

Stressed? Then read our expert guide to dealing with stress in nursing...

A nursing day involves a lot of stress. Whether working with gravely ill patients or helping families cope with the loss of a loved one after death, nurses have to be there for almost every imaginable situation.

It is a job that requires energy on many levels. Physically, the job can be demanding with high levels of physical exertion, culminating in many aches and pains. Mentally, you are required to be 'on the ball', making crucial decisions and answering questions from patients and relatives. Emotionally, the impact is felt when you empathise and help people in an environment where there is pain and sadness. Additionally, the work situation may be characterised by resource limits, poor staffing and organisational change, which all add to the energy expended.

Work or Life?

Maintain a healthy work/life balance. Ask yourself "Do you live to work or work to live?" Use your free time to recharge your batteries. Remember to plan regular holidays and take them. Small treats like visits to the cinema or a meal at a restaurant will help you switch off and relax.

Being aware

Be aware of negative thinking when stressed. Instead of thinking 'I must never make a mistake' think more realistically, for example 'I am doing the best I can in tough situations'. Challenge the internal pressures by turning the musts into preferences, from 'I must complete this today' to 'I'd like to complete it today and will do what I can'. If you identify what you can and can't control, then you can learn to accept external pressures. After all, you are not expected to be superhuman!

Relax

Learning to relax is key to managing stress. This will tell your brain that the threat has gone and the 'fight or flight' response can be switched off. Think of the things that you enjoy that have a relaxing effect on you. For example, a long soak in the bath, a good book or a nature walk. If you treat yourself with more of these simple pleasures then you will find it easier to breathe. There are also meditation tapes available which can have a significant impact on learning relaxation skills. These skills can then be transferred to work situations when you feel tense. Relaxation will also help you sleep.

Get physical

Exercise helps to combat stress levels. Exercise burns up the excess adrenaline and releases feel-good hormones. If you enjoy keeping fit and this area of your life has been squeezed then make time for this again. If you're not used to exercising start small with what you enjoy – swims or a gentle work out with a class,- and build up to a level that suits you. Joining a club or gym can lead to new social horizons and keep you motivated.

Getting help

Counselling is often helpful as a way of giving yourself a regular space to reflect on the problem. You may decide to see a counsellor individually or you could join a group. Your workplace can provide access to a counsellor through their occupational health scheme.

Seeing your GP is not a sign of weakness, it can be a courageous first step towards recovery. Your doctor will advise you on the ways that can make it easier for you to reduce and manage stress. Medication can control symptoms enough to enable you to put into practice some of the methods already outlined.