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# Distress in Oncology Nurses and Navigators

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# Distress in Oncology Nursing

- Oncology nurses have an increased risk of psychosocial distress because of job requirements including large and complex patient loads, lack of resources, insufficient training, performing difficult or high risk procedures, such as administering chemotherapy, and caring for suffering and dying patients (Finley and Sheppard,2017).
- Oncology nursing is known to have high turnover rates, almost three times the average rate of other nursing specialties. (Finley and Sheppard,2017).
- Oncology nurses may have long term relationships with patients who have complex, challenging cancer journeys. (Jakel et al., 2016).
- Oncology nurses are also at greater risk for distress if they have pre-existing trauma or mental health problems, are dealing with current stressful personal problems or loss, or practice unhealthy coping or lifestyle habits.

# Distress in Oncology Nursing

- Oncology nurses can experience grief and the nurse may feel like he or she can't show emotions because they feel it's not professional. It may cause a cumulative effect over time if not resolved (Middleton, 2021).
- Oncology nurses are at risk for a type of trauma known as compassion fatigue. It is also known as empathy fatigue and secondary traumatic stress (STS). This happens when a nurse becomes physically and emotionally exhausted and is unable to regain his or her passion for their job (Boyle, 2011).
- Oncology nurses who are also empaths are at greater risk for distress, compassion fatigue and burnout. Empaths are people who are highly empathetic and sensitive. They are very connected to other people's feelings and emotions and feel what another person is feeling.

# How to Identify Distress

- Be aware of how you're feeling and recognize the signs and symptoms of distress and its triggers (Sheppard, 2016).
- There are scales to help you assess the way you are feeling.
- Listen to what others who know you say – sometimes you don't realize you're distressed but they do.

(Warning Signs, 2023)

## Signs and symptoms of distress in nurses includes:

- physical aches, GI distress
- sleep and weight changes
- mood swings, irritable
- forgetful, trouble concentrating
- unmotivated, loss of passion
- increase in unhealthy behaviors
- worsening of existing health problems
- physical and mental exhaustion
- decreased productivity, increase in sick calls
- withdrawing from people

# Do Something to Reduce your Distress



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- **Self-care** is **First Aid** for your body, mind, spirit and soul.
- Self-care **prioritizes** your total well-being. It is self-preserving **not** selfish.
- Self-care is a gift to yourself.
- A self-care activity should nurture your soul, renew your energy and lift your mood.

# Practice Self-Care

- Learn more about distress – knowledge is power.
- Do things to separate your work and home life (Smith and Teague 2016, p. 205),
- Prioritize your own well-being. Schedule time for fun and self-care (Smith and Teague 2016, p. 200).
- Take a break. Find time just for you every day (Smith and Teague 2016, p. 204).
- Do stress-relieving activities like meditating or practicing mindfulness (Sheppard, 2016).
- Focus on wellness: eating well, exercising and getting enough sleep (Smith and Teague 2016, p. 202),
- Connect with others and share your feelings (coworkers, friends/family, groups, chaplain, social networks).
- Delegate tasks that you can and set healthy boundaries by saying no to commitments that would be difficult to accomplish (Smith and Teague 2016, p. 205).

# Practice Self-Care

- Replace negative self-talk with kind and compassionate words (Sheppard, 2016).
- Ask for a debriefing if a patient dies and speak to the hospital chaplain.
- Think about the positives like the fact that the patient isn't suffering anymore and how you helped the patient.
- Talk to your supervisor.
- Seek professional help with counseling through Employee Assistance Programs and apps like Talkspace.

# Self-Care at Work: Take Five

Even if you just have 5 minutes during your shift, you can practice self-care:

- Breathing exercises
- Meditate
- Stretch
- Get off your unit/out of your office
- Take a walk
- Go outside for fresh air
- Get a coffee or snack
- Watch a video that makes you laugh
- Listen to an upbeat song or sounds on the Calm app

(Smith and Teague 2016, pp. 198-205)



*“Rest and self care are so important. When you take time to replenish your spirit, it allows you to serve others from the overflow. You cannot serve from an empty vessel.”*

- Eleanor Brownn

# Examples of Self-Care Activities

Meditate	Take a bath, light candles	Go somewhere peaceful like a healing garden	Take a day trip
Go for a spa day	Get a massage	Read a book	7-11 day or ice cream day 7/21, LF types
Work on a hobby/ be creative	Go for a walk or hike	Get a mani-pedi	Aromatherapy, Diffuse oils
Deep Breathing	Talk or spending time with a friend or loved one	Use apps like Headspace or Calm	Color or doodle
Exercise like yoga or tai chi	Keep a journal like a gratitude journal	Listen to an audiobook or podcast	Painting with a Twist
Spend time outside connect with nature	Watch fun videos/ movies	Listen to music	Play games with family/friends
Take a nap	Schedule a break to decompress	Attend an exhibit or concert	Attend a class to learn something new Like cooking, painting
Spend time with animals	Be a kid, let your inner child out –something You liked as a kid	Join a club (like a book or garden club)	Dance



# Always remember the flight attendants

You have to help yourself  
first so that you can help  
others

*Put on your oxygen mask first  
assisting others.*

# Resources

- Caring for Your Mental Health (national institute of mental health)  
<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/caring-for-your-mental-health>
- Healthy Nurse Nation [www.healthynursehealthynation.org/](http://www.healthynursehealthynation.org/)
- How Right Now (CDC) <https://www.cdc.gov/howrightnow/index.html>
- Nursing Burnout: What Is It, Signs and How to Prevent and Combat It  
<https://nightingale.edu/blog/nursing-burnout.html>
- Self-Care Series for Oncology Professionals [www.oncolink.org/healthcare-professionals/o-pro-portal/articles-about-cancer-treatment-and-medications/self-care-series-for-oncology-professionals](http://www.oncolink.org/healthcare-professionals/o-pro-portal/articles-about-cancer-treatment-and-medications/self-care-series-for-oncology-professionals)
- Thriving as an Empath: 365 Days of Self-Care for Sensitive People by Judith Orloff, 2019, ISBN-13 : 978-1683642916
- Workplace Mental Health & WellBeing  
<https://www.hhs.gov/surgeongeneral/reports-and-publications/workplace-well-being/index.html>

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