Emotional distress is usually the result of dwelling in a memory of upsetting events, or anticipating negative outcomes which have yet to occur (worry). A mind stagnated by troubling emotions, anger, anxiety, guilt, and sadness, is “unprepared for duty”, impaired to healthy and rational response. To organize the mind, we must alleviate suffering. These emotions are less stressful when experienced through the processes of centering, meditation, and reflection. To “Center” requires mindfulness; accepting the present moment with openness, curiosity, and a willingness to be with what is. This requires a pause; becoming aware of the body and breath cuts the chatter in the brain, providing opportunity for purposeful thought. Centering uses that feedback to overcome external stimuli or emotion, swathing the practitioner in present and calm attentiveness. Defining mindfulness. One method to prevent compassion fatigue during your shifts is to re-center yourself often: ‘center before you enter’. Between patients or interactions take a few deep breaths and center yourself in your own heart space- that sacred place within you where the impulse to serve as a health care practitioner originated- offer yourself gentle tenderness and compassion.

Centering: Close your eyes, or find a soft gaze so your attention is within. Focus on your breathing, a scent, or a calming music. Allow your mind to clear. Ignore thoughts of past and future. Breathe in and concentrate on the present only. With practice you will feel a shift in your consciousness, resulting in a relaxed but alert awareness, able to be fully attentive to the present. Nurses using this practice between patient encounters notice they feel more available to bring peaceful healing into the patients’ space.

Meditation & Reflection: Center yourself. Notice the sensation of the air moving into and out of the body. When ready, release that effort and devote full awareness to observing your moment-to-moment experience. Distractions and thoughts are to be expected- they will pass slowly and become more meaningful as mindfulness capacity increases. If you find the thoughts are helpful, continue to focus on the event, memory or thought. Turning inward, and with intention, be raw, honest, and unfiltered. If you’re comfortable doing so, speak aloud. This is the process of reflection. It refines our construal of thoughts, emotions, and physiological stress signals. When we synthesize stress, we acknowledge it. This enables us to qualify it, and focus or redirect our perception to problem solving, generating a deeper mindfulness. There may be cathartic emotional release in this; if you can, allow it. This is cleansing, and an indication of need for self-care. Consistent Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) practice has proven to improve chronic pain, reduce hypertension, and stimulate the immune system.

The Science: Regular mindfulness practices shrinks the amygdala; the brains center for fight or flight. This diminishes impetuous responses, and births an environment for efficient learning. Boosting the activity of the insula, proliferates creativity, empathy, and supports us in building relationships. Similar to tuning muscles for activity specific response, Centering remodels the brain, restructuring for relaxed and mindful reactions. Holistic nurses use mindfulness to “ground” themselves, or to return to a state of mental clarity, prepared to make thoughtful and reasonable conclusions under stressful circumstances. Regular mindful practice cultivates resilience. Meditation nurtures consistent mindfulness. By training our attention we create and connect neuropathways to calm. Nurses who began a regular mindful meditation practice demonstrated a statistically significant increase in compassion, and decreases in burn-out and secondary trauma.

References