

Stress Management for Nurses

by PAMELA KATZ RESSLER RN, BSN, HNC



The capacity to care is the thing that gives life its deepest significance and meaning.

– PABLO CASALS

These words, by musician Pablo Casals, eloquently state the essence of why many of us entered the profession of nursing. As nurses, we are exceptional caregivers and healers to others. Yet all too often we forget that we need care giving, too, and many of us find it difficult to give ourselves permission to take the time to develop and strengthen tools of self-care when we are so busy with the myriad of tasks we find ourselves involved in on a daily basis.

Because I saw a need within myself and other healthcare professionals to address burnout, disengagement, and helplessness in the face of ever-mounting pressure to speed up and do more, I founded a holistic nursing practice that centers on nurturing and enhancing inner resources of self-care through stress reduction and resiliency skills. Time for self is often the last item on the perpetual “to-do” list, or we become fixated on the external stressors that we strive to control. However, I believe the key to stress management actually resides within each of us and our internal responses to external stressors.

I encourage my students and clients to start small by adding one or two mindful activities to their daily routines, and seeing how their perception of stress and ability to become more resilient to stressors changes positively over time.

Perhaps you would like to try to add one or several of the following suggested tips for bringing mindfulness into your workday and see what changes you notice. *Remember, the only ineffective stress management tool is the one you forget to use.*

Mindfulness Tips for the Workday

1. Take five minutes before you leave the house to gently release any tension by doing some gentle stretches or concentrating on your breathing. Allow your breath to settle in the belly, expanding it like a balloon on the inhale and deflating on the exhale.
2. When getting into your car or walking to your train or bus, concentrate on slowing your breath and breathing from your belly.
3. Use red lights and stop signs as reminders to loosen your grip on the steering wheel and to slow your breathing.
4. When you arrive at work, take a few moments to be aware of any muscle tension. Allow yourself to breathe into the tension, breathing in warmth and relaxation and breathing out any pain or tightness.
5. Use your breaks to truly relax, rather than getting coffee or chatting with co-workers. Try using your breaks to be by yourself, perhaps taking a short walk outside or off your unit, or finding a quiet spot to simply close your eyes and be present in the moment.
6. Choose to STOP: S=stop, T=take a breath, O=observe your mind and body, P=proceed with your tasks. Try to do this before entering a patient’s room to become more centered and aware.
7. Spend one lunch a week eating mindfully and silently.

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Slow your eating down and become aware of all the senses: sight, sound, taste, smell, and touch.

8. At the end of the workday, acknowledge and congratulate yourself for what you have accomplished and try not to focus on what you have not done.
9. Practice mindfulness on the way to your car or other transportation. Become aware of the temperature, sounds, smells, or sights. Bring your awareness to your breathing, allowing it to settle again in the belly. Release any neck or shoulder tension as you proceed towards home.
10. When you arrive home, change out of your work clothes to acknowledge your transition to another role. Make time to be by yourself for 5-10 minutes to be quiet and still before beginning your next full-time job at home.

Focusing on mindfulness and learning ways of renewal and self-care – with the same intention of hope, healing, and compassion that we bring so willingly to others – helps us to be present and aware of the current moment. By not dwelling in the past or projecting outcomes into the future, we gently allow


ourselves to renew and slow down to the more organic and natural pace of life, thus allowing ourselves to recognize that we can be human-beings and not simply human-doings.

***Pamela Katz Ressler RN, BSN, HNC** is the founder and president of Stress Resources, LLC (www.stressresources.com) in Concord, Mass., a firm specializing in stress management and holistic healthcare education, training, and consulting for healthcare providers, corporations, organizations, and individuals. She is a frequent speaker to local, regional, and international audiences on integrating stress management and holistic modalities into the workplace. Additionally, Pamela is a part-time faculty member of the College of Nursing and Health Sciences at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, where she teaches an undergraduate course in stress management. She can be contacted at pressler@stressresources.com.*

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