

CONFRONTING THE EMOTIONAL TOLL OF COVID-19 ON NURSES



BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the healthcare industry in profound ways. The chronic and significant morbidity and mortality has forever altered the lives of patients, families, and caregivers. While some regions of our country have experienced steady declines in cases and hospitalizations, other areas remain in crisis with severe limitations on staffing, capacity, and resources. Nurses who provide direct patient care continue to experience **chronic exposure to stressful and intense working environments, trauma, moral distress, serious illness, and death, which takes an immense physical and emotional toll.** The need for greater support for the healthcare workforce, especially nurses, is undeniable.

A recent report from the Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Inspector General cited hospital administrators describing nurses as "exhausted, mentally fatigued, and sometimes experiencing possible PTSD" from the workloads and the trauma of caring for COVID-19 patients (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021). Supporting the health and well-being of nurses is an urgent priority which is supported by leading organizations, associations, and thought leaders in the industry. The National Academy of Science, in collaboration with The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, elaborates on this imperative in *The Future of Nursing, 2020-2030*. One of the report's major tenets is the need to support the health and professional well-being of nurses, especially on the heels of the pandemic. The American Nurses Association has urged the Department of Health and Human Resources to deem the nurse staffing issues a national crisis (ANA, 2021). Despite these calls to action, 75% of nurse leaders cite emotional health and well-being of staff as a major challenge (AONL, 2021).



I was, and still am, worried that I might contract COVID-19 and spread it in my family.



When not addressed, the repercussions of psychological trauma, moral injury, and burnout can be crippling for the individual and our healthcare system. A healthy nursing workforce is vital to the delivery of healthcare services on local, regional, national, and global levels. Negative impacts on job performance, work engagement, patient care, quality outcomes, retention, and healthcare organizations' finances reflect the significance of the problem.

According to results from a national survey conducted by the American Nurses Association (2021), **47% of nurses who intend to leave their jobs cite work negatively affecting their health and well-being as the primary reason.** The survey also underscored the challenge of the current nursing shortage during the pandemic, with nearly half of respondents saying they plan to leave the profession because of lack of staff and resources. This number is even higher for those nurses who directly treat patients with COVID-19 (ANA, 2021). The levels of extreme exhaustion and burnout have resulted in retention and turnover challenges like never before.

BURNOUT AND ITS IMPACT ON THE CAREGIVER AND PATIENTS

BURNOUT IS NOT A CLINICAL DIAGNOSIS, RATHER IT IS A CONDITION CHARACTERIZED BY:

- Emotional exhaustion
- Depersonalization (detachment from self and identity)
- Reduced sense of personal accomplishment, feeling devalued

The health issues resulting from burnout are physical and emotional and can lead to maladaptive coping (substance use, addiction), depression, and lack of selfcare and attention to one's own well-being (Ortiz-Fune et al., 2020).



I'm often sad because COVID patients die without their families being with them at the end of their lives.



There are many contributing factors to burnout, which have been compounded during the COVID-19 pandemic. Work conditions that result in burnout include constant high stress environments, inadequate staffing, lack of effective work-life balance, poor communication and relationships with peers and leadership, lack of recognition and feeling valued, working long hours, and angry and disrespectful patient and family interactions, among others. Burnout not only affects the individual, but is associated with negative work environments due to factors including:

- Poor morale
- Lower quality care
- Medical errors
- Lower patient satisfaction and adverse patient outcomes
- Negative cultures in healthcare settings

(Monroe, et al., 2021)



I want people to know that we are not heroes. We are human beings.

CARING FOR THE CAREGIVER

Caregivers, notably nurses, are in the caring profession because it's in their nature. Many say it's a "calling." Nurses are valued for their clinical and caring expertise, but how well do they take care of themselves? The data reflects that they traditionally don't do a good job. We need to change this.

Trauma-Informed Care (TIC) is not a new concept in healthcare; nurses and clinicians are trained to assess and care for patients with this approach. TIC assumes that an individual is more likely than not to have a history of trauma, which is supported by the high prevalence of childhood abuse and neglect, intimate partner abuse, gun violence, and sexual assault in our society, among other traumatic experiences one may face throughout their lifetime. TIC recognizes the presence of trauma symptoms and acknowledges the role trauma may play in an individual's life. **It requires a system to make a paradigm shift from asking, "What is wrong with this person?" to "What has happened to this person?"** (Buffalo Center for Social Research, 2021).

Trauma-Informed Self-Care leverages this same concept but shifts the focus from the patient to oneself. Nurses routinely encounter challenging clinical and patient situations—often traumatic ones. Acknowledging these traumatic exposures and addressing them is crucial. Self-care cannot be a term used loosely. Organizations must embrace strategies to help individuals and teams heal. **The traditional stigma** attached to identifying the need for help and accessing support **must be reframed from a culture of caregivers being "heroes" to being human beings**—human beings who have suffered extraordinary emotional burdens.

Solutions to the current crisis facing the nursing profession require investment and change on many fronts including the healthcare industry, policy makers, and organizational culture, among others. **While a multifaceted approach emerges, there are steps organizations can take to empower their employees to heal, grow, and have a path forward that supports their psychological and physical safety.**

INTERVENTIONS AND RESOURCES FROM CCA

CCA is a workplace consulting firm and Employee Assistance Program (EAP) with extensive experience serving hospital systems and healthcare institutions. Having worked **within the healthcare industry for over 35 years**, CCA appreciates that untreated trauma and burnout can be crippling, both for individual and organizational well-being.

Using a team of Industrial/Organizational and Counseling psychologists, behavioral experts, nurses, and Learning and Development professionals, **CCA develops customized solutions to provide proactive support, as well as immediate crisis response.** Our distinctions are our team of clinical experts and our firm belief that cultural change, not one-time training sessions, are key to having a positive, lasting impact on employees and organizations.

Michelle Doran, RN, is one of the newest additions to the CCA team. As a **doctorate prepared nurse and senior healthcare consultant**, Michelle has been instrumental in creating CCA's nurse-focused solutions and has invited several nationally known nurse leader colleagues to join the CCA Nurse Advisory Board. She brings her extensive professional network, decades of clinical, leadership, and professional development experience to the organization **to help develop and deliver interventions for nurses and healthcare team members that will improve emotional health and well-being.**

CCA begins each partnership with an assessment of the organization's unique needs. This helps guide the development and implementation of appropriate programs to mitigate the causes and consequences of burnout and increase individual, team, and organizational resiliency.

In addition to specific content, CCA also provides high-touch account management services to ensure smooth implementation and follow-up for all our programs. These are interventions that CCA has designed to address burnout and trauma for nurses, and that are applicable and adaptable to other members of the healthcare team.



They (leaders) need to really acknowledge the nurses' mental health. No one is talking about that.

PSYCHOLOGICAL FIRST AID FOR FIRST RESPONDERS

Housed on an adaptive learning platform, our Psychological First Aid program involves a series of steps and resources first responders can take in order to achieve a baseline of adaptive coping immediately following a tragedy

TRAUMA MITIGATION EDUCATION

This interactive learning module, which learners can access at their convenience on any mobile device or laptop, is designed to help nurses increase their awareness of trauma exposure, and strategies to mitigate the impact it has on them. CCA developed the evidence-based content with input from an expert licensed social worker and professional nurse.



I have anxiety issues and have lost weight and sleep because of them.

PEER SUPPORT PROGRAMS

Our experience shows that even when nurses are under considerable strain, they are reluctant to contact internal support programs for help due to concerns around confidentiality, mental health stigma, and accessibility. As nurses tend to be more comfortable speaking with other nurses, CCA has created a peer coaching program that has been effectively used across practice settings to support those who experience traumatic events, high levels of stress, and who need coping support. Using an evidence-based model, we assist with creating and maintaining a peer network as a best practice for real-time emotional support.

PSYCHOEDUCATIONAL WEBINARS AND MANAGER-SPECIFIC TRAININGS

Group learning is a successful forum to build skills both for managing personal stress and for managing stressed employees. We have found that ongoing, multifaceted training yields greater success in developing these skill sets. Our dynamic training offerings include:

- General education for staff on causes, impact, and symptoms of trauma, as well as developing resilience and accessing resources
- Manager-specific trainings that help leaders identify and address mental health issues in the workplace
- Training customized for various constituent groups including physicians, nurses, administrators, and others

SUPPORTIVE PROCESS GROUPS

Process groups may be topic-specific or offered as more general forums to address challenging issues or events. They are designed to provide a safe space in which participants can voice challenges, receive validation and support from colleagues, and learn about resources and supportive strategies. These sessions are facilitated by our CCA expert trainers, who are also licensed counselors.

ONSITE TRAUMA SPECIALISTS

If our organizational assessment and analysis identifies locations or departments that have higher than average rates of trauma exposure, or that are exhibiting more symptoms of PTSD and/or burnout, we can place trauma specialists onsite in key areas. This allows an organization to provide immediate support for crises and give those who need it easy access to individual counseling.

TEAM BUILDING

Team cohesion and mutual support are critical to individual resiliency. CCA has designed a customized, 3-part training series that identifies specific factors that may be derailing team cohesion and assists team members in formulating and implementing solutions through the use of standardized, evidence-based assessment tools. CCA is an Authorized Partner with Wiley and can provide access to and interpretation of their DiSC® Workplace assessment and Five Behaviors® team development assessment. CCA combines data from the assessment tools with healthcare-focused team building content to restore optimal team functioning.

ORGANIZATIONAL POLICY REVIEW AND PLANNING

Once any immediate trauma has been addressed, establishing organizational policies that support well-being is crucial. This step may include reviewing and modifying existing guidelines and establishing protocols around interventions to address trauma.

SUMMARY

CCA is committed to helping people and organizations achieve post-traumatic growth during times of unprecedented strains on our healthcare system and providers. The nursing profession in particular has been deeply impacted. Through our partnerships, we complement and fill gaps in internal structures and resources to address the emotional burdens of caregiving. Our approach uses evidence-based interventions in collaboration with leaders and teams to support individual well-being and healthy work environments. We view each partnership as a unique opportunity to share our expertise in developing and implementing effective solutions.

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