As I begin the final year of my nursing degree, many of you will just be starting out on your nursing journey. So to all new first-year students, welcome to one of the most exciting and diverse professions in the world.

I have learned so much already during my training, some of which I wish I had known in my first year. So to help get your nursing degree off to the best start possible, here are my top tips for new nursing students.

Whether you have years of healthcare experience or are new to the clinical environment, you will feel nervous on your first day of placement. You will start many placements in your training and probably feel a bit nervous each time. But this does get easier and you pick up skills to help you settle more quickly.

Prepare for your shift
Iron your uniform in advance and have it ready so you are not rushing around before the start of your shift. Preparing meals to take with you will help you eat more healthily, and doing a test run of the journey to the placement will ensure you arrive on time on your first day.

Wear comfortable shoes
You will find that you’ll be on your feet for much of the time during clinical placements so find the most comfy shoes you can.

Carry a notebook
I always have a notebook for jotting things down, such as reflections I want to write, medication I am interested in researching, or conditions and procedures I want to read up on. Other essential items when on clinical placement are your pens, fob watch and torch.

Always ask questions
This is probably the most important piece of advice. If you are unsure about anything, just ask. No question is a silly question and the team you are with want you to learn. They were once in your shoes, after all.

Raise concerns
It would be untrue to say everything in clinical practice is rosy. If you see questionable practice or are treated unfairly, don’t be afraid to raise concerns. If something doesn’t seem right, challenge it in a professional way. Raising concerns isn’t easy but knowing how to respond to and handle challenges is an important nursing skill. Your university and support network can help you through this – just ask.

Don’t try to learn everything all at once
Focusing on one topic at a time will prevent you from becoming overwhelmed. Research the subject by looking at patient case notes, investigations and care plans, and link the theory to practice. You will learn...
something new every day. It won’t always be the ‘big things’ but all learning experiences will help shape the nurse you will become.

Don’t compare yourself to other people

On my first clinical placement, I was the only one in my tutor group with no care experience. Being in the clinical environment for the first time was a shock to the system and it was hard not to compare myself to my peers. I had many rabbit-in-the-headlights moments but I am now on an equal footing with my peers, and we are cheering each other on all the way.

Surround yourself with supportive people

Having a good support network is vital, for the good times and the tough. Ask for help and support if you need it and don’t struggle on alone. Your support network could be friends, family and other nursing students, as well as lecturers, nurses you meet in practice or people you meet on #NurseTwitter – anyone who can support you on your nursing journey.

Make the most of each placement

Don’t be disheartened if you are allocated to a practice area you believe you think you might not be keen on. Remember that every contact and interaction is a learning opportunity, whether with patients or colleagues, so make the most of it and do you best to remain focused on your learning objectives.

Know what is expected of you

Establish what is expected of you as a student as early on as you can in your placement and set yourself objectives. Use your initiative and don’t be afraid to seek out learning opportunities. Simulation gives students a short-cut to confidence.
YOUR ACADEMIC STUDIES

Half of your time will be spent at university. You get out what you put in with your academic work, so start reading as soon as you receive your assignment brief. Little and often will help you gain a greater depth of knowledge.

Get yourself organised

You will be juggling your studies, clinical placements, your various personal commitments and home life, as well as possibly working part-time, so it is important to be organised. Use a diary or calendar app on your phone to help organise your time and keep a note of assignment deadlines and placement dates – and don’t forget to factor in time off.

Join a nursing society

Nursing societies are great for meeting fellow nursing students, so find out if your university has one you can join. And if it doesn’t, why not consider starting one yourself?

Join a trade union

Nursing is a political profession, so consider joining a trade union such as the RCN. This will help you find your professional voice and engage with the nursing profession on a national level, as well as keeping you up to date with nursing workforce issues. You will find out about important events, such as RCN congress.

Engage with social media

Setting up a professional Twitter account will give you access to a round-the-clock support network, enabling you to connect with nurses and nursing students across the globe and to share best practice. If you are nervous about using social media safely, or would just like advice on how to engage effectively, there is plenty of guidance available, including from the RCN and the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC).

Social media also encourages a flattening of the hierarchies associated with the profession. For example, chief nursing officer for England Ruth May, NMC chief executive Andrea Sutcliffe and RCN England director Patricia Marquis are just a few of the nurse leaders who participate regularly in professional discussions on Twitter. You are free to join in the conversation – they will want to hear from you.

Accounts to get you started include: @RCNStudents, @nursestandard, and @StNurseProject

Reflect on practice

You will see things in clinical practice that you can’t make sense of straight away. Expressing thoughts and feelings will help you process them and move forward, so find a reflection model that suits you and get into the habit of regular reflection. Some people have a private diary; if producing vlogs or blogs, be mindful of maintaining patient confidentiality. There is no right or wrong way, you just need to figure out which method suits you best.

Be kind

When things get tough, try not to lose sight of why you want to be a nurse. Be kind to everyone, even when they are not kind to you.

Make the most of being supernumerary

You have supernumerary status as a student, so make the most of it by getting as involved as you can from the outset. This may be the only chance you get to see a particular clinical procedure or visit a specialist service, so use your time wisely and embrace every opportunity.

Being organised and managing your time effectively will help you deal with the demands of academic life.