

'I just need a space to cry.' How hospitals have set up places where nurses can recharge

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Caring for very sick children daily can be emotionally taxing, even for professionals with years of experience. As front-line workers who also support grieving parents, nurses often cope with chronic stress.

To help support their [nurses](#), Nicklaus Children's Hospital recently created two serenity spaces in the oncology and ICU departments, where staff can go to regroup, unwind and reflect, even if just for a few minutes in the day.

"We really needed a space to decompress and reset," said Peggy Townsend, a pediatric oncology [nurse](#) for over 20 years and now service line administrator in the [hospital's](#) Cancer and Blood Disorders Center.

The new spaces are painted in pastel colors and decorated with wall art, plants, reading and coloring books. They are also equipped with zero-gravity massage chairs. Staff can plug in their devices and listen to music or watch a show. Sometimes it's just a quiet space to cry.

The idea for the serenity spaces came to life during a listening session.

"We asked nurses, 'How can we help? How can we support you?' I'll never forget one nurse who said, 'I just need a space to cry and prepare to take care of the rest of my patients,' " Townsend said.

Townsend, who was director of nursing in the oncology unit at the time, gave up her office to create the first Mia's Serenity Space. The hospital unveiled it last March during a ceremony that included golfer Camilo Villegas and his wife, Maria Ochoa, who have generously funded the serenity spaces through their organization, Mia's Miracles, in honor of their late daughter Mia.

The hospital is working with the couple to create additional similar spaces in other departments.

Nicklaus Children's Hospital also launched two new programs to help nurses and other staff deal with the emotional demands of the job.

In October 2020, the hospital implemented Project D.E.A.R., which stands for Debriefing Event for Analysis Recovery and allows nurses and other staff the opportunity to have structured debriefings following critical events. The sessions facilitate conversation, sharing of resources and allow for emotional processing.

Jasmine Sandoval, a former combat medic in the U.S. Army and the nurse manager of clinical operations at Nicklaus, created Project D.E.A.R. as her doctoral project while studying at the University of Miami.

"We needed a hospital-wide standardized process for debriefing after a critical event," Sandoval said. "The feedback has been great. Participants have expressed how they felt it was necessary and appreciate it."

Mental health support for nurses

CHAT (Connecting, Healing and Achieving Together), another Nicklaus Hospital initiative, was developed by the psychiatric nursing team to provide mental health support and group sharing sessions. The sessions, 30 so far, provide a safe [space](#) for nurses to share their experiences, discuss stressors and support each other. The program has mental health experts on call and available nearly all the time.

Other hospitals have implemented similar programs. Last year, a mental health team from Baptist Health's Community Health and Well Being began offering onsite emotional support, debriefing sessions for nurses and other staff and education on stress management. The team also facilitates meditation and mindfulness activities. Its main focus is supporting nurses working in the ICU, NICU and COVID ICU.

Even before the pandemic, numerous studies have warned about fatigue and burnout among [healthcare workers](#), especially nurses. The last two

years have certainly compounded those effects.

Suzy Castro, director of inpatient psychiatry and lead on the CHAT program's development at Nicklaus, says the feedback has been great so far and hopes the program continues to support more hospital staff.

"When we started creating this program, it had nothing to do with the pandemic, yet so many more people have benefited than we ever expected," Castro said.

Yoga programs

Memorial Healthcare System introduced group prayers during the pandemic for its nurses, along with weekly meditations, Zumba classes, free counseling sessions and outdoor yoga programs.

Jackson Memorial Hospital and Mount Sinai Medical Center, too, have offered yoga programs for its employees during the pandemic.

"We found that some nurses wanted to relax while others needed the workouts to help them recharge," Yanet Obarrio Sanchez, a Memorial spokeswoman, said in an email.

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