

My nursing career began in 1971, and in the five decades since I have seen all types of health care tragedies. I've witnessed children traumatized by a parent's death, an amputation, abuse, and abandonment. I've cared for Vietnam veterans suffering psychological pain from remorseless PTSD and unrelenting survivor guilt. I've seen deaths from gunshot wounds, stabbings, motorcycle accidents, suicide, chronic illnesses, and mostly, the unanticipated scourge of cancer. Yet witnessing all this sorrow over time hasn't diminished the emotional toll it takes on me.

Over the years, I've commonly heard two dichotomous statements: "You must have thick skin to be a nurse," and "You are an angel; I could never do what you do." I used to get angry whenever someone said the first of these statements to me. It implied that I was hardened, stoic, and unemotional when I witnessed the devastating misfortune of others. I also found the angel analogy to be a grand misrepresentation whenever I heard it. Despite understanding the underpinnings of this rescuer metaphor, no way did I wear a halo.

I have now come to accept the fact that tough skin on a nurse is required and not necessarily a negative trait. Rather, it needs to be reframed in a positive light as evidence of perseverance, resilience, and healthy self-protectiveness. For if I exposed my inner core to even the tiniest minutiae of the tragedies I witnessed, I would not be able to function. I couldn't prepare and administer the pain medication, gather the correct supplies, dress the wound, optimally reposition the patient to enhance comfort, or be present to put my arm around a grieving wife's shoulder. Due to the "wear and tear" on me over time, the semipermeable barrier between patients, families, and myself would disappear if I didn't have a certain distance. Ultimately, because of my cumulative grief, I would become the one most in need of consolation—especially because nurses' sorrow is disenfranchised, internalized, and unspoken.

Despite the prominence of this daily struggle between compassion for others and necessary care of oneself, nurses get no anticipatory guidance about the reality of this dilemma during their basic education. When I was a young nurse, no one told me this would be one of the hardest skills to master or that no resources were allocated to help me with it. The emotional hazards of my empathy were not in the lexicon of



Being a Thick-Skinned Angel

The truth behind two contrasting images of nurses

nursing practice. Yet over time, through reading about this phenomenon in other caring professionals and about its application to nursing, I became self-taught in this delicate balancing act.

I believe that nurses are unique in their caring disposition and power to heal. We are the health professionals who are the most present, approachable, and responsible for the total care of patients. In the hospital setting, physician contact is commonly quantified in minutes while nurses are characterized by their 24/7 presence. There is a certain intimacy by virtue of the amount of time nurses spend caring for the ill and the vulnerable. As if by a form of osmosis, nurses often absorb the pain of those they minister to. What is needed is to find the right balance between an attentive and exquisite caring for others and keeping some part of oneself separate and safe—a

hard task to master.

We do our nurse work in tandem with society's enemy, death. We are pariahs of sorts, ostracized from the mainstream avenues of grief support offered to others around the end-of-life experience. This expectation of an emotionless nursing response despite exposure to intense trauma and premature death dismisses the universal human nature of our sorrow, isolating us from others. Until death is accepted as part of all our being, nurses will remain in this vulnerable position. Hence, we must make—and teach our young to make—self-care, self-compassion, and self-preservation a part of our everyday norm as we undergo the daily rigors of moral distress, compassion fatigue, and vicarious trauma.

Over my lengthy career, I have been left on my own to figure out how to sustain myself as a caring nurse. Years of contemplation, introspection, and self-reflection have underscored my emotional evolution. In fact, I have come to realize that it is my hardiness that gives me the strength to enter one room after another when I know darkness prevails on the other side of the door. I have learned over the years that it is exactly this capacity, coupled with an abundance of kindness, finely tuned empathy, and unrelenting compassion, that constitutes the complex expertise of maturing into the estimable stature of a "tough-skinned angel." ▼

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