Healthy Work Environments

Barbara Chamberlain

Employee Wellness: Reducing Stress and Improving Mood

Healthy workplaces provide environments that impact patient safety, promote patient healing, and improve the delivery of quality health care. The current medical-surgical health care environment, however, is fast-paced, complex, stressful, and involves reports of violence, verbal abuse, and dysfunctional relationships that impact employee wellness and job satisfaction. Role overload, role ambiguity, and role conflicts also play a part in the stress that nurses experience daily (Stichler, 2009).

Stress is inevitable in every human interaction; however, people interpret and react differently to stress and stressors (Pender, Murdaugh, & Parsons, 2006). Nurses who work on medical-surgical units have high stress levels because the patient acuity is high and there are many patients admitted with a variety of diagnoses. In addition to the patient population, there are other sources of stress on the job. Nurses may perceive that they lack control over their work environment. They may also believe they lack clarity about job expectations, and they may fear workplace injuries and toxins.

Changing Environmental Factors

Light, color, noise levels, art and music, scents, and collegial relationships contribute to a healthy work environment.

Light comes from natural (sunlight) and artificial (electric) sources. There is evidence to support that medication errors decrease with increased lighting, particularly natural light, because it enhances vision and fosters concentration. Natural lighting increases serotonin production, has a positive effect on mood, and may decrease the potential for depression. Health care environments that provide indoor and outdoor views of plants, trees, gardens, natural settings, and water through floor-to-ceiling windows are perceived as less stressful (Applebaum, Fowler, Fiedler, Osinubi, & Robson, 2010).

Colors in an environment range from soothing blues and greens (with shorter wavelengths) to stimulating reds, yellows, and oranges (with longer wavelengths). Aesthetically pleasing, soft, soothing colors in staff members’ lounges may provide a feeling of calmness, improve mood, and relax individuals, thus helping to decrease stress in the environment (Applebaum et al., 2010).

There are many sources of noise in the health care environment including pagers, overhead announcements, alarms, and telephones. High noise levels are associated with fatigue, stress, emotional exhaustion, burnout, and hearing loss (Applebaum et al., 2010). The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) ranks noise among its top 10 occupational hazards (Pender et al., 2006). Noise may be reduced with the use of soundproof materials, particularly during times of construction.

Another method of noise reduction is through the use of a Yacker Tracker (www.yackertracker.com), which is a device that looks like a traffic signal and is employed to monitor noise levels. Decibel levels are set according to accepted noise levels and lights change color when the noise level changes. A yellow light (or worse, a red light), indicates that the noise level is unacceptably high. Almost automatically, people, seeing the yellow or red light, decrease the volume of noise they are making.

Artwork and music, including other pleasing sounds (water, wind, and birds), contribute to decreased stress levels in healthy work environments. Art inspires and nurtures the human spirit, while music improves breathing and increases relaxation (Seifert & Hickman, 2005).

Health care workers are exposed to scents, odors, and toxins throughout the workday which may contribute to elevated stress levels. Odors should be eliminated immediately and a pleasant, fresh scent should permeate the work setting. Environmental pollutants can be eliminated by air filtration systems and frequent air exchanges. Water disposal systems and recycling lessen the amount of toxic waste in the health care environment and provide a safer environment (Seifert & Hickman, 2005).

Because health care environments are stressful, there is the potential for abusive behavior from other professionals. Healthy work environments are built on mutual respect and trust, value for individuals, and a quest for excellent service and positive outcomes and must permeate all levels of the organization. Strong leadership is essential to create a stress-free and healthy work environment.

Other Ways to Decrease Stress

There are other ways that health care leaders can strive to decrease stress in the workplace. They can change the environment to decrease the number of employee stressors by offering flextime, job sharing, child care benefits, and work reassignments. Ensuring that nurses have meals and breaks will improve morale and decrease stress levels. Some workplaces offer onsite fitness centers that employees may use during the workday. Changes associated with physical fitness include enhanced body responses to stress and good mental health. Healthy food choices should be available in cafeterias and food should be locally grown to ensure freshness and quality. Social support, including a network of caring individuals in the workplace, helps to decrease stress (Stichler, 2009).

When nurses have control over their working environment, their stress levels decrease. Frontline nurses can try innovations that improve the work setting and increase time with patients. Positive, rapid, small cycles of change can have enormous benefit and increase both nurse and patient satisfaction.
Conclusion

Healthy work environments decrease stress, increase morale, and improve quality health care delivery. The responsibility to decrease work stress is not only a leadership responsibility, but also requires obvious attention and commitment by the individual nurse.

References


Barbara Chamberlain, PhD, APRN, MBA, CCRN, WCC, is Program Manager for Transforming Care at the Bedside (TCAB), a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation funded program of the New Jersey Hospital Association, Princeton, NJ. She is a member of the MedSurg Matters! Editorial Committee.