



Self-Care Is a Lifelong Journey

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- ▶ As the most influential catalysts for health care reform in America, the time for nurses to emulate wellness and prevention has never been more critical.
- ▶ By creating healthy habits for ourselves, we flourish as ambassadors of self-care for our patients, families, colleagues, and communities.
- ▶ By taking care of ourselves first, we bring positive energy and vitality to work that positively affects others and influences the overall landscape.
- ▶ In essence, the practice of self-care should be expected as part of the professional role of nursing.



Kim Richards

“Health is not only to be well, but to use well every power we have. The martyr sacrifices themselves entirely in vain. Or rather not in vain; for they make the selfish more selfish, the lazy more lazy, the narrow narrower.”

— Florence Nightingale, 1893

NURSES ARE CONSISTENTLY recognized as one of the most trusted professions.

We, at three million strong, can influence the tipping point in the U.S. health care system to heal our system in a profound way. To ignore this pivotal opportunity would be incongruent with our professional calling. If not us, who? If not now, when?

At the same time, nurse leaders find themselves shouldering an immense workload with increasing responsibility for both hospital financial health and clinical outcomes. The daunting task of consistently balancing professional roles can leave little time, energy, or enthusiasm to care for self. The practice of self-care often just seems like a luxury to be considered “when we have time,” often causing self-criticism, guilt, and recoiling with the oppressive feeling of having one more thing we need to do.

As the most influential catalysts for health care reform in America, the time to emulate wellness and prevention has never been more critical. The clear and compelling Institute of Medicine (2010) report, *The Future of Nursing: Leading Change, Advancing*

Health, also provides a golden opportunity and a unique platform for nurses to lead by example. By creating healthy habits for ourselves, we flourish as ambassadors of self-care for our patients, families, colleagues, and communities. We are familiar with the often catastrophic outcomes when disease *prevention* takes a backseat to disease *treatment*.

Consider the following statistics reported in 2010 by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation:

- Chronic diseases are responsible for 84% of all health care costs.
- In 2009, 145 million people – almost half the U.S. population – had a chronic condition.
- Approximately 67% of the workforce is overweight or obese and, in recent years, there has been a 36% hike in health care spending associated with obesity (Archer, 2012).

Improving the Health Care Landscape

What can individual nurse leaders do to significantly impact our personal, professional, and community health care landscape? Care for self is the first element in any nursing theory, caring model, or healing practice. In our valiant efforts to provide excellence in care for others, the focus can easily shift away from the priority of self, perhaps evoking a martyr-like cycle that transports us further and further away from our authenticity. Unless we catch ourselves, this toxic cycle can suck our lives dry.

In this *Work/Life Balance* column, we’ll focus on practical solutions and examine the six pathways of self-care as defined by Barbara Dossey, PhD, RN, AHN-BC, FAAN, HWNC-BC, co-director, International Nurse Coach Association and international co-director, Nightingale Initiative for Global Health. Dr. Dossey, an internationally recognized expert in the power of self-care practice, has outlined the following pathways: physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, relationships, and choice (Dossey & Keegan, 2013). As we delve into each pathway, the connection to each other will become clear. You can expect real-life examples of how the intervention of individual self-care practice served as the key to impact culture change by setting the tone for enhanced healing environment for all.

The practice of self-care is a lifelong journey. While some routines will become a self-nurturing sanctuary, successful self-care journeys provide dynamic change, adaptation, and flexibility.

What Is Self-Care?

Self-care means choosing behaviors that balance the effects of emotional and physical stressors: exercising, eating nutritious foods, getting enough sleep,

KIM RICHARDS, RN, NC-BC, is an Integrative Nurse Health Coach, and Founder/Owner, Self-Care Academy™; and President, Kim Richards & Associates, Inc., based in Colorado. She may be contacted at kim@self-careacademy.com

practicing yoga, meditation, mindfulness, relaxation techniques, abstaining from substance abuse, and pursuing creative outlets. It means engaging in meaningful nontoxic connections with others who support us, listening to our bodies when we feel something is awry, or knowing when we are headed toward exhaustion. Also essential to self-care is learning to *self-soothe* or calm our physical and emotional distress. Remember your mother teaching you to blow on the scrape on your knee? This was an early lesson in self-soothing but the majority of adults haven't the foggiest notion how to constructively soothe or nurture themselves.

To fully understand the concepts of self-care, let's recognize what true self-care is not. It extends beyond *self-pampering* (not that there is anything wrong with self-pampering) such as pedicures, dark chocolates, and other luxuries. These are all wonderful temporary fixes and boost our mood for a limited time.

Self-care is not *self-indulgence*. Often, the terms self-care and self-indulgence are used interchangeably, as in "Oh, go ahead, indulge. You deserve it." We tell ourselves we are practicing self-care when, in fact, we are engaging in self-indulgence. Self-indulgence is characterized by avoidance of the effortful and substitution of quick and easy antidotes. We may tell ourselves the stresses of our day have drained our energy and "vegging" on the sofa with a quart of ice cream is all we can expect of ourselves, often evolving into a "pity party." Rather than shouldering the hard work of self-care, we settle for temporary and largely symbolic fixes – some of which actually stress our systems further.

Pursuing Personal Health Practices

Like everything else that requires commitment, let's start by taking stock of our personal health practices, our self-care routines, and our role as a professional nurse to emulate a healthy lifestyle.

One of my clients, a chief nursing officer (CNO) of a very large hospital, simply started practicing a more mindful way of looking at what is fueling or draining to her. She made simple diet changes she can easily stick to, such as filling her plate with more vegetables than meat, drinking water consistently, and eliminating soda and processed foods. The changes resulted in a significant improvement in her waistline (a loss of 54 lbs. in 6 months), mood, and energy level. The impact that her adoption of self-care practice has had on her staff is remarkable. She reports they have improved mutual accountability for healthy lifestyle practice, have started opening meetings with a meditative centering exercise, they are more supportive of each other, and feel more connected as a team. There is an atmosphere of, "If she can do it with her busy schedule, I can do it!" While the work remains unchanged, the staff's ability to transform unhealthy

stress by relying upon new self-care tools has made a profound impact on their perception of their work environment. Staff report feeling more resilient, less overwhelmed, and more supported by each other.

Metrics such as employee turnover, unexplained absences, and patient satisfaction scores are being measured with the expectation of further improvement. Return-on-investment expert Ron Goetzel, PhD, notes, "Employers are realizing that it's not just about getting employees not to be sick. It's also about going beyond that so employees are at their physical and mental best" (Goetzel, 2012, p. 41).

Other desirable objectives include:

- Being viewed as caring about employees.
- Providing competitive or exceptional benefits to attract the best employees.
- Increasing employee satisfaction and retention.
- Having higher employee morale.
- Improving productivity.
- Motivating employees to think they are part of a higher purpose, not just "cogs in a wheel," but people who contribute individually and are viewed as important.
- Being recognized as a healthy company.

The CNO's behavior change toward herself, her work, and her reflection upon her personal responsibility to positively contribute stoked the fire under her staff and created a ripple by casting a pebble of self-care in a big pond.

The Nurse Leader's Influence

Behavior change is challenging and requires support, ongoing care, and attention and lots of different entry points. As reported by Sholl (2012):

One of the keys to creating physical health and wellness is to improve the happiness of the employee first," says Shawn Achor, CEO of the corporate strategy firm Good Think, Inc. and the author of *The Happiness Advantage: The Seven Principles of Positive Psychology That Fuel Success and Performance at Work*. 'Research shows that if you can get your employees into a positive mindset first, they're more likely to stick with a healthy-eating plan or exercise program.' This focus on emotional well-being also improves productivity (para. 14).

When we bring our whole, healthy selves to work, everyone benefits. A healthy team requires healthy individuals. By taking care of ourselves first, we bring positive energy and vitality to work that positively affects others and influences the overall landscape. In essence, the practice of self-care should be expected as part of the professional role of nursing.

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The influential choice of every nurse leader can be a catalytic force that is critically needed to feed and sustain the marathon healing our health care system is craving. It is after all a lifelong journey. Why not make the choice and begin today? \$

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