



NURSE'S NOTES

Nina M. Flanagan, PhD, GNP-BC, APMH-BC

The Power of Positivity

Health care is a difficult business. The demands are greater on staff, particularly in long-term care and assisted living. The residents are medically complex, as are their care needs. Documentation has become cumbersome, even with an electronic health record. In the centers where I practice, recent changes in ownership and administration have contributed to the angst and frustration of the staff.

My own observation in these settings is the persistence of negativity — I even see negativity in leaders who in the past were positive. It has been so profound that I have felt the need to write about it.

I believe most people in health care like what they do and want to make a difference. I think the outside influences — changes in ownership, reimbursement, and regulations — have been profound and continue to rapidly shift. Our workplace environment feels unstable, and instability can invoke fear and anxiety. This affects the way we respond to change, but being positive and reframing these situations can help to decrease some of the fear and anxiety.

My research on the topic of positivity has not revealed much on how it affects outcomes, but the impact of negativity on the workplace is clear. This is not new information: the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that negativity costs businesses \$3 billion a year due to its harmful effects.

In his 2012 book *The Positive Dog*, Jon Gordon writes about the effects of negativity on the workplace:

- According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 90% of doctors' visits are stress related.
- Negativity is associated with greater stress, less energy, and more pain.
- Negativity affects a team's morale, performance, and productivity.
- One negative person can create a miserable environment for everyone else.
- At work, 90% of anxiety is created by 5% of one's network.
- Negative emotions are associated with a decreased lifespan and increased risk of heart attack and stroke.

Most of this information will not be new or surprising, as there has been research on the power of positivity and its effects on disease management and improving quality of life. So we know how important a positive attitude is in making life better — why is it so



A leader is responsible for injecting positivity into their team.

difficult to achieve in the health care workplace?

The health care environment is more dynamic than ever, and so is the need for maintaining positivity. But the power of positivity has to start at the top. Leadership has to set the tone for the workplace. Positive energy attracts. Positivity creates productivity. The message must be consistent and constant. As a leader, how can you inject more positivity into your team? Tina Hallis, in her 2015 article "12 Ways to Create a More Positive Work Environment" (<http://bit.ly/2R9KhOo>), offers a few suggestions, and I have provided some practical examples:

1. Give positive reinforcement.
 - "You are so good at . . ."
 - "I am impressed with how you handled that situation with . . ."
 - "I appreciate . . ."
2. Show gratitude.
 - Always say thank you!
3. Spread happiness.
 - SMILE!!!
4. Motivate.
 - Start your daily staff meetings with three positives from the day before.
5. Celebrate wins.
 - Highlight any positives in the clinical setting such as decreased falls, a great state agency survey, family and resident compliments, or staff displaying teamwork.
6. Encourage positive thinking.
 - Post publicly your positive interactions, stories, and quotes.
7. Celebrate.
 - Have pizza parties for appreciation, and celebrate the holidays.

8. Change the way you respond.
 - Try not to get defensive.
 - Listen first.
 - Always say please.
9. Get moving.
 - Encourage exercise.
 - Start a lunch or break walking club.
 - Do 5-minute stretches.
10. Encourage fun.
 - Encourage laughter — we don't do this enough.
 - Have themed days.
 - Hold decorating contests.
11. Share your gratitude.
 - Give five examples of what you are grateful for at work, and share them with your team. Ask each person to share one with a coworker.
12. Engage in random acts of kindness.
 - Do something kind for someone else.

These are all suggestions we have heard before, but they bear repeating to remind us of how simple being positive can be. Perhaps posting these positive points is a start.

No Complaining Tools


Jon Gordon's 2008 book *The No Complaining Rule* does not seek to eliminate all complaining, just the mindless, chronic complaining. The larger goal is to turn justified complaints into positive solutions. A complaint can be an opportunity to turn something negative into a positive. Employees' complaints can become a catalyst for innovation and new processes. It may help to improve customer service. The book uses a workplace example throughout, which implements three "no complaining tools":

- *The BUT* → *positive technique*. This simple strategy helps you turn your complaints into positive thoughts, solutions, and actions. When you realize you are complaining, add the word *but*, then add a positive thought. For example, "I don't like all this paperwork I need to do every day, *but* I do like all the difference I make for my residents."
- *Focus on "get to" instead of "have to."* Too often we focus on what we have to do. "I have to get all this paperwork done," or "I have to get this done or that." Change your perspective from "have to" to "get to." You have a job and have choices, which many people do not. Be grateful first.

A complaint can be an opportunity to turn something negative into a positive and a catalyst for innovation.

- *Turn complaints into solutions.* Again, the goal is not to eliminate all complaining but to change the focus — to eliminate complaining that doesn't serve the greater purpose. With mindless complaining, you are mindlessly focusing on problems; with justified complaining, you can identify a problem and move toward a solution.

These are some starting points in moving toward changing the culture of negativity into positivity. It isn't easy and takes time, but once it's started it can be contagious. It only takes one person to begin to make the change. I have printed out the "no complaining tools" and have them on my bulletin board — I need to be reminded, too!

So ask yourself: What are *you* doing to promote positivity in your workplace? 

Dr. Flanagan is a clinical professor at Decker School of Nursing, SUNY-Binghamton University. She also serves on the AGS Beers Criteria expert panel. Dr. Flanagan has over 20 years of experience as a geriatric nurse practitioner in a variety of settings.