

# Faculty role in promoting nursing student health

By Kristy S. Chunta, PhD, RN, ACNS, BC

## How can you help future nurses build a healthy foundation?

**NURSES** have a primary responsibility to promote health in the United States. In this capacity, they serve as role models, educators, and care providers. In 2017, the American Nurses Association (ANA) launched the “Year of the Healthy Nurse” as part of the Healthy Nurse, Healthy Nation™ initiative, which focuses on the health, safety, and wellness of all nurses. ANA recognizes that nurses often care for others before themselves and identified the need to focus on personal health and wellness. The initiative proposes that a healthy nurse serves as a better role model, educator, and advocate for patients, families, communities, and coworkers.

The current nursing shortage, combined with retirement among the Baby Boomer generation, requires more nurses to fill the void. Student nurses represent

the growing RN workforce, making their health and wellness critical to the future of the profession and the care of the patients and communities they serve. College provides opportunities for students to transition from adolescence to adulthood and to make independent decisions that influence their health. However, results from the *National College Health Assessment II* suggest significant concerns related to nursing students’ health. (See *Not a healthy start.*)

Nursing students need to understand the importance of personal health and wellness, even before they enter the profession, allowing them to adopt healthy lifestyle behaviors and better prepare them for the demands of the nurse role. As a faculty member, you play an important part in this process and have the opportunity to model healthy behaviors.

This article provides strategies you and your faculty colleagues can use to promote health and wellness activities with your students, including nutrition, physical activity, stress management, sleep, and other healthy reminders.

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## Eat right

Encourage proper nutrition among your students by making healthy food and beverage choices for yourself. For example, when eating lunch or dinner during the clinical day, choose healthy items that include fruits and vegetables rather than opting for fried foods or other less nutritious choices. Make an effort to select healthy beverages, such as water, rather than those with high sugar and caffeine content.

When you eat lunch with the clinic group, use the time to talk to students about what they're eating on a regular basis and encourage them to choose wholesome foods and nutritious snacks.

## Keep moving

You can endorse physical activity through a variety of strategies. In the classroom setting, share opportunities for promoting physical activity and encourage participation in upcoming campus activities such as a 5K walk or run. Walking to other buildings across campus, taking a walk during your lunch break, and using electronic fitness devices can model your intent to stay physically active.

In the clinic setting, take the stairs rather than riding the elevator, and invite your students to join you. Consider creating a fitness challenge, such as who can walk the most during the week. These types of activities can encourage physical activity and make them fun.

## Manage stress

Student nurses are especially susceptible to the stress associated with the demands of a tough curriculum, exams, and clinical rotations. In your role as a faculty member, you also face multiple challenges and responsibilities. Promote stress management through your own actions and by encouraging students to manage their stress appropriately.

Make sure students know about campus-sponsored stress-management programs, such as animal-assisted therapy, yoga, or mindfulness classes. Encourage students to participate in these opportunities throughout the semester, but especially during mid-term and final exams. Exposing students to effective time-management skills and reminding them to avoid procrastination can further decrease stress.

## Sleep well

Many students don't realize the consequences of inadequate sleep and often choose to stay up late or go without sleep, especially before exams. Promote healthy sleep behaviors and remind students to adopt this practice, particularly before exams and clinical rotations. En-

## Not a healthy start

The 2016 National College Health Assessment II, from the American College Health Association, indicates a need to help nursing students adopt healthy behaviors. Findings include:

- Only 20% of nursing students reported participating in moderate-intensity cardio or aerobic exercise for 30 minutes, 5 to 7 days a week.
- A mere 5.6% of nursing students reported eating the recommended five or more servings of fruits and vegetables daily.
- More than half (55%) of nursing students described having more than average or tremendous stress.

courage students to track their sleep using fitness apps on their cell phones or other mobile devices to help them evaluate how much sleep they're getting.

## But wait...there's more

Other healthy reminders include not smoking and getting an annual flu vaccination. Not smoking (or starting a smoking-cessation program) models for your students the importance of choosing a tobacco-free lifestyle. Getting immunizations, such as a flu shot, and reminding students to do the same is another healthy option. Most clinical agencies require employees to get vaccinated against influenza or to use a mask when engaging in patient contact during flu season, so faculty and students should have this activity completed.

## Be a faculty advocate

As part of nursing school faculty, you have the opportunity to advocate for health and wellness by serving as both a teacher and role model for your students. When you help them recognize the importance of health and wellness activities early in their professional education, you help them value and build a lifetime of healthy habits. In this "Year of the Healthy Nurse," take the opportunity to examine what you're teaching students about nursing and personal health behaviors. ★

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