A Narrative Analysis of Meaning and Joy in Nursing Practice

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BACKGROUND

Experts in healthcare have established that meaning and joy for healthcare workers are vital to the delivery of safe and effective care. We identified a gap in the literature related to nurses’ experiences of meaning and joy in their practice. This study contributes evidence for understanding what brings nurses meaning and joy in their professional nursing practice, and contributing factors. In addition, with their permission, this study provided nurses with the opportunity to share their stories with others through the online StoryCorps® platform and to preserve them for future generations.

STUDY AIM

To provide a description of those experiences that nurses, across settings and in varied roles, found to be meaningful in their practice and how those nursing practice experiences enabled them to derive meaning and joy from their work.

RESULTS

Analysis of 27 nurse interviews yielded 4 themes: Fulfilling Purpose “I am a nurse”, Meaningful Connection, Impact- The Wow Factor, and The Practice Environment. Meaningful Connection and Impact- The Wow Factor include experiences with patients, families and colleagues. The Practice Environment includes three subthemes: Team, Leadership, and Opportunities for Growth. The themes are described briefly below and illustrated with participant quotes.

Fulfilling Purpose “I am a nurse”

“This was always related to caring and helping and really finding meaning through helping.”

“I first went into nursing for the science and I found that after 37 years that it’s not the science that brings me joy, but the intimate experiences.”

Meaningful Connection

“...its making a difference in the lives of the people you care for and sometimes that means your patients, but then it’s also a huge thing to hear from colleagues that you made a difference or that they appreciate your impact.”

Impact The “Wow” Factor

Joy in nursing came from seeing their positive impact on patients, families or colleagues. Nurses used the word “wow” to indicate how powerful and validating it was to be able to make a difference for others. They reflected on gestures of gratitude from others, positive clinical and functional outcomes, peaceful deaths, resolved suffering and their own development.

• “...there was a handwritten note handed to me – “Thanks. Now I have a reason to live.”
• “...its making a difference in the lives of the people you care for and sometimes that means your patients, but then it’s also a huge thing to hear from colleagues that you made a difference or that they appreciate your impact.”

The Practice Environment

“...a work environment when it felt supportive and collegial, where I’m learning something and gaining some new insights into what is possible and where there is some kind of support for creative thinking and taking risks”

Human connection and relationships enable nurses to provide care that makes a difference, is meaningful, and makes them feel joyful about their impact. Nurses described meaningful connections with patients, families and colleagues.

• “...what makes me want to keep coming to work in the morning is those moments I’m able to have with my patient or my family member, just finding their humanity— I really appreciate those small moments that I’m able to get to know who my patient is, who the family is, that’s what makes it seem all the more worthwhile to me to have that connection with them and maybe impact their life in some way beyond the physical care that I’m providing as a nurse.”
• “meaning for me in nursing has really been found in not only my patients, but in my ...relationships with my colleagues.”

METHODS

The study utilized a narrative inquiry approach (Rieissman, 2008), with StoryCorps® to elicit, document, and interpret nurses’ stories of their experiences with meaning and joy in their nursing practice. A narrative is an oral story told by a participant. Nurses told their stories in response to this opening statement “Please share your experiences with me and provide examples to illustrate your thoughts on joy and meaning in nursing practice. You may choose to start at the beginning of your career and share how you found joy and meaning in each role or you may choose to start with the more memorable stories of joy and meaning whenever they happened. The order does not matter; I just ask for details as you talk. Please share with me what you think brings joy and meaning to your practice. What does meaning look and feel like? Context may help so please be specific.”

Sample: Using a snowball sampling approach, nurses were recruited until data saturation occurred. Twenty-seven Registered Nurses, with a minimum of one-year experience practicing in the United States, (20 females, 7 males; highest degree AD-PhD, majority BSN or higher; 31-60+ years of age; 1-40+ years of practice; diverse practice specialties and settings, diverse roles including clinical nurses, educators and administrators).

Analysis

Each researcher independently read and re-read the narratives. They identified meaningful statements which were shared with each other along with preliminary themes. The team reviewed all the statements and the draft themes. Two of the researchers examined the selected statements in detail and categorized the themes into four which were reviewed by the entire team individually and collectively. The four themes were defined and the words carefully chosen to illustrate the meaning and joy found in nursing practice.

LEADERSHIP IMPLICATIONS

• Get to know your colleagues and why they became nurses
• Help them to connect their experiences with their sense of purpose
• Co-create a practice environment that supports both the science and the art of nursing
• Co-design care models and practices that enable nurses to form meaningful connections with patients, families and colleagues
• Provide time and physical space for the “little things” that nurses do to make a difference in the patient and family experience
• Celebrate the impact that nurses have on patients, families and colleagues. Praise and thank.
• Create storytelling opportunities where nurses can share meaningful and joyful experiences, celebrate!
• Establish processes for peer and patient/family recognition and appreciation.
• Create the conditions for nurses to form meaningful relationships with other members of the team.
• Encourage and reward creativity, innovation, professional autonomy and risk-taking.
• Establish infrastructure for shared decision-making through professional governance.
• Create opportunities for voice- listen and ask questions.
• Support education and professional development opportunities.
• Create opportunities for interprofessional collaboration and team training.