

Nurse burnout: what causes it and how to deal with it



Hospitals and clinics are expected to provide the best possible care for their patients. And nurses, among the most visible members of hospital staff, are always there to assist both patients and physicians with their needs. Often they also serve as the link between patients and doctors, taking responsibility for much of the routine care before and during treatment.

With the kind of work that nurses do, it comes as no surprise that a new study shows many of them suffer from stress and depression. But what's worrying is that, according to the same study, nurses who suffer from depression are more likely to commit medical errors. The results of the study, led by Ohio State University (OSU) researchers, are published in the *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*.

Based on a survey of nearly 1,800 nurses, the research team found that 54% reported poor mental and physical health, and a third said they were dealing with some degree of anxiety, stress or depression. Other interesting findings from the study include:

- Nurses with poorer mental or physical health are between 26% and 71% more likely to commit medical errors compared to nurses in better health.
- About half of the survey respondents said they had committed a medical error in the past five years.
- Fewer than half of the nurses surveyed said their professional quality of life was positive.

"When you're not in optimal health, you're not going to be on top of your game," according to Bernadette Melnyk, RN, dean of OSU's College of Nursing and chief wellness officer for the university.

Melnyk said the survey is the first research to connect nurses' self-reported errors to their mental and physical wellness. While there are limitations to the usefulness of self-reported data, she said that studies like this should push healthcare leaders to create programmes that support clinicians and improve their well-being.

"Healthcare systems and hospitals have to do a better job of creating wellness cultures for their clinicians," she said.

Previous research has highlighted that nurses suffer from depression at twice the rate of the general population, but despite their clinical expertise they may not recognise the signs of their stress as clinical depression.

Some provider organisations have offered resilience training designed to help nurses and other clinicians ease their own stress and support one another. Dignity Health has used this approach to great effect as "resilience is the antidote to burnout," said Page West, RN, the health system's chief nursing officer.

Executives and team leaders sometimes get so absorbed in the day-to-day of patient care that they forget the needs of their team members, West said.

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