

Excerpt from **The Mindful Nurse: Using the Power of Mindfulness and Compassion to Help You Thrive in Your Work**

All nurses are familiar with *doing* mode. Your training emphasizes it, and in a profession that is task-driven, being busy is valued. Yet, when you are constantly in *doing* mode, your monkey mind leaps from one thought to the next, you forget about the moment you're in, and after a while, your feelings control you. Unable to switch out of *doing* mode, and hijacked by whatever thought or emotion pops up, you end up merely going through the motions.

Operating this way makes you lose touch with what is going on right there in the moment. For example, if your mind is on other things when you drink your coffee, you don't really taste it. If you spend your break reviewing lab results, you've not enjoyed your moment in the present to re-group and re-charge.

What details are you missing when you are always *doing*? How about the smiles and hellos from visitors and colleagues, the beautiful flower arrangement at the nurses' station, the great sunrise out the window, or the opportunity to say "thanks" to the person who opens the door?

If you're stuck in *doing* mode when you meet your first patient, you miss the opportunity to make a real connection. The present sails past and never comes back. That moment is lost forever.

Autopilot

In your eagerness to get things done, you can become so absorbed in your thoughts that you don't notice what is going on inside or around you. Have you ever missed your stop on the bus because you were daydreaming? Or put your keys in the fridge while talking on the phone? Have you ever entered the medication room and stared at the shelves, unable to remember what you went in there for or what you needed? Or maybe you started up your computer to check a lab value but couldn't remember what value you were looking for or why.

Rather than focusing on the task at hand, you are on "autopilot," absentmindedly going through the motions. If you're "autopiloting" a lot, sooner or later, you will trip up and make mistakes.



On autopilot, you focus on the result rather than giving full attention to the task at hand. That said, autopilot is not always a bad thing. In fact, it's important. The brain's ability to switch into this mode allows you to complete complex tasks like driving or using a computer without thinking about all the detailed actions involved. Thus, being on autopilot allows you to avoid expending unnecessary energy on routine things. However, sometimes you forget to come out of autopilot and fixate instead on the next urgent task on your to-do list. Research has shown that the average person spends 47% of the time on autopilot. If you're trapped on constant autopilot, you will likely feel exhausted and dissatisfied with life. Remember to take an occasional break from *doing* to help you connect with yourself and others and recharge your batteries.

Mindful presence

In the course of your workday, you may be on autopilot while you're with your patient, preoccupied by your never-ending workload and urgent to-do lists. Although your time together may be limited, how can you spend the precious time you do have together in a heartfelt way where your patient feels your caring presence?

Consider this:

Imagine that you're in conversation with a patient. You're completely present during the interaction. The patient feels a genuine connection with you. Because you have been mindful during the conversation, the person feels you are really listening. They trust what you say. They feel comfortable, content, and at ease in your presence. Can you sense how mindful presence can enrich your work as a nurse?

Try this:

Mindful presence

- Before you enter a patient's room, scan your body for sensations.
- Perhaps your jaw is clenched or your shoulders are tense.
- Notice any sense of feeling rushed or anxious, and acknowledge these feelings without trying to get rid of them.
- Take some mindful breaths, letting your tension and busyness dissolve on the exhale.
- As you get ready to meet your patient, set the intention to be fully present.
- Knock on the door and establish eye contact as you enter the patient's room.
- Introduce yourself warmly and make a connection.
- Chat together for a moment or two before moving on to the assessment or placing your fingers on the computer keyboard.
- Whenever you notice your attention has wandered, gently bring it back to your patient and the task at hand.
- Set the intention to give your patient your full attention during each interaction. Unhook from the busyness of your day, come off autopilot, and take a moment to become grounded.
- Mindful presence doesn't take more time. Instead, it adds value - it makes every moment count.