Imagine: Compassion Fatigue Training for Nurses

Ann Marie Lee Walton, RN, MPH, OCN®, CHES, and Mimi Alvarez, RN, MSN, PMHCNS-BC

The residency program for oncology nurses at University of North Carolina Healthcare is comprehensive. New graduate nurses in the inpatient setting undergo 13 weeks of orientation with two primary preceptors on the unit and then meet monthly for four hours of didactic learning and support for the first 12 months. The nurse educators who planned this residency wanted to create a celebration that would encourage reflection on the past year and teach self-care strategies as well.

Mimi Alvarez, RN, MSN, PMHCNS-BC, a psychiatric clinical nurse specialist with the Comprehensive Cancer Support Program, has developed a presentation for the nurses on compassion fatigue. Alvarez’s presentation addresses the risks of passionately caring for patients. Alvarez knows that nurses have to be acutely aware of where their “gas tank” of emotional energy hovers and have a conscious awareness of the dynamics of caring. Mimi’s desire to teach this class comes from her own experience.

“When I was a baby nurse in oncology, no one told me that I would be coming home and be having dreams about my patients; that something would remind me of my patient. No one told me any of this would happen. I thought I was losing my mind, that something was wrong with me. I was being human.

“To understand (the patient’s) humanity I have to go inside of myself and understand my own humanity. There is no way I can be in a relationship with (the patient) and not be touched. There is no way I can care for another and not be changed. That component of self reflection is what is missing in the training of nurses. We teach nurses to reflect clinically, not psychologically.”

In this painting, I have memorialized this 21-year-old college student who relinquished his life to cancer. As his nurse, I was honored with his confidence and was impressed with his courage and resilience. Through him, I learned the art of self-discovery and recovery of hope, and was moved to create this painting in his image.

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She also highlights rituals that continue the development of high performance. Alvarez also distinguishes the etiologies of compassion fatigue and burnout.

For the second half of the presentation, Alvarez creates an experience of how to let go of some of that fatigue. She asks the nurses to take a few moments to center themselves within a private, sacred space in the hospital chapel. Soft music plays and tea lights and singing bowls adorn the altar. Alvarez then leads an oil-cleansing ritual that helps the participants connect with themselves, release fatigue, and become grounded again. Mantras also are used with the oil therapy to enhance focus of the nurses. Patricia Cadle, MRE, BCC, oncology chaplain for University of North Carolina Healthcare, then plays the singing bowls to promote balance and well being.

Finally, the participants reconvene in the classroom for the sharing of a meal and continued fellowship. This four-hour workshop is in no way exhaustive of the training that could be done in compassion fatigue for nurses.

Oncology lends itself to a belief that we, as nurses, are privileged to see and participate in the journey of others. This opportunity allows nurses to reflect on their own humanity and not just their clinical skills. The authors imagine a forum within oncology to allow for regular self-reflective exercise, self-reflective supervision, and being able to meet with someone about the warning signs of compassion fatigue. Self-reflection is like a muscle which will atrophy if not exercised; we hope one day to hone its performance for all of our staff on a more regular basis.

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