

Projecting Your Professionalism



Nursing is identified as a profession because it requires both extensive education in science and specialized training. But simply working in an identified profession does not automatically make one a professional. Professionalism involves much more than degrees and credentials. It includes a certain work ethic, attitude, code of conduct, appearance, communication style, among other matters. So what does it take to be a true professional and what does professional behavior, demeanor and appearance look like?

By Donna Cardillo

Pay Attention to Your Appearance

Image and appearance matter more than many nurses realize. Patients put their welfare in our hands, entrust us with their lives, and rely on us to advocate for them and make life saving decisions on their behalf. That level of responsibility requires an appearance worthy of that trust. You have to inspire confidence in others. Part of the way you do that is by dressing in a manner that conveys maturity, seriousness of purpose, and conservative good taste. In other words, you have to create a professional image to reflect the professional person you are.

Whether you're wearing scrubs, uniforms, or street clothes, your garments should be clean, pressed, in good repair, and conservative in appearance. This

includes footwear and accessories. Bright colors and cartoon characters do not convey seriousness or convey confidence. And while some pediatric nurses may argue that the latter helps them to appear "friendly" to their charges, being covered in fictional characters is not the only way to gain a child's trust. The child is not the only person you have to instill confidence in – there are the parents, and others on the remainder of the health-care team.

The same goes for tattoos and piercings. Body art is very popular these days. But visible hardware and other body art is not only forbidden by many employers, it can be frightening and offensive to some clients. Your clients' needs supersede your desire for self-expression in the workplace.

Adopt a Professional Demeanor

How you act in any situation speaks volumes about your character and can either convey confident confidence and competence or shatter it. Study principles of conflict management and clear communication. Learn to stay calm and not react rather than reactionary even in the face of criticism or hostility. Learn how to use appropriate body language (non-verbal communication) to your best advantage and to inspire confidence. For example, keep your facial expressions in check and don't roll your eyes in the presence of patients or staff when a physician or manager says something you don't agree with. Address it in private. Eye rolling or similar behavior sends a

message to the patient that the health-care team is in conflict. Likewise, don't criticize a coworker, including your boss, to patients. You may take it lightly but it can make patients feel afraid. Be mindful of conversations you have and comments you make within earshot of patients and family. Consider their perspective; they are often scared, apprehensive, and feeling vulnerable.

Stay Patient/ Family Focused

Always acknowledge patients and their family members in every health-care setting. Smile, make eye contact, shake hands if appropriate or use a light touch. Maintain the utmost respect for your charges. Remember that a patient is first a person with a life, a family, a culture, a nationality – regardless of his or her current level of health and ability. Patients are our clients; we serve them. Be caring as well as technically astute. Don't get so caught up in tasks and your work routine that you overlook what your profession is all about. It is sometimes easy to feel and act like you're working on an assembly line when there is so much to do and so little time to do it in. Stay connected and focused.

Set Yourself Apart

Introduce yourself with name and title or credentials to everyone you encounter in the workplace. Don't assume people will know what you do or who you are by the nature of your work. Wear a visible name badge at all times. Don't remain a nameless generic entity. When introducing yourself to patients say something like, "My name is Avish Assam. I am the registered nurse in charge of your care today." This conveys that even if you are not visible and present at all times, you are behind the scenes coordinating the care. Patients want and need to know who the nurses are. If you don't distinguish yourself, you are minimizing your role.

Get Connected

Join and get active in your professional associations. This ensures that you are an involved and informed member of your profession. Membership provides an opportunity to develop a professional network of peers to share information and best practices, to stay cutting edge with knowledge and information, to create a support system, and to be a vehicle for ongoing personal and professional development.



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Keep Moving Forward

Once you have a nursing license, you have an obligation to get into a continuous learning cycle. This encompasses furthering your formal education at some point. It also includes regular attendance at nursing seminars and continuing education programs, pursuing clinical certification when appropriate, and reading

industry journals. Additionally, it is important to expand your knowledge, experience, and skill base by eventually taking on more responsibility, developing professional writing and speaking skills, and looking for new experiences and opportunities at work, through volunteer activities and through your professional associations.

Maintain a Public Persona

Wherever you go and whatever you do, you are always representing the nursing profession as a whole. People will judge the profession based on their encounter with you – whether in the healthcare setting or not. You have an obligation to act responsibly and within the law in all aspects of your life. You are a role model and a health teacher. Stay abreast of national trends and issues related to health and healthcare so that you can answer questions that come up and assist consumers in understanding the bigger picture of healthcare.

Getting out of nursing school and passing NCLEX is only the first step toward being a professional nurse. Understanding and practicing professionalism will foster self-respect, self-satisfaction, and confidence. It will also help to garner more respect, recognition, and opportunities for you and for all nurses. And the more respect, recognition, confidence and opportunities each nurse has, the more we will be able to positively impact the nursing profession, the patients that we serve, the larger healthcare system, and society as a whole. ©



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