WORK PRESSURES

The toll emotional labour is taking on nurses’ mental health

Bad backs used to be considered the occupational hazard of nursing, but scrutiny and expectation weigh more heavily these days

It used to be a common complaint among nurses – after years of lifting and bending – that our lower backs suffered. Indeed, my generation of nurses would often shrug off back pain as an ‘occupational hazard’ and find our new friends at yoga classes or the chiropractor.

Hoists, slipmats – such were our dreams made of, and it was ‘1-2-3 and lift’. The expense and nurses lost to illness or disability required a response and duly it was addressed.

Now however, we seem to be equally phlegmatic about another consequence of the intolerable expectations placed on the NHS staff: namely, the poor mental health experiencing by healthcare professionals.

Stress, depression and sickness absence

New figures published by NHS Digital reveal that mental health challenges are now the main cause of health-related absences among health service staff in England.

A total of 17.7 million days’ sick leave were taken between December 2017 and November 2018. Of these, 4.2 million were due to stress, anxiety, depression or other mental health conditions.

Too stressed to work: the effects of mental ill health on NHS staff

rcni.com/stress-at-work

As a Nursing Standard report has noted (see the link, below left, to find the article), this figure is greater than the total for the next two most common reasons for sickness absence combined – musculoskeletal conditions, excluding back problems, and coughs, colds or flu.

Physical health problems that were once anticipated and stoically tolerated by nurses because of their duties have now been overtaken by the consequences of emotional labour. Complacency cannot be the appropriate response to such a shocking fact.

It is important to explore what could be behind this emerging trend.

Acuity, scrutiny and expectations all greater now

It is not appropriate to suggest today’s practitioners are less robust than those who came before. There never was a golden age of supreme beings who populated the profession, whatever anyone might say.

‘Next time you look at the maintenance schedule on any piece of equipment in your workplace, maybe just ask whether you take similar care of yourself’

The acuity and complexity of the conditions with which patients present has undoubtedly changed, along with the expectations placed on healthcare staff to manage them. Scrutiny from politicians and the media has never been more present.

On a positive to note, if people are content to disclose mental health difficulties, perhaps the cultural norm of coping at any personal cost has been finally laid to rest.

Access to mental health awareness training for all line managers

Solutions are unlikely to be quick and will require a concerted response.

Potential approaches could include fast-track referrals to psychological interventions, mental health awareness training for all line managers, and mindfulness classes that encourage a self-care approach, from undergraduate preparation through to continuing professional development.

Next time you look at the maintenance schedule on any piece of equipment in your workplace, maybe just ask whether you take similar care of yourself.

Or do you unconsciously perpetuate the myth of the indestructible nurse?

NHS Digital’s latest sickness absence summary

tinyurl.com/NHSDigi-sickness-absence

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