Transitioning to Nursing Practice: Surviving and Thriving in Your First Year

By Cristiana Bittner

Congratulations, New Grad! Graduating from a nursing program is a splendid accomplishment. With all the clinical hours, study time, care plans, projects, and the NCLEX-RN® behind you, it is time to eagerly anticipate your first employment opportunity and look forward to wearing the title you have worked so hard for—RN. Along with this title comes much responsibility, which may provoke anxiety because you will no longer be in the protective student role with instructors guiding you. New graduates often experience challenges in their first year of practice as they grow into the role of a registered nurse. “Many experience fear of failure, fear of total responsibility, and fear of making mistakes” (Morrow, 2009).

Because the first year of practice is critical for building the new nurse’s confidence, try to choose your first place of employment carefully. Finding the right fit can make the difference between a positive first year and a distressing one. Your transition experience will depend greatly upon the support and culture of the unit where you launch your nursing career. To find the right fit, consider what is important for you. How far are you willing to commute? What is the nurse-patient ratio? Will this facility support and encourage continuing education? Most importantly, will this facility offer a nurturing environment—one where you feel safe and appreciated as you learn to take on your full responsibility as a registered nurse? Anything less may hinder your growth and development and possibly even lead you to quit.

Choosing a facility that has values similar to yours and offers a residency or at least a comprehensive orientation is paramount (Chandler, 2010). Once you land an interview, request a tour of the prospective workplace in order to have an inside look at the culture of the facility; if you can, speak with new nurses, especially new graduates, about their experiences. This could prove insightful and beneficial in your search for the right fit.

The transition from student to registered nurse entails a steep learning curve. You are not alone if you feel a little shaky in your new role as an RN—this is perfectly normal and no cause for concern. One nursing diagnosis that often is appropriate for the new graduate is stress related to lack of organizational skills, insufficient experience, and a large patient-care load. The reality is that most new graduates do not feel adequately prepared straight out of nursing school.

Nursing school provides a foundation upon which the new graduate nurse can begin to build a career through experience in the workplace. The following opinions from a Norwegian study on the experience of neophyte nurses reflect how new graduates typically feel in their first year on the job (Wangsteen, 2008):

“No matter what you say about being responsible in your last year as a student—you are not. Because someone is right behind you all the time and stops you if you are about to do anything wrong.”

“I had to ask all the time—ask about everything…Should I call the doctor now, or? I didn’t have a clue.”

“…suddenly I was the one supposed to make the decision! That was not easy.”

Knowing what to expect can help smooth your transition to practice. New nurses are often placed on the night shift, required to work weekends and holidays, and may be assigned difficult patients that no one else wants to take on. Look for the opportunities in the challenges. For example, although your circadian rhythm may be thrown off as you adjust to working nights, the night shift has its benefits. Nights are less hectic and allow the new nurse to work at a slower pace, take time to look up things, and consult with other staff.

Many nurses start out on a medical-surgical unit, which calls for the new graduate to work with clients who require care of central lines, chest tubes, colostomies/urostomies, and traheostomies. In addition, the new graduate will be expected to know how to use various pumps (e.g., IV, PCA, enteral feeding) and how to troubleshoot any alarms that go off. Nonetheless, no matter how much experience you had in nursing school, there is always one skill—or several—to which you have never been exposed or have not done enough to be proficient. For this reason, new nurses require ongoing guidance and support from experienced nurses (Morrow, 2009).

To succeed and even thrive in your first year, you must have the support of a knowledgeable registered nurse who is gifted in the art of teaching. You may be paired with a nurse who is a clinical expert, but if his or her teaching leaves much to be desired, you will not get the most benefit. Some hospitals provide
a 3- to 6-month orientation period with a preceptor who can strategically mold the new graduate into a competent nurse by assigning responsibilities incrementally.

As a new graduate, try to find a place of employment where you are “allowed to be new and...are encouraged to ask questions” (Wangsteen, 2008). In the ideal environment, your preceptor will give you advice before you even ask, talk through situations and procedures while you perform them independently, and teach time management by helping you map out your day. A good preceptor will allow you to wobble on your own as you take your first unsteady steps in the infancy of your nursing career, yet be close by in case you need support and reassurance.

It may be worthwhile to seek employment at a hospital that offers an evidence-based nurse residency program to bridge the gap between academia and professional practice. Nurse residencies guide new graduates through their first year of employment to ensure the development of effective critical-thinking, time management, and decision-making skills. Residency programs have been shown to reduce new nurse turnover rates by providing support during that challenging first year. For example, the new graduate retention rate at the University of Tennessee Medical Center increased from 71 percent in 2007 to 88 percent in 2012 after the inauguration of their nurse residency program (Keasler, 2013). One of the major benefits of nurse residency programs is being able to share your triumphs and challenges with other new graduates on your unit. Who better to understand what the new graduate is going through than another new graduate? Interested? The following website, www.nurseresidencyprograms.com, may help you find the ideal nurse residency program for you. However, nurse residency programs are competitive and placement in these programs is challenging.

More important than choosing the perfect employment fit at your first healthcare facility is having a positive mindset. Not all new RNs will get their dream job or even their first choice of specialty or clinical setting. Your attitude and mentality have the power to make or break you during your first year as a new RN. Regardless of where you start, it is crucial to have a positive mindset towards the challenges of being a new nurse. View your first year as a learning experience—do not become discouraged if a few mistakes or misunderstandings creep in (Wangsteen et al., 2008). Try not to compare yourself with the other nurses on your unit; they may have a wealth of experience and knowledge that will soon come to you too. Keep in mind that every great nurse started where you are starting—clueless and scared. For this reason, it is important to embrace criticism and feedback. You will grow as your competency is being evaluated, whether you are being congratulated for a job well done or corrected for having made a mistake. Feedback, whether positive or negative, is vital for growth in your confidence as a nurse.

If you have the new nurse jitters, the good news is that you are not alone. The staff around you can help as you figure out your own unique style of managing and caring for patients. The participants in the Norwegian study mentioned earlier had a bumpy start, but they appreciated their first-year experiences because they learned from them (Wangsteen, 2008):

“I am more relaxed now. I know the routines and I know when I have to carry out different activities. My day is organized and I am good at delegating. To delegate was difficult in the beginning.”

“The first half year was full of new patients, new diagnoses, lots of new situations that were strenuous. But now I have days when I feel, ‘Today was good. I managed it all. I knew it all.’ That’s a good experience.”

“Looking back I wouldn’t have missed that time. I learned so much.”

With repetition and experience, “real-world” nursing will become easier and more manageable. One thing is certain—you will experience growing pains as you are stretched and molded by your debut year as a nurse. You will look forward to the day when you can trust your own decisions without needing to ask so many questions and you will be guiding and growing new graduates. Until then, ask as many questions as you see fit and keep a positive attitude. I wish the new graduates of 2015—all the best as you search for the perfect workplace and develop from neophyte to proficient professionals!

References


Cristiana Bittner graduated from Nyack College in Nyack, New York in May 2014. She is currently employed as a medical-surgical float nurse at White Plains Hospital. A very special thanks to Elizabeth Simon, Dean of the School of Nursing at Nyack College, who encouraged her to submit this manuscript for publication.

For a related piece, please see Victoria Marie Conlu’s article on page 43, “Embracing Uncertainty”.