

Managing Holiday Stress, Starting the New Year Well

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We will soon be in the midst of holiday season stress, thinking about New Year's resolutions. Making and keeping New Year's resolutions is fraught with disappointments (nearly 80% fail by February), so I prefer to challenge myself by setting goals for the year, such as a yearly reading goal. My goal is 52 books per year, and each year has a different accompanying theme such as reading only nonfiction works or women authors or authors of color. I also set a health goal (notice I did not say weight loss goal) to engage in physical activity 5 days each week. In addition, with the help of a health and wellness coach, I also learned to reframe how my health and wellness goals can be an asset to my leadership practice.

As nurse leaders, we all experience the pressure and stress of leadership, which absolutely impacts our health and wellness. In a 2018 article in *Nurse Leader*,¹ I described the different types of coaches nurse leaders may engage in a coaching relationship. For this month's column, I spoke with Marit Weikel, Licensed Professional Counselor and certified Health and Wellness Coach of Weikel Health & Wellness, LLC, whom I worked with during the Executive Nurse Fellowship program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. I discovered I was not at all attuned to my level of stress. My blood pressure was sky high, I ruminated about diet and weight, and I suffered from migraine headaches. Below is what I learned on my personal journey, which may in turn help others reflect on their own boundaries in order to set healthier goals heading into 2020.

PRESSURE, RUMINATION, AND STRESS

Pressures resulting from external environmental demands (e.g., at work or trying to maintain work-life balance) do not always result in stress. We can all identify a work situation that some found stressful, but others did not. For some, pressure can be energizing and motivating, and can stoke creativity. For others, pressure leads to rumination, thinking over and over about some past or future event: "what if this happens" or "what if that happens" or "if only..." ending with the attachment of negative emotions ("if only I had been bolder in the boardroom" or "I should have terminated that poor performer sooner" or "what if I take a PTO day and the unit falls apart"), which is what leads to stress.² Recall from our pathophysiology courses that ruminating results in stress, which in turn

can lead to symptoms of anxiety. You may have been ruminating about work the last time you arrived in your driveway, which is why you don't remember the drive home. Leaders who ruminate excessively all have elevated levels of the stress hormones adrenaline (short-acting) and cortisol (long-acting).

Normal levels of the stress hormone cortisol stimulate fat and carbohydrate metabolism, but increased levels often result in cravings for sweet, high-fat, and salty foods, which can wreak havoc on a leader's diet. Although 1 pint of ice cream (or an extra glass of wine) after a bad day may be needed and deliciously soothing, repeating that behavior in order to manage your stress is definitely going to impact your health. High cortisol levels are also often associated with weight gain, so finding other strategies to manage that stress are critical. A health and wellness coach can assist in better understanding stress, how it manifests (e.g., with headaches, fatigue, insomnia, being quick to anger, or "just not feeling good"), and in formulating a strategy to deal with it.

HEALTH AND WELLNESS COACHES

Your desired end state—reduced stress, improved nutrition, or increased activity (or maybe all 3)—will help guide your search for a health and wellness coach who is the best fit for you. Health and wellness coaches work at hospitals, fitness centers, public health organizations, major corporations, insurance companies, nursing homes, nonprofit agencies, and training centers. Perhaps your organization already has a relationship with a coach you can contact. If not, a quick Internet search reveals a variety of independent and freelance coaches to consider. In my August 2019 column,³ I compared the pros and cons of national board and proprietary certifications, along with a caution for the buyer to beware; the same holds true when deciding to engage a coach. As you research coaches, look for those with certification from the National Board for Health & Wellness Coaching (NBHWC) or those who are professionally trained and licensed counselors. Wellcoaches, Inc., an early educator of coaches from the American College of Sports Medicine, has a website, Find a Coach.⁴ The coach you select should partner with and support you as you navigate establishing new healthier behaviors. I asked Marit to share what nurse leaders can gain in a coaching relationship because so often they are so busy

in caring for others that they have little time left for themselves. She replied: “The coach does not prescribe what to do. The coach believes the client has the answer within themselves, so the coach will help the client access and clarify those goals. By asking thought-provoking questions, the coach helps clients to access those answers for themselves, allowing them to create and build the change they want to see in their life. There should be a personal, honest, and reflective relationship between client and coach.” The outcome is to develop sustainable strategies to bring overall wellness, health, and well-being. This type of coaching is effective either face-to-face or via phone. Certain coaches will also work with small groups via video-conference, which for some is a more affordable option.

Coaching fees and sessions vary, and most health insurance plans still do not cover health coaching, but check with your human resources department. New coaches charge around \$50 to \$75 per session, with more experienced coaches charging \$100 to \$200 per session. Coaching packages are also available with enough options to fit most budgets. Marit offers both 3- and 6-month packages that all begin with a 40- to 60-minute call to begin to establish rapport and to clarify health and wellness goals. After the initial session, there are shorter calls ranging from 20 to 30 minutes each. Prior to each session, I provided Marit with a written mini-update that made me reflect on the new behaviors I was working to establish.

STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE HEALTH AND WELLNESS

As Marit and I moved to talking about health and wellness strategies, she indicated yes, all strategies are teachable. But what Marit said next stopped me cold: “Clients have to decide what’s ok and what’s not ok. Having poor or unhealthy boundaries leads to stress, which leads to burnout. Exhaustion, anger, and resentment all hint at unhealthy boundaries. Health and wellness coaches help with boundary setting, when to set them, why to set them, and to revisit them regularly. Boundaries need regular maintenance.” This was my “aha” moment—no one else but me could put my health and wellness first in order to be a more effective leader.

The hard part for nurse leaders (or at least for me) was putting myself first. I now use the following strategies to support my own health and wellness: 30-minute power walk 5 days a week and working out in a gym 2 days each week (because exercise reduces levels of adrenaline and cortisol, and releases endorphins), acupuncture, massage, 8 hours of sleep each night, and healthy dinner kit delivery at home (the time saved on menu planning and grocery

shopping makes this very affordable). Other strategies such as yoga, meditation, mindfulness, facials, essential oils, and candles can also help. Walk the dog or walk during lunch (try to minimize the number of meetings with lunch), dance, box, run, try Pilates or Zumba. Try music, deep breathing, less caffeine (while not easy, I have been diet Coke free for almost 7 years), or use the stairs. In my last job, there was 1 staff member who excelled at telling jokes, so any all-staff meeting started with a joke, and before long, that became part of our culture because laughter reduces stress. Most importantly, learn to say “no” (see setting boundaries).

By giving yourself permission to take better care of yourself, you can lead by example for your staff. Marit indicated, “big change can start with the nurse leader, leading by example in their own organization,” such as incorporating strategies to achieve the Quadruple Aim. Why not hire a health and wellness coach for your staff, encourage group coaching, or participate in the American Nurses Association’s initiative Healthy Nurse, Healthy Nation challenge? Information and resources are available on their website, with a focus on the 5 domains of nutrition, quality of life, safety, rest, and physical activity, combining to help create a population of healthy nurses.

CONCLUSION

I am not implying this work is easy, but only you can help manage how you react to pressure. Colleagues will comment I look great, for which I always thank them for their kind words, but it is challenging to maintain healthy boundaries. 2020 could be your year to set healthier boundaries.

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