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Using Reflective Journaling to Improve the Orientation of Graduate Nurses

abstract

Reflective journaling is valuable in improving critical thinking and problem solving in nursing students. Incorporating reflective journaling into the orientation process with new nursing graduates may decrease anxiety during this challenging transition while continuing to improve critical thinking. Engaging graduate nurses in reflective journaling during the orientation process may result in more satisfied, competent nurses overall.

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Reflective journaling is a successful tool used in the educational setting to deepen critical thinking and assist nursing students in solving clinical problems and learning from their experiences (Ireland, 2008). Reflection encourages students to examine the implications, meaning, and actions of their experiences, leading them to become more competent. In the reflection process, students seek knowledge, identify their strengths and weaknesses, and facilitate communication with faculty (Langley &

Brown, 2010; Salera-Vieira, 2009; Taylor-Haslip, 2010).

BENEFITS IN THE WORKPLACE

The use of reflective journaling is commonplace in nursing education in the 21st century; therefore, most graduate nurses are exposed to this practice as part of their prelicensure education program (Coward, 2011). The transition from nursing student to practicing graduate nurse is a confusing, frustrating, and overwhelming progression (Salera-Vieira, 2009). Reflective journaling eases the pain of this process while improving decision making of graduate nurses (Sealy, 2012; Walker, Cooke, Henderson, & Creedy, 2013).

IMPLEMENTATION

Depending on the individual institution, different staff members are responsible for new staff orientation and staff development. The staff member responsible for development and education of new staff is the appropriate individual to implement the reflective journaling practice with new nursing employees. Initially, the staff member instructs the graduate nurse to select a memorable and significant practice experience on which to journal. Some

examples of journal entry topics include:

- Impostorship.
- Insecurities with technology and electronic health records.
- Lack of confidence regarding skills or therapeutic communication.
- Intimidation in working with seasoned staff or physicians.

The graduate nurse completes the reflective journaling assignment weekly and submits the journal to the staff member for review each week. The staff member provides constructive feedback in the form of cue questions to initiate further reflection. Providing regular feedback to nurses promotes improved decision making and interpretations in their nursing care (Evans, Malhotra, & Headley, 2013). Examples of thought-provoking cue questions include (Kennison, 2012):

- What do you feel is the physiological or emotional explanation for your patient's behavior?
- What feelings arose for you in this situation?
- How did this experience change you?
- What did you learn from this situation?
- What personal beliefs affected your decisions or actions?
- What would you do differently in a similar situation?

After the staff member provides feedback to the graduate nurse, they meet to discuss the reflective journaling and further explore the graduate

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nurse's feelings. The graduate nurse should be given at least 1 week after receiving feedback to allow time to explore and incorporate new actions and thinking into practice (Forneris & Peden-McAlpine, 2006).

Graduate nurses who participate in weekly reflective journaling that includes scheduled discussions with a designated staff member for the first 3 to 6 months of employment demonstrate improved decision making (Forneris & Peden-McAlpine, 2006; Walker et al., 2013). The combination of reflective journaling and scheduled discussions between the graduate nurse and staff member prompt the graduate nurse to discuss insecurities concerning clinical practice, reflect on clinical learning issues, and explore new ideas in a safe, cooperative environment, thus leading the graduate nurse to make better critical decisions in clinical practice (Forneris & Peden-McAlpine, 2006; Walker et al., 2013).

Discussions should include the staff member validating feelings and providing support to the graduate nurse. The staff member may relate feelings he or she had as a new nurse and reassure the graduate nurse that these feelings are normal for new nurses. The staff member also could

coordinate additional training and shadowing experiences for the graduate nurse to improve the identified areas of concern. Frequency of these discussions may range from weekly to bimonthly depending on the institution's orientation structure.

SUMMARY

The transition from nursing student to practicing graduate nurse is difficult. The use of reflective journaling allows for a deeper understanding of oneself in addition to improving critical thinking (Ireland, 2008). Nurses use critical thinking to make clinical decisions that affect patient outcomes every day, and incorporating reflective journaling into this transitional process not only decreases stress for graduate nurses but also improves overall competence as well as retention in the workplace (Benner, Sutphen, Leonard, & Day, 2010; Salera-Vieira, 2009).

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