

# Your First Year as a Nurse

By Teresa John

**Y**ou've done it, you've graduated from nursing school. Finally! Now comes the time when you get to relax and take it easy for a while. After all, you have just spent countless hours studying, preparing for clinicals, and sitting in classes, right? Well, maybe not. If you are not already tired of hearing about the NCLEX-RN®, you will be in the coming weeks. Perhaps you have already spent some time getting that great job you wanted and are just waiting until your first nerve-racking day. Well, take it from me, things will work out. I was in those exact shoes one very short, very exciting year ago. Here is what I learned and I offer it as a survival guide along the road of your first year as a nurse.

## Getting That First Job

Go on several interviews. Try to find a place that “just feels right” and let that motto aid you in deciding on your first job. Don't be afraid to try a specialty. If you are interested in something, find a place with a job opening and apply. Don't be afraid of change. Try your best to embrace it.

## Take Some Time Off

Before you start your new job, take some time for yourself. Whether it is just hanging around with your friends and family or going away on vacation, it will rejuvenate you and prepare you for those long days ahead of studying and working.

## Get To Know Your New Job

Gather all your materials from your interview and read them.





Make sure you have a copy of your job description. You may also want to familiarize yourself with the population you will be working with. Try to make another visit to the site to get to know your way around before you start your new job.

## The First Day

Get there early and introduce yourself to everyone. Find out who your preceptor will be and talk with him or her about your experience and what you feel comfortable doing on your own. You may want to plan to have a formal meeting with your manager or clinical specialist early on to get an explanation of expectations. Try not to be too nervous; just remember that you have worked hard to get where you are. Make sure you enjoy it.

## Orientation

Find out how long your orientation will be, if you will be with the same person throughout, and what will be expected by the end of your orientation period. Do a lot of observing during this time. Each place has its own culture and many times you can gain a lot just by observing. You also want to make sure you learn everyone's name and say hello every day. Have lunch with someone you don't know well.

Make it a point to always be on time and ready to work at the start of your shift.

## New Experiences

During the first few months, you will find many things that your clinical experience in school or as an extern did not predict. You should keep in mind that you are new and that easy feeling of comfort really only comes with time. Don't be too hard on yourself. Learning new things is challenging, but really rewarding. You will face procedures you've never done, medicines you've never given, and illnesses you've never treated. Take it slow, ask questions: there is never a stupid question. Ask and you will be wiser than you were before.

## Time for Yourself

During this stressful time, take care of yourself. Make sure you are getting enough sleep, eating well, and being physically active. Don't forget to have fun at work, but when you leave, try to leave your work at work. Have someone you can vent to outside of work. This can be anyone whom you trust and who will really listen. Don't be afraid to branch out and find things to do outside of nursing.

## You've Got To Have "Patients"

Everyday you will interact with many people who all have one main goal: to do the best for the patient. This should always be in the back of your mind whenever you interact with anyone, whether it be the head attending or the person who cleans the floors. You are the patients' advocate and the person who sees them through tough times. Prioritize your patients' needs, and remember that you can't be everything to everyone. Nursing is a 24-hour-a-day job, and you do not have to do everything on one shift.

## Coworkers, Colleagues, and Physicians

Health care is not one-dimensional; it is a multisystem interdisciplinary approach. You will work with many people including nursing assistants, housekeepers, dieticians, food servers, social workers, occupational therapists, physical therapists, as well as a variety of physicians, including, depending on your institution, residents, interns, medical students, attendings, fellows, and specialists. And that is not even the complete list. Needless to say, personalities sometimes conflict. If you have respect for people, they will in turn have respect for you. Each member of the team plays a unique role in the life of the patient. Find out about your colleagues' jobs, know what they can and cannot do, and learn their names. Say hello every day. This will help you get comfortable with talking to them. Be assertive, not intimidated, and ask for help when you need it. Don't forget to help others and show your willingness to help out.

## Managers and Preceptors

When you work in health care, you will have a nurse manager or charge nurse to report to on a daily basis. You will also want to get a copy of the institution's organizational chart – this will help you know to whom you will be reporting and who you can go to for help. It is important that you get to know your supervisors, but remember that they are

there to keep the unit functioning. Make sure that you do your work, do not waste time, and use your resources wisely. Your preceptor will be someone who may or may not have chosen to have you with them. Be respectful of them and make sure that you clearly communicate your needs, and ask them to do the same so there is no confusion when it comes time for you to be on your own.

## Procedures and Policies

When you start a new job, you need to learn the policies behind the procedures you will perform on a daily basis. Learn where things are kept and who you can go to with questions. Try to find out things on your own first, but if you have questions, ask. Review policies and procedures as you come to them in your practice and soon they will become your own. Trust your instincts, but if you don't feel comfortable with something, ask for help from your preceptor or someone with more experience.

## Lifelong Learning

You will learn something new every day at work. Use your resources wisely. Observe experienced colleagues, use the internet, read your nursing books to learn about illnesses that are unfamiliar, use drug reference guides to look up medications you don't know, and ask a lot of questions. Sign up for continuing education classes. Learn all that you can.

## Extracurricular Activities

Joining professional organizations is wise: professionals need a place to network and share ideas. Becoming a member of a state nurses' association and specialty organization will advance your career and remind you that the world of nursing is bigger than your unit at your hospital. These associations help to lend support and offer many conferences and educational opportunities. Some even offer discounts to new graduates.

## Stay Positive and Motivated

Be positive every day. Turn any negative things that happen into positives. Make positive choices and let positive words inspire you to do great things. You have come far; remember this when things get frustrating. Keep a journal and record your good experiences with patients and highlight how you felt. Look at it when you are feeling down; not only is it a great pick-me-up, but it will help when you look into promotion. Avoid negative people as they will only drain you of your new positive energy and surround yourself with motivating, happy people. As more time passes, not only will your attitude at work and home be better, but you will soon be able to teach new graduates the ropes.

Always keep in mind that you worked hard to get where you are today. Sure, not everything is going to be perfect, but with a little perseverance and determination, you can be a great nurse. It just takes a little practice, a lot of patience, and a positive attitude.

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- Make positive choices and let positive words inspire you to do great things.
- Prioritize your patients' needs...Nursing is a 24-hour-a-day job, and you don't have to do everything on one shift.

### recommended reading

Cardillo, D. W. *Your First Year as a Nurse: Making the transition from total novice to successful professional.* Prima Publishing, 2001.

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