Our Vision: Excellence in quality integrative health care, engaging all human capacity for healing and health.

With this re-introduction of The Bridge, we consider one of the most powerful aspects of Integrative Medicine: nursing care. In particular, we explore Holistic Nursing, as framed by the personal experiences of Nanci Taylor, RN, a Multidisciplinary Nurse Navigator in the WDH Seacoast Cancer Center, and member of the WDH Integrative Therapies Committee. As you’ll see, Holistic Nurses (whether certified or not) are all nurses who put “healing the whole person” at the center of their practice. Please enjoy learning about this inspiring approach to patient care.

- Holly Roche, MS, LMT, WDH Integrative Therapies, editor

From Nanci Taylor, RN:

In 1991 I was diagnosed with walking pneumonia. I lived with severe asthma for 1 year post-pneumonia. I broke my ribs from coughing so hard. I was on the maximum amount of inhalers and steroids and still, I couldn’t catch my breath. I was desperate, so when a friend recommended a Reiki treatment, I decided to try it. I was unable to lie down for my treatment so the practitioner did Reiki while I sat in a chair. Amazingly, I could breathe “normally” for 72 hours after that treatment. I was curious, how could “energy work” act like a medicine? Thus began my journey as a Holistic Nurse. I am frequently asked, “What makes a Holistic Nurse?” Lucia Thornton, past president of the American Holistic Nursing Association (AHNA) has kindly given us permission to reprint her article for this issue of The Bridge. I hope you enjoy it as much as I do. If you have any questions or comments, please contact me at Nanci.Taylor@WDHospital.com.

Holistic Nursing: A Way of Being, a Way of Living, a Way of Practice
by Lucia Thornton, in NSNA Imprint, January 2008 (re-printed with permission)

Holistic nursing can be practiced in any setting. Demographics from the American Holistic Nursing Association (AHNA) membership show that 39 percent of holistic nurses work in hospitals, 23 percent in private practice, 15 percent in academia/education/research, 11 percent in hospice/palliative/long term care, and 9 percent are students. (AHNA, 2007).

AHNA defines holistic nursing as “all nursing that has healing the whole person as its goal” (AHNA 2007). As a student, you can begin to incorporate holistic practices that will enrich your personal life, your educational experience and your clinical practicum. Holistic nursing is a way of being, a way of living, and a way of practicing that will transform your life and transform

A Way of Being
Being a Caring and Healing Presence

A primary focus of holistic nursing is to bring “caring” and “healing” back into our health care system. The first step in this process is for nurses to learn to love and care for themselves. While this may seem a selfish pursuit, learning to care deeply for ourselves by taking the time to nurture ourselves physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually is absolutely essential. When we do so, we begin to realize our wholeness and we actually become a healing presence for our patients.

As a student nurse you are concerned primarily with what nurses “do” (e.g., giving treatments, changing dressings, monitoring vital signs, etc.) Mastering clinical nursing techniques and treatments is essential in order to help your patients heal and recover from their illness or surgery. However, who you are, how you feel inside, and the attitude that you convey also have a profound effect on the patient. When you walk into a patient’s room feeling depleted and exhausted, you are creating an unhealthy environment by your presence. If, on the other hand, you are well rested and feel content and peaceful inside you create a healthy and wholesome environment by your very presence.

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Taking good care of yourself is a prerequisite to providing holistic care for your patients. Learning to listen deeply to your own heart and your own truth allows you to connect in a deeply caring way with your patients. As Jean Watson says, “We must learn to treat ourselves with love and respect before we are able to treat others that way” (Watson, 1998). Love and caring are essential in the healing process, both for ourselves and our patients!

A Way of Living

Role Models for Healthy and Wholesome Living

Holistic nurses strive to be models of wholesome and healthy behavior by creating optimal health in every aspect of their lives – physically, mentally, emotionally, socially and spiritually. Achieving optimal health in all the areas of our lives is a lifelong endeavor.

Resistance to change, self-doubt, and low self-esteem can block our journey to optimal nurturance. Examining these blocks is crucial for understanding and identifying sources of resistance. Many of these attitudes and beliefs are caused by social conditioning and early life experiences that simply no longer apply to adult life. Being willing to explore what lies beneath the surface is important if we are to create healthy and wholesome patterns of living (Thornton, 1998).

Commitment to Self-Care, Self-Exploration and Awareness

Take some time to begin examining the various aspects of your life. The first step is gaining an awareness of your patterns and habits and bringing into consciousness that which has been unconscious. Some of the practices utilized by holistic nurses for self-exploration and awareness include meditation, creating time for reflection and introspection, dreamwork, mindfulness practice, and journaling.

Commitment to Caring for the Environment

Holistic nurses advocate and promote healthy environments and the healing of our planet. Just as Florence Nightingale advocated and understood the importance of clean, fresh air and clean surroundings for her patients, so too do holistic nurses promote practices that help ensure the sustainability of our earth. Holistic nurses understand that the health of our planet is inextricably linked to the health of every individual.

A Way of Practice

Centering and Intention Setting

Centering and creating an intention for healing are processes the holistic nurse engages in prior to any patient interaction. Centering involves focusing your attention on your heart, setting aside concerns and thoughts, and connecting with feelings of love and compassion.

With this intention, the nurse is consciously setting aside her own concerns and focusing on the patient; she focuses on the idea that the interaction will be “for the greater good of this person”; and she is making a conscious decision to be fully present. The nurse creates an environment that promotes and sustains a caring-healing interaction.

Acknowledgment of Infinite and Sacred Nature of Being

Holistic nursing acknowledges that people are infinite, sacred and spiritual beings. Florence Nightingale spoke of human beings as a “reflection of the Divine with physical, metaphysical and intellectual attributes” (McCrae, 1995). Jean Watson teaches that we are “sacred beings” (Watson, 1998). Martha Rogers speaks of unitary human beings as “energy fields that are infinite in nature” (Thornton, 1999). From the perspective of holistic nursing theorists, people are energy fields that are infinite and sacred. This orientation makes a difference in how we approach each other. It shifts how we speak, how we listen, how we relate and how we interact.

Caring/Healing/Transcendent Presence

Another characteristic of holistic practice is the depth and profound quality of presence that the nurse has with his patients. Jean Watson speaks of the “full use of self” in the transpersonal caring process. When the nurse becomes heart-centered, he can connect with the person at a heart/soul level – a deep psychological and spiritual level.
Holistic Nurses in Private Practice

Many holistic nurses have their own private practices in which they use a variety of approaches and modalities in providing holistic care. Some of the common interventions that holistic nurses incorporate include: subtle energy healing (e.g., healing touch, therapeutic touch, Reiki, etc.), reflexology, guided imagery, biofeedback, aromatherapy, massage, nutritional counseling, cognitive therapy, life-style counseling, breathing and relaxation techniques, music and sound therapy, and acupressure.

Holistic nurses, through their knowledge and understanding of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) therapies can guide their clients in safely integrating them into their healing process.

Education and Board Certification

There are currently 13 undergraduate programs in the United States endorsed by the American Holistic Nurse Certification Corporation (AHNCC) that prepare undergraduate students in holistic nursing. To be eligible for board certification by the AHNCC at the basic holistic nursing level (HN-BC), a nurse is required to have: (1) an active, unrestricted U.S. license; (2) a baccalaureate or higher degree; (3) at least one year of full-time or 2,000 hours of part-time practice within the last five years as a holistic nurse or graduation from and AHNCC-endorsed university, and (4) a minimum of 48 contact hours of holistic nursing continuing education within the last 2 years (AHNA, p. 20).

After becoming eligible for certification, the nurse must pass a qualitative assessment and a quantitative examination to obtain certification. Board certification is also offered at the advanced practice level (AHN-BC) for nurses with graduate degrees. The eligibility criteria for advanced practice is similar and certification also requires passing a qualitative assessment and a quantitative exam (AHNA, p. 22).

The American Holistic Nurses Association (AHNA) endorses and sponsors a variety of educational programs related to holistic nursing practice. For more information access the AHNA website at www.ahna.org

Lucia Thornton, a holistic nurse educator and consultant, is a former President of the AHNA. Her work in transforming hospitals into “healing environments” has received national, state and local recognition.


