



# **Burnout Syndrome among Nurses in Intensive Care Unit: An Essential Approach**

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## **Authors' contributions**

*This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.*

## **Article Information**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Intensive care units are specialized units of healthcare facilities where healthcare professionals, especially nurses, provide 24-hour advanced life support and care. The stressful working environments including emergency care, high mortality & morbidity, ethical dilemmas, and pain care predispose them to the high risk of physical and emotional exhaustion that can lead to burnout syndrome. Critical care nurses working under high-pressure settings are irreplaceable, and their retention in critical care space has become a healthcare challenge recognized globally, so there is an immense need to overcome burnout syndrome among critical care nurses. This article discusses the dimensions of burnout syndrome, factors for which nurses are at risk for burnout syndrome, and various interventions done at different levels to overcome burnout syndrome.

*Keywords: Nurses; Intensive Care Unit [ICU]; burnout syndrome.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

An intensive care unit is a specialized department of health care facility providing care to seriously ill patients with life-threatening illnesses requiring 24-hour advanced life support. Health professionals working in intensive care units, including highly trained nurses and doctors, need to be highly dedicated and invested to deliver safe, empathetic, and effective patient care. ICUs are considered highly stressful environments for healthcare workers. Besides the physical toll, they are also under tremendous psychological pressure to deal with critically ill patients, including discussing the risk of death with patient relatives, announcing a death in an unexpected situation and always being ready for an emergency [1].

## 2. FACTS AND STATISTICS

Since December 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic in the Chinese city of Wuhan caused by SARS-CoV2 spreading internationally, with a series of waves, has caused devastation in countries leading to outrageous consequences, causing overloaded ICUs that overwhelmed the hospital capacity [2]. During this time, the shortage of resources such as ICU beds, ventilators, and Personal Protective Equipment [PPE] apart from the disruption of healthcare delivery causes an increase in psychological burden among healthcare workers [3]. This situation further burdened health care workers with the need for highly effective patient care, fear of personal safety, and extended work timings which if persisted for a longer duration can lead to distress and burnout causing deterioration in quality of life, increased absenteeism, and psychological problems ultimately compromising patient care.

According to WHO 2022 report, nurses account for about 50 percent of the global health workforce so, therefore more than 50 percent of the nurses contribute to the current shortage of health workers [4] due to which critical care nurses are at high risk for burnout syndrome as they often confronted by traumatic events leading to severe depression, exhaustion, and chronic physical complaints.

## 3. STRESS AND BURNOUT SYNDROME

In 1974, Freudenberger describes burnout as a mental state when an employee is not able to manage excessive working demands at the

workplace. This state is most likely to occur in employees who are more 'dedicated and committed' to their work but ultimately failure and inability to fulfill working demands cause insomnia, fatigue, frequent headaches characterized by frustration, anger, drug abuse, and signs of depression. Consequently, affecting an employee at both physical and emotional level which further impact the organization [5,6]. Due to the nature of work at ICUs requiring emergency care, physical strength, significant emotional work, and personal involvement, nurses are more vulnerable to burnout syndrome. This has a poor impact on the individual itself but also affects the delivery of care to the patients. Burnout syndrome among nurses contributes to increased absenteeism, staff turnover, social isolation, and physical and emotional stress, ultimately affecting patient care.

## 4. RISK FACTORS

According to WHO, Burnout is an occupational phenomenon [7] conceptualized as a syndrome resulting from prolonged job stress which is not successfully managed caused by physical and emotional stress which further has negative effects on the quality of patient care. There are risk factors for burnout syndrome among ICU professionals that need to be identified to reduce the prevalence and incidence of burnout syndrome among them. A systematic review [8] suggested age, sex, marital status, educational status, working environment, connection with colleagues, and working experience in ICU have identified risk factors for burnout syndrome in an ICU. Other risk factors include long working hours, job dissatisfaction, the role of leadership in an emergency, and moral injury. Also, time pressure, excessive shift works, lack of support from colleagues and higher authority, and lack of control over work tasks are important risk factors for health professionals, especially nurses' burnout syndrome [9].

These risk factors can be identified at an early stage by measuring the burnout syndrome with a questionnaire developed by the social psychologist Maslach, based on three dimensions that are Exhaustion, Cynicism or Depersonalization, and Inefficacy or lack of personal accomplishment [10] also known as Maslach Burnout Inventory widely used today. Relating these dimensions to nurses, exhaustion is when a nurse is exhausted either physically or emotionally and he/she felt completely drained

due to high work demand. Depersonalization is the feeling of detachment from self and others, this is usually triggered by emotional stressors at the workplace and Personal Accomplishment is when nurses have a feeling of being incompetent, not able to work professionally, and negative self-perception. [11]. After measuring these domains of Maslach burnout inventory, one can examine burnout syndrome among ICUs healthcare professionals especially nurses considered to be more at high risk, so that early interventions can be done.

## 5. WHAT CAN BE THE INTERVENTIONS TO COPE-UP WITH BURNOUT SYNDROME IN INTENSIVE CARE UNITS?

Burnout syndrome must be addressed at three levels, as depicted in Fig. 1.

### 5.1 Individual Level

At the Individual Level, Nurses have to find out the problem they are going through and further, it needs to be solved.

- Young nurses' must develop emotional resilience which can increase their growth potential at a young age and single or without children nurses are found to be at major risk for burnout syndrome.
- Maintaining health status by meeting daily basic needs of nutrition and rest for the body.
- Maintaining effective body and mind relationships.
- Taking a break from a continuous working schedule, and spending time with family and friends.
- Exploring new hobby, places, or things that relieve stress and brings joy in life.
- While working in an ICU, the mind needs to be continuously in an active stage, single minute is important as it takes less than a minute before a stable patient became unstable and sick. Also, the alarming sounds of ventilators, syringe pumps, infusion pumps, etc. require constant attention. Both physical and emotional strength is equally dissipated during working hours in an ICU. Therefore, deep breathing exercises, meditation, and adequate sleep should be adopted in daily routines to support self-care.
- Being assertive, so that he/she can confidently deal with any situation and

openly express their feelings with retaining the right to say 'NO' without violating any rules can help reduce burnout.

- Be assured that all patient care and needed documentation is been accomplished during duty hours to prevent stress and feelings of low personal accomplishment.
- Keeping oneself updated with the latest technology and information through authentic resources and enhancing skills by attending workshops and conferences helps in effective decision-making.
- Developing 'Problem- focused' coping skills to cope-up with stressful working environments and accepting the difficulties of the job. Therefore, showing a more positive coping response. [12].
- Respecting your profession and considering the periods of high patient care demand as an inevitable component of it.

### 5.2 Intra and Inter-Professional Collaboration

It is well known that intra and inter-professional collaboration is very much needed in all work areas but it plays an important role in healthcare settings especially ICUs as teamwork is highly needed here as an emergency response or keen observation for better patient health outcome.

Communicating with colleagues or intra-professional collaboration is both physically and emotionally supportive of each other and is also directly associated with lower burnout syndrome. [13]. The prevalence of burnout syndrome is highly influenced by the work environment, improvement in worker's self-esteem, colleague support and job satisfaction can be protective factors [14]. It helps to ease the burden of care and exchange of information and skill enhancement.

Whereas effective inter-professional collaboration supports team-based patient care involving the active participation of each discipline, resulting in the best quality of care for patients. Also, clinical communication, that is, between doctors and nurses can help to prevent medical errors, and decrease mortality rates [15] by ensuring nurses have all the needed information to treat patients safely.

We need to know that every health professional plays a vital role in the health care team as every

profession has its own philosophy and different knowledge base. [16]. A sense of togetherness boosts staff morale, improving staff relationships. Hence, resulting in better patient outcomes, more health benefits to all healthcare providers, and, most importantly, job satisfaction.

### 5.3 Systemic Level

System solutions are essential at the systemic level besides individual, intra, and inter-professional collaboration. Nursing is the most stressful and exhausting profession, causing physical and emotional exhaustion. [17]. An organization must be education focus for its health care professionals. Organizing induction training programs and skill development programs for newly joined nurses will boost their confidence and enhance their decision-making power, which is highly required as ICU nurses either while giving care to the patients or in an ethical dilemma. Also, in this new era of technology, online programs can be conducted to enhance nurses' knowledge and attitude towards their profession may significantly improve their mental health and symptoms of depression [18].

Being an ICU nurse, one can understand the common situations of emergency care which are, performing cardiopulmonary resuscitation, assisting in endotracheal intubation, inserting a

central venous catheter, arterial lines, and difficult patient care, of which there are positive outcomes or 'survivors', [19] which are celebrated or appreciated rarely by workplace or organizational leaders, eventually decreasing morale and self-esteem. Further, this specialized care in ICUs may be perceived as a burden by healthcare professionals resulting in burnout syndrome.

An organization must ensure the availability of ample resources in emergency patient care to reduce stress at work and prevent ethical dilemmas. Providing better remuneration for the work done will satisfy nurses to do their best and boost their confidence to face daily new challenges in an intensive care unit. Being a higher authority in a hospital assures equal distribution of work to the nurses working at the same pay level and position irrespective of caste, gender, financial status, and power will enhance teamwork, reducing psychological and physical exhaustion resulting in exclusive patient care and health outcome.

Organizational support and hospital management had a protective effect on burnout syndrome [5]. There is a need to prevent and address burnout for which inter-professional leaders and organizational administration should discuss various approaches to rule out these challenging situations of healthcare professionals.

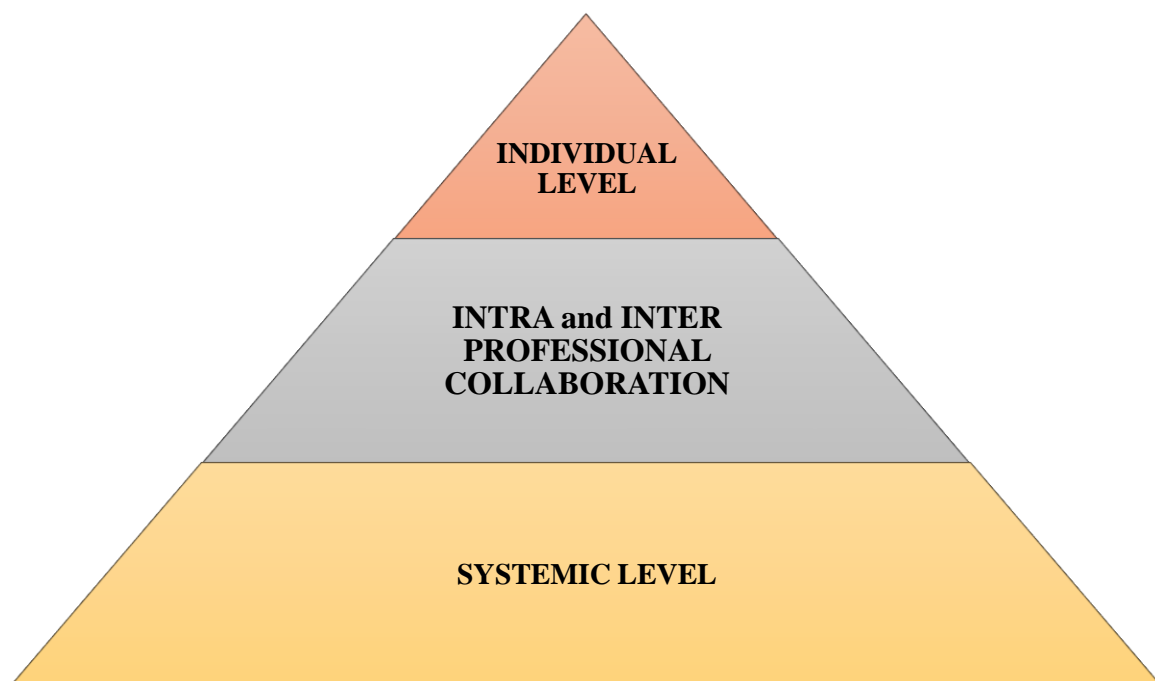


Fig. 1. Shows three intervention levels of burnout syndrome

## 6. CONCLUSION

Knowing the dimensions of burnout syndrome and how nurses are at risk for burnout syndrome, there is a need to implement the interventions at individual, intra & inter-professional, and systemic levels focusing on recognizing and reducing physical and psychological symptoms. Otherwise, there may be a risk of losing a significant potential workforce, and thus, the most invaluable part of critical care, that is, caring, needs to be honored and respected. Nursing is an individual awe-inspiring profession that needs to formulate measures to have a healthy workforce to provide quality patient care, decrease medical errors, enhance performance levels, and finally job satisfaction.

## CONSENT

It's not applicable.

## ETHICAL APPROVAL

It's not applicable.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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