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ADVICE AND DEVELOPMENT

It’s okay to ask for support after a traumatic event

Counselling helped one student to realise she shouldn’t ‘just carry on’

In May 2018, I was in my first year of nurse training when I stopped at the scene of a terrible road traffic collision on my way home from placement. A young female motorcyclist had been hit by a car and was in cardiac arrest. Her injuries were so traumatic, some of the worst I have ever seen. I delivered cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) for the first time, but despite my best efforts, and those of others who had stopped at the scene, she died.

Having never carried out CPR on a real person before, I was terrified when I stopped and offered my assistance. But not only was it my professional duty to help, I wanted to do all I could to give the patient the best chance of survival.

An air ambulance arrived on the scene and when the patient was pronounced dead by the trauma doctor, I felt nothing but shock. It took me a few days to get over this feeling.

From local news reports about the accident I was devastated to learn that the patient was the same age as me and had a family. Although I was upset by this, I felt I had to move on and couldn’t let it affect me. I had seen other nurses move on from similar situations and thought I had to do the same.

Nervous feeling

I didn’t think much about the incident over the following few months, until I started my second year of training. When my third placement began, I was advised that I would start caring for my own patients, which made me nervous. I was unsettled by this feeling, having never shied away from caring for patients independently in the past.

By Stephanie Powell
second-year nursing student, University of Gloucestershire
One morning when I was driving to placement, I had a panic attack. I had to pull over in a layby and couldn’t bring myself to drive the rest of the way. I had a bad feeling, like a black cloud hanging over my head, but I had no idea where this was coming from.

I tried to carry on as normal, but started thinking about the accident I had stopped at earlier in the year. I began to feel guilty, questioning everything I had done that day and thinking that maybe I had done more harm than good.

Professional support

Then, while on placement, I had the worst anxiety attack I had ever experienced. This made me realise that I needed to take a step back and spend some time away from my placement. The anxiety grew worse, and I knew I had to get professional help.

I went to my GP, who prescribed medication for anxiety, and I also sought help from the mental health services at my university.

I started to realise that driving long distances was part of my anxiety, along with caring for patients who were at significant risk of deteriorating – I was worried that I would miss something and have to do CPR again.

After speaking with a counsellor, I realised this was all linked to the accident I had stopped at months before. I was subsequently diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

The counsellor helped me realise that what I was experiencing was normal after witnessing a traumatic event. This was reassuring. Counselling also helped me realise that I am only human, and that it is okay not to feel okay.

After a few sessions my anxiety improved, and I felt empowered. I realised that what I did that awful day was something to be proud of. The guilt started to lift from my shoulders.

I have faced many emergency situations since and have felt okay. Although I have yet to perform CPR again, I feel confident when in emergency situations. This has helped with my recovery from PTSD, as well as my nursing practice.

No super-heroes

The most important lesson from the experience is that it is okay to show your emotions. Nurses are not super-heroes, and we should never feel embarrassed about feeling this way. My advice to anyone who has been through, or is going through, something similar is never give up. Don’t let these experiences get the better of you, and if you feel like you need emotional support, speak up – help is there if you ask for it.

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