Giving your best when motivation is missing

Stress and events at work and at home can all contribute to dips in your morale. Rest, time away from work and peer and social support can help you get back on track.

Morale among NHS staff has fallen over the past few years, with the most recent staff survey suggesting nearly a third of those working in the overstretched NHS are considering leaving their jobs.

Understaffing, the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and disputes over pay and working conditions may all contribute to the bigger picture of how it feels to work in the NHS in 2024. Many of these issues are complex, and solutions will take time and require top-level commitment.

But for many nurses, at the start of a long shift the most pressing issue may be more personal: how do you give your best when you’re not feeling your best?

What causes a lack of motivation?

Professor of sport and health psychology at York St John University Daniel Madigan says everything from how your work is structured to how things are communicated, as well as life events outside of work, may affect morale. As a result, both individual and organisational factors contribute to motivation.

Working in an environment where you feel unable to achieve high standards may leave you feeling low, adds Professor Madigan. ‘Perfectionism can be energising but the need to be perfect – and more importantly, to avoid imperfections such as failure – can make individuals vulnerable to poor motivation over time, especially when they’re under stress,’ he says.

Senior lecturer in adult nursing at De Montfort University Penny Tremayne has looked at strategies that can help nurses. ‘Having some control over how your work is structured, for example the shifts you work, can help,’ she suggests.

How can I work when I feel unmotivated?

Lead nurse for safe staffing at University Hospitals of Leicester NHS Trust Pippa Clark says reaching out to a team is usually helpful. ‘If you’re struggling, talk to your colleagues,’ she says. ‘Speak to your manager about how you’re feeling, if you have a good relationship with them. You could also think about speaking to a professional advocate if things are quite difficult where you work.’

Professor Madigan agrees: ‘Seeking help from others – such as peers and family – can help relieve stress and safeguard motivation. We know social support can be very helpful.

‘Evidence also suggests that mindfulness activities can help reduce stress and burnout and enhance motivation.’

Is it normal for my motivation to fluctuate?

‘It’s unrealistic to think that you’re going to be 100% every day – we all have things going on that affect how we feel,’ says Ms Clark.

‘What helps is making sure you take breaks, eating properly, and taking some annual leave each quarter – so you get a week or so off every three months.’

‘If you do end up speaking abruptly to a patient then it’s best to just apologise quickly’

Pippa Clark, lead nurse for safe staffing, University Hospitals of Leicester NHS Trust

Ms Tremayne recommends factoring in rest and restorative sleep, and warns of the need to stay vigilant about your response to stress, even if you thrive under pressure.

‘A healthy level of stress is okay – we act on that adrenaline – but when it becomes harmful it’s important to take action, or it could compromise patient care and your own self-care, family and relationships.’

Patient care when you’re not feeling your best

‘Ideally we’re like swans,’ says Ms Clark.

‘Gliding serenely on top of the water, regardless of what’s going on underneath. But it can be hard not to let how you are feeling show. Patients are very clever and they are watching you. But they are human, and they know that you are human too.

‘If you do end up, for example, speaking abruptly to a patient then it’s best to just apologise quickly. I remember a patient asked me if they could go back to bed just at a moment when I

By Yvonne Covell health journalist

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When low morale becomes something more serious – how to spot signs of burnout

While everyone will go through periods of low motivation from time to time, sometimes it can be an indication of something more serious. ‘Motivation fluctuates over time, but monitoring your own motivation levels, as well as that of colleagues, can help you see the warning signs of burnout,’ says York St John University professor of sport and health psychology Daniel Madigan.

Here are some signs of burnout to look out for:

» You feel detached from the job ‘Burnout causes individuals to distance themselves from their work, or, in the case of nurses, from those under their care,’ says Professor Madigan

» You question your ability to make a difference ‘You may feel a reduced sense of accomplishment – like you no longer contribute to your job,’ he says

» You start to feel cynical ‘The development of a cynical attitude to work, in combination with increased feelings of exhaustion, tend to be early symptoms of burnout,’ Professor Madigan says

» You take less care over things ‘Taking greater risks can be a symptom of burnout, says De Montfort University lecturer in adult nursing Penny Tremayne

» You neglect your own needs ‘Reduced self-care can also be a result of burnout,’ says Ms Tremayne

Seeking help from others – such as peers and family – can help relieve stress and safeguard motivation

Daniel Madigan, professor of sport and health psychology, York St John University

felt very stressed, and I replied rather abruptly, “No, you’re staying in your chair.” But I realised it hadn’t come out as I meant it to, went back and apologised for being abrupt and explained: “If you go back to bed now then it increases your risk of hospital-acquired pneumonia following chest surgery, which is why it’s best to stay sitting in the chair for a bit longer.”

Where to look for support
If you think you may be experiencing burnout, the following resources could be helpful:

» Mental Health at Work – Our Frontline: support for healthcare workers tinyurl.com/mental-health-work-toolkit

» Samaritans samaritans.org

» Nurse Lifeline (0808 801 0455) nurselifeline.org.uk/helpline

» RCN – Supporting your mental well-being tinyurl.com/wellbeing-support-rcn

» NHS Better Health: Dealing with stress tinyurl.com/better-health-stress

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