



Anxiety. Nursing's hidden struggle.

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Feeling anxious at work? Feeling anxious about going to work?

I think the first thing to say here is that you are far from alone. And the second thing to say is that you are amongst friends.

| In Australia approximately 14% of the population experiences anxiety. |

Feelings of anxiety are to be expected in the nursing profession. We are ordinary people who are expected to manage extraordinary situations, no?

Sometimes situations that *most* people would find completely overwhelming or even unimaginable.

Unfortunately, I think that some of those very strengths that make us good nurses, such as sensitivity, compassion and high self-expectations, combined with the mental and physical stress of our work, leave us all a little psychologically vulnerable to experiencing anxiety.

Often, during our work, we find ourselves pushing the boundaries of our comfort zones, and a certain amount of anxiety at times like this is a natural response.

In fact, in small doses, it might even be a *useful* response, helping us to stay focused and switched-on to the current situation.

But constant exposure to triggers of anxiety can have more pernicious consequences. Sometimes anxiety that you are experiencing at work can expand and flood out into the rest of your life.

Its impact can range from simply annoying and frustrating, all the way through to completely debilitating.

Generalised Anxiety Disorder.

Generalised anxiety disorder (GAD) may exist if you have experienced the following symptoms frequently over the last 6 months:

- Excessive worry and feelings of anxiety
- Feelings of loss of control over your emotions at these times.
- Feeling that your anxiety is making it difficult to carry out nursing or study activities.
- Feeling that your anxiety is impacting on your socialising with friends and family.
- depression.
- constant rumination.

GAD may also be accompanied by physical sensations such as:

- irritability
- difficulty concentrating
- specific muscle tension (such as in the jaw or the back)
- sleeping difficulty.

Treatment.

The most important thing to recognise here is that if you are experiencing an unmanageable anxiety that is affecting your work and your life:

1. you are not any lesser of a nurse.
2. you are not any lesser of a person.
3. you will not need to stop being a nurse.
4. you probably will need a little help from your friends (so don't try to hide it away from *everybody*)

There are many incredibly effective medical and psychological treatments available to help manage anxiety issues. It is important to get professional help to tap into the treatment that will be most effective for your own situation.

Not all experiences of anxiety will require professional help. Nurses are nothing if not resilient. Sometimes a good support network of friends and colleagues and a little *self*-directed care will be enough to work through the odd anxiety patch. But we are also pretty bad at acknowledging those times when we do need a higher level of support.

Research has shown psychological therapies such as:

Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) <https://www.beyondblue.org.au/the-facts/anxiety/treatments-for-anxiety/psychological-treatments-for-anxiety>

or

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)
<http://www.anxietyhappens.com/AcceptanceCommitment/>

to be most effective in dealing with GAD. Sometimes medication treatment may be used as an adjunct.

There are also many things you can do yourself:

- Talk about your experiences with close friends or family.
- Reduce or cut caffeine and other stimulants.
- Look for ways to reduce stressful stimuli at work.

For example: temporarily reducing your hours, temporarily moving to another area, roster patterns.

You need to look at things that might help in your own circumstance. Consider talking about this with a trusted member of your senior nursing leadership.

- Examine ways you can improve your current diet and exercise activities.

Anxiety as a path:

Finally I would like to say (from my own experience) that although it may not seem it at the time, anxiety may be an important path for you.

Working to address the underlying causes of anxiety (with therapies such as CBT) can lead to a deep examination and re-orientation of some parts of your life.

It can definitely be more of a of a *re-order* than a dis-order.

I by no means mean to belittle the very real suffering and hardship that anxiety can bring to those experiencing it as well as family and friends.

But it *can* give you the opportunity to develop a whole new set of skills and ways of experiencing life that will perhaps make you a better person.

And, perhaps, a far better nurse.

Where to find more info:

Beyondblue

www.beyondblue.org.au

ph. 1300 22 4636

Information on depression and anxiety, available treatments and where to get help.

You can visit <http://www.beyondblue.org.au/anxietysupport> for a list of services specially for people experiencing anxiety, their friends and family.

These services include national and state-based information and referral lines, face-

to-face treatment and support services, and links to online information, support and treatment.

Lifeline

www.lifeline.org.au

ph. 13 11 14

Access to crisis support, suicide prevention and mental health support services.

Mindhealth connect

www.mindhealthconnect.org.au

Access to trusted, relevant mental health care services, online programs and resources.

References:

1. anxietyhappens.com [Internet]. [cited 2014 Jan 22]. Available from: <http://www.anxietyhappens.com/>
2. Generalised anxiety disorder (GAD) [Internet]. [cited 2014 Jan 22]. Available from: <http://www.beyondblue.org.au/the-facts/anxiety/types-of-anxiety/gad>



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