

Beyond burnout: fostering *nurse wellness* in healthcare



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Addressing the *well-being of nurses* is one of the most powerful levers for strengthening healthcare delivery.

Across the country, nurses are calling for environments that support their growth, protect their time, and enable them to practice at the top of their license. When organizations invest in nurse wellness, they unlock measurable improvements in **patient safety, care quality, team culture, and retention.**

This paper explores practical, evidence-based strategies that help nurses thrive. By focusing on **supportive leadership, collaborative work environments, streamlined systems, and innovative tools**, health systems can build workplaces where nurses feel valued, energized, and empowered. Nurse wellness goes beyond simply an initiative—it is a strategic priority that strengthens every facet of care delivery and drives long-term organizational success.

The scope of the crisis: data and impact

Prevalence and cost

The current landscape of nurse wellness reveals both challenges and significant opportunities for improvement:



35-45%

35–45% of nurses report **experiencing burnout** under normal conditions. During the COVID-19 pandemic, burnout rates reached **as high as 70%**.¹



\$9B

Nurse burnout **costs the U.S. healthcare system** an estimated \$9 billion annually due to turnover, reduced productivity, and increased medical errors.²



20%

Health systems investing in nurse wellness programs see **20% lower turnover rates** and the cost savings from retaining nurses is estimated at **\$262,300 per nurse**.³

Patient safety implications

Nurse wellness also has a direct influence on patient outcomes:



2.7x

Patients cared for by burned-out nurses are 2.7 times more likely to **experience medication errors**.⁴



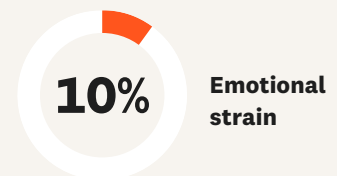
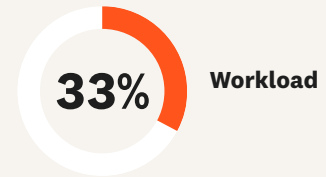
31%↓

Patient satisfaction scores are 31% lower when cared for by nurses experiencing burnout.⁴

Strengthening wellness isn't only about improving staff experience—it is also a core driver of safe, high-quality care.

What nurses are telling us

What are your biggest wellness challenges?*



As one experienced nurse noted in the chat:

“In 30 years of nursing, the biggest challenges are a mixture of all included in that question.”

*In a poll conducted during Reclaiming Nurse Wellness in Today's Complex Healthcare Environment webinar held in late 2025.

¹ National Academy of Medicine, 2023

² National Academy of Medicine, 2024

³ Journal of Nursing Administration, 2023

⁴ American Journal of Nursing, 2024

Understanding systemic contributors to nurse distress

Organizational factors

- **Leadership and culture**

Leadership plays a pivotal role in creating supportive environments where nurses can thrive. Nurses need leaders who are present, responsive, and invested in their well-being.

- **Workload and staffing**

Inadequate staffing ratios force nurses to compromise the quality of care they provide, creating a cycle of guilt and frustration that accumulates over time. Sustainable staffing models empower nurses to deliver high-quality care and reduce stress significantly.

- **Safety concerns**

When nurses feel physically safe and supported, they can focus fully on patient care and teamwork.

System and Process Factors

- **Documentation burden**

Excessive documentation requirements pull nurses away from direct patient care, creating internal conflict between professional obligations and patient needs.

- **EHR complexity**

When electronic health record systems are poorly designed or overly complicated, they become barriers to care rather than facilitators, adding to nurse frustration and reducing time with patients.

- **Administrative tasks**

The accumulation of non-nursing tasks—from supply management to endless compliance requirements—dilutes the professional nursing role and contributes to dissatisfaction.

Individual and Professional Development Factors

- **Unique stressors for novice nurses**

New nurses face particular vulnerability to moral injury. They often lack the confidence to advocate for themselves or push back against unsafe practices, yet they feel pressured to appear competent.

- **Work-life balance**

The demands of nursing, including 12-hour shifts, mandatory overtime, and emotional exhaustion, make it difficult for nurses to maintain healthy boundaries and personal wellness.

- **Ongoing education needs**

Without clear career development paths and ongoing professional growth opportunities, nurses may feel stagnant and undervalued, contributing to turnover and dissatisfaction.

“I had a pivotal learning experience as a leader years ago. One of my most seasoned nurses said, ‘I’m giving 120%. There’s just no more to give.’ It made me reflect on how I could better support my staff.”

Tiffany McCauley, MSN, RN
Clinical Nurse Executive,
Elsevier



“New nurses may feel uncomfortable questioning an order by saying, ‘This is what the policy says.’ We need to help build their psychological safety and confidence.”

Kandi Helminiak, BSN, RN
Clinical Nurse Executive,
Elsevier



Evidence-based strategies for leaders

Building sustainable self-care routines

While organizational change is essential, supporting nurses in developing personal wellness practices creates a foundation for resilience:

- **Nutritional support**
Encourage healthy eating before shifts and provide access to nutritious snacks
- **Micro-breaks**
Normalize taking short breaks to clear one's mind, even during busy shifts
- **Physical activity**
Support opportunities for movement and exercise
- **Sleep hygiene**
Educate about the importance of quality rest between shifts
- **Stress management**
Provide resources for mindfulness, meditation, or other stress-reduction techniques

Team-based approaches

Creating a culture where nurses actively support one another reduces isolation and builds resilience:

Peer support programs

- Formal buddy systems for new nurses
- Peer responder programs for critical incidents
- Regular check-ins between colleagues
- Leaving for the day together after shifts to debrief

Structured debriefing

- Post-event debriefs after difficult patient situations
- Root cause analysis that focuses on systems, not individuals
- Encourage First Aid training for all staff
- Access to spiritual care or counseling services

Psychological safety

- Fostering an environment where nurses can voice concerns without fear
- Validating emotions and experiences
- Creating space for vulnerability and support

“We had this practice of leaving for the day together. We all checked in on each other before we left for the day to see if there was any last minute things that [we could] wrap up and help out with. This created a sense of support and reduced the feelings of isolation when things are tough.”

Tiffany McCauley, MSN, RN
Clinical Nurse Executive,
Elsevier



Evidence-based strategies for leaders *(continued)*

Technology and tools

Technology should simplify nursing workflow, not complicate it. Leaders should:

Evaluate current systems

- **Conduct** regular audits of documentation requirements
- **Identify** and eliminate redundant charting
- **Streamline** EHR workflows based on nurse feedback

Implement evidence-based solutions

- **Provide** clinical decision support tools that save time
- **Offer** evidence-based content at the point of care
- **Ensure** technology is intuitive and user-friendly

Create feedback mechanisms

- **Install** anonymous suggestion boxes for EHR improvements
- **Establish** regular IT office hours for nurse input
- **Ensure** transparent tracking of requested changes and their status

“I had a manager that wanted me to lead without exceptions, meaning I couldn’t work with individuals to switch their schedules, giving them a day off if they were feeling stressed or had emotional strain. I realized I needed to support my clinicians so they could support me. We’re in this life together.”

Kandi Helminiak, BSN, RN
Clinical Nurse Executive, Elsevier



Authentic leadership

The quality of leadership directly impacts nurse wellness and retention. Leaders should consider the following strategies:

Visibility and accessibility

- Regular leadership rounding on all shifts
- Open-door policies with genuine follow-through
- Presence during difficult situations

Advocacy and support

- Advocating for resources nurses need
- Amplifying nurse voices to higher administration
- Removing barriers to care and practice

Transparency and communication

- Initiating honest discussions about organizational challenges
- Explaining decision-making processes
- Admitting mistakes and modeling growth

Shared governance and interprofessional collaboration

Shared decision-making distributes responsibility and strengthens teamwork.

Expand governance structures

- Include interprofessional representation in nursing councils
- Create shared accountability for patient outcomes
- Involve all disciplines in policy and protocol development

Benefits of shared responsibility

- Reduces the burden on individual nurses
- Creates psychological safety
- Improves communication and collaboration
- Addresses systemic issues more effectively

Proven wellness strategies from the field

Healthcare organizations across the country have implemented creative and effective wellness initiatives. The following strategies were shared by participants of the Reclaiming Nurse Wellness in Today's Complex Healthcare Environment webinar:

Physical safety and security

- De-escalation and self-defense training
- Dedicated security presence in high-risk areas such as emergency departments and psychiatric units; security escorts to walk staff to their cars at the end of shifts
- Comprehensive workplace violence prevention programs

Emotional and spiritual support

- Code Lavender programs: hospital chaplains who bring wellness carts, listen, pray with staff, and provide support
- 24/7 peer support helplines for staff experiencing difficult situations

Debriefing and processing

- Structured debriefs after every difficult patient event
- Root cause analysis that prevents recurrence
- Calm Moments programs with spiritual care debriefs
- Peer responder programs offering confidential 1:1 support

Physical wellness spaces

- Dedicated respite rooms on every nursing unit
- Zen dens with massage chairs, essential oils, and calming activities
- Quiet spaces for meditation or decompression
- Coloring pages and other stress-relief activities

Connection and community

- Monthly birthday celebrations and social gatherings
- Team lunches focused on connection, not work
- Sending GIFs or memes to break tension
- 15-minute pet-viewing video breaks during shifts
- Pet therapy programs

Wellness programs and resources

- Wellness carts with healthy snacks, lavender items, stress balls, face masks
- Mental health apps
- Access to wellness coaches
- Robust employee assistance programs
- Professional wellness certificates and training

Leadership accessibility

- CNO coffee chats on individual units
- Open forums for staff feedback
- Anonymous comment boxes with transparent tracking of issues
- Regular leadership rounding across all shifts

Decision-making transparency

- Shared decision-making processes
- Staff input and departmental votes for EHR improvements
- Forums for communication when staff are affected by leadership decisions
- Including frontline staff in strategic planning

The path forward

Systemic priorities

Inclusive wellness initiatives

Healthcare systems must ensure that wellness interventions benefit all staff members. Too often, efforts to reduce physician burnout inadvertently shift work to nurses and other staff, worsening their conditions.

Strategic plan integration

Nurse wellness cannot be solely a nursing initiative—it must be a health system priority included in strategic plans at the highest organizational levels.

Investment in retention

With current improvements in nurse retention rates, organizations have a welcome and vital opportunity to invest in their existing team rather than constantly recruiting and orienting new staff. This creates space to:

- Focus on professional development and career pathing
- Address systemic issues causing distress
- Build strong, cohesive teams
- Improve overall workplace culture

Organizational education

Many nurses don't fully understand their organization's structure, which can lead to misdirected frustration and ineffective advocacy. Leaders should:

- Provide comprehensive orientation to organizational structure
- Explain decision-making processes and constraints
- Help nurses understand where to direct concerns
- Create clear pathways for advocacy and change

Breaking down silos

While healthcare has typically operated in departmental silos, addressing nurse wellness requires a whole-system approach:

- CNOs and senior leaders rounding on individual units
- Cross-departmental collaboration on wellness initiatives
- Interprofessional governance and shared accountability
- Transparent communication across all levels

“A lot of hospitals are retaining their nurses right now and that gives leadership time to really invest in these nurses. If we can keep our clinicians in the hospital and don't have to spend so much time orienting and onboarding them, we can really focus on well-being.”

Kandi Helminiak, BSN, RN
Clinical Nurse Executive,
Elsevier



Call to action

Nurses enter the profession driven by **purpose, compassion, and a commitment to excellence**. When organizations remove barriers and invest in their well-being, nurses can deliver the highest level of care and rediscover the meaning that brought them into the field.

Addressing nurse wellness requires commitment from every level of healthcare leadership.

For healthcare executives

- Prioritize nurse wellness in strategic plans and budget allocations
- Ensure wellness initiatives benefit all staff members equitably
- Hold leaders accountable for creating psychologically safe environments
- Measure and report on wellness metrics with the same rigor as financial and quality indicators

For nurse leaders

- Be visible, accessible, and authentic in your leadership
- Advocate fiercely for the resources your staff needs
- Create structures for shared governance and interprofessional collaboration
- Model self-care and set boundaries that protect staff wellness

For all healthcare professionals

- Look out for colleagues showing signs of moral distress or injury
- Speak up about systemic issues affecting care quality
- Participate in wellness initiatives and peer support programs
- Support cultural change toward collective responsibility

For healthcare organizations

- Invest in wellness interventions and evaluate their effectiveness
- Simplify documentation and optimize EHR workflows
- Provide adequate staffing and resources for quality care
- Create clear pathways for career development and professional growth



When healthcare leaders commit to authentic support, shared accountability, and systemic improvement, nurses can rediscover the meaning and purpose that first inspired them to join the profession.

Elsevier recognizes that supporting nurse wellness is not only essential for individual caregivers but also fundamental to advancing human progress. Through our comprehensive clinical nursing solutions, we partner with healthcare organizations to empower nurses with evidence-based resources, continuous learning, and practical tools that foster professional growth and well-being. The nurses caring for our patients, our families, and our communities deserve nothing less than a full commitment to their wellness and professional flourishing—and Elsevier stands alongside them every step of the way.

For more information, please visit elsevier.com/health/nurse

“When nurse leaders expand the governance to include interprofessional team members, it creates a culture of shared accountability instead of individual nurses feeling solely responsible for identifying gaps and advocating. That sense of shared responsibility is a huge contributor to feeling valued and psychologically safe.”

Tiffany McCauley, MSN, RN
Clinical Nurse Executive, Elsevier

