

PTSD and Nursing: What you need To Know

- Research shows that 30-40 % of nurses have PTSD, which may be lower than the actual number given that nurses are not likely to self-identify and that PTSD in women is misdiagnosed as anxiety, depression, or burnout.
- Studies of burnout and compassion fatigue show that nurses who experience one or both of these phenomena, also showed symptoms of PTSD. In fact, burnout and compassion fatigue have overlapping symptomology with PTSD, which is often misdiagnosed as burnout and CF.
- The scale that measures PTSD is biased in favour of men's PTSD symptoms, and may not capture symptoms women experience.
- Violence or the threat of violence plays a large role in development of PTSD in nurses. Nursing is one of the most dangerous professions, as studies show that nurses are more likely to be attacked at work than prison guards and police officers. In Manitoba, 52% of nurses have been physically assaulted, while 76% have been verbally abused, which highlights the prevalence of violence in our healthcare facilities.
- A study of nurses in New York concluded that the, "stress of exposure to assault and the potential for assault appear to impact nurses' emotional states in the form of PTSD."¹ Moreover, nurses who did not sustain any injuries, but anticipated some sort of violence at work, reported higher levels of stress than nurses with minor injuries.²
- Nurses are susceptible to both primary and secondary or vicarious trauma, including cumulative trauma, which is a result of events that are not typically seen as traumatic, but are emotionally and physically taxing.
- Medical advancements that enable numerous interventions to keep patients alive longer, in turn prolong nurses' exposure to suffering and dying.

¹ Jacobowitz, William. "PTSD in Psychiatric Nurses and Other Mental Health Providers: A Review of the Literature." *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*. 34, 2013. 787-795. Pg.787.

² Jacobowitz, Pg. 789

- Over the years, research has shown that nurses have a higher prevalence of PTSD than is reported in post-Vietnam war veterans.³
- The threat of serious injury or death is as strongly correlated with PTSD as actual combat exposure in military personnel.⁴
- Nurses are unique, given their role on the healthcare team, and as a predominantly female profession. Their role is to provide care, nurturing, and empathy, which opens another dimension and a vulnerability to development of PTSD.
- PTSD in nurses also has ramifications for workplaces, it's been shown to be linked to decreased job satisfaction, increase in sick leave and staff turnover.⁵

A Manitoba study of nurses with PTSD, showed the following as top 5 stressors that lead to PTSD:

1. Death of a child, particularly due to abuse
2. Violence at work
3. Treating patients that resemble family or friends
4. Death of a patient or injury to a patient after undertaking extraordinary efforts to save a life
5. Heavy patient loads

³ Powell, Patricia. *The Prevalence of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder among Registered Nurses Working Manitoba Emergency and Intensive Care Units*. University of Manitoba: Winnipeg, MB. Pg.2

⁴ Jacobowitz, William. Pg.787.

⁵ Andriaenssens, Jef. "The Impact of Traumatic Events on ER Room Nurses: Findings from a Questionnaire Survey." *International Journal of Nursing Studies*. 49:2012. 1411-1422. pg.1419.