

CHAPTER 3 - DEVELOPING, SUSTAINING, AND RETAINING NURSES IN THEIR CAREERS

Strategy 11

Increase awareness and support for the mental health of nurses

Strategy 11.1 Employers of nurses should help support the mental health and well-being of nurses by:

- a) Developing organizational training and services, including in nurse residency programs, for:
 - i. Leaders and managers to learn to recognize signs of mental health distress and appropriately connect colleagues to available supports.
 - ii. Evidence-based peer-to-peer solutions to support mental health and well-being, such as Stress First Aid.
 - iii. Recognizing burnout and reducing stigma around compassion fatigue.
- b) Raising employee awareness about existing services (e.g., Employee Assistance Programs [EAP]) and increasing access to counseling and mental health services, particularly during work hours.
- c) Adopting setting-specific practices that give nurses the opportunity to access team support in stressful moments.
- d) Ensuring sick leave policies clearly define mental health care as a legitimate use of sick leave and allow nurses to use sick leave days without penalty.

Desired Result

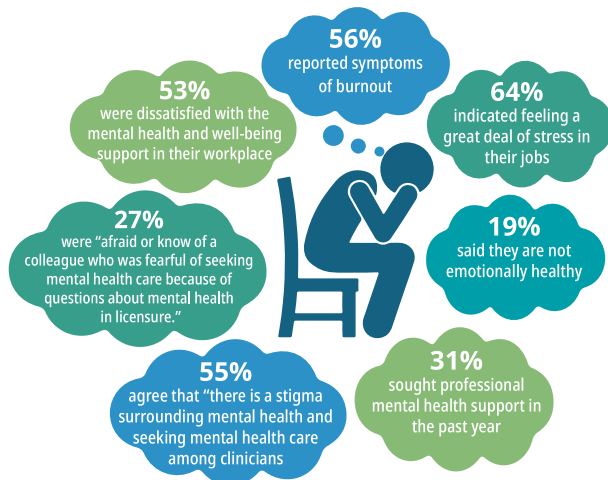
Nurses will have the knowledge, tools, and support from employers to identify and address mental health needs for themselves and colleagues.

Why does the task force recommend this strategy?

Nurses face a myriad of stressors in their daily work, including high patient loads, emotional strain from patient outcomes, and the physical demands of the job, all of which can take a significant toll on their mental well-being. Mental health support can take many forms, such as providing access to counseling services, creating peer support networks, implementing stress-reduction programs, and ensuring that workloads are manageable. Recognizing and addressing the mental health needs of nurses can lead to reduced burnout rates, lower turnover, and a more positive workplace environment. Ultimately, prioritizing the mental health of nurses is a critical component of sustaining the health care system and ensuring that patients receive the best possible care.

Context

Nurses' Mental Health Status and Feelings



A 2023 national survey revealed that burnout and mental health challenges among nurses remain high.²⁷ Contributions to burnout include insufficient staffing, high patient loads, and excessive time spent on administrative tasks. Despite the high levels of reported burnout and stress, more than two-thirds of surveyed nurses stated they were not currently receiving mental health support.²⁷ Another 2023 survey found that younger nurses' responses were more negative than those of older nurses in terms of satisfaction and mental health or well-being.²⁸ The mental health and well-being of nurses not only impacts individuals and teams, but the entire health care system through turnover rates and the quality of patient care.²⁹

In a national survey of nurses, those who said they did not seek professional mental health support said they did not because:

- 47% not needed
- 30% lack of time
- 24% I feel I should be able to handle my own mental health

- Nurses Foundation. *Mental Health and Wellness Survey 4*. <https://www.nursingworld.org/practice-policy/work-environment/health-safety/disaster-preparedness/coronavirus/what-you-need-to-know/survey-4/>

LEADERSHIP AND TEAM CULTURE

There are strong links between incivility in the workforce and burnout, resulting in poorer mental health among nurses as well as higher turnover rates. Organizational and team leadership play an important role in promoting mental health support within the nursing workforce, shaping the culture and performance of individuals and the teams they lead.³⁰ Leaders who adopt a health-promoting approach can create a healthier working environment, decrease conflicts, and build stronger relationships.³⁰

Source: McKinsey & Company. *Understanding and prioritizing nurses' mental health and well-being*. <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/healthcare/our-insights/understanding-and-prioritizing-nurses-mental-health-and-well-being>; American Nurses Foundation. *Mental Health and Wellness Survey 4*. <https://www.nursingworld.org/practice-policy/work-environment/health-safety/disaster-preparedness/coronavirus/what-you-need-to-know/survey-4/>; Trusted Health. *2022 Frontline Nurse Mental Health & Well-Being Survey*. <https://works.trustedhealth.com/research/2022-frontline-nurse-mental-health-well-being-survey>



“Only one in five nurses (20%) utilized mental health programs offered at work. For those participating in the programs, only a quarter (24%) think the programs are effective. This represents a significant drop from 2021, when nearly one-half of nurses (46%) said employer-offered mental health programs were effective.”

- AMN Healthcare. *The Pandemic's Consequences: Survey of Registered Nurses.*
<https://www.amnhealthcare.com/siteassets/amn-insights/surveys/amn-rnsurvey-2023-final.pdf>

An example of a program that facilitates a healthy team culture is **Stress First Aid**, an evidence-based peer-support program that is being implemented across North Carolina via a HRSA-funded initiative through the Duke University School of Nursing. This program aims to identify and mitigate the negative impacts of stress before they impair well-being. It provides participants with a toolkit for performing a timely safety assessment and responding appropriately when they suspect a peer needs support.³¹

Other examples of work in this area include a North Carolina Medical Society initiative that is part of the **Clinician and Physician Retention and Well-Being Consortium**, which has a goal of reducing burnout among clinicians. The North Carolina Nurses Association is an invited partner to the Consortium. The first phase is to remove or reword questions about behavioral health treatment from credentialing applications. In partnership with the Dr. Lorna Breen Heroes' Foundation, this consortium offers resources that will be provided to employers of nurses to help affect culture change and provide supportive environments for clinicians, including nurses.³²

Other examples of efforts to address health care worker burnout and mental health nationally and in other states include:

- **American Nurses Association** – The ANA is providing members with free access to the **Nurse Burnout Prevention Program™** by SE Healthcare. The program provides nurses with video and audio content that helps them develop a Personal Burnout Prevention care plan “to break old patterns and identify new methods of dealing with personal stressors and organizational pressures”. Nurses can earn up to 22 continuing education units.³³
- **Virginia** - The **SafeHaven program** provides peer coaching and counseling to physicians and nurses as well as medical and nursing students. This program, established in 2020 by Virginia House Bill 115, helps to address burnout and other mental health issues.^{34,35}
- **Colorado** - The medical board does not require physicians to report mental health conditions if the condition is known to the Colorado Physician Health Program and the physician follows the recommended actions.³⁵
- **California** - The University of California San Diego's School of Medicine established a **Healer Education Assessment and Referral Program (HEAR)**, which addresses the high levels of depression and burnout in the health care profession. It educates medical students, faculty, and hospital staff about risk factors and offers confidential stress and depression assessments.³⁵

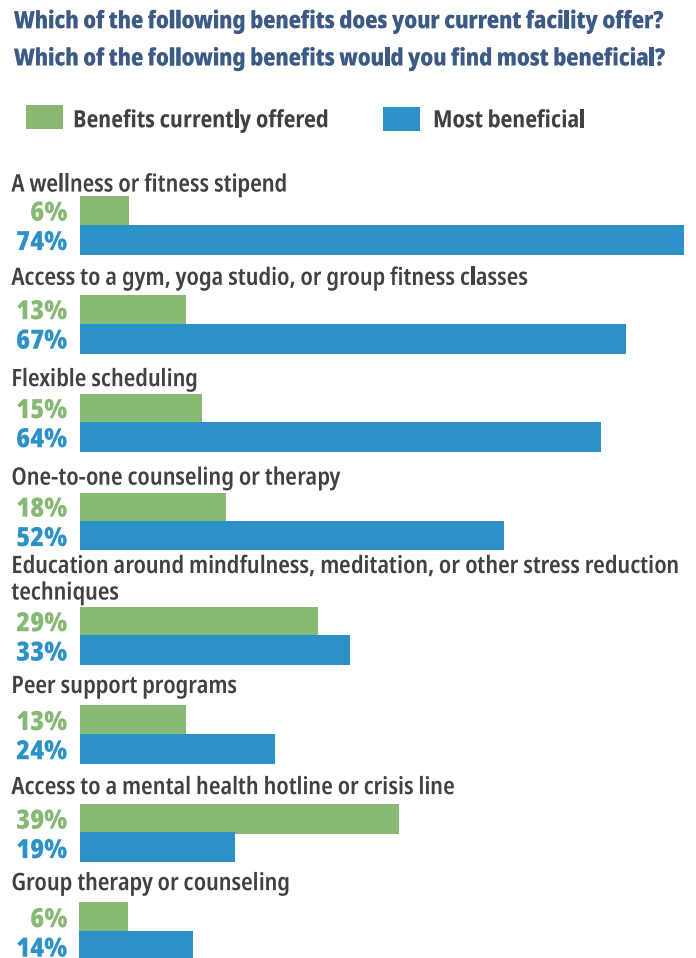
MENTAL HEALTH AND SICK LEAVE

For those who need further assistance, there is the option to use sick leave for mental health needs. In 2022, 22% of full-time days lost by the nursing workforce were due to mental health issues, making this the most common reason nurses missed work.³⁶ While taking personal time off (PTO) is not the same as having designated mental health days; prioritizing mental health by taking days off work can increase personal well-being and reduce the risk of substance use and suicide.^{37,38} Providing nurses the flexibility to use sick pay for mental health days can help reduce the stigma associated with mental health issues and encourage nurses to prioritize their mental well-being.

WHAT NURSES SAY ABOUT ADDRESSING MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS

A survey of nurses identified a large gap in the types of benefits they are currently offered by employers and the ones that they might find most beneficial (see Figure 13). While 40% of nurses didn't know what mental health benefits their employer offered, those who did said that wellness or fitness stipends, access to a gym, yoga studio, or group fitness classes, and flexible scheduling would be the most beneficial to their wellness. This contrasted with a low percentage of employers who offered those benefits.³⁹

Figure 13. Mental Health Benefits Offered by Employers and Those Preferred by Nurses



Source: *Trusted Health. 2022 Frontline Nurse Mental Health & Well-Being Survey.*
<https://works.trustedhealth.com/research/2022-frontline-nurse-mental-health-well-being-survey>

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Finally, while it is vital to address the mental health needs of nurses, it is equally important to identify the root causes of the stressors that may lead to those needs. A survey of nurses found the top five strategies to reduce stress in the workplace would be:

- More nurse input into decision-making (86%)
- Create safer working environment (86%)
- Increase salaries (87%)
- Reduce patients per nurse (89%)
- Increase support staff (90%)²⁸

Strategy 13 - Create robust systems that involve nurses as leaders in decision-making that impacts their work environment, patients, and the interprofessional team (Page 80) discusses how nurses should be key leaders in addressing these practice environment conditions.

KEY RESOURCE NEEDS



Associations representing employers of nurses can help employers address the mental health and well-being of nurses in their workplaces by promoting resources and best practices listed in this strategy.

The NC Board of Nursing can increase awareness among nurses that continuing education units and/or contact hours for license renewal are available for mental health/stress first aid courses, neurodiversity training, and mental health stigma reduction opportunities.