulent life events and providing understanding (Crotty, 1998). According to Rodgers (2005), phenomenology is the interplay between the perception, objects, and reality of human experience that shape the events or objects which have shaped the experience. Hermeneutical phenomenology as a choice, when researching the topic of complementary and alternative medicine with nurses who have burnout syndrome, would add to the researcher’s interpretation of the data. Purely describing the experience with transcendental phenomenology would just leave the topic open to subjective interpretation. A phenomenological study would help nurses as healers and the patients through their lived experiences. Implementation of a pilot study on the effects of holistic therapies on nurse burnout would provide valuable insight into caring for future nurses and increasing retention.

Research on burnout needs to be presented to encourage involvement at local and national levels because of the nursing shortage crisis. Nurse researchers can raise awareness of the growing numbers of nurses who burn out and leave the profession. As change agents, the challenge will be to advocate for changes to provide safety for nurses and preservation of professionals in practice by helping nurses prevent burnout. Professional nurses are becoming aware of the crucial need for holistic practice in the workplace. Nurses requesting for a tranquility room or meditation areas in the workplace is becoming more evident in the hospital setting (Gonzalez, Pizzi, Thomas, Cooper, & Clyne, 2013). Teaching nurses to help themselves by setting goals, modifying their jobs, delegating, self-healing, self-caring, performing self-evaluations, and achieving work-life balance will help reduce stress and anxiety, and in turn, reduce nurse burnout. Likewise, teaching nurses to administer holistic modalities helps them manage their own stress which in turn helps to improve their personal outlook and sense of empowerment (Cuneo et al., 2011). Movement toward this paradigm shift to incorporate holistic therapies into self-practice, clinical practice, and education of nurses will result in collaborative research to further provide evidence of the significance of mind, body, and spirit (Vitale, 2009).

We must keep qualified and skilled bedside nurses in the profession. Incorporating holistic modalities into our daily lives can help reduce stress. And because stress is the root of burnout, I would like to conduct a pilot study on mindfulness meditation in the workplace to bring nurses back to practicing holistically. We as holistic nurses need to be leaders in the areas of self-care and self-healing. It all comes down to this basic question: How can we care for others, if we do not care for ourselves?

REFERENCES


