



# Understanding the Generational Gaps: Preserving your Mental Health at School and Work

By K. Lynn Wieck and Peggy Landrum

No one said nursing was going to be easy, but sometimes students feel like the deck is stacked against them. Feelings of lack of control, frustration, and exhaustion are not uncommon. When you add the need to interact with people of varying generations and the expectations inherent to this

environment, the stress level can begin to look unmanageable. What is the secret to maintaining sanity and producing positive results as a student and graduate nurse? Learn what challenges students face and how to cope as you strive to manage your education and career in an intergenerational world.

## The Stressors of a Nursing Education

Successful navigation of nursing education means that a student must balance physical and mental health in order to meet academic, clinical, and personal challenges. The emerging workforce values flexibility, life options, and balancing work and life issues (Tulgan, 2000). It is reasonable to assume that this dedication to balance will also drive their educational endeavors. What does the evidence show regarding students' abilities to achieve and maintain the mental comfort zone needed to be successful in nursing school?

## Managing Stress

Student nurses have a variety of stressors as they enter and progress through their programs of study. Shipton (2002) described student stress as arising from six contact points. Students perceive stress relating to actions by the clinical faculty, such as being evaluated, waiting for faculty presence, faculty incompetence and moodiness, and enduring direct observation by the clinical faculty. Another stressor is actions by the nursing staff (negative attitudes, actions and comments) and actions by peers (competition versus dependence). Implementing new clinical procedures is also a stressor due to unfamiliarity and lack of confidence. Clinical preparation and encountering new clinical rotations are stressors which were seen as invading personal time and promoting chaos and lack of control (Shipton, 2002). A key to successful completion of nursing school is the ability to manage the stress involved.

## Conflicting Values

Values filter the information we use to judge situations and make decisions and ultimately shape our consciousness (McNeese-Smith, 2003, p. 260). When a student encounters shared values in the education setting or in the workplace, it becomes possible to build some trust, loyalty, and commitment (Laschinger, 2000). McNeese-Smith

and colleagues (2003) compared three generations, the veterans (over age 60), baby boomers (41-60 years), and Generation X (27-40 years), to determine similarities and differences in values. Gen X placed significantly higher value on having variety in their work and the importance of economic returns. For other values, there were no generational differences. However, generational conflicts have been reported in corporate America related to commitment to work and balance in the workplace (Tulgan, 2000).

## Building Resilience

Resilience refers to the ability to bounce back from adversity, to adapt or change in order to survive and thrive. Building on the concepts of reflective thinking and connectedness, students can learn how to work with faculty to ponder the life and work situations they encounter

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in order to make good decisions (Hodges, et al., 2005). Being connected, or sharing ideas and feelings, is another way to promote the mental and emotional life jacket that prevents the student from drowning in a sea of indifference and complexity.

Success in nursing school may depend on the students' ability to manage the stressors encountered along the way. Different generations manage stress in different ways. There are also different values as people age and mature into their professional role. Furthermore, coping mechanisms, such as resilience, are skills that can be learned (Hodges, et al., 2005) and improved with

practice and attention. Acquiring coping skills promotes mental comfort and helps student nurses to thrive in the intergenerational work and academic environment of the 21st century.

## The Intergenerational Workforce

Today's academic and professional workforce is more diverse than at any time in history. For the first time, four generations function together in the work environment. Due to the high average age (53.5 years) of nursing faculty (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2004), nursing students are very likely to encounter members of all four generations in nursing school. What are the characteristics of each generation and what implications does each have to maintaining the mental comfort of nursing students?

**Traditionalists (Veterans) (born between 1922 & 1945).** The grandparents and great-grandparents of those just entering the workplace, this cohort is known as the "Greatest Generation." They built their reputation during World War II where almost every man and many of the women served their country in the war effort. The country was united behind the war, and patriotism was a virtue elevated to almost divine status. They did as they were told, served their country, and came home intent on making a better life for their children. They have strong traditional values that center around religion and family values. They have a strong work ethic and are fiercely loyal to their employer. Most of them stayed with the same company for 30+ years, and they see job-hopping as a sign of disloyalty and lack of commitment. This generation built today's corporate environment, and they believe they are entitled to respect and consideration (Zemke, et al., 2000).

**Interaction Strategies:** Faculty in this generation believe that they have earned respect and consideration because of their age and education status. Successful interactions with this

generation include using formal titles and showing respect. Meetings should be scheduled ahead of time as this generation does not like drop-ins. Being raised during the depression, they value hard work, preparation and organization. It is difficult for this group who has known life-threatening stress to relate to the frustration of having the internet down for an hour, a potent stressor of today's youth. Technology, which eliminates much manual work and streamlines outcomes, has created a dilemma for this age group. They see many of today's technological advances as short-cuts which are undesirable. They may expect a student to write out a drug card by hand when the entire drug book can be contained on a personal data assistant (PDA) device that fits in the hand. Not having grown up with technology and often being intimidated or unfamiliar with the latest gadgets, they may require activities that seem redundant and counter-productive to the tech-savvy young student. Instead of fuming at the idea of having to write a care plan, students might consider talking to the faculty person from an outcomes and evidence-based practice approach. Ask, "What is the outcome that is expected from this activity?" Then offer alternatives to reach those outcomes, such as using the PDA or prepared care plan which can be personalized for each patient.

**Baby Boomers (born between 1945 & 1960).** Baby Boomers grew up in a time of great economic prosperity. They are highly competitive and willing to sacrifice for success. Recognition is very important to them; they feel they have earned respect. They are comfortable with a more personable communication style and a more relaxed work environment. Their lives have been influenced by "causes," and they value the idea of collective action. They took up the cause of civil rights and marched together to get attention and action. They place a high value on personal wealth and instant gratification (Zemke, et al., 2000).

**Interaction Strategies:** Most of today's nursing faculty fall in the Baby Boomer generation. They take pride in their non-traditionalism. For example, the women of this generation were the first to work outside the home in great numbers. Because they value collective action to get results, they are likely to see organizational involvement as important and be surprised when younger generations do not value attending meetings and paying organizational dues. Helping reframe organizational action into outcomes which may be addressed at least partly online may help to get younger people involved.

Stress management when dealing with Baby Boomers may call for a reorientation of priorities. The deep commitment to work tends to be an expectation that Baby Boomers have of younger nurses. Faculty may be surprised and irritated when students do not want to schedule clinicals at times that interfere with social plans or family events. Many Boomers sacrificed for their careers and are affronted when young people are unwilling to make the same sacrifices. Discussing family obligations and work priorities up front may help to keep school responsibilities manageable. Understanding that this generation learned in hands-on classes with a lot of teacher interaction may explain why they want to get physically involved in helping the students learn, such as guiding the student's hand during practice IV insertions. Patience and discussions are good ways to get feelings out in the open and allay potential problems.

### **Twentysomethings (Gen "X") (born between 1960-1980).**

One of the major tasks of the twenty-something generation is seeking balance and perspective in their lives. They have watched their Boomer parents work themselves into heart attacks, divorces, or get laid-off after many years of service. This experience has taught them that loyalty to the job is overvalued (Tulgan, 2000). They value commitment to their profession more than loyalty to an employer which is why they have no intention of staying at a job for

more than a few years (Zemke, et al., 2000). The ideal entry workplace for this generation features alternative work environments, accelerated career mobility and opportunities for high paybacks. They expect a dynamic work and learning environment. Having grown up in a technology-friendly world, the emerging workforce values online courses, just-in-time learning, and emphasis on outcomes over process.

**Interaction Strategies:** The twenty-something generation is interested in themselves (Cordinez, 2002). They enter the workforce with ideas that they expect to share, innovations that they expect to be adopted, and high expectations of acceptance and success. This generation responds well to praise and feedback. Even if the feedback is not all



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endeavor as a way to improve their marketability and to become more competitive for high-paying jobs; therefore, it is an investment. As with any investment, they have expectations of themselves and the institution where they see themselves in a type of “part-owner” role. They do not value the boss role (Tulgan, 2000) which includes faculty, so their eagerness to be part of the learning team is not meant as disrespectful; it is merely a way to reach the outcomes.

Meetings are intolerable, and classes are just another form of meeting to them. If they can reach the outcomes without attending the classes, they feel justified in doing so. If the outcome is a test, which is often the case in academia, then actions will be aimed at passing the test. Clinical competence is stressful since the outcomes are often not as clearly stated and evaluation is not as well defined. They are frustrated with repetition and redundancy which they often find in doing care plans and charting.

**Millennials (Nexters) (born between 1980 & 2000):** Also called Nexters, the Millennials are shel-

tered, group-oriented, pressured and conventional. They are highly collaborative and optimistic although they share the twenty-something emphasis on having balance in their lives. They have always had computers and do not consider the computer to be “technology” - it is an assumed part of life much like a pencil is to their parents. They want a voice in academic decisions, and they have high expectations of themselves and their employers and educators. They want to get on-board and up to speed very quickly. With this generation, high maintenance is the key to high productivity (Tulgan, 2005).

**Interaction Strategies:** The Millennials are more laid back than their twenty-something older brothers and sisters, so their stress levels may be more manageable. They are willing to compromise and seek to get things done through groups. Because the half-life of knowledge is so short in the information technology society, they are more interested in doing than in knowing. Therefore, reading copious chapters about a topic is a total waste of time to them. They are naturals for clinical simulation and clinical experiences. However, because their learning

more closely resembles Nintendo than logic, with a focus on trial and error (Clausing, et al., 2003), they need close supervision in the clinical setting. They are accustomed to spell-check, so they do not waste time learning how to spell correctly. They have zero-tolerance for delays, and because the Internet is available 24/7, they have an expectation of instant attention from faculty and peers (Frاند, 2000).

## Making it Work

Maintaining a healthy mental outlook during nursing school and entry into the workforce is vital to launching a productive and satisfying career. While attention to diet, exercise, and other physical health parameters is common, activities which promote mental health are often overlooked or ignored. Generational conflict is a real and common stressor that nursing students and new graduates will encounter. Open discussions about the differences and similarities between the generations can be a step toward intergenerational harmony. ☺

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**Lynn Wieck, PhD, RN, FAAN**, is the Jacqueline M. Braithwaite Professor at the University of Texas at Tyler, TX. Her work on intergenerational conflict resolution is renowned and well-respected. She is also CEO of Management Solutions for Healthcare.



**Peggy Landrum, PhD, RN**, is an Associate Clinical Professor in the College of Nursing, Texas Woman's University, Houston Center. She is a clinical nurse specialist in psychiatric and mental health nursing and is an advisor to the student nurses' organization.