

# Avoiding burnout in nursing through mindfulness

DR ALAN RUTH, BEHAVIOURAL MEDICINE PRACTITIONER IN PRIVATE PRACTICE



*"Mr Duffy lived a short distance from his body."*  
James Joyce

Ireland's healthcare environment is very demanding. Nurses in general practice, must cope successfully with numerous demands to make timely, accurate decisions that can affect human lives. The work is very challenging and demands stamina and full engagement. Caring for patients is often emotionally draining and can contribute to job burnout. Burnout in health professionals has been associated with decreased patient satisfaction and longer patient-reported recovery times.

The term 'burnout' was coined in 1974 by Dr Herbert Freudenberger. He defined burnout as "the extinction of motivation or incentive, especially where one's devotion to a cause or relationship fails to produce the desired results." Burnout is brought about by unrelieved work stress, which results in:

- Depleted energy reserves and emotional exhaustion
- Lowered resistance to illness
- Increased dissatisfaction and pessimism
- Increased depersonalisation in interpersonal relationships
- Increased absenteeism, inefficiency at work, and reduced personal accomplishment

Emotional exhaustion refers to feelings of being emotionally overextended and depleted of one's emotional resources. It is a feeling of being drained and without any source of replenishment. Depersonalisation refers to a negative, hardened or excessively detached response to other people. Reduced personal accomplishment refers to a decline in feelings of competence and productivity at work.

## Effect of stress in nursing

According to Irving et al (2009):

*"Stress has been shown to significantly reduce healthcare*

*professionals' attention and concentration, detract from decision-making skills, and diminish healthcare professionals' ability to communicate effectively, to convey empathy, and to establish meaningful relationships with patients."*

Stress is inescapable in the nursing profession, and it affects nurses, their patients, and even the caring relationship itself. Stress can impair a nurse's ability to observe, listen to, and to understand their patients. To practice safely, healthily, and with compassion, nurses need to effectively manage stress. The practice of mindfulness has proven to not only help nurses to cope with the high demands of their work, but also with their lives outside of work.

## Mindfulness in healthcare

Mindfulness is about being aware and paying attention to what you are doing. Paying attention is essential to the provision of high quality patient care. With increasing distractions in today's turbulent healthcare environment, it can become very difficult for the modern nurse to remain focused. Many general medical practices pride themselves on the ability of their staff to multi-task. However, the ability to effectively multi-task has been disputed by some researchers whose view is that it can lead to increased stress and errors.

Mindfulness has many connotations and various authors have defined it differently. Furthermore, multiple conceptualisations of mindfulness exist. For the purpose of this article, I will use the following definition proposed by Jon Kabat-Zinn, Professor of Medicine Emeritus and creator of the Stress Reduction Clinic and the Centre for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School:

*"the awareness that emerges through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment."*

The major effect of mindfulness is the reduction of stress.

Research clearly shows that mindfulness practices and interventions effectively reduce stress, anxiety, depression, and is an effective intervention for many chronic illnesses such as psoriasis, chronic pain, and fibromyalgia with significant decreases in general medical symptomatology.

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) was originally created as an 8-week, patient-centered, evidence-based intervention that focuses on teaching mindfulness meditation, breath work, basic yoga, and other relaxation methods. MBSR was initially developed by Dr Kabat-Zinn in an effort to teach patients with chronic medical conditions how to lead fuller and healthier lives.

The results of a prospective randomized controlled study of the use of MBSR in healthcare professionals suggests that MBSR *“may be effective in reducing stress and increasing quality of life and self-compassion in healthcare professionals”*

A review of the literature found that MBSR has repeatedly demonstrated positive impacts on health and well-being in a variety of populations. A meta-analysis of 20 studies in a wide-range of clinical populations found consistent improvements in depression, anxiety, coping style, and quality-of-life measures. Specific to the healthcare field, a review of 10 studies of the impact of MBSR on healthcare professionals' health and wellness found that MBSR consistently reduced stress and anxiety and improved positive affect i.e. improved experience of feeling or emotion.

Studies have found statistically significant improvements in mood and burnout post-MBSR intervention, and among MBSR intervention groups as compared to control groups. In addition to improved mood and decreased burnout, another study reported that nurses completing an MBSR programme, described in qualitative interviews, stronger interpersonal communication, increased self-awareness through becoming more mindful and reflective, improved effectiveness at dealing with stress, and an ability to take hold of their lives.

Serenity has been linked to decreased stress and improved general health, and for decades has been recognized as an important aspect of nursing. Serenity has also been shown to be related to lower nurse burnout. Emerging research has demonstrated that serenity is positively related to mindfulness, and that MBSR programmes show positive impact on serenity among nurses.

#### Physiological and psychological benefits of mindfulness

Research has shown that it elicits the 'relaxation response' and that it alters a number of biological markers including inflammation, immune response and blood pressure. The relaxation response is a physiological response that is the opposite of the stress response. It has been described as an antidote to stress.

Psychological research has identified the following benefits of mindfulness:

- Reduced rumination
- Stress reduction
- Boosting of working memory
- Improvement in focussed attention
- Lowering of emotional reactivity
- Improvement in cognitive flexibility

#### Mindfulness in general practice

In April 2013, the results of a survey on stress levels, interest in, and knowledge of mindfulness in the context of general practice in Ireland, were reported at the *European Association for Physician Health (EAPH)* conference in Dublin. The survey randomly selected 200 GPs in the HSE South region and received a 64% response

rate. Among the survey findings were:

- a. A significant proportion of GPs experienced stress beyond a level at which they could comfortably cope.
- b. More than 77 per cent said they were interested in attending a mindfulness course.
- c. 71 per cent had heard of mindfulness.
- d. Just over 64 per cent were not aware of the ICGP endorsed course. Importantly, only 9 per cent of GPs surveyed said they had actually used mindfulness themselves.

Mindfulness fits well with nursing in general practice. Mindful practice in nursing facilitates nurse well-being and improvements in the quality of patient care, resulting in a 'win-win' situation for nurses and patients. Research has demonstrated that healthcare practitioners who themselves practice healthy habits are more effective in motivating patients to make significant positive changes in their lives. This is also true of healthcare practitioners who practise mindfulness.

#### Are you at risk of burnout?

You may be at risk of burnout, if some or all of the following are true:

- You've been under unrelieved, intense pressure for quite some time
- You have very high standards and feel a need to do everything perfectly
- You have an over-developed sense of responsibility and have been trying to achieve too much
- You find it difficult to say 'no' in relation to taking on additional responsibilities or tasks
- You have been giving others too much emotional support for a long period, and as a result, have neglected your own needs and interests
- You are becoming irritable and not as physically energetic
- You are not as sharp mentally or as caring emotionally
- You have lost your sense of purpose
- You have become increasingly detached from relationships
- You have a growing tendency to think negatively.

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## Additional coping strategies to avoid burnout

In addition to mindfulness, other coping strategies can minimise the impact of stress and alleviate its harmful consequences.

The first step, in avoiding burnout, is to recognise and accept a need for change. If being a nurse is no longer enjoyable, you need to accept that you are unhappy instead of denying your own unhappiness. Recognising the early signs of burnout will allow you to take corrective action. If you want to better manage the stressors in your life, improve the quality of your life and avoid burnout, you need to have a personal action plan. Your action planning and plan implementation may involve you in taking the following actions:

- Systematically identify your personal stressors (causes of stress), either on your own or with someone's help. One way is to write a list of everything that you think might be contributing to you being on the road to burnout. This can seldom be done in one session. You need to be very honest with yourself. In reviewing your final list, see if you can aggregate some of the stressors into theme groupings, for example, 'working with patients', 'interpersonal stresses with colleagues', 'shift-work problems' – whatever theme grouping titles are meaningful to you. Once you have identified and grouped the stressors, you should have an organised and comprehensive picture of your situation. It is then crucial for you to identify what you have the power to change and then devote your energies to making those changes. Don't allow yourself to fall into a cynical 'what's the use' mentality.
- Think about what being a nurse means to you and what your values are. It can be useful to also write these down. Get in touch with yourself, your values, and what you want out of life i.e. your goals, both professional and personal.
- Consider whether your job can be adjusted to make it more in line with your preferences e.g. would you prefer to work in a different general practice or nursing specialty?
- Discuss how you feel with a trusted colleague(s) and also your family. They can be a major source of support and can help clarify your thinking.
- Decide to take a holiday to give you time to get things in perspective.

**If you want to better manage the stressors in your life, improve the quality of your life and avoid burnout, you need to have a personal action plan.**

- Learn to be more assertive and to say 'no' when you feel you are being asked to do more than you can handle.
- Decide to step back from people who drain too much of your emotional energy.
- Get plenty of rest, eat a healthy diet, and take regular exercise. It is important that your regular exercise involves something you enjoy or you will not keep it up.
- Find the sense of humour that you may have lost.

Nurses at risk of burnout, need to heed the sort of advice they would probably give a friend. Above all, they need to create a balance in their life by investing more of themselves in family and other personal relationships, social activities, and hobbies.

If as a busy practice nurse you would like to enjoy the benefits of mindfulness, there is a catch. In order to be effective, mindfulness requires a significant time commitment for regular practice. If you would like to 'dip your toe in the water' at minimal expense and time commitment, I would recommend a course you can do online visit:

<http://www.bemindfulonline.com>

*"Whatever the present moment contains, accept it as if you had chosen it. Always work with it, not against it."*

Eckhart Tolle

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