

# Creating and Sustaining Peace Within for the Journey of Nursing Leadership

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Peace within self or an inner calmness may be created and sustained by caring for self at a deep level, committing to an inner journey, and by dedication to maintaining a practice of self-care. Suggestions for creating and sustaining peace within self, using the model “Listen, Envision and Take Action” (LET or allow), are explored as a guide to support and maintain an inner journey. The authors describe how a peaceful presence may guide the journey of nursing leadership. Along the path of self-care focused on the inner journey, the nursing leader may experience enhanced health, self-knowledge, resilience, and a transformation of relationships personally and professionally. As nursing leaders’ role model care for self in the workplace, the organization may experience an increase in nurse satisfaction. **Key words:** *healthful work place, inner journey, inner peace, nursing leaders, self-care, self-knowledge*

*Our capacity to make peace with another person and the world depends very much on our capacity to make peace with ourselves.*

Thich Nhat Hanh

**N**URSING LEADERS are responsible for directing the staff, leading change initiatives, and ensuring patient well-being and safety in an increasingly complex setting. One of the organizational goals of the American Organization of Nurse Executives for 2012-2014 is that nurse leaders will “serve as initiators and primary influencers in creating positive, safe, healthful practice/work environments.”<sup>1</sup> The Human Caring Theory defines a healing environment through the *caritas* processes

as “creating a healing environment at all levels (physical as well as nonphysical), subtle environment of energy and consciousness, whereby wholeness, beauty, comfort, dignity, and peace are potentiated.”<sup>2</sup> One attribute of a healthful work environment that would bring balance to the work day includes quiet time for the nursing leader to reflect, thus promoting peace.<sup>3</sup> As the nursing leader finds peace within self, she or he may be able to bring a presence of peace out to others.<sup>2</sup>

The first component of The Nursing Leadership Institute Competency Model includes “personal mastery” or self-understanding.<sup>4</sup> On the basis of this model, one way to understand and develop self is to provide time for reflection and care of self-activities, both personally and professionally. Focusing on an inner journey of self-knowledge may assist to support a peaceful presence conducive to promoting and sustaining a healthy work environment. Knowing self allows the nurse leader to develop the skills needed for today’s health care environment beginning with self-understanding.<sup>3,4</sup> Creating and sustaining

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peace within by using the model “Listen, Envision and Take Action” (LET) are explored as a guide to promote and maintain care of self through a personal, inner journey that may be beneficial and supported in the work environment. The model was created by the first author of this article on the basis of her doctoral research<sup>3,5</sup> and was adapted from a cyclical action research model, “Look, Reflect and Act.”<sup>6</sup>

### LISTEN, ENVISION, AND TAKE ACTION

A peaceful presence or inner calmness may be created and sustained by caring for self at a deep level, committing to an inner journey, and by dedication to maintaining a practice of self-care. Self-understanding as a part of the inner journey begins by listening to self. Listening may be accomplished by taking time for reflection in a way that is meaningful, both in a personal manner and in the work setting. As the nursing leader takes time for reflection, she or he is able to listen to self, envisioning what is needed to care for self at a deep level and take action to commit to the inner journey.<sup>2,3,5</sup>

#### Listen

Listening to self, the first step in the LET model, begins by taking quiet time and reflecting through self-assessment. Reflection may be enhanced by the practice of meditation, mindfulness, and breathing techniques.<sup>7</sup> In the LET model, “listening” is essential to undertake before envisioning and action. Initially, granting permission to take the time to focus on one’s self for even 5 minutes a day can be challenging for nurse leaders, considering the magnitude of their personal and professional demands.<sup>5</sup> Devoting time to reflect is essential as the first step in the journey of self-care and inner discovery. Quiet time is essential for the inner journey of caring for self. In a study conducted with 10 nursing leaders in the hospital environment, the leaders indicated that relaxation, quiet time, focusing on self, and meditation assisted them on their

journey of self-care.<sup>8</sup> Asking self-assessment questions and taking time to ponder experiences will enable the nurse leader to access, understand, and grow from his or her lived experiences.<sup>9</sup> As the authors worked with the LET model, questions were developed that the nurse leader could ask self, such as: “At a deep level within me, what do I really need to nourish my entire being spiritually, emotionally, and physically? How am I? Am I tense or relaxed? Am I joyful or distraught? What am I experiencing?”

“Reflection is the method to access, make sense of, and learn through experience.”<sup>10(p25)</sup> Reflection has been used to guide practice by valuing personal knowledge, resolving contradictions, developing expertise, and enabling caring skills to become visible and valuable components of nursing.<sup>10</sup> Recording thoughts, feelings, and experiences can assist the nurse leader in identifying and clarifying self-care priorities.<sup>11</sup>

Thorpe and Barsky<sup>12</sup> discuss how 8 registered nurses used the 3-stage (ie, awareness, critical analysis, and new perspective) reflective-thinking model of Atkins and Murphy<sup>13</sup> to signify the need for change on the journey toward healing. To admit that one might need to focus on the inner journey and listen to self requires an open mind and heart.<sup>14</sup> Other skills required in the reflective process are the ability to recollect, recognize, and describe uncomfortable feelings and thoughts.<sup>13</sup>

Another useful way to listen to one’s self is to develop the ability to live mindfully. While mindfulness meditation is a specific method of meditation, the practice of mindfulness throughout the day is a way of being in the world. Mindfulness is being in the present moment, enabling one to observe that which is happening without judgment. It is focus, recognition, acknowledgement, and awareness. In a person’s thought world, the tendency is to live in either the past or the future. Living mindfully is the art of letting go of distractions either from one’s inner thoughts or from the external environment and noticing thoughts, feelings,

and sensations. The very act of being intentional and choosing to live in the moment allows the nurse leader to select what phenomena should be noticed and acted upon. When done mindfully, walking, yoga poses, *tai chi*, and other forms of mindful movement combined with the breath can bring a person to a quiet place of relaxation.<sup>7,15</sup> Mindful living is “learning to open up to all that”<sup>7(p7)</sup> the nurse leader is, “to live life to the fullest,”<sup>9(p7)</sup> and to pay attention to that still, small voice within. The resultant effect of mindfulness is an inner peace “associated with patience and acceptance and enhanced relaxation and toleration and at the same time fewer negative reactions without being passive or withdrawn.”<sup>16(p324)</sup>

Focusing on the breath is a simple manner of relaxation and stress reduction. One method that uses focusing on the breath as a starting point is the “relaxation response.”

Briefly stated, the relaxation response is defined as the response that is the opposite of the “fight-or-flight” or stress response. It is characterized by the following: a decreased metabolism, heart rate, blood pressure, and rate of breathing; a decrease or “calming” in brain activity; an increase in attention and decision-making functions of the brain; and changes in gene activity that are opposite of those associated with stress.<sup>17(p56)</sup>

Researched as a stress-reduction technique for decades, the Relaxation Response research indicates that, in addition to stress reduction, counteracting stress can improve memory in older, healthy adults.<sup>18</sup>

Engaging in a spiritual practice may assist in achieving a peaceful presence. As part of a qualitative study looking at reflective journaling and self-care, one participant in the study described focusing on a goal of spiritual practice as assisting to decrease her stress level and bringing peace whereas another participant reported, “In caring for self, and especially focusing on spiritual energy, I have found new strength to call forth in caring for others.”<sup>11(p19)</sup> A pilot study of 10 oncology patients<sup>19</sup> found that using centering prayer sessions during chemotherapy treatment was beneficial. Eight of 10 patients reported

feeling relaxed, calm, and having a sense of spiritual presence. Significant positive differences were noted on scores measuring emotional well-being and faith and lowered scores for anxiety and depression.

### **Envision**

After taking time to listen to self, a part of the inner journey that may be helpful is to envision your best self.<sup>20</sup> One of Watson’s *caritas* processes states, “Embrace altruistic values and Practice loving kindness with self and others.”<sup>2(¶1)</sup> To practice loving kindness, one must come to know self, envisioning what is needed for creating an optimal life experience, both personally and professionally.<sup>20</sup> Self-forgiveness,<sup>21,22</sup> self-compassion,<sup>23</sup> giving thanks or gratitude,<sup>14,24</sup> and expecting or envisioning the best possible outcome<sup>20</sup> leading to self-acceptance<sup>23</sup> may assist one along the path of life and learning.

Self-forgiveness is defined as “a person’s dispositional forgiveness of self, others, and situations beyond one’s control.”<sup>22(p313)</sup> Avery et al,<sup>21</sup> in a correlation study of 95 university students, found that self-reported physical and mental health were positively correlated with a capacity for self-forgiveness. As leaders are using the tool of self-forgiveness, they may enhance physical and mental health, allowing them to function at their optimal self.<sup>21</sup> It is strongly suggested by research that those who are more self-compassionate lead healthier, more prolific lives than those who are self-critical.<sup>21,23</sup>

Gratitude is defined by the Institute of Heartmath as “an active feeling of thankfulness, an energetic quality that uplifts one’s energy and spirit.”<sup>14(p2)</sup> Research has found a positive correlation between appreciation, heart-brain synchronization, and an improvement in cognitive performance.<sup>25</sup> Emmons and McCullough<sup>24</sup> found that accounting for blessings leads to improved psychological and physical performance. The participants in the gratitude arm of the study felt hopeful about their future, optimistic about their lives, and increased their participation in exercise. Taking time to express gratitude, thus improving

psychological and physical performance,<sup>24</sup> may allow a nursing leader to improve his or her professional practice.

Expecting the best is a way to envision a person's greatest self, providing "effective motivation for making positive life changes."<sup>20(¶3)</sup> By listening to self, a person can reflect on what she or he would like to see in his or her life and what steps to take to achieve results. Along the inner journey, imagery may be used in many ways, including stress reduction, changing behavior, improving performance, or producing a desired outcome.<sup>20</sup>

Along the path of self-care focused on the inner journey, the nursing leader listens to self through self-assessment, enhanced by reflection and mindfulness.<sup>13,15</sup> She or he then focuses on what is needed for the inner journey of self-care, which may include self-forgiveness,<sup>21</sup> giving thanks or gratitude,<sup>14,24</sup> and self-compassion,<sup>21</sup> and expecting or "envisioning" a positive outcome<sup>20</sup> assists a nursing leader to take his or her insight for self-care to the next step in the LET process, "action."

### Take action

How can a nursing leader add the inner journey of self-care into his or her already busy life? Caring for self at a deep level, committing to an inner journey, and dedication to maintaining a practice of self-care can be challenging for anyone. One of the challenges of adopting a practice of self-care is overcoming the perception that one does not have sufficient time to engage in the process of self-care. It is essential to give one's self-permission to take the time to enjoy life, to value the inner journey, and to recognize the importance of self-care.<sup>5</sup> In the LET model, after listening to self and envisioning the best self, the action step involves commitment to self-care, engaging a support system, and finding ways to incorporate self-care in the work environment that will assist in keeping the dedication of self-care in the forefront.

Engaging in the LET model, a commitment to the inner journey of self-care, involves re-

flexion on the previous steps of listening and envisioning. It is important to explore options to find a method of reflection that is enjoyed by the individual. It may be writing in a notebook, journaling on the computer, or voice recording your thoughts. Ensuring privacy and not being disrupted is critical and may be achieved by informing family members and by turning off mobile phones and notification systems.

A formal self-assessment, such as the "Integrative Health and Wellness Assessment,"<sup>26(pp166-178)</sup> allows one to evaluate spiritual, mental, physical, emotional needs as well as relationships, environment, health responsibility, balance, and satisfaction. This allows for looking at where you are in the present moment and where you would like to be as you continue on life's journey, by setting self-care goals.

Support is crucial as the nurse leader intentionally chooses to begin and remain on an inner journey of self-care.<sup>5</sup> Planning regular time away from work and family responsibilities can be scheduled. Meeting with a spiritual director and attending contemplative, spiritual retreats can provide guided reflection to sustain the nurse leader on the inner journey of listening, envisioning, and taking action.

Caring Groups have been used in nursing education for "students and faculty to give and receive care, to develop self-awareness and empowerment and to recognize that self-care precedes caring for others."<sup>27(p476)</sup> Sharing Circles, used by The American Holistic Nursing Association for conference participants, have created a safe, sacred space for sharing individual and collective journeys of transformation.<sup>28</sup> A similar approach to the Caring Groups<sup>27</sup> and Sharing Circles<sup>28</sup> may be helpful in the practice setting to provide a safe place for nurses to embark together on the journey of self-care.

### CARING IN THE WORK ENVIRONMENT

Nurse leaders want to ensure that each patient receives safe, compassionate, quality care. To achieve this goal, each nurse leader

not only needs to expect the best but also must ensure that the staff have what is needed to create and support a healthy work environment.<sup>29</sup> The staff in the health care environment cannot be excluded from the search for their personal authentic depth and vitality.<sup>30</sup> It is only by being in tune to care of self that a nurse can more fully address the needs of others through a caring mode of being.<sup>31</sup> Opportunities for self-reflection, inner listening, and contemplation on the meaning of their work must be provided to the staff.<sup>32</sup>

A leader alone cannot create the vision for quality safe-care in a healthy work environment. Employees need to make the connection to the organization's goals mission, vision, and values. Do the organization's values support caring? Many workers lack the sense that the work they do makes any difference or that their efforts contribute anything of real value.<sup>30</sup> Some ways to help the staff start on the journey to inner listening are to create opportunities for people to identify their own values and how these can be put into action at work. Beliefs and values are embedded in and deeply influence each person's world view, perceptions, and actions in everyday experiences.<sup>35</sup>

It is important to align employees' values with those of the organization, as one's values influence his or her actions and responses to everyday encounters. Shared values, a common purpose, and a shared vision produce the ability for leaders to influence others in a positive way.<sup>34</sup> An example of a mutual vision is the shared governance model, introduced more than 25 years ago as a way to improve nurses' work environment, satisfaction, and retention.<sup>35</sup> Using the shared governance model would be a way to involve direct caregivers in the decision to incorporate the LET model that may empower the staff to build processes for self-care.

People who chose to work in health care are most satisfied with their work when they know they are making a positive difference.<sup>32</sup> Seligman<sup>36</sup> believes that happiness comes when a person recognizes his or her signa-

ture strengths and uses those strengths in his or her personal and professional lives. In a correlational study of 136 registered nurses, self-nurturance, career fulfillment, and overall life satisfaction, were positively linked.<sup>37</sup> On the basis of these findings,<sup>37</sup> as a nurse cares for or nurtures self, an organization may experience an increase in nurse satisfaction scores, possibly leading to an increase in nurse retention.

How can the nursing staff be encouraged to reflect on who they are and what they value? How can they be helped to find ways to be more present in their current work and with their team? First, it is the responsibility of the nurse leader to role model a healthy lifestyle of self-care as well as a calming presence.<sup>38</sup> Nurse leaders need to develop a caring presence in their relationships with employees, both in groups and individually, and respond to opportunities to model creating and articulating caring to their colleagues.<sup>32</sup>

Employees need to be offered the opportunity for quiet and reflective times so that they can hear their inner self and fully understand their personal inner strengths. Some suggestions for the work environment are meditative music in staff lounges or quiet rooms where the staff can go to rest, meditate, or simply reflect. Encouraging all staff members to take a short break each shift for creative and reflective thinking emphasizes the importance of care of self.<sup>32</sup> Such time allotment communicates the commitment of the nurse administrator to enhance the growth of the nurse as a caring person.<sup>39</sup> "Taking action" may also include beginning all meetings with a caring story about how a staff member made a difference in a patient's care. Offering suggestions and methods of self-care through workshops and newsletters may assist nurses in keeping the value of self-care in the forefront.

Nurses need to strengthen the relationship with self to experience the lived world of self-care. Implementation of a self-care regimen by nurses serves as a role model for patients and for their peers, which could have a positive impact on patient care. Including caring for

self on each nurse's self-evaluation is a way to remind them of the importance of putting self first.<sup>32</sup>

In a qualitative study, nursing leaders described the importance of creating space for relaxation, refocusing, and quiet in the hospital environment:

"In the stressful environment that I work in, I think that probably one of the most important things a person can do . . . is to set some time during the day, even if it is five or ten minutes and just unwind in a quiet space and re-center and refocus on themselves. I think it would help re-energize. The longer you can take of course, the better . . . you get caught up in the hustle and bustle."<sup>5(p78)</sup>

"If we could have a room set up, nurses could come in for a quiet moment and just meditate . . . a quiet moment for the day—that would be so nice . . . it's that time away from the crowd . . . Caring for Self. You put yourself first."<sup>5(p78)</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In looking at the evidence presented in this article, the authors have concluded that nursing workplaces have become more intense, complex, and demanding environments. Car-

ing is a primary need in nursing leadership. As nurse leaders begin the inner journey of self-care, using the LET model of listening, envisioning, and taking action could impact the health care institution, the nursing leaders, the staff, and ultimately the patients and family members. As leaders are personally engaging in the LET process, they can bring this method out to their staff by listening to the staff, envisioning the best for the unit or institution, and taking action to create a healing environment for all.

Time for reflection and renewal should not only be allowed but also expected as a part of the workday for all employees from the nurse leader to the bedside caregiver. As nursing leaders are engaged in the self-care process, coming to know self, focusing on the inner journey, and supported to care for self in the workplace, the nursing leaders will be better able to function at their peak. As nursing leaders are caring for self, they are able to bring a peaceful presence, joy, and an enthusiasm for life to the work environment. The organization may experience an increase in nurse and patient satisfaction and a healing work environment beneficial to patients and employees. This simple act of the power of caring, beginning with self-knowledge gained from the inner journey, can transform individuals and institutions, bringing peace to self and out to the world.

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