

The Growth & Development of Professional Nurses



As individuals enter nursing programs, the process of socialization in the professional role begins. Novice nursing students learn the definition of professionalism, standards of practice and the code of ethics. For many, the concept of professionalism is quite new, including one's appearance, behaviors and communication.

By Kathleen B. LaSala

Nursing Students

Nursing students may not typically worry much about the image they project to their teachers and fellow students, sometimes coming to class late, or wearing jeans, sweatpants, or even pajama bottoms and flip-flops. However, students are quickly indoctrinated to the dress code for clinical practice in the nursing profession. Nursing programs have strict guidelines regarding what students can wear and standards for professional



behavior. Faculty members identify issues that will reflect poorly on the student or program, such as negative behaviors, sloppy appearance or unethical actions. Students are reprimanded for unprofessional behaviors, such as smoking, cursing, rudeness or inattentiveness to patients or staff. In addition, students learn they need to handle stress and conflict in a professional manner early, as they deal with heavy workloads, stressful situations and group projects frequently.

Criminal background screening and drug tests now expose off-campus behaviors as well, including underage possession and drinking, driving under the influence, drug violations, felonies and crimes against other persons. When a student has compromising behavior it will become a problem in a professional program. On the other hand, faculty members will also identify students who present themselves well in the classroom and community environment, seeking them out when looking for leaders, volunteers, mentors and students to recognize through awards or recommendations. Students do not always understand that nursing school is the beginning of their professional role.

Nursing students should not underestimate these early, formative years.

Starting One's Nursing Career

Personal appearance and behavior in an interview setting cannot be overemphasized. Nursing managers expect a potential employee to be professional and well dressed. The candidate should start the process by being on time and well-prepared. Remember the old saying "you never get a second chance to make a first impression." Give yourself plenty of time to do it right. Arrange conservative, professional clothing for an interview even if it means borrowing an outfit. Everything should be in good repair, clean, and matching, even down to the shoes, belts, and socks. Handbags, briefcases or notebooks need to be well organized, with materials easily accessible and electronic devices turned off. Extra copies of one's resume should be available to everyone in the interview process and one should be ready to share experiences and skills, ask and answer questions, and have questions prepared ahead of time based on your research of the institution or setting.

Professional Communication

Quick, brief communication patterns have become the standard format for electronic communication and charting. Society has become comfortable using symbols, abbreviations, and code words. Many of these methods are appropriate when used in the correct context, but few things are less professional than a letter or document that is too informal or contains poor grammar, unknown abbreviations and spelling errors. In addition, electronic methods have increased the expectancy of a quick response rate; however, this can become intrusive and may result in poorly planned communication. Messages can be rapidly reproduced and forwarded to others, resulting in confidentiality violations as recipients are less controlled. One should be aware that written and recorded documents also make first impressions, carrying the same weight as a first physical appearance, especially if the document is the only thing visible.

In delivery of public presentations at conferences, meetings or as representative of the nursing profession to the public, the nurse should be well prepared with handouts, electronic media if needed, and a back-up plan should the media fail. The nurse should practice the presentation ahead of time and plan it appropriately for the time frame allowed, with attention to nonverbal behaviors, such as hand and body movements. It is helpful to participants if a planned time is allowed for a question and answer session at the end. Take the opportunity to network with others at the conference. Conferences and meetings are an excellent place to meet other professionals outside of your day-to-day circle of people and ideas. Nurses should carry business cards and identification materials with them as part of the networking process.



Being and Becoming a Mentor

Along the path from the novice student to the expert nurse, there will be many avenues for growth and development through mentorship. Mentorship is a one-on-one relationship between a younger or newer individual and an older or more experienced individual, based on a trusting, guiding relationship (Sullivan, 2004; Fowler & Fowler, 1985). The relationship is generally between individuals of unequal rank and potential power (Sandler, 1993) with the shared mutual goal of career advancement (Burke, 2005). Generally, a mentor relationship depends on both the individual seeking the direction and advice of another; as well as the other's willingness to provide the support, leadership and professional connections necessary (LaSala & Enzman-Hagedorn, 2005). Mentors can help prepare the nurse for clinical practice, leadership roles, and career promotion and can aid in self-esteem and job satisfaction (Vance, 1989). Most professionals will have several mentors across their professional careers and benefit greatly from the advice received and the guidance available. ☺

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