I remember the first time one of my patients died. She was a very young woman with a surgical infection. A rush of adrenaline filled my body as I pushed on her chest to circulate blood to her vital organs. The whole Medical Intensive Care team did all that we could, but we were unable to save her life. Driving home that night I was in tears, wondering how anyone would want to do this for a living and endure this stress and pain on a daily basis. Being a Registered Nurse in an intensive care unit can be one of the most stressful and emotionally draining professions. When I left work after my shift, the heavy weight from the suffering of my patients and their families was almost unbearable.

To be able to separate work from home life is important in nursing, and the best way to find the right balance between self-care and patient care is to make time for one’s self. Finding that middle ground between working hard on the job and working hard on ourselves will support our emotional wellbeing and help prevent compassion fatigue and burnout. Meditation is an effective self-care solution to achieving and maintaining emotional stability and work-life balance because it is centered around the principles of knowing the mind, shaping the mind, and freeing the mind (Thera, 2014, p. 8). Finding even a few minutes to free our minds of the stress of a normal nursing day can be just what we need to thrive as nurses.

Research has shown the cognitive benefits and stress-reducing effects of meditation (Shapiro, Astin, Bishop, & Cordova, 2005). Recent studies have also explored how meditation can help with emotional processing. Desbordes et al. (2012) studied the lasting effects of an 8-week training in meditation on people’s ability to control emotional responses while they are in ordinary, non-meditative states. The researchers concluded “that meditation training may affect emotional processing in everyday life, and not just during meditation” (Desbordes et al., 2012).

There are many different forms of meditation. Krasner et al. (2009) describe a few of the different methods in mindfulness meditation for cultivating self-awareness: the body scan, sitting meditation, walking meditation, and mindful movement (see sidebar at right). Some forms of meditation can be done anywhere and anytime. For example, on difficult days, we can take our 15-minute break outside. This would be a great form of walking meditation.

One form of meditation that I like to practice is sitting meditation, specifically parked in my car 15 minutes before work. Not knowing what I am going to walk into before work can be stressful in and of itself,
not to mention the stressors of caring for two young children at home. While waiting to walk into work, we can take a moment to focus on our breathing, sit with eyes closed, and imagine the air moving in and out of the lungs. We can practice taking slow, deep breaths, and perhaps even try some guided imagery.

Finding a few minutes of self-care is rewarding and great for any situation. It relaxes our minds, provides emotional stability, and helps us prepare for our shifts, our lives at home, and the obstacles we may encounter. Balance is important in life and integral to self-care. It will help shape who we want to be, while providing us with the tools to find that balance. Whether we arrive at work early to give ourselves those precious minutes alone to focus on our breathing, or take a walk during our lunch breaks, finding time for meditation as self-care can help patient satisfaction, reduce nursing burnout (Davies, 2008), and alleviate life’s stresses. Taking time to care for our emotional health and wellbeing is as important as the life-changing care we give our patients.

REFERENCES


Taylor Schroeder is a Registered Nurse in Cincinnati, Ohio. She has specialized in Critical Care Nursing while embracing holistic care for six years. She lives with her husband, two young daughters, and their dog, Ziggy.