

## A, B, C's Of Critical Thinking

A typical day on your unit: there are patients to see, vitals to check, medications to distribute, charting to be done, consultations with doctors, patient education, family members who require medical updates phones to answer and the list goes on and on. In order to manage these tasks effectively, critical thinking skills must be applied; it allows a busy nurse, whether new or experienced, to go from overwhelmed to organized; below is a blueprint for critical thinking application. It is as easy as a-b-c!

### **1. The big picture: the crucial first step in effectively organizing your work...**

- Review all of your tasks and available resources
- Assessment: the number and acuity of patients on your unit
- Staffing: the number of nurses present on your unit

### **2. Organize your tasks: minimize your stress and stay on top of your tasks**

Make a list: physically list all your tasks after you have identified them; it is the best way to keep track of them. Remember this list is likely to change throughout the day.

Planning: plan your day according to what needs to be done. As part of the plan, prepare for each task by reviewing the resources you will need to help you complete the tasks. If that means soliciting help in advance when moving or discharging a patient, having a plan can make the process much more efficient.

Time management: your plan needs to include attention to time. It is best to allocate the appropriate amount of time for each activity so that you don't run short. For example, if distribution of medications takes 45 minutes, make sure you allocate 50-55 minutes so you can complete your rounds without skimping on time. More allocation of time is recommended for a high priority task, (such as distribution of medication). Running short of time can adversely affect patient care, which is something you want to avoid.

Focus: it is best to keep your focus on what you are doing; stay on top of any non-urgent disruptions in order to keep on track. If not, your time management will suffer, and it will be more difficult to get your work done.

Overwhelm: overwhelm is normal, and it can also become the culprit on the road to disorganization if you let it take charge. When you begin to feel overwhelmed, take a deep breath and regroup in order to think with a clear head; it is always best to make decisions with clarity not panic.

**3. Prioritization:** when organizing tasks, prioritization is key. High priority items should be at the top of your list. If you find yourself saying, "everything is a priority", guess what? You are not prioritizing! Start again. For example, if a doctor needs a patient's chart right away, that would become your top priority.

Create a system: as simple as 1, 2, 3: place a 1 next to the highest priority on your list; if you have several 1's, the list may read: 1a, 1b, 1c, etc. You are still prioritizing your tasks when you implement this system; you are simply doing it in an extra-organized fashion.

Re-prioritization: Remember those interruptions I referred to earlier? They often happen with great frequency. It is best to be mentally and emotionally prepared to shift your priorities, at any given time, based on what is currently happening. For example, if one of your patient codes at the same time another patient needs pain medication, the patient who codes becomes your highest priority. Therefore, what was once 1a on your list may shift to 1b or perhaps 2.

Review your plan: as you re-prioritize your tasks, your list may change considerably. If a priority item shifts downward on your list, it doesn't mean that it is a signal to abandon it; what it usually means is that it will need to be done at a different time and that may affect your planning. Communicate any changes that may involve another team member who has agreed to help you. Ongoing communication with your resources helps keep them in the loop and may ensure their willingness to help you in the future, due to your accountability.

#### **4. Problem-solving:**

Review problems, prioritize them: once again, prioritize problems as they emerge and address the ones that need immediate attention first.

Strategic approach: a strategic approach to problem solving is always best: review all available resources, solicit help in advance and communicate your needs clearly. For long-term recurring problems, a long-term systems change is highly recommended; a systems change is preferable over a short-term fix.

Finally, pick and choose your battles wisely: rather than spending your time being upset and frustrated over issues that aren't within your control, it is best to focus on problems where solutions are possible. Using critical thinking skills will help you manage your workload and put you in control over daily events, rather than daily events having control over you. Quite simply, they are an all around winner!

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