

The Power of Self-Care to Transform Culture, Improve Retention, and Boost Resilience

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“Living a healthy lifestyle is a constant state of mind.”

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(personal communication)

Betty (a fictitious name) is a 54-year-old chief nursing officer (CNO) in a 300-bed acute care hospital in the Midwest. Betty has been a nurse for 30 years and a CNO for 10 years, having worked her way up through various management levels over her career. Married for 26 years, Betty has 3 children and 2 grandchildren, all whom live within an hour's driving distance of Betty's house.

Betty's typical day starts at 5 a.m. as she wakes to a screeching alarm, gingerly rolls out of bed, checks her e-mail, turns on the TV, showers, mentally berates herself for her “disgusting” (her word) weight gain, puts a box of pastries on the counter for her husband, grabs a mug of sugared coffee, and shouts goodbye without a response, while running out the door for a meeting at 6:30 a.m. While driving to the hospital, Betty is on her cell phone, checking messages and making a “to do” list in her head, getting a report from the night supervisor. “This is going to be a tough day,” she thinks to herself. Betty feels the “emergency urgency” of her day speeding up already, and she's not even at work yet. The night supervisor's attitude is negative, sarcastic and derogatory of the staff.

As she walks into the conference room, Betty grabs a couple of pastries and a glass of orange juice from the breakfast bar, and then sits down for her meeting with several angry surgeons, upset because their block scheduling is in jeopardy, operating room turnover times are too long, and staff morale is poor. As they relentlessly state their frustrations, Betty feels her heart rate increase, along with a brief palpitation that subsides. She remembers that she forgot to take her hypertension and arthritis medications because she was in a hurry, but could probably find a few stray ibuprofen in the bottom of her purse to get her through the morning.

Betty pours herself another cup of coffee, adding powered creamer and a couple sugar packs; her cell phone is lit up with messages and voicemails, 1 from her daughter and 2 from her elderly father who lives alone and is confused about his medications. They urgently need her help in various ways—today.

After the meeting, Betty makes her journey towards her office. On the way, she feels her stomach cramping, and her



bladder is full, but she foregoes the restroom on the way as it can wait till later. She needs to check on something in her office for one of her directors who left her a voicemail. As she passes a nursing station, she hears several staff complaining about the rough night and how tired they are. One nurse says that last night was her fourth 12-hour shift in a row, and she has to babysit her 3-year-old granddaughter when she gets home. Betty gives them a quick nod of “good morning” as she keeps walking to her office, her swollen left knee causing her to limp slightly.

As she reaches her office door, she is out of breath. As her administrative assistant greets her with paperwork to review, adding to an already overflowing in-box, Betty is thinking, “Where's that ibuprofen?” As she falls into her chair and starts rummaging through her purse, Betty catches a reflection of herself in the window. “Who is that woman looking back at me?” It is a pivotal moment for Betty as she feels guilty, exhausted, and overwhelmed. But mostly, she feels alone and trapped. Betty “loves” her job but is suffering the effects of running on an empty tank. Adrenal overload has become her

new normal, and she can't remember the last time she scheduled anything just for her. In her efforts to care for everyone else, Betty has lost herself and is suffering the consequences of an unhealthy lifestyle. Intellectually, she understands the fallout from chronic stress and disease, yet she doesn't see a way to get off the "giving" treadmill. Who would do her work?

Although some may see Betty's story as an extreme example, as a nurse health coach, my calendar is filled with clients who relay very similar stories of their lives. Indeed, they profess to love their work, but the stress and demands of their jobs can easily consume them and create negative health effects if they are not vigilant in their self-care. While interviewing nurse leaders who have learned to infuse their daily hectic schedules with moments of self-care, I often hear about a critical moment or health event that profoundly influenced them, creating an almost immediate, deep shift in their perspective surrounding the importance of caring for themselves.

In an informal, randomized national survey by Self-Care Academy, LLC, 28 nurse leaders (20 CNOs, 8 directors) were questioned about their self-care practice using the 6 pathways identified by Dossey and Keegan¹ that include:

- Physical
- Mental
- Emotional
- Spiritual
- Relationships
- Choice

During 1-on-1 and small-group coaching sessions, the participants created their personal self-care plan based on lifestyle improvements they chose. Coaching support was dependent on their desire, current knowledge, and degree of readiness to change.

Participants were asked to select an accountability buddy (some chose each other) to track their progress along their journey for 6 months. Initially, they were asked to briefly "check in" with each other for 10 to 15 minutes each week, then every 2 weeks, and then once per month.

The leaders were asked to provide a baseline assessment on a scale of 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent) of their individual areas of influence, depending upon their level of responsibility with regard to morale, retention, teamwork, and resilience.

What was the general morale and mood of their team/staff? Was their behavior supportive of each other?

Had there been high turnover or problems with retention? How had that affected the team?

Had there been any difficulties or challenges above normal, and how did they bounce back? How had they typically reacted to major change?

The initial self-assessments revealed that 89% of the participants felt diet and exercise was their most critical need for improvement, with 58% identifying weight gain of 10 lbs. or more within the past 2 years, and 54% identifying a chronic disease/ailment rooted in poor nutrition/hydration and/or lack of exercise. This finding is consistent with the conclusions by Speroni et al.²

Other identified areas of improvement desired included:

- Management of daily stress (98%)
- Spending more quality time with friends (60%)

- Deepening of emotional connections with significant others (48%)
- Participation in hobbies or favorite activities (48%)
- Regular participation in spiritual rituals, worship, celebrations, or community events (46%)

After 6 months, 22 (6 dropped out for various reasons) of the original 28 participants reported the following:

- 54% had lost 10 lbs. or more by increasing their physical activity and being mindful of their food intake. They reported that having an accountability buddy had been key to their success.
- 88% felt they were better able to handle negative stress by using various tools they learned through coaching sessions and their accountability buddy.
- 40% spent more quality time connecting with friends as well as significant others in their lives.
- 34% improved participation in favorite hobbies and activities.
- 42% improved participation in spiritual events or celebrations.

Feedback included, "I never realized how spirit-nurturing singing in my church choir was for me. I had let it go due to busyness with my job and never thought that just a couple days a week would fill me up and make a difference in my ability to let problems not bother me so much. My colleagues also commented on my attitude improvement."

"By modeling the healthy behaviors and creating a positive change in my life, those around me started asking my 'secret' to success. It was then that I was able to discuss my own ambivalence about participation in a study that was simply about improving my own self-care. I felt 'self-ish' at first, but knew that my unhealthy lifestyle needed a makeover. Observing how my team and my colleagues responded to *my* change was enlightening and motivating. It was the boost of energy that both my team as well as I needed, and most importantly, my success gave me the credibility to start a conversation about healthy lifestyles with my colleagues and staff."

"When I started taking better care of myself, my *perspective* on events, situations, and tasks changed for the better. Because I felt better, I felt more empowered to choose how to react to a challenge, and the negative energy I may have felt before had been replaced with a knowledge that I do have a choice of how I respond. My resilience factor had newfound spring!"

Although self-care tools can be used in moments of both chronic and acute stress, these types of lifestyle techniques, more importantly, act as the foundation of a long-term plan for health empowerment. Although the tools are important, what they offer is even more important. And what they offer is *perspective*.

One CNO expressed concern regarding turnover of her staff. Upon reflection, she wondered how her own poor health habits had spilled over into the morale and culture of her team. She observed how her success provided a new platform for discussion of work-life balance. Because of the personal shift she felt, she made a point of regularly asking her blend of new and tenured directors and managers their

feelings surrounding self-care. She began looking at practical ways to offer space and activities that support a healthy lifestyle. Her efforts were met with overwhelming support and gratitude by the staff.

Although it was too soon to tell whether there was a specific degree of improvement in turnover, several key staff confided that they had been ready to resign because of feelings of not being cared for or valued, and it had affected their communication and connection with colleagues. They embraced the new offerings of healthy lifestyle and particularly stress-reduction education.

Jennifer Mensik, PhD, RN, NEA-BC, FACHE, second vice president of the American Nurses Association, had a compelling reason to amp up her own self-care. "While I might have been a health nut related to eating and walking, I ignored my work habits. I spent years, 2 decades, working more than full time and going to college, almost no vacations, not taking care of myself in that regard. Unfortunately, with my newly diagnosed autoimmune disease, I slowly became more and more tired over the years, and I thought how I felt was normal. It is important to remember that you know yourself the best, and you are your best advocate. If you feel like something is not right, speak up and ask questions. Talk to your provider. But most importantly, take care of yourself!"

In review of Betty's day, how could such a typical day have any time for moments of self-care? Yes, it's easy to see the numerous potential opportunities as we gaze inside someone else's life; however, when it comes to our own, it's not so easy to see the gradual residue that builds up with each day with each choice, and eventually, each month.

It's also apparent that Betty's behavior in ignoring poor self-care habits verbalized by her staff (the nurse who was tired and had worked 4 12-hour shifts, and then was taking care of her grandchild) needed to be addressed. However, because Betty was neglecting her own self-care, what example was she? Betty had lost her ability to be a credible role model, and she knew it.

Although seemingly easy, defining self-care is a bit like trying to hit a moving target. It depends on the person and the circumstance, and is always changing moment by moment. However, like anything else, there are some ground rules for guidelines.

Self-care is taking time out of your day to build or preserve your own health or wellness. Although this can look many different ways, any practice is considered self-care if it satisfies the following guidelines:

- Doing whatever it is you feel your body needs, in the present moment.
- Does not involve doing anything for someone else.
- Does not promote disconnection from your body or the environment.
- You often get lost in the experience.
- Helps moves you toward a specific health goal.

Transforming culture, improving resilience, and boosting retention comes by first reflecting upon where you are with each. The power to affect these critical elements starts from

within self and radiates outward to affect those around you. As the participants of the study learned, even with the busiest of schedules, infusing your life with moments of self-care creates profound health improvements you and influences those around you. While navigating the challenges of multiple responsibilities, don't forget the key to success...YOU! **NL**

References

1. Dossey B, Keegan L. *Holistic Nursing: A Handbook for Practice*. Sudbury, MA: Jones and Bartlett; 2008.
2. Speroni KG, Earley C, Seibert D, et. al. Effect of Nurses Living Fit™ exercise and nutrition intervention on body mass index in nurses. *J Nurs Adm*. 2012;42:231-238.

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