

# Self-Care for the *Nurse* *Entrepreneur*: Finding Time & Balance

by AMY RUFF, RN, BSN, WOCN with JANET HOFFMAN

**D**rawing from 23 years of personal experience as well as input from other nurse entrepreneurs, Vicki D. Lachman (1998) writes, “Caring for the self as an entrepreneur requires courage, commitment, and persistence in self-care activities. . . . Walk a mile, meditate, eat fresh fruits, get a mammogram, assert yourself – all these behaviors require the initiative of an individual interested in taking responsibility for his or her health” (p. 48).

## Is Self-Care for Nurses a New Concept?

From age five, I wanted to become a nurse, determined and excited to learn how to care for others. In the early days of my nursing career, I don’t remember ever thinking about *self-care*. We went to the hospital, put our heart and soul into our work, and returned home exhausted and mostly satisfied. Did we think about good diet, exercise, or stress relief? Not really – we went to the diner at midnight after work, ate pancakes and french fries, stayed up late, and considered walking the hospital hallways to be sufficient exercise. Stress? We slept a lot. Our habits were not the healthiest despite our training.

It didn’t take long for the stress, workload, and responsibility to take their toll. My sleep habits worsened, and I woke up feeling anxious about my next shift. I was terrified of making a patient error. My usual happy mood was becoming cloudy, and my energy level was bottoming out. I knew I needed to do something, but my inclination as a nurse was caring for others first.



Courtesy of TM for Women

## Self-Care is Not Selfish

Reducing stress for mental, physical, and emotional health is emphasized everywhere. As stress accumulates, nurses can start having symptoms of psychosomatic disease. We can become angry, exhausted, depressed, and sleepless. We may become dependent on medication, caffeine, alcohol, or non-pharmaceutical drugs. Depleted of energy, we may compromise our relationships. Because we have so little spare time, when we seek a way to improve health, we need to choose something effective that we are likely to continue doing.

## Stress & the Nurse Entrepreneur

Nurse entrepreneurs use their nursing education and business insight to start ventures and look to the future, seeing opportunities where others see obstacles. Usually there are

*Self-care is not selfish – it is a small investment of time that strengthens us so that we can contribute more to others.*

many outside influences that can affect a business, such as new technology, shifting consumer preferences, general healthcare trends, and policy or regulatory changes. The profession of nursing is inherently stressful and demands self-motivation, skill, knowledge, and expertise, but being an entrepreneur demands another set of skills too. Entrepreneurs are risk-takers, negotiators, proactive change agents, and they need to be creative enough to identify a niche market and develop a consistent customer base. They have to be adaptable and able to think on their feet.

When this new dimension of innovation, creativity, time, and energy is added to a nursing career, the stress multiplies. Nurse entrepreneurs, in particular, need to choose self-care techniques that are so effective they will be motivated to continue doing it.

### **Self-Care & Addressing Nurse Fatigue**

In 2014, the ANA published a position paper on the joint responsibilities of registered nurses and employers to reduce risks from nurse fatigue and to sustain a culture of safety, a healthy work environment, and a work-life balance. It states:

*Registered nurses and employers in all care settings must collaborate to reduce the risks of nurse fatigue and sleepiness associated with shift work and long work hours. Evidence-based strategies must be implemented to proactively address nurse fatigue and sleepiness; to promote the health, safety, and wellness of registered nurses; and to ensure optimal patient outcomes. (ANA, 2014)*

It occurs to me that when nurses are the employers, they certainly must regard their own health as they would the health of their employees. Once their business starts to grow, they may end up working long hours hiring, training, and managing others; managing finances, insurance, and payroll;

and learning to delegate. In the complications and pressures of daily life and work, they may find their own health taking a back seat to getting things done...until health and well-being spiral out of control. This is not something they would ignore in their employees. Just like in an airplane when you are instructed to put your oxygen mask on before your child's, the nurse entrepreneur must stabilize their own mental, physical, and emotional well-being as a foundation for addressing their employees' balance.

Because nurse entrepreneurs are competent, well-organized, and equipped to flourish in a changing healthcare environment, it should be easy for them to schedule and maintain self-care activities, right? Actually, that is often not true. Many nurse entrepreneurs struggle to find self-care solutions that are evidence based, easy, not too time-consuming, and can be done anywhere when time is available. In 1972, I was fortunate to find something that does fit the bill, had plenty of published research backing it up, took little time to learn, and rewarded me with both immediate and cumulative benefits.

### **About the Transcendental Meditation® Technique**

I found that Transcendental Meditation (TM®) is a non-religious, effortless meditation that I can do sitting comfortably anywhere with my eyes closed for 20 minutes twice daily. My mind simply disengages from its usual active, chatterbox level of thought and settles deeply until it reaches a unique state of restful alertness – my own silent nature.

Surveys show that 19 million Americans practice some form of meditation (NCCIH, 2015). In surveying the literature on meditation, I found that different techniques have varying degrees of benefit. Some meditations involve effort – trying to control thoughts or being attentive to thoughts or the body. There's also guided meditation and contemplation. TM is unlike all of these – in fact, it's a completely different process.

As I looked into the scientific research on TM, I learned that this psycho-physiological state has the characteristics of brain wave coherence and profound physiological rest, which allow the nervous system to throw off stress, fatigue, and imbalances in mind and body (TM for Women, 2016; Travis & Shear, 2010).

Maribeth Flood (2016), MS, RN, ARNP, LMHC is a nurse practitioner entrepreneur in private psychiatric practice established in Washington state. She has studied the effects of TM practice by learning it personally and reviewing hundreds of studies on it. She has found that TM, though not a substitute for lost sleep, gives us more energy as well as helps us use our time more efficiently; she explains:

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*The TM technique has been shown by published research to increase the coherent and integrated functioning of the brain, increasing our organizing power, focus, and efficiency during the day and evening. We find that with increased clarity, we can do less and yet manage to get more done.... The TM technique increases energy, stamina, and resilience so your day will be better than you'd have anticipated.* (Flood, 2016)

### TM, Epigenetics, & Scientific Backing

Recently, I became interested in epigenetics (the study of changes in gene expression that do not affect the genetic code) and the deeper reasons that the TM technique enhances life. DNA in a cell may be influenced by signals originating from outside the cell, including energetic messages emitted by our negative and positive feelings. Nurses know that to live a healthy balanced life, we must nourish ourselves with sufficient deep rest, life-sustaining food, and healthful habits. Because TM effectively reduces stress and increases mental and physical harmony, encouraging feelings of happiness and peace, it supports a positive change in genetic

expression. In fact, recent research suggests that TM can affect gene expression (Wenuganen, 2014).

Researchers agree that the Transcendental Meditation (TM) technique most effectively reduces stress and improves brain functioning. There have been 380 peer-reviewed studies on the TM technique conducted during the last five decades and published in leading journals. The box below describes just a few of the relevant research conclusions related to TM.

### Self-Care, Happiness, & Spirituality

According to nurse entrepreneur Maribeth Flood (2016), “The Transcendental Meditation technique creates a fundamental increase in awareness which allows us to have an improved perspective on reality and a more stable foundation in our inner self. This growth of awareness also diminishes the power of changing circumstances as triggers. That, along with the very tangible benefits of reducing stress and anxiety, makes life more manageable and enjoyable.”

Nurses have told me that they were able to adopt just this *one* thing into their daily life, improving their mental and

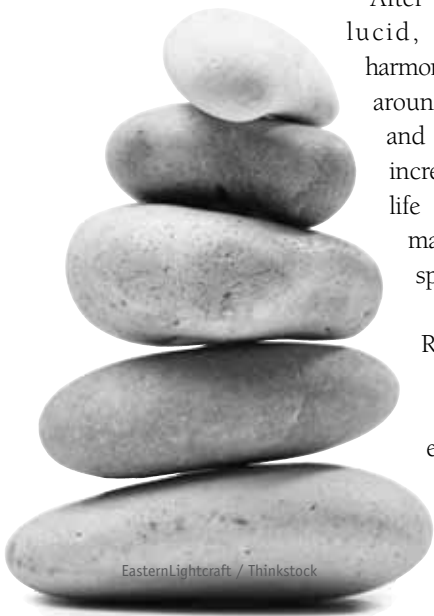
## What Does the Research Show?

Following is a sampling of research findings on the effects of Transcendental Meditation:

- A meta-analysis compared all self-help techniques on which trait anxiety had been studied – a study of 146 independent outcomes (Eppley, Abrams, & Shear, 1989). The study included the TM technique, progressive muscle relaxation, concentration, mantra meditation, biofeedback, and placebo techniques. *TM showed more than twice the reduction of trait anxiety as all other techniques.* The other techniques showed no better results than the placebo; concentration meditation was less effective than the placebo.
- Another published meta-analysis, shows that *TM reduces depression and use of alcohol and drugs* (Alexander, Robinson, & Rainforth, 1994). According to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s Interdisciplinary Nursing Quality Research Initiative (NQRI), nurses are more prone to depression, with 18 percent of nurses experiencing symptoms of depression – twice the rate of the general public (Lampert, 2016). TM allows the mind to experience fulfillment and inner happiness. Chemical changes in the blood indicate reduced depression and anxiety during and after TM practice (Jevning, Wilson, & Davidson 1978).
- Sheppard, Staggers, and John (1997) reported on a long-term study of government employees who learned the Transcendental Meditation program. The research found that after three years, they continued to show *significant reduction in depression*, in contrast to control employees who had participated in an educational stress management program (Sheppard, Staggers, & John, 1997).
- A study of executives and workers in the automotive industry found that after three months of regular practice of the TM program, employees showed *increased professional and personal satisfaction* in comparison to controls from the same worksites (Alexander et al., 1993).
- A *Journal of Business and Psychology* article reviewed research and case studies on the application of the TM program in the workplace (Schmidt-Wilk, Alexander, & Swanson, 1996). The reviewed literature indicates that TM contributes to *improved employee health, increased job satisfaction, improved job performance and productivity, and improved organizational performance and climate.* These results are discussed in terms of the development of consciousness of the individual and the organization.
- An experiment on *stress reduction* using the TM technique and progressive muscle relaxation was conducted at a South African firm with 80 employees (Broome, Orme-Johnson, & Schmidt-Wilk, 2005). Psychological stress decreased significantly over 5.5 months for the TM group ( $p < .0002$ ) with 67 percent of the decrease in the first two weeks. Blood pressure reduced significantly only for the TM group.

physical health significantly. I can say with great confidence that the TM technique, easily incorporated into my day, has become the basis for my well-being and saved my nursing career.

There are nurses who aren't anxious or depressed but sense that there is something missing from their daily experience – something profound or spiritual. Probably the most precious benefit that I have found from meditating is a growing sense of inner joy and connectedness to myself and the wholeness of life itself. Absence of disease, it seems, is not what defines health – health means wholeness.



After meditation, my mind is lucid, more peaceful, more harmoniously connected to the world around – and my body is relaxed and refreshed. This experience increasingly pervades my daily life and is reflected in all the manifestations and blessings of spiritual development.

Ann Rose Dichov, MSN, RN, a holistic nurse who works in case management, says, “TM uniquely establishes me in my inner self, enabling me to move through the world in a kinder, more just, more compassionate, and integrated way” (personal communication, 2014).

Why compromise quality of life to be a nurse entrepreneur? If you have the energy, creativity, and motivation to be an entrepreneur and put your nursing education and experience to work for others, be sure to take care of yourself along the journey. You can renew yourself on a daily basis instead of getting exhausted and stressed. You can find inspiration in the depths of yourself spontaneously, be happier, be productive, and run your business like a pro. Self-care is not selfish – it is a small investment of time that strengthens us so that we can contribute more to our families, our patients, and our communities.

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