



Nurses Caring for Nurses: Surviving to Thriving

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Disclosures

Christopher Wojnar

- Founder & CEO - Empowered Psychiatric Solutions
- Critical Care Nurse – Aurora St. Luke’s Medical Center
- Board of Directors – Wisconsin Nurses Association
- Ambassador – Dr. Lorna Breen Heroes’ Foundation
- Vice President – United Suicide Survivors International
- Member – MCW Department of Suicide Research and Healing and Milwaukee County Suicide Review Commission

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- Founder and President - Wisconsin Peer Alliance for Nurses
- Emergency Department Nurse - Aurora St. Luke’s South Shore
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- Director of Communication - International Healthcare Facility Diversion Association
- Advisory Board member - healthcarediversion.org
- Ambassador – Dr. Lorna Breen Heroes’ Foundation
- Member: National Organization of Alternative Programs; International Nurses Society on Addictions; Wisconsin Organization of Nurse Leaders; Wisconsin League for Nursing

Objectives



Engage in self-assessment of stress levels to determine the need to engage in stress reduction activities.



Identify factors within their workplace that can trigger the need to employ coping mechanisms to manage stressors.



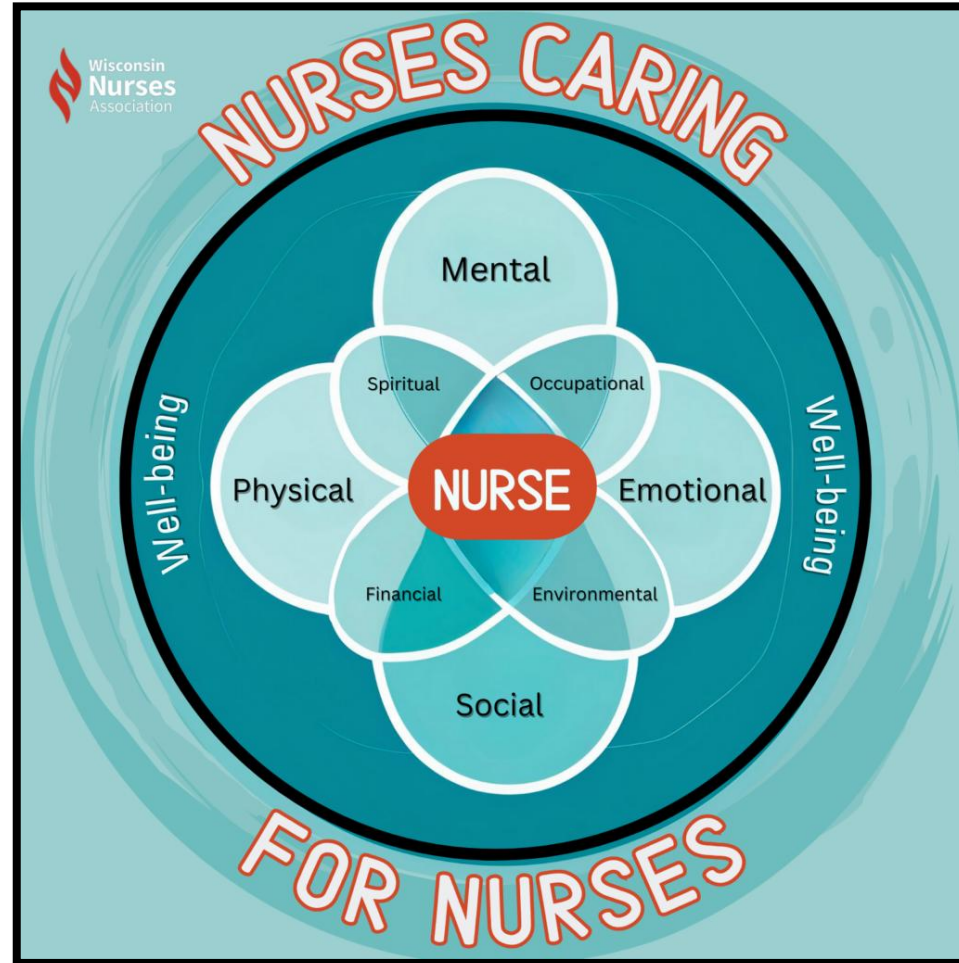
Identify communication strategies that can improve the ability of the nurse to set boundaries, communicate individual needs and manage workplace conflict.



Demonstrate a simple, in-the-moment strategy for coping with stress

Wisconsin Nurses Association

Nurses Caring for Nurses



Pain into Purpose



Why this matters...

Nurses know what to do but doing it isn't easy.

We teach
others how to
care for
themselves

But the pace,
pressure, and
culture of
nursing make
that hard to
apply to
ourselves

This isn't a
personal
failure, it's a
systemic
challenge

Let's name
the barriers
and work
together to
move forward

Bridging the Intent-Action Gap

What gets in the way? (Share in chat)

- Time pressure & shift demands
- Guilt or feeling selfish for taking a break
- Survival mode under chronic stress
- Fear of judgment for needing help

What helps?

- Small, repeatable actions
- Permission to pause
- Peer support & protected time
- Culture that normalizes self-care



Nurses & Defense Mechanisms



Unconscious coping patterns under stress



Help nurses keep functioning in intense situations



Common examples: denial, intellectualization, displacement, projection



Useful short-term, but can block self-awareness over time



Recognizing them builds self-compassion and healthier coping

Perceived Stress Scale (PSS)

<https://www.das.nh.gov/wellness/docs/percieved%20stress%20scale.pdf>

What does my score mean?

- The higher your score, the more stress you're *perceiving* in daily life
- That doesn't mean something is wrong with you, it means you've been carrying a lot
- Stress shows up in your body, your mood, and your ability to cope



Cohen, S., & Williamson, G. (1988). **Perceived Stress Scale (PSS)**. New Hampshire Department of Administrative Services.
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**For each question choose from the following alternatives:
0 - never 1 - almost never 2 - sometimes 3 - fairly often 4 - very often**

- _____ 1. In the last month, how often have you been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly?
- _____ 2. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?
- _____ 3. In the last month, how often have you felt nervous and stressed?
- _____ 4. In the last month, how often have you felt confident about your ability to handle your personal problems?
- _____ 5. In the last month, how often have you felt that things were going your way?
- _____ 6. In the last month, how often have you found that you could not cope with all the things that you had to do?
- _____ 7. In the last month, how often have you been able to control irritations in your life?
- _____ 8. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were on top of things?
- _____ 9. In the last month, how often have you been angered because of things that happened that were outside of your control?
- _____ 10. In the last month, how often have you felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?

Cohen, S., & Williamson, G. (1988). **Perceived Stress Scale (PSS)**. New Hampshire Department of Administrative Services.
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Reflect on Your Score

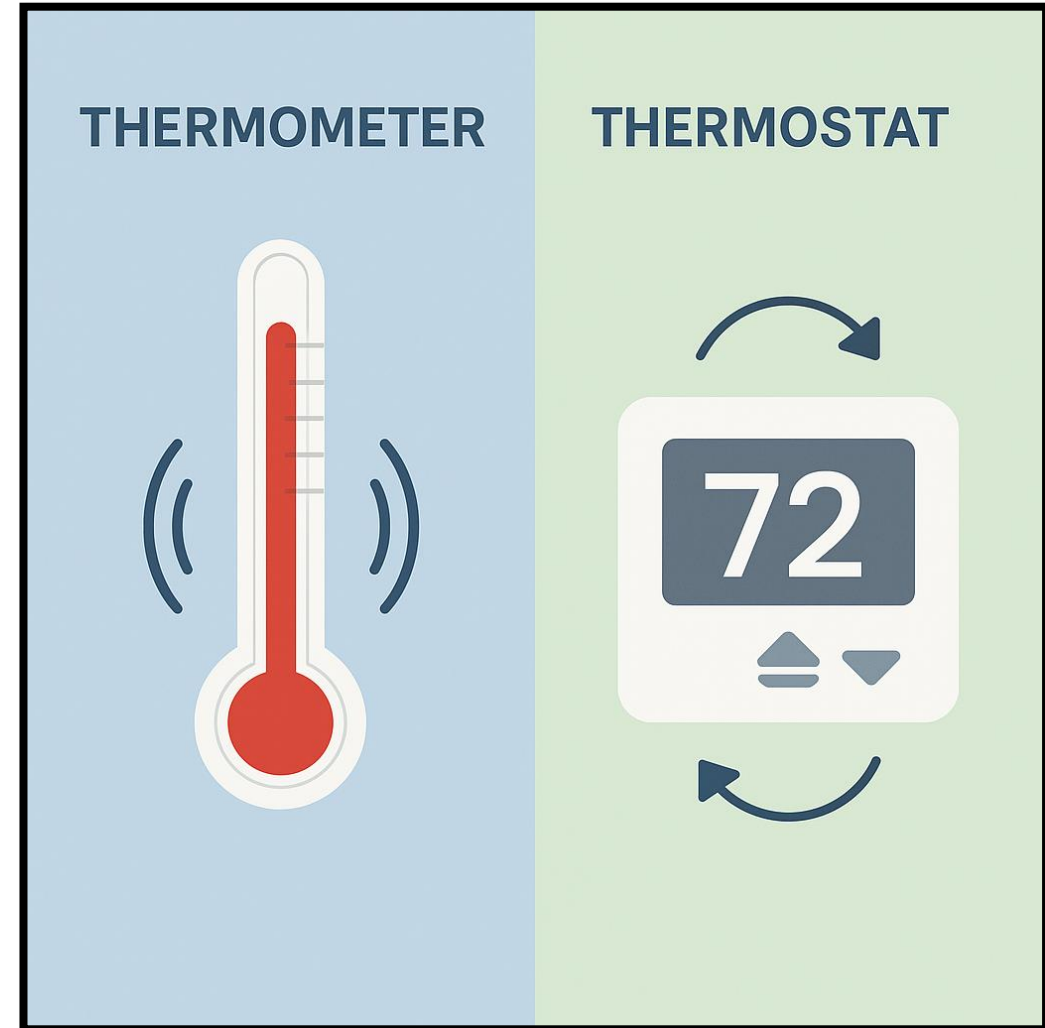
Stress Thermometer vs. Thermostat

What did your score make you think or feel?

Did it affirm anything you've been noticing in yourself?

Where do you feel this stress in your body or your day-to-day life?

What support or shift might make things feel just a little lighter?



The HPA Axis: How Stress Affects Nurses' Bodies



Under Chronic Stress:

Hypothalamus signals → Pituitary gland → Adrenal glands

Adrenals release cortisol, the body's main stress hormone

Cortisol increases blood sugar, blood pressure, heart rate



Pathological Effects Over Time:

Constant activation = **HPA axis dysregulation**

Results in emotional exhaustion, immune suppression, sleep disturbances, anxiety, and burnout

Contributes to higher rates of depression, cardiovascular disease, and even impaired cognitive function in nurses

What's Fueling the Stress?

Common Triggers in the Workplace:

Understaffing or
unsafe ratios

Moral distress
or patient
suffering

Lack of time for
breaks or meals

Communication
breakdowns

Pressure to say
yes when we
need to say no

Strategies for Frontline Nurses: Addressing Type 3 Workplace Violence

Know your workplace policies

Document incidents clearly

Set respectful boundaries when safe

Seek peer and mentor support

Report early, before things escalate

Protect your emotional well-being

Naming the Gap

Knowing isn't the problem.

Doing is hard
when...

Let's stop blaming
ourselves and start
naming what's real.

Survival mode
overrides intention

You feel guilty for
stepping back

There's no time or
support

Communicating Needs Without Guilt

Strategies to try:



Use “I” statements: “I need a break before I can safely continue.”



Repeat a boundary calmly: “I’m not available to stay late today.”



Ask for what you need without over-explaining



Trust that your needs are valid, even if others don’t understand them right away

You're Not Stuck with the Brain You Have

How You Can Retrain Your Brain

Recognize negative
or automatic thought
patterns

Reframe: shift from “I
can’t” to “I’m
learning” or “I’m
trying”

Practice small,
consistent
mindfulness
moments

Use self-compassion
instead of harsh self-
criticism

Focus on what’s
within your control,
not what isn’t

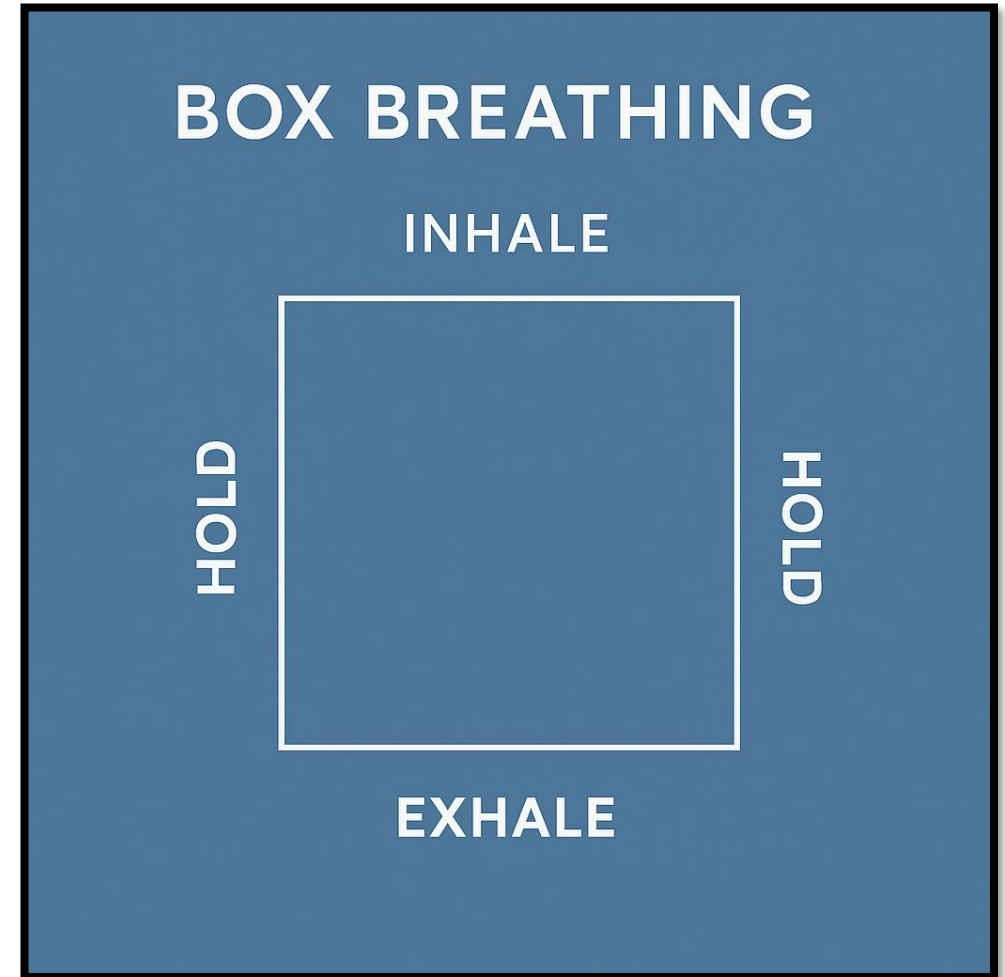
A Simple Reset – Box Breathing

Let's try this together.

Box Breathing:

- Inhale (4)
- Hold (4)
- Exhale (4)
- Hold (4)

Just 30 seconds of this can reduce your heart rate and calm your nervous system.



Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR)

- Systematically tense and release muscle groups
- Helps reduce physical tension and stress
- Increases body awareness and calm
- Can be done seated, standing, or lying down
- Just a few minutes can reset your nervous system

Guided Script

Close your eyes

Pay attention to your breathing

Release areas of tension
in your body

Notice how you feel

Mindfulness Practice: The 5-4-3-2-1 Grounding Technique

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Use your five senses to anchor in
the present moment

5 things you can see

4 things you can feel
(touch)

3 things you can hear

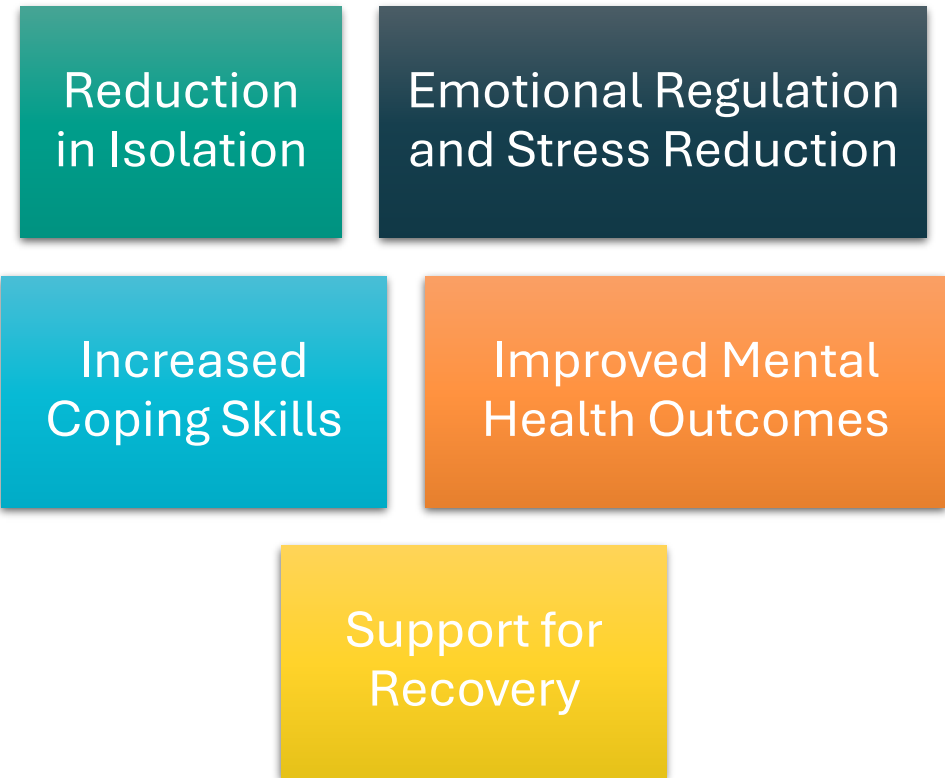
2 things you can smell

1 thing you can taste
or are grateful for

Peer Support

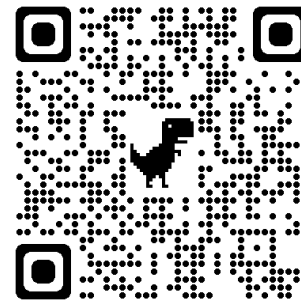
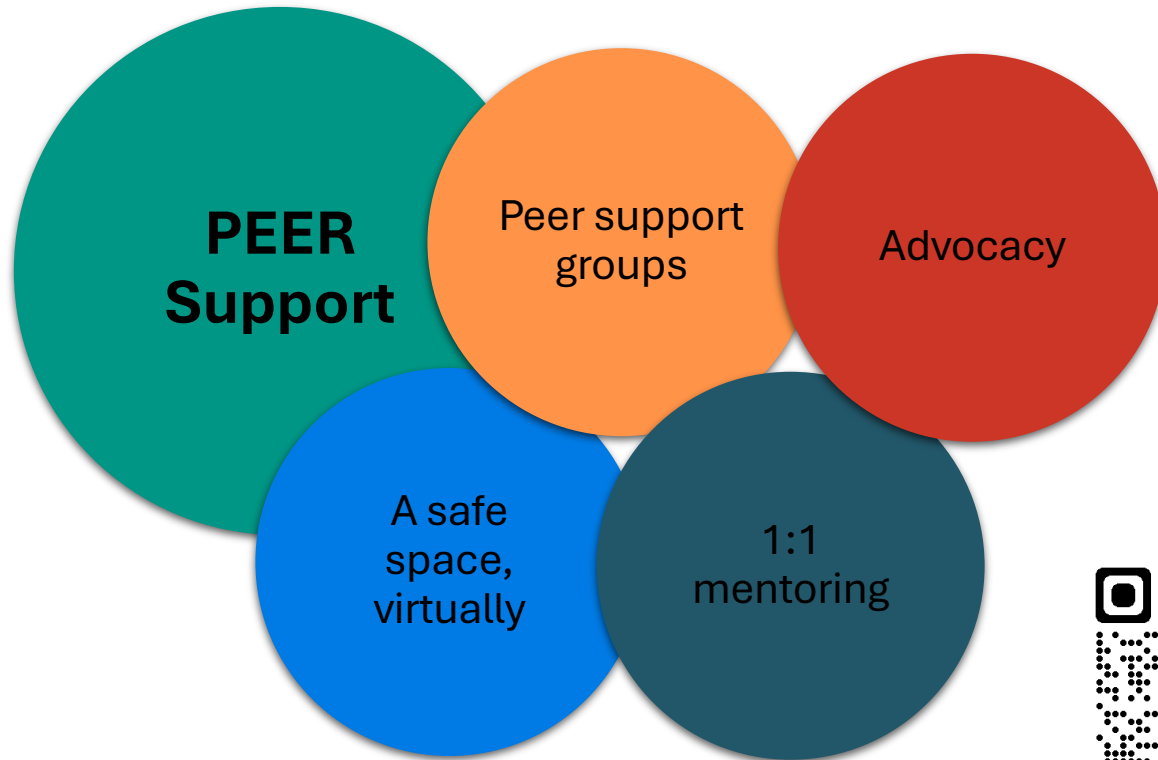
The Evidence Behind Peer Support

- **Process of giving and receiving non-clinical assistance**
- **Sharing lived experience and practical guidance**
- **Creating a safe space**
- **Providing empathy, validation and empowerment**

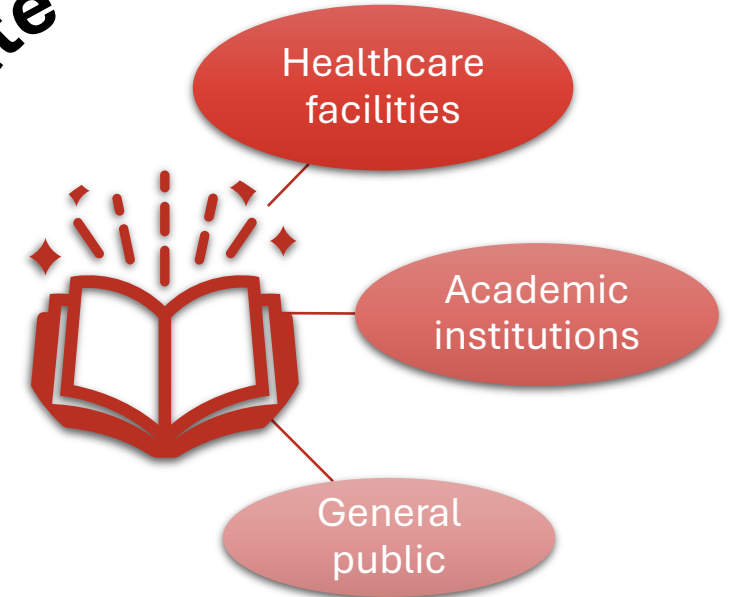


Peer Support

Wisconsin Peer Alliance for Nurses (WisPAN)



Educate



- ▶ Website <https://wipeeralliance.org/>
- ▶ Email wispan2021@gmail.com
- ▶ Phone 414-376-7002



Proactive Mental Health Treatment

Seeking help is a sign of strength, not weakness

Prioritize mental health before reaching crisis points

Use peer support, counseling, or EAP services early

Know your workplace and licensing protections for seeking care

Advocate for systems that encourage early, confidential help

Empowering Nurses to Change the System

- Recognize that unsafe environments, not individual weakness, drive burnout
- Speak up about unsafe workloads, policies, or practices
- Engage in shared governance or workplace committees
- Support and advocate for policies that protect nurse well-being
- Join collective efforts (professional associations, peer networks) to drive change
- Remember: system problems need system solutions

Call to Action: Be a Voice for Change

- ❑ Identify one issue in your workplace that affects nurse well-being
- ❑ Talk with peers — you are stronger together
- ❑ Bring concerns to a leader, manager, or shared governance group
- ❑ Know your rights and advocate for fair, safe practices
- ❑ Join a professional association to amplify your voice
- ❑ Remember: change starts when we stop accepting the unacceptable

One Small Shift

Think about this question:

What's one small shift I can make that honors what I'm already carrying?

Share in the chat!

Maybe it's...

- Taking your full break
- Drinking water before your shift starts
- Saying “no” without apology
- Texting a friend for support

Small changes matter, especially when they're consistent.

Resources & Support

- [WNA - Nurses Caring for Nurses \(NCN\)](#)
- [WisPAN Peer Support](#)
 - Free & confidential substance use and mental health peer support for Wisconsin nurses
- [988 Lifeline - If you need emotional support, reach out to the national mental health hotline: 988](#)
- [Empowered Psychiatric Solutions | Mental Health & Suicide Prevention](#)
- [Home - Dr. Lorna Breen Heroes Foundation](#)
- [The Emotional PPE Project](#)
- [NurseGroups](#)
- [Operation Happy Nurse: Nurse peer support network and community](#)

Reach out. You are never alone.

Closing Reflection & Feedback

- What resonated most today?
- What do you want more of in future sessions?
- What's one thing you'll try differently this week?

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Thank you!