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FRIDAY AUGUST 10TH 2012

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Participants at ANA conference learn strategies to help themselves and their patients

Stress relief, sleep, staffing, yoga, snacks and change — all were part of the American Nurses Association's (ANA) Healthy Nurse Conference aimed at getting participants to think — and maybe re-think — what they can do to get healthier and be better able to communicate healthy habits to their patients.

More than 400 nurses and others concerned about health attended the June 14 event, which was held just prior to the ANA's House of Delegates meeting. First Lady Michelle Obama sent a message that was read at the event acknowledging nurses' essential role in improving the health and wellness of all Americans.

In her welcoming remarks, ANA President Karen A. Daley, PhD, MPH, RN, FAAN, provided some statistics on the current state of nurses' health and noted that RNs generally put the health and well-being of others before taking care of themselves.

"Today's conference will show you that there is a better path to health and well-being, and ANA will be there to support you every step of the way," Daley said.

With that in mind, *New York Times* bestselling author David Maxfield talked about the science and principles behind changing behaviors — from altering one's diet to committing to an exercise program.

"We think we fail because we don't have willpower or the grit to change — or that we have some character flaw," Maxfield said. "But what we need are skills to change."

He noted that people first must be able to identify the crucial moments when they are at risk for engaging in unhealthy behaviors, such as smoking cigarettes instead of discussing a difficult problem with a spouse. Then they must create "vital behaviors" that will help them succeed in making positive changes, such as gaining the ability to control their environment. That could be as simple as using smaller plates to ensure appropriate portion sizes at meals.

Like Maxfield, nurse expert and West Virginia Nurses Association member Aila Accad, MSN, RN, also interacted with the audience during her presentation on instant stress-busters for nurses. She noted that the cause of all stress is having no control.

"One principle to keep in mind is that you can't change anything outside of you, like other people or new technology,' she said. "You can only change what's inside you."

To prevent stress and burnout, Accad urged nurses to break the perfection myth.

"No one can be perfect, and trying to be perfect just feels frustrating and defeating," she said. Instead Accad recommended that nurses focus on their talents, affinities, skills and experience, and stop "should-ing" themselves. She also asked audience members to practice a technique known as emotional release — tapping on certain parts of face and upper body — that will help them diminish negative feelings.

Eating right, and getting moving

Karen Gabel Speroni, PhD, MHS, RN, director of nursing research at two Inova hospitals in Virginia, shared results of a study of nurses who participated in a Nurses Living Fit™ (NLF) program. The 108 nurses in an "NLF group" had to comply with certain interventions, such as walking 15,000 steps a day, doing yoga at least once a week, drinking the recommended amount of water each day, and getting eight hours of sleep a night. At the end of the first 12 weeks, nurses in the NLF had a significant reduction in their BMI and waist circumference compared to the 109 nurses in the "contrast group."

Speroni urged conference participants to advocate for ongoing, evidence-based programs, such as NLF. She also gave vivid examples of how portion size has changed in the last 20 years, and the length of time it takes to burn off the difference in calories. For example, an order of French fries 20 years ago generally was 210 calories, and today it is 610. To burn the extra calories, someone would have to walk a dog for an hour and 10 minutes, she explained.

Arizona Nurses Association members Bernadette Melnyk, PhD, RN, CPNP/PMHNP, FNAP, FAAN, and David Hrabe, PhD, RN, shared their personal, family stories and their participation in a program to become healthier offered through the Human Performance Institute. They then talked about the Nurse Athletes program they are launching and its strategies.



Karen Gabel Speroni challenged nurses to sit with an "engaged core."

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"I always thought being a great multi-tasker is a great thing," said Melnyk, university chief wellness officer and dean, The Ohio State University (OSU) College of Nursing. But multi-tasking depletes energy. She explained that managing one's energy — physical, emotional, mental and spiritual — is key to feeling and getting healthy. She suggested that one critical way to manage energy is for nurses to examine whether what they are spending their time and energy on is aligned with their ultimate purpose and mission in life.

"No matter what age you are, it is not too old to make health changes for yourself and your family," she said.

Hrabe, executive director, Academic Innovations and Partnerships at OSU, focused his presentation mostly on nutrition recommendations. For example, he suggested that people should eat light and eat often to stabilize blood glucose levels, improve metabolism, and maintain energy levels and optimal brain function. He also emphasized the importance of engaging in a variety of exercise — such as yoga and cardiovascular interval workouts — and taking other routine steps to increase physical activity — like literally taking the steps instead of an escalator.

Sleep and the work environment

"Sleep is important for life and health, and it affects all organ systems," said Claire Caruso, PhD, RN, research health scientist, NIOSH. Yet many health care workers are not getting enough sleep. She reported that 52 percent of night health care workers sleep less than six hours a day, and that, according to ANA's 2011 Health and Safety Survey, 10 percent of nurses reported an automobile crash because of fatigue or shift work.

Caruso also pointed to fatigue and shift work's practice implications. She specifically noted a study showing that nurses who worked six, 8-hour day shifts were less likely to make mistakes than their colleagues who worked four, 12-hour night shifts.

She said that managers and nurses share the responsibility of reducing risks in the workplace. Managers should implement strategies to reduce nurse fatigue by improving schedules, workloads and the workplace culture. Individual nurses should learn behaviors to maximize sleep and alertness, and manage their family and social activities.

In addition to addressing strategies to help individuals get healthier, ANA presented a panel focusing on creating a healthy nurses workplace.

Environmental health expert and Maryland Nurses Association member Barbara Sattler, DrPH, RN, FAAN, spoke about toxic products present in the workplace and households that can affect nurses' health and lead to conditions and diseases, such as asthma, cancer, and endocrine-related problems.

She gave an example from the Body Burden study of a nurse whose blood and urine samples revealed the presence of 87 harmful chemicals that should not have been in her body. She urged nurses to determine what toxicants are found in their hospital products and look for best practices and resources, such as www.enviRN.org, to keep themselves safe.

Immunization expert and Pennsylvania State Nurses Association member Judith Coates, DNP, CRNP, FNP-BC, spoke of the importance of influenza immunization for health care workers.

She described "seven truths we must accept," which included that influenza-infected health care workers can transmit the deadly virus to vulnerable patients, and that health workers and systems have an ethical and moral duty to protect patients from transmittable diseases.

ANA Department of Nursing Practice and Policy Director Cheryl Peterson, MSN, RN, provided information about revisions to an important ANA document on staffing — another top workplace concern.

"ANA believes — and the research shows — that staffing and the work environment are inextricably linked to your health and wellness," Peterson said. Nurse members can access *ANA's Principles for Nurse Staffing* at www.nursingworld.org/ANAsPrinciplesforNurseStaffing.

More tips, treats and incentives

Whole Foods Market healthy eating specialists urged people to eat mostly whole foods, such as vegetables, fruits, and grains; read labels for hidden sugars, such as molasses and corn syrup; plan meals; and eat appropriate portions. Participants received free healthy lunches and snacks.

To help nurses burn off those calories, Joanne Duchaine, group fitness director, The Energy Club, got nurses out of their chairs and swaying to salsa moves and yoga stretches during two 15-minutes sessions.



Joanne Duchaine led participants in salsa and yoga moves.

Finally, ANA's Chief Executive Officer Marla Weston, PhD, RN, discussed her ongoing journey to remain healthy and challenged nurses to commit to one change to get or stay healthy. Participants then filled out reminder cards noting a healthy behavior change they want to pursue. ANA will mail the cards back to nurses in a few weeks to help them stay on course.

Participants left the conference armed with strategies to help themselves and their patients.

New Hampshire Nurses Association member Lindsay Fuller, RN, a charge nurse who works nights at a nursing home, said she particularly valued the information on sleep and sleep deprivation.

"I want to keep myself healthy to be able to keep my residents healthy," said Fuller as the main reason for attending the conference.

Said Katie Sweeney Wilson, a certified health education specialist and the daughter of a nurse, said, "I'm passionate about the work that nurses do and wellness, and it is really time for nurses to look out for their own health."

Suzy Harrington, DNP, RN, MCHES, director for ANA's new Center for Health, Safety, and Wellness, emceed the event and encouraged participants to watch for new resources and education on "Healthy Nurse" in the near future. For more information on ANA's work to improve nurses' health and wellness, go www.ananealthynurse.org and to www.nursingworld.org.

The conference was made possible in part by a grant from the American Nurses Foundation.

— Susan Trossman is the senior reporter for *The American Nurse*.

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