

Career wellness

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Big and small changes can help you cultivate a healthy work life.

This is the sixth installment in a series of articles on wellness. You can read the earlier articles at american.nursetoday.com/category/wellness101/.

IMAGINE a life in which you have the perfect job: You're doing what you were cut out to do, learning new things all the time, and facing exciting challenges while your colleagues treat you with respect. You start each day looking forward to work and come home excited about what you've done. Is this far from your reality? If burnout, stress, and dissatisfaction are common themes for you and your colleagues, it may be time to re-evaluate your career wellness.

Work and dream alignment

Career wellness can be defined as engaging in work that provides personal satisfaction and enrichment and that's consistent with your values, goals, and lifestyle. After sleep, we spend most of our time at work, so ask yourself if your work motivates you and lets you use your abilities to their full potential. Also, are you aligned with your dreams and areas of passion? If you're aligned with your dreams at work, you'll have a good energy level that's sustained throughout the day. If not, you'll find going to work and staying motivated is challenging; it could be time to re-evaluate how you spend your working hours.

Protecting your career wellness may mean making big changes, like moving to another job or going back for more education so that you can apply for a higher position. (See *A personal story*.) But sometimes small steps help in big ways.

On-the-job strategies to "direct your sails"

Use these suggestions and resources to re-evaluate your career and re-energize your work life.

Mindfulness on the job. Mindfulness involves developing an intentional awareness that's open and accepting and allows you to respond rather than react to situations. Research supports that mindfulness can increase on-the-job resiliency and improve effectiveness and safety. These simple steps can help you incorporate



A personal story

by Brenda Buffington

*"Ships are safe in the harbor,
but that's not what ships are built for."*

—John A. Shedd

In 2013, I set out on what I now refer to as my "wilderness adventure." I left city life in Columbus, Ohio, and moved across the country to the United States Air Force Academy (USAFA) in beautiful Colorado Springs, Colorado. My new home, on the USAFA base nestled at the foot of the Rocky Mountains, was entirely new country to me. The job was amazing, and I quickly made new friends, but my work/life balance was out of alignment.

Then came the call: My "snowbird" father's health was failing, and he was relocating back to Ohio from sunny Arizona. I wanted to be there to help him, and I missed my sons, who were still in Ohio. A series of new developments and a research collaboration at The Ohio State University College of Nursing led to an opportunity to return to Columbus.

I risked a lot—new friends, a great job in a beautiful location—by moving back, but I now walk to work, never worry about parking, and my work/life balance is aligned. I needed to go there to get back here. A favorite quote by Thomas S. Monson has carried me through: "We can't direct the winds, but we can adjust the sails."

Promoting self-care at work

Incorporate some of these suggestions at your organization to encourage self-care among all of the staff.

Introduce self-care in staff meetings. At the Ohio State Medical Center, we do “Band in Your Hand” workouts using stretch bands, chair aerobics, guided mindfulness moments, and lunch and learn programs to build resiliency and reduce stress.

Post beautiful pictures. Research shows that visual triggers can help to motivate behavior change and reduce stress. Let everyone have a chance to decide which picture will be displayed and change it often.

Reward self-care and self-healing behavior. Openly recognize positive behaviors. For example, thank an employee or coworker who stayed home to get well rather than coming to work.

Create a “respite room.” Any small space can be turned into an area dedicated to peace and quiet. If possible, include a comfortable chair, low lighting, and maybe even a punching bag or pillow to release tension. If you’re not in a position to change your workspace, make your car an area of calm you can escape to on a break.

mindfulness into your day:

- Quiet your inner voice. Take 10 slow, deep breaths and concentrate on the air passing in and out of your lungs.
- There’s an app for that! Many free apps, such as Headspace and Calm, can help you quickly ease into mindfulness.

Self-care in the workplace. Many self-care and self-healing tools are low cost and can significantly and positively affect your work environment. All of us, not only leaders, can promote self-care and potentially reduce sick leave and absenteeism by creating an environment where people thrive. Read Sandra Thomas’ book, *Transforming Nurses’ Stress and Anger: Steps Toward Healing*, for some great ideas.

Cultivate a positive mindset. Leadership experts Tim and Brian Kight of Focus 3 explain that “one of the distinguishing characteristics of successful people is not only their ability to generate a positive, productive mindset, but to sustain it.” You’ll find a lot of power in keeping yourself positive and remembering that every event’s outcome is tempered by your response to it. The Kights formulate the importance of a person’s response, or “R factor,” this way: $E + R = O$: An event plus my response equals the outcome.

Multitask less, monotask more. Do you ever end up feeling fried at the end of a day? Multitasking may be the culprit. Try becoming more aware of when you’re distracted and picture a stop sign. Then, give your all to one task.

Purpose, pleasure, and pride. Author and founder of Blue Zones, Dan Buettner, who has researched happiness and longevity, says purpose, pleasure, and pride are important to a long and happy life. If we can design our workplace to increase each of these, we can stack the deck in favor of a fulfilling work life. Here are some ideas for how to do that:

- **Make a best friend at work.** One of the most powerful contributors to work satisfaction and productivity is agreement with the statement, “I have a best friend at work.” Some studies suggest this may be because friends work better together than acquaintances. And a best friend can just make work more engaging and fun.
- **Seek a job that fits you.** As Hungarian psychologist (and originator of the concept of “flow”) Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi advises, “Finding a job that engages your natural talents and gives you constant feedback is a sure way to build happiness.”
- **Consider your work hours.** Research shows that people who commute an hour each way would need an additional 40% of their monthly wage to be as satisfied with their life as people who walk to work. If a long commute is affecting your work pleasure, intentionally use that time for enjoyment by listening to music or positive audiobooks.
- **Set goals.** Setting goals gives us something to look forward to and a framework for accomplishing it.

Take action and set a SMART goal

Your road to career wellness begins when you take action. Start by setting SMART career wellness goals that are specific, measurable, achievable, and realistic. Set one goal that you can do each day for 30 days (it takes 30 days to break an old habit or make a new one).

Here are two suggestions:

- I will take 1 minute before and after my shift to just breathe, get my thinking right, and become more mindful of the present moment.
 - I will spend 10 minutes a day journaling about how I feel about my work so that I can gauge where I am.
- In some cases, career wellness requires big changes, but for many of us, simple steps can bring us back to the real reason we became nurses in the first place and rekindle that original joy. ★

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