

# How to Practice Mindful Nursing

Do you ever feel panic at the end of a long weekend or vacation, wondering where the time went? Do your days, weeks, and months blend into one another, each day bringing you more of the same?

At work, you move through a series of tasks so that patient care runs smoothly—you assess your patients, change drips, review test results. However, you may be on autopilot the entire time, lost in doing and unaware of the present in which you are *being*.

Perhaps you have spent entire shifts in doing mode and missed out on connecting with yourself and your patients? That's not to say that doing is a bad place to be. On the contrary, doing mode is an important part of everyday life—it helps you plan your day, finish the tasks you started, and pay attention to detail. In the same way, doing mode helps you manage your daily routine from driving in traffic to shopping for dinner to paying bills. But once you complete your tasks, it is important to switch out of doing mode and simply be in the moment.

Think of it this way: doing would be your mode if you were planning a romantic anniversary dinner. You would choose the restaurant, get directions, and drive there. Once you arrived, though, you would want to enjoy your meal and the time with your loved one. That is when you would switch to being mode. Obviously, it is important to be able to switch off doing mode after its job is done and enjoy life. Imagine if you were to spend your romantic dinner checking traffic patterns for the drive home!

All nurses are familiar with *doing* mode. Your training emphasizes it, and in a profession that is task-driven, being busy is valued. Yet, when you are constantly in doing mode, your monkey mind leaps from one thought to the next, you forget about the moment you're in, and after a while, your feelings control you. Unable to switch out of doing mode, and hijacked by whatever thought or emotion pops up, you end up merely going through the motions.

Operating this way makes you lose touch with what is going on right there in the moment. For example, if your mind is on other things when you drink your coffee, you don't really taste it. If you spend your break reviewing lab results, you've not enjoyed your moment in the present to re-group and re-charge.

What details are you missing when you are always doing? How about the smiles and hellos from visitors and colleagues, the beautiful flower arrangement at the nurses' station, the great sunrise out the window, or the opportunity to say "thanks" to the person who opens the door?

If you're stuck in doing mode when you meet your first patient, you miss the opportunity to make a real connection. The present sails past and never comes back. That moment is lost forever.

## Autopilot

In your eagerness to get things done, you can become so absorbed in your thoughts that you don't notice what is going on inside or around you. Have you ever missed your stop on the bus because you were daydreaming? Or put your keys in the fridge while talking on the phone? Have you ever entered the medication room and stared at the shelves, unable to remember what you went in there for or what you needed? Or maybe you started up your computer to check a lab value but couldn't remember what value you were looking for or why.

Rather than focusing on the task at hand, you are on "autopilot," absentmindedly going through the motions. If you're "autopiloting" a lot, sooner or later, you will trip up and make mistakes.

On autopilot, you focus on the result rather than giving full attention to the task at hand. That said, autopilot is not always a bad thing. In fact, it's important. The brain's ability to switch into this mode allows you to complete complex tasks like driving or using a computer without thinking about all the detailed actions involved. Thus, being on autopilot allows you to avoid expending unnecessary energy on routine things. However, sometimes you forget to come out of autopilot and fixate instead on the next urgent task on your to-do list. Research has shown that the average person spends 47% of the time on autopilot. (Killingsworth 2010). If you're trapped on constant autopilot, you will likely feel exhausted and dissatisfied with life. Remember to take an occasional break from doing to help you connect with yourself and others and recharge your batteries.

## Mindful Presence

In the course of your workday, you may be on autopilot while you're with your patient, preoccupied by your never-ending workload and urgent to-do lists. Although your time together may be limited, how can you spend the precious time you do have together in a heartfelt way where your patient feels your caring presence?

### Consider This:

Imagine that you're in conversation with a patient. You're completely present during the interaction. The patient feels a genuine connection with you. Because you have been mindful during the conversation, the person feels you are really listening. They trust what you say. They feel comfortable, content, and at ease in your presence. Can you sense how mindful presence can enrich your work as a nurse?

### Try This:

#### Mindful Presence

Before you enter a patient's room, scan your body for sensations.

Perhaps your jaw is clenched or your shoulders are tense.

Notice any sense of feeling rushed or anxious, and acknowledge these feelings without trying to get rid of them.

Take some mindful breaths, letting your tension and busyness dissolve on the exhale.

As you get ready to meet your patient, set the intention to be fully present.

Knock on the door and establish eye contact as you enter the patient's room.

Introduce yourself warmly and make a connection.

Chat together for a moment or two before moving on to the assessment or placing your fingers on the computer keyboard.

Whenever you notice your attention has wandered, gently bring it back to your patient and the task at hand.

Set the intention to give your patient your full attention during each interaction. Unhook from the busyness of your day, come off autopilot, and take a moment to become grounded.

Mindful presence doesn't take more time. Instead, it adds value—it makes every moment count.

## About the Author



Carmel Sheridan is a psychotherapist and supervisor in private practice. She is the author of three books including *"The Mindful Nurse: Using the Power of Mindfulness and Compassion to Help You Thrive In Your Work"*. Carmel facilitates mindfulness retreats and training programmes on self-care and compassion fatigue for nurses and other healthcare professionals. For more information, see <http://nursingmindfully.com/>