



Cultivating Compassion: Remembering the First Days of Nursing

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How many years have you been in the profession of nursing? Do you remember that feeling of being in nursing school, that first time you went into the clinical setting? That feeling of being anxious and scared, nervous about having to take care of a 'real' patient rather than the mannequins can be conjured up with just one word, one thought, one reference. The feelings all come rushing back. The idea that nursing students are welcomed into the clinical site and will be able to help the nursing staff is told to students throughout the semester. It is theorized that upon entering the clinical unit and beginning to work with the Staff Nurses that all of those fears and nerves will be laid to rest once greeted by friendly staff members. But the reality is that once students enter the clinical unit, they are met with nurses who are seemingly less than thrilled to be paired with a student nurse. The perception from nursing students and the clinical instructors in charge of the students is that many of the staff nurses are not friendly and do not want to help teach or train student nurses. The clinical instructors are not immune to this reception by the staff either. The instructors can have difficulty obtaining assignments for the students, access to medication records, and locating supplies due to not being allowed to have keys or computer codes to access necessary items. All of these factors lead to a compromised learning environment for the novice student nurses and further impair the learning process.

As a nurse educator with many years of clinical nursing behind me, looking at the perspective of the staff nurses it is understandable that they do not necessarily want to take on any extra responsibility. Nurses in facilities today are overwhelmed with large patient assignments consisting of patients with multiple co-morbidities and extensive lists of medications. Additionally, many patients require wound care, tube feedings, glucose monitoring, intravenous lines, injections or urinary catheters, and supervising other staff members. With minimal ancillary staff shared across the unit, staff nurses take on many aspects of patient care nowadays. Therefore, adding a student nurse to this list of responsibilities can be burdensome as an additional person who needs supervision.

Staff nurses must always remember that students need to learn in real time during the clinical rotations under their guidance and

expertise while remembering how they felt when they were in nursing school themselves. Nurses must remember the fear of not knowing the answers when a patient asks a question, not knowing where the linens or supplies are, and the fear of making a mistake that could cost someone their life. Nurses must also recognize that a large part of their nursing role involves education regardless of where they are employed. Staff nurses are helping to train future caregivers and therefore must utilize their knowledge and skills to teach the next generation of nurses.

Student nurses must also take an active role in remaining open minded and recognizing that staff nurses are heavily scheduled and have to perform many tasks within their shift. There are deadlines and expectations that need to be met for each patient as well. When a staff nurse is unable to properly teach a student nurse due to situational constraints, then the nurse must actively take on an observer role, as this is still a learning experience. And lastly, student nurses need to remember what was helpful to them when they were students so they can properly educate the student nurses they will be assigned to in the future.

In academia, there seems to be a pervasive sentiment that the more strict and rigid the instructor, the better the instructor is. Instructors wear this rigidity as a badge of honor at times. As a nursing instructor, I have chosen to take a very different approach to student nurses. This approach is to promote learning, not fear, and this is done by remaining approachable to students both in the classroom as well as the clinical sites. Ultimately, the idea is for student nurses to feel comfortable asking questions in a learning environment so they become better nurses as they navigate each clinical experience. And my hope is that these future nurses will remember their own nursing school experiences as positive ones, and in turn continue to impart this type of learning to the future generation of nurses.

References

1. Gellar Maataoui, M. (2025). Cultivating Compassion: Remembering the first days of Nursing.