

Happiness: *The Highest Form of Health*

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Engagement results at an urban hospital revealed nurses were challenged by stress. To create a happiness culture, nurse leaders participated in a book club based on *The Happiness Advantage*. Activities were designed to promote optimism, foster social support, and provide stress management ideas. A resilience toolkit was provided to teams. Subsequent engagement results showed managers scored above the national benchmark in managing stress (3.59 versus 3.48); 65% of nursing units improved. Nurse friendliness scores increased (83.4% versus 86.6%) as did likelihood to recommend scores (82.6% versus 86%). Improving personal well-being is the first step in creating a culture of happiness.

Choose to be happy. This advice is easier said than done. Personal happiness can be impacted by many internal and external factors. The methods by which these factors are processed can help build resilience and hardwire the brain for positivity. This article explores a leadership case study on the impact personal well-being had on nurse leaders, their teams, and the patients they care for on a daily basis. It also provides a toolkit of resources for building resilience and hardwiring happiness to aid in one's journey toward the highest form of health.

BACKGROUND

In 2016, Press Ganey nurse engagement results at a large urban academic hospital revealed nurses were challenged by workplace stress. The average score for the question “the amount of job stress I feel is reasonable” on a 0- to 5-point scale for our nurses was 3.42. The Press Ganey national health care benchmark for that question was 3.48. As a result, nursing shared leadership (shared governance) was asked to identify

strategies to decrease stress and increase engagement. To accomplish this task, shared leadership explored existing resources within the organization as well as best practices demonstrated in the literature.

Personal well-being has been a focus at this institution for quite some time, with executive leadership understanding the impact it has on teamwork and patient care. In 2017, the nursing strategic plan at the organization included a goal related to care profession to *foster resilience in personal well-being by promoting strategies for self-reflection and exploring opportunities for support of self and colleagues within the Northwestern Medicine Interprofessional Relationship-Based Care (NM IRBC) Practice Model*. The professional practice model depicts the interconnectedness of 3 relationships: relationships with self, relationships with colleagues, and relationships with patients and families. Encouraging caregivers to focus on personal well-being further supports the relationships that are cultivated with colleagues and patients.

The American Nurses Association recognized 2017 as Year of the Healthy Nurse, including a happiness initiative.¹ Several authors have demonstrated that happiness leads to increased productivity, engagement and performance.²⁻⁴ When looking at well-being, the first step in a journey toward happiness begins with self. The American Organization for Nursing Leadership (AONL) nurse manager model recognizes self-reflection and self-awareness as 2 essential competencies required when developing the leader within oneself.⁵ Personal reflection and self-awareness provide the opportunity to better understand causes of stress, allowing individuals to then work on building resilience to alleviate these stressors. As nurse leaders, improving personal well-being is the first step in creating a culture of happiness within our teams.

KEY POINTS

- **Personal happiness can impact productivity, engagement, and performance.**
- **The habit of happiness can be hardwired by building resilience and incorporating positive activities into a daily routine.**
- **By learning methods to improve personal happiness, nurse leaders are able to share these strategies with their teams to foster resilience and create a culture of happiness and well-being in the work environment.**

Table 1. Happiness 21-Day Challenge

Activity	Action	Benefit
<i>Three gratitudes</i>	Write down 3 new things you are thankful for every day	Trains the brain to scan the world for positivity
<i>Journaling</i>	Write 1 positive experience you had over the last 24 hours	Relive happy moments through detailing experiences
<i>Exercise</i>	Perform light activity for 10 minutes per day	Teaches the brain that behavior matters
<i>Meditation</i>	Perform a daily 2-minute meditation activity such as focused breathing	Allows the mind to step away from multitasking and focus on the task at hand
<i>Conscious act of kindness</i>	Perform a random act to make someone's day better	Increases feelings of social support and connectedness

Personal happiness may have a ceiling, but it can act as a catalyst to fuel team success. In the context of relationships, once personal happiness has been hardwired, focus can be shifted to cultivating happiness within teams. This can lead to increased productivity, engagement, and performance for the entire team.⁴ A culture of happiness can then manifest in relationships with patients and their families.

A great example of the impact stress and building resilience has on relationships in the healthcare setting focuses on shift work for nurses, a known stressor due to workload and scheduling practices.⁶⁻⁸ After a busy shift, adopting strategies like exercising can help decrease stress and build resilience. This can lead to starting the next shift with a positive attitude. Happiness is contagious and allows better connection with teammates. As nurses, teamwork is essential for patient care. In working together as a team, communication improves, work is more efficient and patients notice—leading to increased patient satisfaction scores.⁹

With this in mind, shared leadership at our organization recommended designing sessions to foster happiness and resilience for nurse leaders. The goal of the training was to improve engagement and enhance the patient experience by taking the time to work on personal well-being.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT BOOK CLUB

To create a culture of happiness, nurse leaders participated in a leadership development book club based on Shawn Achor's *The Happiness Advantage*.³ This 5-month leadership development book club was implemented in January 2017 to promote optimism, foster social support, and provide ideas to manage stress. Activities related to principles that fuel performance success were provided. Leaders shared lessons learned and best practices with their respective teams.

The first book club session included a Happiness 21-Day Challenge (*Table 1*).¹⁰ Leaders were asked

to engage their teams in performing daily habits of happiness including exercise, meditation, journaling, an act of kindness, and 3 gratitudes. Performing 1 of the activities from the list for 21 consecutive days helps to mentally hardwire the brain for happiness.

Subsequent book club sessions focused on methods to incorporate learned happiness behaviors into the workplace. The practice of giving thanks is shown to help your brain scan the world for positivity instead of focusing on negative experiences.³ Techniques were taught to assess happiness and levels of gratitude during interviews. Nurse leaders were asked to reflect on questions that invoked appreciation and self-care routines and to role play interview scenarios. Nurse leaders were able to incorporate these questions into job interviews to ensure potential candidates for nursing positions were a good fit for the unit culture. *Table 2* displays sample interview questions.

Leaders collaborated to define what workplace happiness looked like for their teams and discussed methods to identify and reduce stressors in their work area. For example, 1 unit wanted to optimize time-off requests during summer, the busy season of the year. The team created a calendar of available hours for transparency to allow for collaboration and coordination of vacations. This system ensured all employees were able to take a seasonal vacation and recharge. It even reduced the number of unscheduled days off, ensuring the units were properly staffed for patient care.

At another session, participants were challenged to perform a conscious act of kindness toward a coworker. This action could be simple, such as sending an encouraging text message to a colleague. Both the executor and the recipient reap benefits, because the act of kindness increases feelings of social support.³ To illustrate the point, nurse leaders were given a carnation and asked to deliver that flower to someone who had helped them during the week as a way to thank them for their efforts. As the leaders performed this act of kindness, they took a

Table 2. Sample Interview Questions

Sample Interview Questions

When was the last time you said thank you, and what were the circumstances? How did that make you feel? How did that make the recipient feel?

Tell us about the last time you showed appreciation for a team member.

What do you like to do for fun after a busy day at work or school?

What are 3 things you are grateful for today?

Signs of Compassion Fatigue

Emotional	Sensitivity, mood swings, irritability, cynicism, lack of joy, anxiety, depression, trouble concentrating/focusing, coping with food or alcohol
Spiritual	Questioning faith and purpose
Workplace	Dreading work, avoidance, decreased efficiency and productivity, increased errors, job turnover
Social	Loss of interest, loss of enjoyment in activities, isolation
Physical	Fatigue, difficulty sleeping, headaches

Figure 1. Indicators of Compassion Fatigue

picture with the recipient to capture the happy moment. When the group reconvened, the pictures were shared on an Instagram feed to allow all the leaders to visualize the social support created by the activity.

As the book club concluded, each service line was asked to determine a process for embedding personal happiness habits into their daily routine. One area incorporated a simple stretch and flex routine performed at the nurse’s station into their daily habits. This light activity helped to rejuvenate the team and prevent midshift burnout. It also created a social bond between the interprofessional team members—and sometimes patients would even join in on the fun. Nurse leaders shared these examples at the session to pass along ways to sustain the culture of happiness they created.

The book club finished prior to the 2017 engagement survey. It was 1 strategy utilized to improve personal well-being among nurse leaders and their teams. These activities worked to improve optimism and social support on the units. Creating a culture of resilience was another opportunity to positively impact levels of managed stress for the clinical nurses.

BUILDING RESILIENCE

The concept of resilience is necessary for nursing—being able to withstand or recover quickly from difficult

conditions. In the field of nursing, challenging situations are faced every day. One way to manage these stressors is through creating a supportive culture of resilience.

A first step toward developing a resilient workforce is in understanding the potential ramifications of compassion fatigue. Compassion fatigue can manifest itself in a number of ways (*Figure 1*) and can influence a person’s personal and professional life.¹¹

McNutt and Watson¹² suggest using the ABC’s to manage compassion fatigue. A stands for awareness—having the self-awareness to know one’s work and emotional limits. This allows for better preparation and adjustment to challenges. B stands for balance—building something that brings joy to oneself into their daily routine. And C stands for connections—building relationships with others to help process experiences in a more positive manner.

Another way to combat compassion fatigue and foster resilience is through self-care—the essential strategy of taking the time to take care of oneself. This can be done physically using activities such as exercising, meditating, eating right, and getting enough sleep. It can also be done mentally through actions like recognizing our strengths, engaging in new learning, and correcting negative thinking. Quality self-care can help prevent burnout and increases the ability to have therapeutic relationships with others.

Resilience Domains

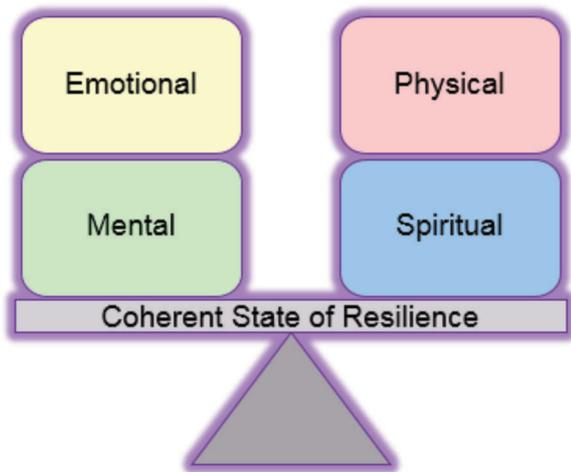


Figure 2. Domains of Resilience

CARING FOR YOURSELF IN THE FACE OF DIFFICULT WORK

Our work can be overwhelming. Our challenge is to maintain our resilience so that we can keep doing the work with care, energy, and compassion.

10 things to do for each day

1. Get enough sleep.	6. Focus on what you did well.
2. Get enough to eat.	7. Learn from your mistakes.
3. Do some light exercise.	8. Share a private joke.
4. Vary the work that you do.	9. Pray, meditate or relax.
5. Do something pleasurable.	10. Support a colleague.

For more information see your supervisor and visit www.psychosocial.org or www.proqol.org

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SWITCHING ON AND OFF

It is your empathy for others helps you do this work. It is vital to take good care of your thoughts and feelings by monitoring how you use them. Resilient workers know how to turn their feelings off when they go on duty, but on again when they go off duty. This is not denial; it is a coping strategy. It is a way they get maximum protection while working (switched off) and maximum support while resting (switched on).

How to become better at switching on and off

- Switching is a conscious process. Talk to yourself as you switch.
- Use images that make you feel safe and protected (switch off) or connected and cared for (switch on) to help you switch.
- Find rituals that help you switch as you start and stop work.
- Breathe slowly and deeply to calm yourself when starting a tough job.

Figure 3. ProQOL Pocket Card

This ultimately impacts the quality of care that nurses are able to provide.¹³ For these reasons, it is important to keep perspective of what generates joy, as well as what takes it away, so that focus can be kept on self-care, well-being, and overall resilience.

Work done by the HeartMath Institute suggests that resilience requires the ability to self-regulate energy from 4 different resource domains (physical, emotional,

spiritual, and mental).¹⁴ Figure 2 displays the domains of resilience. Using self-regulation techniques such as the ABCs or self-care allows alignment of resource domains and transition to a more coherent or balanced state of resilience. In this resilient state, positivity abounds, and it is easier to recognize available opportunities. Energy is also heightened, which allows for greater flexibility and adaptation to change. Additionally, this state of resilience yields improved focus and organization, ultimately increasing productivity.

Levels of personal resilience also impact relationships. As previously discussed, the relationship with oneself benefits from decreased levels of stress and improved physical health and well-being. Relationships with colleagues are impacted by increased flexibility and open mindedness, leading to enhanced collaboration and increased perspective, which fosters connectedness and social support.¹⁵ The relationship with patients and families benefit from providers having an increased capacity for compassion and empathy, which in turn improves the patient experience.

RESILIENCE TOOLKIT

There are a number of tools and techniques available to help strengthen resilience. The clinical teams involved in this initiative focused on personal development efforts related to self-awareness and self-care.

Self-Awareness

Strategies for self-awareness included completion of assessment tools from StrengthsFinder 2.0, Emotional Intelligence 2.0, or Insights Discovery.¹⁶⁻¹⁸ Tools such as these provide individuals with a better understanding of personality traits, tendencies, and areas of discomfort. This awareness can help in preparation for challenging situations and can also provide supportive methods for working in the team environment.

Self-Care

Another area of focus was self-care for stress management. Resources available throughout the organization were reviewed with the teams. This included discussion of the “quiet rooms,” which are meant for rest and relaxation, and are available to all employees. Other suggestions provided for relaxation involved guided deep breathing, use of cell phone applications, and integrating tips from the ProQOL pocket card.¹⁹ Figure 3 displays the ProQOL pocket card.

MEASURE AND RESULTS

Inspired by *The Happiness Advantage* leadership development book club, interprofessional teams at our organization had the opportunity to partake in activities to hardwire habits of happiness. The teams also participated in strategies to build resilience through self-awareness and self-care. The results of these efforts led to an improvement in employee engagement scores. The 2017 Press Ganey engagement

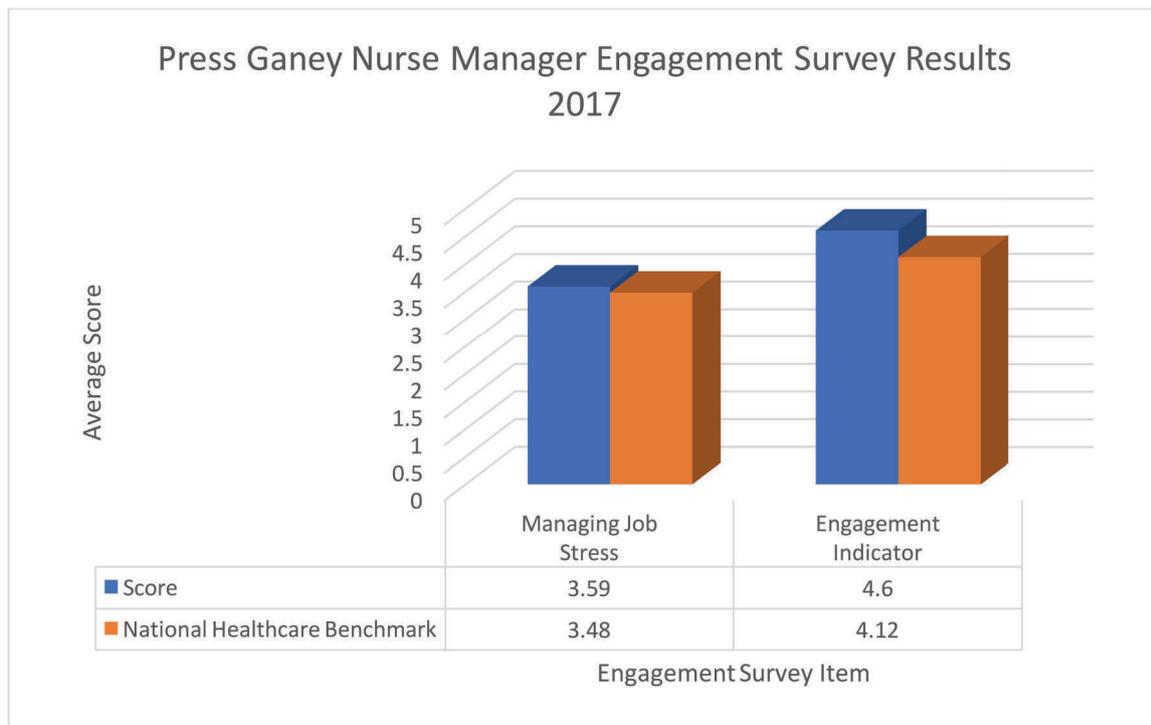


Figure 4. Nurse Manager 2017 Engagement Survey Results

results showed nurse managers scored above the national health care average in managing stress (3.59 versus 3.48). The nurse managers were also in the 99th percentile for engagement, scoring above the national health care benchmark (4.60 versus 4.12). **Figure 4** displays the nurse manager engagement survey results.

An appreciable impact on team engagement for clinical nurses was also noted. Changing culture does not happen overnight. In many cases, it will take longer than the 5-month span of the leadership development book club. A team was considered successful if a nursing unit either scored above the national benchmark or if they improved their score from the previous engagement survey. Results showed that 65% of nursing units improved or scored above the national average in managing job stress, and 60% of nursing units improved or scored above the national average in overall engagement.

Patient experience was another area of measure for the impact of this work. The project team sought to evaluate whether the happiness culture translated to patients' perceptions of teamwork. The Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems (HCAHPS) survey question pertaining to nurse friendliness was considered a reflection of nurse happiness and was therefore used as a measurement in regards to patient experience.²⁰ Nurse friendliness top box scores demonstrated a year-over-year increase (83.4% versus 86.6%) from 2016 to 2017 after implementation of the leadership development book club initiatives. **Figure 5** displays the results.

The patient outcome of likelihood to recommend was also used as an indicator of overall quality of care, accounting for teamwork, communication, and unit culture. These top box scores also increased year-over-year (82.6% versus 86%). **Figure 6** displays the results.

IMPLICATIONS

By learning methods to improve personal happiness, nurse leaders can share strategies with their teams and potentially increase happiness in the work environment. Happiness fuels nursing performance and achievement of patient outcomes. Once this culture is created, sustainment is paramount. Our organization has used multiple strategies to ensure new employees have access to the tools provided in this article. The Happiness 21-Day Challenge is included in the stress management session provided to all nurse residents as part of their year-long onboarding residency program. Unit engagement committees have adapted their personalized self-care strategies to fit their culture. Many clinical nurses also focus their professional development projects on personal well-being. Nurse leader development sessions continue to focus on the journey for self-awareness and how it can be implemented to strengthen resilience and cultivate personal well-being. Organizational support for these initiatives has had a positive impact on our teams. This is reflected in our first-year turnover rates of 10.62%, which outperforms the PWC Saratoga Health Care Industry top decile of 14.5%.

There are many tools available that promote strategies for developing resilience and increasing

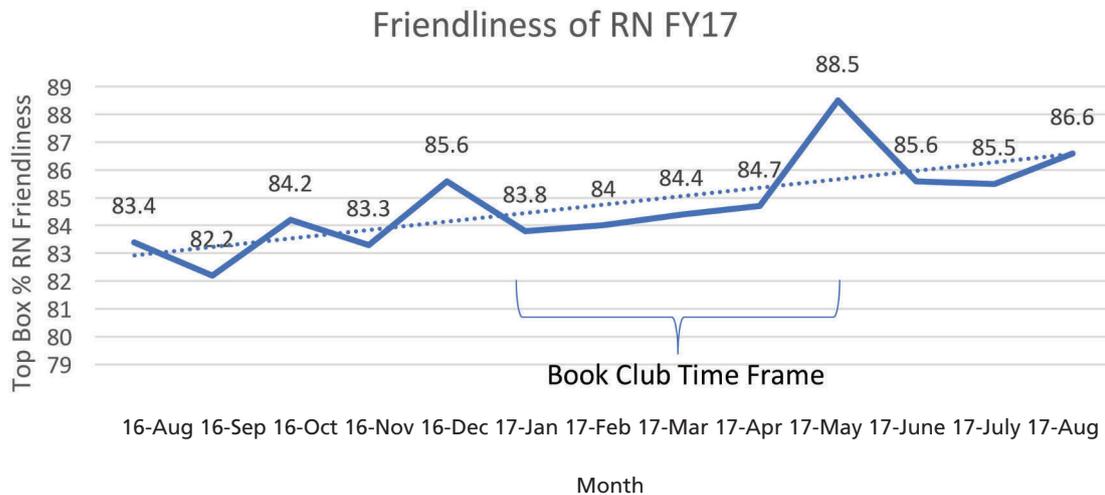


Figure 5. HCAHPS: Patient’s Perspectives of Care Survey Results for Nurse Friendliness

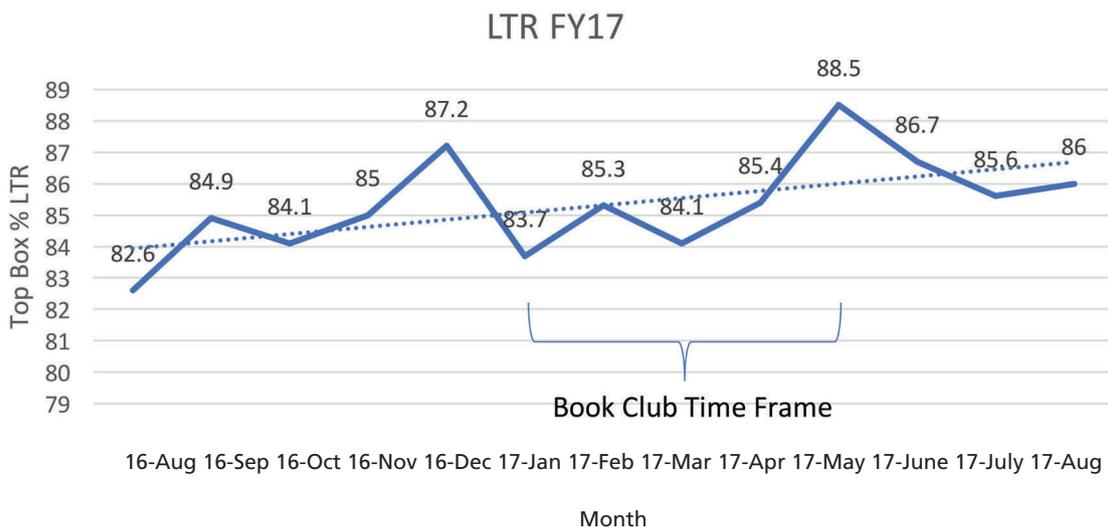


Figure 6. HCAHPS: Patient’s Perspectives of Care Survey Results for Likelihood to Recommend

happiness. These tools range from books to cell-phone applications and website resources—all of which are designed to promote self-care and work-life balance. Happiness is a choice to make. Through building resilience and incorporating positive activities into a daily routine, the habit of happiness can be hardwired. This takes work—but aren’t you worth it? The key to success is in *choosing* happiness and committing to strategies such as those used in the 21-Day Challenge. A strong habit of happiness can lead to a happier future.

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