

# Working through your emotions

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## **It is important for nurses to understand and manage their emotional responses to caring, says Nicola Davies**

Emotional labour is a term often used when referring to emotionally taxing situations that have a corresponding drain on emotional energy. The term is less widely known than that of physical labour, yet work involving emotional labour is demanding, skilled and requires experience.

Emotional labour is an aspect of many occupations, but is more prevalent in the caring professions. Offering comfort and showing empathy are important nursing skills because nurses sustain the morale of patients, reassure those who are experiencing pain or anxiety, and comfort bereaved relatives.

It is often the emotionally stimulating aspect of nursing that appeals to those who choose it as a career. The emotional interactions with patients add value and meaning to the working day and often lead to a sense of accomplishment.

But what is the effect of this emotional labour on nurses' health? When emotional labour results in a personal cost it can be associated with intention to leave a job, absenteeism, job dissatisfaction and stress, as well as fear of emotions, cynicism and insincerity. Excessive emotional labour has also been associated with depression, anxiety and emotional exhaustion.

Coping mechanisms can help. Emotional intelligence has been defined as the ability to manage feelings so that they are expressed appropriately and effectively (Goleman 1995). This capability is concerned with perceiving emotion, understanding emotion-related situations and being able to manage them. This intelligence is an important personal resource in work involving emotions and it has been suggested that emotional intelligence should be formally recognised as a key requirement in caring for patients.

Disappointingly, the skill involved in emotional work such as nursing is often unnoticed and poorly rewarded.

### **Enhancing support**

Managers need to ensure emotional issues are covered as part of nurses' supervision. They also need to explore how nurses manage their own and patients' emotions, and how they come to terms with the unavoidably taxing aspects of care, such as trauma and death. And finally, managers should reward emotional intelligence and enhance support mechanisms.

### **Nicola Davies is a freelance writer and health psychologist**

#### **Coping with emotional labour**

- Use supportive resources in the workplace.
- Develop personal coping strategies.
- Gain control of your emotions by acknowledging and dealing with difficult feelings.
- Seek support – friends, family, colleagues.
- Reflect on feelings and their effect on your work.

- Identify unmet emotional needs and how you can meet them.
- Express your feelings to someone who listens, understands and values you.
- Discuss emotions during supervision sessions.
- Share coping methods with other colleagues.
- Never ignore emotions.