Cognitive rehearsal

By Joy Longo, PhD, RNC-NIC

Learn a strategy for addressing incivility and bullying in nursing.

Unprofessional behavior within healthcare organizations, in the form of incivility and bullying, adds more stress to an already stressful environment and also jeopardizes patient safety. Too often, nurses are on the receiving end of incivility. Promoting a civil work environment requires effort by both the organizational leadership, through policies and action, and individual team members. On an individual level, nurses can help tackle unprofessional behavior using techniques such as cognitive rehearsal that promote communication and respect.

This article discusses some of the reasons behind workplace incivility, how individuals typically respond to disrespectful behavior, and how to use cognitive rehearsal as a tool to address it.

What’s behind incivility?
Conflict often arises in stressful environments with competing priorities and values at stake. Every day, nurses are expected to deliver competent, comprehensive patient care but are often met with distractions and a lack of resources. And as part of a healthcare team that includes various disciplines, nurses must struggle to make their priorities known, while acknowledging other team members’ priorities.

Rather than recognizing each team member’s unique contributions to patient care, coworkers may let conflicts develop and manifest as incivility and disrespect. When combined with technology that facilitates communication without face-to-face interaction, which makes saying things that would never be communicated directly to another person easier, professional encounters deteriorate and create a culture of incivility. (See Incivility defined.)

How do you respond to incivility?
When faced with unprofessional behavior, most people

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choose fight or flight. Some respond immediately as a form of defense, but reciprocating in a similar manner may perpetuate the problem. Others choose to ignore incivility in an attempt to minimize the situation, inadvertently sending a message that the behavior is acceptable. Some people, though, recognize the inappropriateness of the behavior, but they lack the knowledge and skills to respond accordingly.

To address incivility and bullying, a unified approach is needed in which all stakeholders assume a role in improving the work environment. As a nurse, you understand the organizational leadership’s responsibility to address unprofessional behavior, but you also can take action to curtail incivility. Cognitive rehearsal is one way to mentally prepare yourself to address threats from incivility or bullying.

What’s cognitive rehearsal?
When confronted with unprofessional behavior, your primary concern should be safety. Though direct communication can help de-escalate situations and repair interactions, consider the well-being of each person involved. If an immediate threat exists, remove yourself from the situation. Without an immediate threat, appropriate responses that foster communication and collaboration are warranted.

One technique that’s shown promise in curtailing incivility and bullying is cognitive rehearsal, which allows you to prepare to respond to unprofessional behavior in a manner that’s not construed as retaliatory. Used as a strategy in behavioral health for impulse control, cognitive rehearsal involves memorizing responses designed to prevent acting impulsively. Rather than responding immediately or emotionally to unprofessional remarks or behavior, you hold and process them, which allows you to think about the potential situation and what the most appropriate responses might be. By using a planned, rehearsed response, you acknowledge the situation and create an opportunity to communicate expectations for appropriate behaviors and future interactions. (See Cognitive rehearsal in action.)

Griffin successfully used cognitive rehearsal by educating a group of 26 new graduate nurses about it during hospital orientation. One year later, Griffin found that all the new nurses could respond positively when confronted with uncivil behavior. Though a few of the staff nurses perpetuated uncivil behavior and responded negatively by shunning the new nurses, overall the technique led to positive responses from the staff nurses who were confronted, including making them aware of how certain behaviors were perceived. Since Griffin’s original work, others have used cognitive rehearsal as a strategy to combat incivility and bullying.

Cognitive rehearsal in three acts
Griffin described cognitive rehearsal as a three-part process. First is participation in didactic instruction. This can include learning to recognize unprofessional behavior, understanding the consequences for employees and patients, discussing the theoretical underpinnings of incivility and bullying, and learning about the work and

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Both authors work at the Frances Payne Bolton School of Nursing at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio. Nadine Marchi is an instructor and volunteer teaching strategies coordinator with the QSEN Institute. Rachel Grdina is the codirector of the International Health Programs and WHO Collaborating Center, office manager of student services, and formerly the administrative coordinator for the QSEN Institute.

Selected references


Joy Longo is an associate professor at Christine E. Lynn College of Nursing, Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton, Florida.

Selected references


