Chapter 14

Underappreciated and Undervalued:
Nurse Dissatisfaction and the COVID–19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This chapter seeks to analyze the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on nurses and how it has affected the prevalence of compassion fatigue, moral injury, and overall job satisfaction. It examines current intervention strategies and frameworks and offers recommendations for how these systems may be improved to better support nurses. Numerous instruments have been developed in an attempt to study compassion fatigue. One of the most widely used of these instruments is the professional quality of life (ProQOL) scale. Using the ProQOL scale as a foundation, the author conducted an anonymous survey of nurses (n = 91) employed at a major university-affiliated hospital in Chicago. The author also conducted two longer individual interviews with nurses who are employed at this hospital. The pandemic has profoundly harmed nurses and triggered a cascading stream of consequences. The pandemic has increased the prevalence of both compassion fatigue and moral injury. Nurses are chronically overworked and lack critical resources and support from hospital management.

INTRODUCTION

"By choosing to enter the profession of nursing, we are choosing to be in service to others. But we did not sign up to be martyrs."

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the healthcare landscape in complex and unpredictable ways. Healthcare providers have been forced to rapidly adjust to increasingly intense working conditions during a time of tremendous uncertainty. Nurses, who are at the forefront of patient advocacy and caregiving,

have borne the brunt of many of the intense and traumatic consequences of the pandemic. This prolonged exposure impacts the well-being and mental health of nurses. Compassion fatigue (CF) is defined as stress and declining emotional capacity that results from repeated interactions with traumatized individuals. In nurses specifically, CF may emerge from prolonged exposure to the suffering of others. Cocker and Joss describe CF as the intersection of secondary traumatic stress (STS) and cumulative burnout (BO), a state of physical and mental exhaustion brought on by an inability to function in one's everyday environment (2016). The COVID-19 pandemic "forces frontline health-care workers to make difficult medical decisions that may result in moral injury. Understanding the extent to which physicians, nurses, and other health-care workers experience moral injury while working in a pandemic is of critical importance to establish preventative measures and trauma-informed treatment" (Litam & Balkin, 2021). The COVID-pandemic has also aggravated the nursing shortage in the United States. The American Hospital Association (AHA) reports that the United States is experiencing a critical nursing shortage that is expected to persist until at least 2030 (AHA, 2021). Without intervention, this shortage is expected to worsen.

Healthcare providers regularly face intense, high-stress situations that affect their own mental well-being. Those working in Intensive Care Units (ICUs), in particular, regularly care for critically ill patients with higher mortality rates than those in other units. "A growing body of evidence suggests that burnout among ICU nurses and ICU physicians is a remarkable result of the demanding and continuously high-stress work environment. It has been suggested that ICU professionals could be emotionally affected by end-of-life issues, ethical decision making, observing the continuous suffering of patients, disproportionate care or medical futility, miscommunication, and demanding relatives of the patients" (Van Mol et al., 2015). Understanding these potential unit-specific variables is important in developing effective and targeted intervention strategies.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Defining Compassion Fatigue

While compassion fatigue (CF) is a widely used term, especially within healthcare, the construct of CF and how it is measured remains debated. Researcher Kathleen Ledoux concluded that "there are multiple and diverse understandings and definitions of what compassion fatigue is. So much so, there are equally multiple, diverse and conflicting strategies to mitigate it"(2015). To better understand what compassion fatigue really is, Ledoux began by exploring and defining what compassion itself means. Interestingly, Ledoux found that the tools most often used to measure nurse compassion fatigue do not appear to measure the construct of compassion. None of the multiple definitions of nurse compassion fatigue that were explored actually aligned with an understanding of compassion. This has important implications for how CF should be measured and the effectiveness of current interventions.

Emily Peters, BSN, RN, defines compassion fatigue as "declining empathetic ability from repeated exposure to others' suffering" (2018). By clarifying the concept of compassion fatigue, Peters argues, methodologies of treatment and intervention for CF in nursing may be improved. Peters conducted a concept analysis of compassion fatigue by reviewing the following databases: OVID, CINAHL Complete, Science Direct, Academic One File, Criminal Justice Abstracts, Education Full Text (H.W. Wilson), PsycARTICLES, PsycINFO, Social Work Abstracts, and Teacher Reference Center. Through this research, Peters concluded that CF occurred across disciplines. However, nurses in particular were especially

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