Workplace Incivility

Workplace incivility in the healthcare environment is defined as low-intensity negative interactions, either verbal or non-verbal, that violate norms of mutual respect. Incivility, also called nurse bullying or horizontal bullying, can disrupt patient care, damage professional relationships, and harm overall organizational culture. Nurses, physicians, students, patients, and their families are all stakeholders in fostering a respectful and collaborative atmosphere.

Definition

The ANA Position Statement (2015) on incivility states that nurses must make "a commitment to – and accept responsibility for – establishing and promoting healthy interpersonal relationships with one another." The 2015 position statement and 2023 Magnet Application Manual include the following definitions (Meyers, Evans & Erickson, 2021):

- Bullying: harmful acts intended to humiliate, undermine, offend, and cause stress to the recipient.
- Horizontal violence: physically and psychologically damaging actions that happen in the workplace.
- Incivility: rude and discourteous actions that violate professional standards of practice.

Incivility can occur between co-workers, staff and patients, staff and patient's families, as well as students and faculty. Forms of workplace incivility include (Harris-Haman, 2023; Kisner, 2018):
- **Verbal abuse**: publicly criticizing a coworker, dismissing ideas or comments, using a condescending tone, gossiping, shouting, swearing, name-calling, or making threats
- **Nonverbal abuse:** eye-rolling, staring, making faces, excluding another from conversation
- **Passive-aggressive behavior**: refusing to communicate, refusing to perform assigned tasks, sabotaging a coworker
- **Bullying**: repeated negative actions by one person towards another and can include any of the above as well as social manipulation, insulting comments, aggressive behaviors, withholding information, failure to respect privacy, accusing a coworker of someone else's error, assigning unfavorable work, or expressing untrue critique.

Key Clinical Considerations and Outcomes (Meyers, Evans & Erickson, 2021)

Any form of workplace incivility is unacceptable and has many adverse effects including:
- Jeopardized patient safety
- Negative impact on patient care
- Diminished teamwork, communication, and department-level shared decision-making
- Medication and/or medical errors
- Upsurge in sentinel events
- Increased patient mortality
- Reduced quality patient care
- Higher cost of care
- Decreased patient satisfaction
- Lower morale and productivity

- Absence from work
- Reduced nursing engagement and greater staff turnover
- Adverse effect on organization's reputation
- Destruction to the nurse/patient relationship

In addition, workplace incivility has been linked to higher rates of chronic illness, weight gain, social isolation, and substance abuse among healthcare providers.

Risk Factors

Factors that can contribute to incivility include:
- Hierarchical Structures: Power imbalances may foster incivility, especially if senior staff misuse their authority.
- Inadequate Communication: Lack of clear communication channels can lead to misunderstandings and frustration.
- Lack of educational training and accountability
- High stress environments or excessive workloads
- Cultural Norms: Some workplaces tolerate or even normalize incivility as part of their culture.
- Lack of teamwork
- Staff Shortages: Understaffing increases workload and decreases tolerance for errors or delays.
- Ineffective patient hand-offs
- Time constraints/deadlines

Steps to Address Incivility

1. **For Individuals:**
   - **Model Respect:** Always treat others with dignity and respect, even in stressful situations.
   - **Practice Active Listening:** Give full attention to the speaker and acknowledge their concerns.
   - **Address Issues Promptly:** Speak directly to the person involved in a calm, professional manner.
2. **For Leaders and Institutions:**
   - **Establish Clear Policies:** The Human Resources department must create and enforce policies that define and prohibit incivility.
   - **Provide Training:** Offer training on communication, conflict resolution, and stress management.
   - **Promote a Culture of Respect:** Recognize and reward positive behavior while addressing incivility promptly.
   - **Support Reporting Mechanisms:** Ensure staff can report issues anonymously without fear of retaliation.
   - **Develop a zero-tolerance policy.** Established penalties for each infraction (e.g., verbal warning for first offense, written warning for second offense, leave without pay for third offense, and finally termination).
3. **For Teams:**

- o **Foster Collaboration:** Encourage teamwork and shared problem-solving.
- o **Hold Regular Meetings:** Use meetings to address concerns and promote open dialogue.
- o **Celebrate Achievements:** Acknowledge and celebrate team successes to boost morale.
4. **For Nursing Education:**
   - o **Mentorship Programs:** Pair students with experienced nurses who model professionalism.
   - o **Feedback Systems:** Provide constructive feedback and encourage students to voice concerns.
   - o **Educate on Professionalism:** Incorporate training on professional behavior into nursing curricula.

Other suggestions include:
- Refer to the American Organization for Nursing Leadership (AONL) and Emergency Nurses Association (ENA)'s *Guiding Principles on Mitigating Violence in the Workplace* (2014), created to assist leaders in developing measures to diminish violence against healthcare professionals.
- Commit to the Joint Commission Sentinel Event Alert (2021) on *Behaviors that undermine a culture of safety,* which states, "Safety and quality of patient care is dependent on teamwork, communication, and a collaborative work environment. To assure quality and to promote a culture of safety, health care organizations must address the problem of behaviors that threaten the performance of the health care team."
- Develop educational programs for all members of the organization and discuss ways to advance communication skills and enhance team building. Key elements include building trust, clarifying roles, engaging staff in decision-making, and modeling positive interactions (Kisner, 2018).
- Utilize simulation or role-play exercises to identify ways incivility can damage patient care and ways in which the matter can be resolved.
- Develop a committee to battle this epidemic and help create solutions for the organization at large.

Education

By fostering a culture of respect and collaboration, healthcare organizations can create a safe and positive environment for staff, patients, and families. All team members within an organization should receive education on professional behaviors that align with its code of conduct. A zero-tolerance policy for workplace incivility should include appropriate penalties for each infraction. Building positive relationships and addressing incivility promptly ensures not only better workplace morale but also improved patient care and organizational success.

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