Stress, Coping, Healing and the Quest for Civility

By Cynthia Clark
The stressors of nursing school are real, varied, and complex. Mild stress levels can motivate students to complete assignments and meet deadlines, achieve success on exams, and increase creativity and inspiration (Clark, 2013). While a certain amount of stress can be motivating, and may even give us an edge, other stressors may be less inspiring and can leave students feeling anxious, defeated, and tense.

Some of the major stressors for nursing students include heavy academic workloads and exam schedules, feelings of inadequacy and insecurity in the clinical setting, and fear of making a mistake (LeDuc, 2010). In addition, student nurses are also challenged by the competing demands of family, work, and school; financial concerns; competition for grades and scholarships; facing an uncertain future; and experiencing academic incivility (Clark, 2008, 2011, 2013 in progress).

Academic Incivility
The stress of incivility changes us. Incivility is defined as rude and disruptive behaviors, which often result in psychological and physiological distress for the people involved. If left unaddressed, it may progress into threatening situations or can result in temporary or permanent illness or injury (Clark, 2013). I have been gathering stories from student nurses around the globe for more than a decade to gain a deeper and better understanding of the factors associated with academic incivility; most importantly, to develop best practices to minimize and address the problem in nursing education and practice. Recently, I asked nursing students to describe an example of academic incivility, the impact it had on him or her, and how he or she coped (or didn’t cope) with the experience. The stories that follow are distressing examples of incivility; however, they are also compelling accounts of perseverance and coping during stressful and challenging times. Names have been changed to protect the student’s identity.

Dana’s Story: One of the most stressful experiences of my nursing education happened during a clinical rotation. I had a very erratic, labile, and unsupportive instructor. In fact, she was pretty much absent and unavailable. She gave us our daily clinical assignments—and we wouldn’t see her again until hours later during post-conference. She was very critical; she berated students, and I found myself dreading getting up in the morning and constantly questioning whether I wanted to be in nursing school at all. I found myself withdrawing and making every attempt to fly under the radar. I kept praying that I would get through it and made every attempt to avoid conflict with the instructor. Instead, I focused on learning from my nursing preceptor. I kept telling myself “just hang in there; for this too shall pass.”

Tom’s Story: I was part a group where the final grade was based on each member’s ability to contribute equitably to the project’s completion. The stakes were high because individual grades were based on the overall performance of the group and how the group performed as a team. One of our members was frequently late for meetings, failed to complete her share of the work, gossiped about other classmates, and often would text message when she seemed bored with the group work. The class assignment deadline was approaching and we were concerned that the project would not be completed on time or be of good quality. When we attempted to discuss this with our group member, she became angry and very agitated. It was really stressful so we decided to do her part so that our class grade would not suffer.

Stress is inevitable, particularly in nursing where making life and death decisions is a common and sometimes daily experience. Too much stress, especially if prolonged and coupled with poor coping strategies, can compromise physical, emotional, and spiritual health. Some common signs and symptoms of stress include insomnia, fatigue, headaches, muscular tension, gastrointestinal problems, irritability and anger. Other signs include suffering from frequent colds or infection, nervousness, excessive worry, and lost time with friends and loved ones. Chronic and prolonged stress plays a role in developing Type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and mental illness.

While stress may be a given in our lives—incivility in nursing education creates an unnecessary and preventable form of stress, exacts an emotional and physical toll, zaps our energy and diminishes our self-worth. Thus, we must be equipped with tools and strategies that protect our health and foster an environment of civility.

Taking the Direct Approach
Engaging in a direct and critical conversation can be a cause of stress; however, doing so may be the most effective approach. Unfortunately, many of us lack the essential skills for engaging in candid conversations where emotions run high and where conflict negotiation skills are vital. Many people refrain from speaking directly with uncivil individuals when a conversation is clearly needed because they “don’t know how,” or perhaps “it feels emotionally unsafe.” Many students avoid addressing incivility with an instructor because “there is a clear power differential, or because “there is too much to lose, including receiving a failing grade, or worse, being expelled from the nursing program altogether.” In many cases, students feel inexperienced or ill-prepared to address incivility, especially with their peers and superiors. While there are no universal techniques to successfully address every uncivil situation, there are a few guiding principles.

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Reflecting, Probing, and Creating a Safe Zone

When faced with the prospect of engaging in a potentially difficult conversation, ask yourself, “What do I want for myself, the other people involved, and for the relationship?” After careful reflection, then ask, “What will happen if I do engage in this conversation, and what will happen if I don’t?” Lastly, ask, “Do I feel equipped to address the issue directly, or is it best to report my observations to a supervisor,” and “Is there a protocol or a set of guidelines to assist me in this process?” If you choose to engage in a direct conversation, plan wisely. Create a safe zone in which to conduct the conversation. Meet at a mutually beneficial time and place, avoid interruptions, and set the stage for meaningful conversation and problem solving. If desired, a third person can be invited by either side to listen in or mediate.

The Conversation

Critical conversations can be stressful, so be sure you are well hydrated, rested, and as stress free as possible. Drink plenty of water, and do some deep breathing exercises or yoga stretches before the meeting. When the meeting starts, stay focused on your purpose, maintain eye contact, and avoid being judgmental. Let’s consider Tom’s story and the lack of team member involvement (let’s call her Abby). Here is an example of how you might address Abby’s behavior using the DESC (Describe, Explain, State, and Consequence) model (Bartholomew, 2007).

Describe: Abby, thank you for meeting with me. I’d like to talk with you about some recent observations regarding our class project.

Explain: Yesterday, when you arrived for our group meeting, you seemed distracted and unprepared. When the team reviewed our task list, your contribution to the class project was incomplete. When the project started, each of us, including you, agreed to complete our individual parts on time and in a quality way. The project is nearly due, and you have yet to follow through.

State: Abby, we need you to complete your part of the group project before the due date. If you need help, or if something is keeping you from completing your part, we need to know so we can problem-solve as a team.

Consequence: It’s important to me and the rest of the team that you understand that this is a serious concern. If you fail to do your part, we will enlist the support of our instructor to fill her in on our concerns.

Now, let’s consider a similar conversation with an uncivil faculty member. In this situation, students often perceive the stakes to be higher since faculty hold a position of authority and are the “keepers of the grade book.” Again, ask yourself the reflection and probing questions above, and thoughtfully consider the intent and context of the event and your possible contribution to it.
While an e-mail message can help get the conversation started, having an in-person meeting can be empowering. After agreeing on a mutually beneficial time and place to meet, free from interruptions, and conducive to conversation and problem-solving, you may consider using the DESC Model with Professor Green. Using your most respectful and professional communication style, here is an example of how the conversation might go.

**Describe:** Thank you for meeting with me, Professor Green. I’d like to talk with you about some recent observations regarding our clinical experience.

**Explain:** It’s clear that you have a considerable responsibility to oversee our clinical experiences at Acme Medical Center. However, when you are unavailable to discuss important issues related to my patient’s condition, I am less able to administer quality care. Also, when you address me in a negative tone, I feel inadequate and it impacts my nursing practice.

**State:** I would like to make a plan to spend more time with you to be better prepared to administer safe, quality patient care. Also, your words have a significant influence on my ability to learn and to provide nursing care.

**Consequence:** Can we make a plan to address these concerns?

Clearly, I realize that addressing an uncivil faculty member can be intimidating. Therefore, being prepared and creating a safe zone is absolutely imperative. You may consider practicing or role-playing the scenario with a trusted family member, colleague, or classmate. Being well prepared, centered, and organized can go a long way in resolving the conflict and reaching a win-win solution. Whether you are addressing an uncivil peer or a faculty member; be sure to make a plan for a follow-up meeting to evaluate progress on efforts to resolve the issue. If taking a direct approach is too difficult, refer to nursing program and organizational policies to guide the process and to help you resolve the issues. You may also consider having a discussion with your dean, who may suggest contacting your state board of nursing for guidance and support.

**Stress Management and Self Care**

There is an inextricable link between stress and incivility (Clark, 2013). When people are stressed, rushed, unhappy, fatigued and hungry, incivility is a possible outcome (Forni, 2008, Clark, 2013). Thus, we need to make stress-reduction strategies and self-care measures a part of our daily lives. The American Holistic Nurses Association (2012) recommends several stress management techniques including deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, guided imagery, and mindful meditation. Other stress reduction techniques include finding quiet time for reflection and contemplation, journaling, yoga, and talking with a trusted person when worries build.

I recently asked my students about healthy ways to manage stress and they suggested enjoying time with family, friends, pets and other supportive people, getting regular exercise, enjoying fresh air and sunshine, engaging in hobbies and other relaxing activities, eating healthy, drinking plenty of water, and getting adequate sleep. Others suggested visualizing a positive future, avoiding sleeping pills, drugs, and too much alcohol, seeking professional help, de-cluttering our lives, and listening to our favorite music.

Whether intended or not, the impact of incivility can be quite stressful. Very real physiological changes occur in response to stress. Because stress is a reality of life, and eliminating it is impossible, we all need to know and practice a variety of stress-management techniques. Identifying and sticking with the stress-reducing techniques that work for you are vital. Several types of exercises and activities are effective in reducing or managing stress including Pilates, yoga, Tai Chi, meditation, progressive relaxation, deep breathing, and visualization. Eating right and getting enough rest are also important in a stress-management plan for life.

Consider putting “me time” into your calendar and treat these entries as important as any other work meeting or other activity. By taking care of yourself, you will be better able to attend to the needs of others. Keep a gratitude journal—focusing on gratitude, appreciation, and love for the people and things around us can help decrease stress and put life into perspective. In his book titled *Spontaneous Happiness*, Dr. Andrew Weil (2011) describes keeping a gratitude journal as a means to boost happiness levels. *(Continued on page 38)*
Dr. Weil suggests devoting a few minutes each day to giving thanks for the good things in our lives and counting our blessings. Expressing gratitude might be one of the most effective strategies in achieving and maintaining a contented life. Forgiveness is a close cousin to gratitude and another important key to emotional health. Both must be practiced on a daily basis (Clark, 2013).

Downey (2006) recommends that nurses and student nurses at all levels need to manage stress and create a balanced life. Relaxation techniques such as imagery, massage, energy re-patterning, and sense therapies can assist nurses in meeting daily goals of maintaining and enhancing physical, mental, and spiritual health. Nurses who develop a self-health care plan integrating mind-body-spirit rituals for increasing energy and maintaining balance in their lives are more effective care providers. The following strategies inspired by Downey can bring a sense of peace and calm during stressful moments and challenging times.

Change your environment and make it friendlier to your senses: alter the lighting, add music, flowers, fun pictures, or photos. Stick up for your individual needs, assert yourself, and without aggressiveness address issues that matter to you. Change how you view situations; think of stressful events as challenges instead of threats. Visualize yourself meeting (or exceeding) a significant challenge, and once you have succeeded in doing this, celebrate and reward yourself. Clear your mind by sitting in silence at least once during the day. “Unplug” your phone, television, computer, and other distractions and step away from chaos into silence. Create and enjoy a quiet place; take a deep breath and begin to clear your mind to create space for positive thoughts. Learn to say “no” appropriately and “yes” to things that fit your life plan.

Make time for exercise to rejuvenate your mind, body, and spirit. Exercise is an excellent outlet for the release of endorphins that improves your mood and gives positive feelings of energy and euphoria. Pay attention to nutrition and eat mindfully. Avoid fast foods, and replace them with whole foods such as fruits, vegetables, and non-processed foods. Take time to notice the texture, aroma, and taste of the food—and imagine how it is nourishing and restoring your health. Get plenty of sleep and use relaxation techniques to begin the resting process. Avoid misusing drugs, alcohol, smoking and binge eating. Your body is already trying very hard to adjust to the demands of the day. Avoid negative people and surround yourself with positive people who believe in you and support you.

The costs of incivility are vast. Uncivil behavior increases stress levels, erodes self-esteem, damages relationships, and threatens our way of life (Forni, 2008; Clark 2013). Incivility lowers morale, causes illness, and leaves people feeling stressed, vulnerable, and devalued. Therefore, creating and sustaining communities of civility is vital – and even though stress will always be a part of our life, with practice, we can improve our stress management capacity and increase our ability to cope with the myriad of life’s challenges.
References
Clark, C.M. (in progress). Three-year longitudinal study on students’ perceptions of stress, coping, and fostering academic civility.

Cynthia Clark, PhD, RN, ANEF, FAAN, is an award-winning professor in the School of Nursing at Boise State University and the Founder of Civility Matters®. Her pioneering work on fostering civility has opened essential conversations on a serious issue that often remains hidden and ignored. Dr. Clark’s ground-breaking research has brought national and international attention to the controversial issues of incivility in academic and work environments and has led to the development of “best practices” on ways to measure, prevent, minimize, and address uncivil and disruptive behavior. Her book titled, “Creating and Sustaining Civility in Nursing Education” is available through Sigma Theta Tau International Publishers. For more information, visit Civility Matters at hs.boisestate.edu/civilitymatters, or her Musing of the Great Blue blog at musingofthegreatblue.blogspot.com.

National Student Nurses Day

National Student Nurses Day (May 8) is during National Nurses Week, which is celebrated annually on May 6 (National Nurses Day) through May 12, in commemoration of Florence Nightingale’s birthday. This is a great time to emphasize how important nurses are to their communities.

If your state association or school chapter organized an event to celebrate National Nurses Week or National Student Nurses Day, let us hear about it! Email: nsna@nsna.org attn: Happenings.