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A Healing Place for the Healers: Meditation Room for Neuro ICU Healthcare Heroes

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INTRODUCTION

Working in the Neuro Intensive Care Unit (Neuro ICU) is demanding and rewarding. Neuro ICU nurses face unique stressors daily, including critical patient conditions, complex care demands, and the emotional toll of caring for patients with severe neurological illnesses. The added burden of the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified these stressors, increasing the risk of burnout among nurses¹.

Recognizing the immense pressure Neuro ICU nurses endure, we implemented a unit-based meditation room project titled “A Healing Place for the Healers: A Meditation Room for the Neuro ICU Healthcare Heroes.” This designated meditation room aims to provide nurses with a sanctuary for relaxation, meditation, and mental rejuvenation. Initial evidence and anecdotal feedback from our Neuro ICU staff at UC San Diego suggest that the meditation room has significantly reduced stress and improved well-being, job satisfaction, and retention rates.

This article explores the impact of a meditation room on Neuro ICU nurses, backed by recent evidence and staff feedback, and examines how this innovative solution supports the mental health, job satisfaction, and retention of nurses in high-stress settings.



Jansen Irving B. Pagal, BSN, RN, CCRN, SCRNP has over 20 years of ICU experience. Jansen is a dedicated nurse who serves in multiple roles, including bedside care, resource support, charge nurse, mentor, and preceptor. As Stroke Champion for his unit and co-author of *Fitness in the Workplace* (2023), he completed a widely recognized clinical advancement project on creating a meditation room for Neuro ICU nurses and he has presented at numerous conferences. His commitment to nursing earned him the 2024 Nurse of the Year in Transformational Leadership award at UC San Diego Health.

Background: Understanding the Need for Stress Reduction

Nursing is widely recognized as a high-stress profession, with Neuro ICU nursing presenting unique mental and physical challenges. Studies indicate that the intense workload, emotional toll, and long hours in the ICU setting contribute to higher burnout and turnover rates among ICU nurses compared with other specialties². Burnout among healthcare workers, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, has risen sharply, with many nurses reporting feeling emotionally exhausted, overworked, and undervalued³. Burnout can result in reduced job performance, compromised patient safety, and poorer physical health outcomes for nurses⁴.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the necessity of psychological support for healthcare professionals. A recent survey indicated that nearly 40% of nurses experienced depression, anxiety, or post-traumatic stress symptoms during the pandemic⁵. This mental health crisis within the nursing workforce demands immediate solutions. Strategies for promoting mental health and resilience are essential for protecting the well-being of healthcare professionals and sustaining quality care delivery⁶.

Project Overview: “A Healing Place for the Healers”

“A Healing Place for the Healers” was designed to address these pressing concerns in the Neuro ICU. The project involved converting an underutilized space into a meditation room within the unit, specifically tailored for the needs of our nurses. This room provides a quiet, private environment where nurses can meditate, practice mindfulness, perform yoga, pray, destress, and even take a short power nap. The aim was to create a healing environment that encourages nurses to decompress and reconnect with themselves in the midst of a high-stress shift.

The meditation room is equipped with calming music, aromatherapy diffusers, soft lighting, comfortable seating, yoga mats, and resources for guided meditation. Nurses have access to the room during their breaks,



Figure 1. (Before) Exhausted Neuro ICU nurses reflect the heavy toll of relentless stress and burnout in the demanding healthcare environment.

Pictured with permission: Liliy Au-Yeung, Jansen Pagal, Kim Lustina, Joann Calingay, Teresa Angeles



Figure 2. (After) Neuro ICU nurses embrace the calming atmosphere of the meditation room, unwinding, yoga, essential oils, massage and inspiring books.

Pictured with permission: JoAnn Calingay, Giena Laroza-Allen, Sarah Breedlove, Michael Kennedy, Dawn Carroll, Jansen Pagal, Heather Stinger, Jessica Justus, Chirstine Lane, Molly Kelleher



Figure 3: Christie Lane

allowing them a dedicated space to recharge and regain emotional and physical balance before returning to their patients.

Evidence-Based Benefits of Meditation Rooms for Nurses

Research indicates that creating unit-based meditation or relaxation rooms can have a positive impact on well-being, job satisfaction, and retention rates of ICU nurses⁷. Meditation and relaxation practices have been shown to reduce symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression, all of which are prevalent among ICU nurses⁸.

1. Reduced Stress and Burnout

Multiple studies highlight the effectiveness of mindfulness and meditation in lowering stress levels among healthcare providers. Mindfulness practices can reduce psychological distress, with measurable effects on stress levels, emotional well-being, and job satisfaction⁹. A similar study conducted in an ICU setting found that regular use of a relaxation room equipped with meditation resources significantly reduced burnout symptoms among nursing staff, leading to improved morale and job retention¹⁰.



2. Improved Mental Health and Well-being

Mindfulness and meditation have been associated with improved mental health outcomes, including decreased symptoms of anxiety, depression, and emotional exhaustion¹¹. Practicing mindfulness or engaging in meditation for even a few minutes each day has been shown to enhance resilience, increase emotional awareness, and improve self-care practices among nurses¹². Research shows that ICU nurses who regularly engage in mindfulness exercises report feeling less emotionally drained, enabling them to provide better patient care¹³.

3. Enhanced Physical Health and Reduced Fatigue

Stress management practices such as yoga and meditation can also improve physical health. The repetitive stress of long shifts can lead to physical ailments such as musculoskeletal pain and fatigue, impacting both work performance and quality of life for nurses. Studies reveal that nurses who participate in yoga and meditation experience reduced physical discomfort, improved sleep, and enhanced energy levels¹⁴. Additionally, meditation and mindfulness help

reduce the physiological impacts of stress, including lower blood pressure and improved heart health¹⁵.

4. Improved Staff Retention and Job Satisfaction

Nurses are more likely to stay in their roles when they feel valued, supported, and mentally healthy. Creating a space dedicated to their mental well-being not only boosts morale but also fosters a supportive workplace culture. A 2021 study found that access to workplace wellness programs, including meditation spaces, led to a 30% improvement in job satisfaction and a 20% reduction in turnover rates among nurses¹⁶. Neuro ICU nurses in our unit have reported increased job satisfaction since the introduction of the meditation room, with many expressing gratitude for having a quiet space to decompress during shifts.

The Importance of Supportive Environments in the ICU

The neuro ICU presents a unique set of challenges due to the critical nature of patients' conditions. Nurses in this setting must balance intense physical demands with significant emotional strain. Unit-based initiatives such as "A Healing Place for the Healers" not only support nurses in managing stress but also reinforce a culture of care that is essential for staff resilience. According to *Critical Care Medicine*, supportive work environments improve nurses' mental health, reduce the likelihood of burnout, and improve patient outcomes¹⁷.

Conclusion: Creating a Sustainable Model for Well-being

The success of "A Healing Place for the Healers" demonstrates the powerful impact of creating unit-based meditation rooms in ICU settings. While nursing is inherently challenging, providing nurses with resources to manage stress and mental health can make a significant difference in their well-being and job satisfaction. It is essential for healthcare institutions to invest in spaces and initiatives that support the mental and emotional health of their staff, ensuring the well-being of healthcare professionals and their patients. I am grateful to have



Figure 4. 3F Neuro ICU Zen Room

Pictured left to right with permission: Chirstine Lane, Molly Kelleher, Jansen Pagal, JoAnn Calingay, and Ali Ahmadzal

a committed manager, Dawn Carroll and our assistant manager Mia Douglass, for supporting us with this important endeavor to help our nurses. Considering the benefits observed, it is recommended that all critical care and other nursing units consider establishing similar meditation spaces for healthcare staff. This investment in the mental health and resilience of nurses improves individual well-being and strengthens the healthcare system as a whole.

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