

From the Editor-in-Chief

Put on Your Own Oxygen Mask First

Beth Ulrich, EdD, RN, FACHE, FAONL, FAAN



Nurses are courageous. Nurses are strong. Nurses are resilient. And nurses are tired. This is certainly not how we envisioned celebrating the Year of the Nurse!

The COVID-19 pandemic affects our lives from all sides. It's not just about what patients need from us, about what our colleagues need, what our family needs, or what we need for ourselves. It's all of that and more.

Indeed, there are few aspects of our lives that the pandemic has not touched in some way. Things we took for granted six months ago (eating dinner in a restaurant, going to a movie, sending our children to school, having enough personal protective equipment to do our jobs, or being able to buy toilet paper when we want to) are no longer routine.

Nurses are used to handling emergencies big and small – from a patient's blood pressure crashing during a hemodialysis treatment to figuring out how to dialyze and transplant patients in the middle of a natural disaster, even when that disaster goes on for days or weeks. What we're not used to is professionally and personally battling a disease that no one fully understands for an undetermined amount of time. To do that, we're going to have to take better care of ourselves. It's time (and maybe past time) to remember that to save others, we need to put on our own oxygen masks first.

Taking Care of Us

A multidisciplinary group, the National Academy of Medicine Action Collaborative on Clinician Well-being and Resilience (2020), has offered seven strategies for clinicians to use to sustain themselves through the pandemic. Those strategies, along with some suggestions on implementing them, include:

- **Meet basic needs.** Physiological needs form the base of Maslow's hierarchy and the foundation of our ability to do everything else. Make sure you eat, drink, sleep, and exercise.
- **Take breaks.** Even before the pandemic, nephrology nurses reported they often did not have time at work for meal or bathroom breaks, and that excessively long shifts, especially in acute settings, resulted in fatigue (Ulrich & Kear, 2018). Without breaks, our minds and bodies become compromised – a danger to ourselves and our patients.
- **Stay connected.** We're finding new ways to stay connected through technology like Facetime Sunday din-

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ners and Zoom cocktail hours. I got a text the other day from a friend. It said, "Hello my dear friend. I was thinking about you and wanted to check-in. Stay safe and stay well." This is a friend that I typically see at nursing association meetings, but have not seen in a while due to meetings being cancelled or moving to a virtual environment. The simple text message meant so much; it stimulated me to reach out to other friends. My friend, unwittingly, started a whole chain of connections.

- **Respect differences.** We aren't all handling this disease or the pandemic the same way – either professionally or personally. And we may not agree with decisions our patients make. Respectful conversations can move us closer together even if we don't agree.
- **Stay updated.** Make sure you have the most up-to-date information from reliable sources, but don't get so bogged down or obsessed that it does more harm than good.
- **Perform self-check-ins.** When you're checking on everyone else, make sure to also check on yourself. And don't ignore your own physical and mental health needs once you identify them.
- **Honor your service.** You are doing important work. Nurses are generally very humble about the work we do. We're not used to being called heroes. And even if you don't like the image of an angel of mercy, hear the thanks the person calling you that is trying to convey.

Dealing with Sustained Uncertainty

The sustained uncertainty of this pandemic requires that we take a long-term approach to caring for ourselves. It is far easier to tackle even the most stressful events when we know how long we have to do something before we are done, but that is just not the world in which we live right now. To get through the pandemic, we have to accept – if not embrace – uncertainty, control what we can, and make sure we care for ourselves so we are there for ourselves and the people we care for professionally and personally, when this is over – whenever that is.

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