

Stages of Adaptation: From New Grad to Savvy Nurse



The process from new grad to nurse can be divided into four stages: (1) Excitement, (2) Overwhelm, (3) Recovery, and (4) Commitment. We can expect the stages of adaptation, or a similar process, to accompany new nurses as they acclimate to their role as clinicians. It is preferable for new grads to have the help of their colleagues, including a skilled manager armed with some well-thought out strategies, to smooth out the rough edges of this precarious time. Learn the four stages of adaptation, both their characteristics and the strategies for response.

STAGE ONE: EXCITEMENT

Characteristics: include feelings of anticipation, enthusiasm, anxiety, happiness and an eagerness to learn

Strategies for response:

- Identify a few nurses who can show you the ropes, such as where to get supplies, the best approach to getting things done and identifying colleagues who are willing to be helpful.
- Request introductions and establish rapport with key stakeholders who can facilitate you getting the resources you need in order to do your job effectively.
- Communication: despite the hectic environment, establish yourself as an assertive communicator; get into the habit of asking questions in order to learn and avoid costly mistakes.

STAGE TWO: OVERWHELMED

Characteristics: include feelings of fear, sometimes dread, intimidation, anger, helplessness and hopelessness.

Strategies for response:

- Normalize the feelings of being overwhelmed; it is part of the initial adjustment period of entering an environment where the norm is multi-tasking with multiple demands and limited resources.
- Choose not to live in a state of overwhelm: use this experience as an opportunity to develop an organized approach to your work. Start with planning, organizing and prioritizing your tasks. This approach will allow you to focus your attention on what is most important.
- Ask for help: as a beginner, it is usually expected that you will and should ask for help when you need it. In particular, get into the habit of asking for help when you don't understand how to do something and when you need clarification following unclear communication.
- Appreciation: show your sincere appreciation to those who do help you; this gesture will probably continue to increase your chances of getting more help in the future.

STAGE THREE: RECOVERY

Characteristics: feelings of budding competency, an ability to see the big picture, a balanced view that considers the good as well as the not-so-good, and strategies for managing your workload.

Strategies for response:

- Validation: applaud yourself for moving from overwhelm to recovery; some nurses don't get to this stage.
- Keep cultivating the qualities that helped move you to recovery: adapting effective work habits, a mature attitude that allows you to see the good along with the not-so-good, a desire to learn from others and, most importantly, a willingness to keep asking questions!
- Build on your success: as you become aware of how far you've come, you can make a commitment to use opportunities to continue to learn and grow in order to become the competent nurse you want to be.

STAGE FOUR: COMMITMENT

Characteristics: feelings of competency; you feel more like the savvy nurse who knows and understands the expectations of being a nurse; in the best case scenario, you have become a solution-oriented, problem-solver who has developed a strategic approach to getting things done.

Strategies for response:

- Commitment to ongoing communication: you communicate what you need, when you need it. You don't assume that others 'know' what you are thinking; you let others know what you need and want in order to get the job done.
- Commitment to teamwork: reciprocity is your approach to teamwork; you help others with patient care and they, in turn, help you.
- Commitment to being proactive: you exercise your influence and advocate for change in order to work more efficiently.
- Commitment to good patient care: you not only follow the standards of good patient care, but you go beyond the basics: you truly listen to your patients and tailor your response to their specific needs, whenever possible.

Not all nurses will go through these four stages of adaptation the way they are presented in this article. Some nurses may get stuck in a particular stage along the way and stay there. If a nurse lives in a counterproductive stage, such as overwhelm, that will affect productivity, satisfaction and his or her relationship to being a nurse. However, if a nurse has the winning combination of a good attitude and a desire to learn and works on a supportive team, a new nurse can become that dedicated, savvy nurse that we all need and want!

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