Healthcare professionals give tremendous amounts of themselves—both physically and emotionally—to their work. Every day (and into the night) healthcare workers have the privilege—but also bear the burden—of being with individuals at their most vulnerable. They bear witness to tragedy and heartbreak, crisis and dysfunction. They work with patients, families and colleagues through immense stress, fear, sadness, guilt and pressure.

The physical and emotional toll of this work is significant. The effects can be long lasting and pervasive, affecting not only the healthcare professional, but patients and families in their care, and the organization for whom they work.

Acknowledging and being responsive to the experience of staff is fundamental to person-centeredness. Below are three initiatives implemented by Planetree Certified organizations to address the realities of being a healthcare worker today and to create a culture of caring for staff.

3 Initiatives to Create a Culture of Caring for Staff:

1. Code Lavender
2. Tap Out Initiative
3. Critical Incident Peer Support
What Is It?

Code Lavender is a rapid response-style support intervention for staff. A Code Lavender alert can be activated by staff, leaders or others during times of extreme stress or immediately following a traumatic event to provide in-the-moment relief from emotional distress. When a Code Lavender is called, a team of specialists is deployed to meet staff where they are at and provide in-the-moment emotional support and resources to ease their suffering. The Code Lavender team is akin to emotional first responders. They do not take the place of employee assistance, counseling or peer support that provides longer-term assistance for those who may benefit.

At Bayhealth Medical Center, volunteers respond to a Code Lavender by setting up a “Zen Den” on the unit in need. The portable Zen Den remains on the unit for 24 hours (or as long as needed), and features a sound machine, adult coloring books, candles, a portable waterfall, a massage chair, soothing music and lights, aromatherapy, and “chocolate therapy.”

Why Do It?

If staff are feeling mentally overwhelmed or emotionally drained, patient care can suffer. These feelings can contribute to burnout, which ultimately compromises both quality of care and quality of life for the healthcare professionals who are suffering. Code Lavenders are a tangible way an organization can express its dedication to its staff’s mental and emotional well-being.

How Does It Work?

Code Lavender team members may include chaplains, integrative therapists and others who work together to care holistically for staff. Interventions may include comforting music and treats, massage, aromatherapy, breathing exercises, affirming reading material, aromatherapy, and calming distractions such as journaling or adult coloring books. Asking staff to weigh in on what supports would be most meaningful to them will go a long way toward creating a Code Lavender that meets their needs. Key to the success is supporting staff to avail themselves of the offerings. This can be achieved by having supervisors schedule staff in to take turns covering for each other as each person takes a needed break.
What Is It?

Tap Out is a nurse-designed initiative introduced at Enloe Medical Center in Chico, California that enables staff who may be struggling to develop or maintain a relationship with a patient or family member to switch the assignment (i.e. “tap out”) to another colleague who may be better suited to meet that specific patient’s needs.

Why Do It?

The tap out initiative supports staff’s well-being by providing staff a greater sense of control and the freedom to declare when they have reached a breaking point while ensuring patient care is not compromised.

How Does It Work?

A tap out initiative will only create the desired impact when implemented within a culture where staff trusts that they can express some vulnerability without it being used against them. Furthermore, since the tap out initiative is essentially self-directed by the team on the unit/in the department, it requires sufficient autonomy and empowerment to switch assignments in the moment based on either an individual’s recognition that they need to remove themselves from an encounter for their personal well-being or a co-worker’s observation that a colleague may be struggling interpersonally with a patient.

To maintain the integrity of the initiative, ensure that debriefs occur when tap outs are instituted to better understand the circumstances and verify the approach is being used appropriately.

“We want staff to be successful and want our patients to be cared for well. We want to let people know that they can be human. The Tap Out initiative lets people know it’s okay to be human and we’re here to support you. If we need to switch we can.”

Source: Enloe Medical Center (Chico, California)
Critical Incident Peer Support

Source: Stamford Hospital (Stamford, Connecticut)

What Is It?
Structured group debriefing sessions to help staff vent their thoughts and feelings, provide support to each other and learn how to manage their stress following a traumatic incident or sentinel event. The sessions are run by facilitators trained in Critical Incident Stress Management who guide participants through a methodical approach that includes deep listening, identification of thoughts, feelings and psychological responses to the trauma event, and information to help prepare for anticipated stress symptoms.

Why Do It?
Stress reactions following a traumatic incident are often experienced in isolation, and can lead to physical and mental symptoms that adversely impact one's well-being. The Peer Support Program implemented at Stamford Hospital provides space for colleagues to come together and share their experiences, feelings and reactions. The initiative helps to create a culture of caring by providing staff with a safe, secure, and healthy outlet to talk about a shared experience and to foster a culture of mutual respect, compassion, and support. This, in turn, promotes staff teamwork and improved communication, which has a direct benefit to both the staff and patient experience.

How Does It Work?
Debriefings facilitated by team members trained in the process usually last from one to two hours and generally occur within 24 to 72 hours of the critical incident. It is important to understand that the purpose of the sessions is to defuse, decompress and stabilize. It is not a time to critique the incident or individual performance.

All staff should be made aware of how to request a Peer Support debriefing, and a schedule should be developed to ensure that a Peer Support Team member is on-call and available 24-hours a day to field the requests. The role of the on-call team member is to triage the request and coordinate the team response, including communication of the plan to the affected staff.

It is recommended that the Peer Support Team be interdisciplinary, and may include pastoral care chaplains, nurses, physicians, social work and human resources personnel who receive training to facilitate the debriefs.
Looking for more support to create or strengthen an organizational culture of person-centered care? Planetree is here to help. Check out practical tools and resources available at resources.planetree.org.

Planetree also offers a range of on-site coaching and training opportunities. Our Experience Advisers will partner with you to develop and implement a customized implementation plan. For more information, go to planetree.org or call 203-732-1365.