18.5: Spiritual Care of Self

Provision 5 of the American Nurses Association Code of Ethics states, “The nurse owes the same duties to self as to others, including the responsibility to promote health and safety, preserve wholeness of character and integrity, maintain competence, and continue personal and professional growth.” Spiritual care is associated with better health and well-being for everyone, including nurses and nursing students. A desire to help others in need is an important part of spirituality, which has been described as a life-giving force based on faith, discovering meaning and purpose in life, and offering the gift of self to others.

Spiritual resources can help nurses and nursing students overcome the emotional toil associated with caring for seriously ill and dying patients and prevent compassion fatigue and burnout. Read more about compassion fatigue and burnout in the “Grief and Loss” chapter.

Many spiritual traditions use contemplative practices to increase compassion, empathy, and quiet the mind. Examples of contemplative practices and other methods to build spiritual strength include the following:

- Meditation can induce feelings of calm and clear-headedness and improve concentration and attention. Research has shown that meditation increases the brain’s gray matter density, which can reduce sensitivity to pain, enhance the immune system, help regulate difficult emotions, and relieve stress. Mindfulness meditation in particular has been proven helpful for people with depression and anxiety, cancer, fibromyalgia, chronic pain, rheumatoid arthritis, type 2 diabetes, chronic fatigue syndrome, and cardiovascular disease.
- Yoga is a centuries-old spiritual practice that creates a sense of union within the practitioner through physical postures, ethical behaviors, and breath expansion. The systematic practice of yoga has been found to reduce inflammation and stress, decrease depression and anxiety, lower blood pressure, and increase feelings of well-being.
- Journaling can help a person become more aware of their inner life and feel more connected to experiences.
Studies show that writing during difficult times may help a person find meaning in life’s challenges and become more resilient in the face of obstacles. When journaling, it can be helpful to focus on three basic questions: What experiences give me energy? What experiences drain my energy? Were there any experiences today where I felt alive and experienced “flow”? Allow yourself to write freely, without stopping to edit or worry about spelling and grammar.

- Prayer can elicit the relaxation response, along with feelings of hope, gratitude, and compassion, all of which have a positive effect on overall well-being. There are several types of prayer rooted in the belief that there is a higher power that has some level of influence over one’s life. This belief can provide a sense of comfort and support in difficult times. A recent study found that clinically depressed adults who believed their prayers were heard by a concerned presence responded much better to treatment than those who did not believe.

- Find a spiritual community and friends. Join a spiritual group, such as a church, synagogue, temple, mosque, meditation center, yoga class, or other local group that meets to discuss spiritual issues. The benefits of social support are well-documented, and having a spiritual community to turn to for fellowship can provide a sense of belonging and support.

- Nurture your relationships with family, significant others, and friends. Relationships aren’t static – they are living, dynamic aspects of our lives that require attention and care. To benefit from strong connections with others, you should take charge of your relationships and put in the time and energy you would any other aspect of your well-being. It can be helpful to create rituals together. With busy schedules and the presence of online social media that offer the façade of real contact, it’s very easy to drift from friends. Research has found that people who deliberately make time for gatherings or trips enjoy stronger relationships and more positive energy. An easy way to do this is to create a standing ritual that you can share and that doesn’t create more stress, such as talking on the telephone on Fridays or sharing a walk during lunch breaks.

- Mindfulness has been defined as, “Awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally.” Mindfulness has also been described as, “Non-elaborative, nonjudgmental, present-centered awareness in which each thought, feeling, sensation that arises is acknowledged and accepted as it is.” Mindfulness helps us be present in our lives and gives us some control over our reactions and repetitive thought patterns. It helps us pause, get a clearer picture of a situation, and respond more skillfully. Compare your default state to mindfulness when studying for an exam in a difficult course or preparing for a clinical experience. What do you do? Do you tell yourself, “I am not good at this” or “I am going to look stupid”? Does this distract you from paying attention to studying or preparing? How might it be different if you had an open attitude with no concern or judgment about your performance? What if you directly experienced the process as it unfolded, including the challenges, anxieties, insights, and accomplishments, while acknowledging each thought or feeling and accepting it without needing to figure it out or explore it further? If practiced regularly, mindfulness helps a person start to see the habitual patterns that lead to automatic negative reactions that create stress. By observing these thoughts and emotions instead of reacting to them, a person can develop a broader perspective and can choose a more effective response.

- Spending time in nature is cited by many individuals as a spiritual practice that contributes to their mental health.

**Note**

Explore additional resources about developing spiritual well-being to avoid burnout at the University of Minnesota’s Earl E. Bakken Center for Spirituality & Healing.


