

The Emotional Side of Nursing

Dealing with Loss

You stand by the bed as your patient slips away. You try to comfort grief-stricken relatives and friends. You sit down to fill out the necessary paperwork, but your eyes keep filling with tears.

Or perhaps you come in for your regular shift and are met with the somber news that one of your patients took an unexpected turn for the worse and has passed away.

As the grief begins to sink in, you realize that no matter how thorough nursing school was, nothing could have prepared you for this moment.

Nursing and Grief: Dealing with the Loss of a Patient

Empathy is a powerful tool for a nurse. But that same empathy can allow you to become heavily invested in your patients, and when one of them dies, the loss can be very difficult to handle. Putting on a stoic front might be necessary to help the grieving family members in the immediate aftermath of a death. Take a deep breath and set aside your grief long enough to attend to what needs to be done. Keep yourself busy with paperwork, final arrangements, and comforting the grieving family.

But once you are in private, take the time to grieve. Many a nurse has worked to the end of a shift and not shed a tear, only to fall apart and sob when they got home. Mourning is a powerful way to recognize the loss, and those shed tears will help you move forward and provide better care to other patients.

When you face death and dying so often, how do you keep your work life from eating away at your personal life? Where do you draw the line between the two? The answer to that question is unique to each nurse, but maintaining a good balance between your work and the rest of your life can help you keep the loss in perspective.



Finding that Work-Life Balance

Your good emotional health is crucial to being a great nurse. Take steps to find support long before you start to feel burned out. Here are a few good ways to begin:

- **Find a good support system.** Talk to your fellow nurses about how you are feeling. Sometimes the loss can hit hard, and it helps to discuss it with someone who has been through the same experience. Keep in mind that though many seasoned nurses might seem unaffected, beneath the surface they are grieving, too. They just have different ways of coping with it.
- **Talk to a counselor.** Meeting with a staff counselor or opting for private counseling can help you through a particularly difficult period.
- **Take a class in coping.** Many hospice organizations offer regular classes in coping with loss. Some offer classes geared toward nurses and caregivers. The class can offer insight into the process of death and give you coping tools to deal with the aftermath.
- **Focus on good things.** Keep that work-life balance strong by immersing yourself in the things that make you smile. Relaxing hobbies, time with friends, and breaks for travel are all good ways to take a breather from nursing and can offer a wider perspective.
- **Eat healthy foods and exercise regularly.** Maintaining a good diet and exercising regularly might seem routine, but they are often the first things to slide when you are emotionally drained. You have to take care of yourself before you can effectively take care of others, so don't let the comforts of a regular routine slip away from you.

What You Can Learn from Terminally-Ill Patients

When you lose a patient, finding the silver lining can help you handle the grief. Kathy Egan, a certified hospice and palliative nurse, believes something can be learned through every loss.

"In order to care for people, you have to experience the loss yourself, create and maintain your own balance, finding meaning and purpose in all experiences, even loss," she points out.

Frame your loss in meaningful terms, and ask yourself positive questions. What did you learn about how to handle grieving family members? What did the patient want most during their final hours? What little tricks did you learn for keeping them comfortable?

Honor your patient by seeing the loss as a learning experience, and you can become a better nurse in the process.