



A Nurse First | Season 2, Episode 8 Symphony of self-care

[Terri Ann Parnell]: I started my nursing career in Greenwich Village, New York City, over 40 years now, and worked in many types of hospitals and healthcare systems, hospitals within that system. Health literacy and communication and culture and language have always been very important to me, and I kind of pulled that thread through everything that I've done, no matter the role. And prevention goes along with that, and wellness because we need to meet people where they are, and it's kind of all integrated. So, I guess in 2014, I decided like, "What am I going to do now when I grow up?" kind of a thing and decided to take the leap and launch my own consulting business.

[Welcome to A Nurse First. This is Terri Ann Parnell telling her own A Nurse First story.]

[Terri Ann Parnell]: I have many healthcare professionals in my family, immediate family, nurses, physician, nurse practitioners. So, even though I wasn't at the bedside during COVID, I heard everything that they all went through, and so I decided to kind of pivot, which I've done throughout my career and launch TAP Wellness Coaching, which is wellness coaching specifically and only for health care professionals and nurses.

The reason I started TAP was to really, finally do what I've been doing for myself and informally for nurses and friends over the years. And they would always say, "You need to do this, you should just do this instead," and it was always the time, but I was so busy with my other business that I couldn't. With COVID, we had that opportunity to kind of re-look at everything, pause, reflect on what we were doing. And I said, I'm going to take my hobby and what I've been doing for years for myself, my family, friends, and colleagues, and launch the business.

Nurses deserve to have permission to take care of themselves, just like they do everybody else. I see when people care for themselves, it makes such a difference, so that was why, and I just feel like at this time in my long nursing career, my journey, that I really wanted to give back. I started to feel like I'm coming my full circle now.

[Terri officially launched TAP Wellness Coaching at the beginning of 2022, fully understanding the healthcare environment from her lengthy career. She designed her program to specifically address the unique challenges nurses face with the goal of helping her clients create long-lasting healthy habits.]

[Terri Ann Parnell]: Many wellness programs talk about movement and food and sleep, but not many talk about resilience or have a certain focus on self-care. But that's what is important to nurses, so that's why I structured it that way. There's that saying, "You can't pour from an empty cup," so I always have felt that we need to take care of ourselves first so that we can be the best person, whether it's a nurse, a

mom, a spouse, a sister. And if we don't take care of ourselves, we don't have that resilience, and we don't have the ability to be objective and be able to care for others.

And I think it's really important for nurses to figure out how to have work/life, I like to say harmony instead of work/life balance because I don't believe in balance. There is no such thing to me, that I always have a picture of that scale that you're trying to weight it so that it's perfectly balanced and one side isn't dropping more than the other, but I think harmony is really more appropriate, certainly for healthcare professionals. So how can you really go to work, be your best self, feel good, feel energized, feel excited, find the joy again in nursing, but then also come home and be able to disconnect, regroup, and do all of the same things that you need to do for your family.

It reminded me recently of the football player that had that sudden death experience and how all I heard or read was how devastated the viewers were, and everybody, how it was so hard for them to go back after that, which, it is very hard. And they did the right thing, in my opinion, by not playing the rest of the game. But healthcare professionals, nurses, deal with that and may experience a similar type thing with the patient, and then are expected to continue on with their other patients that same shift and then go home and make dinner and do whatever else they're supposed to be doing. And we need to really care for ourselves and reflect and build that resilience so that we can find that harmony in life and be healthy. Otherwise something's going to give.

The most important lesson that I've learned about self-care is no one else could do it for you. You've got to prioritize it, and you have to make that decision to do it and stick to it. Nurses have an amazing ability to care for others and give so much, which is a positive and a negative, because they don't ... I will generalize, which I try not to do, but nurses are not very good about taking care of themselves. They put everybody else before them, they don't prioritize themselves, they'll take care of their patients, their neighbors, family will be calling asking advice, everybody else. But their self-care, it's essential. So, I think it's extremely important, like I said, for everybody, but nurses and healthcare professionals with the environment that they're dealing with, and the stress and the high acuity, even more so.

So there's many strategies that can help nurses maintain their self-care. So self-care is so individual. For some, it's going out for a run. For someone else, it's just sitting and meditating, it's writing in a gratitude journal. It could be cooking, it could be dancing to music in their home. Everyone is so different. But the key is scheduling it every day, and it could just be a few minutes, and sticking to it. That's really what TAP is all about. It's figuring out what each nurse can do for themselves so that they can be more resilient, feel healthy, feel energized, find that joy in their work so that they could live a happy, healthy, harmonious life and care for themselves the same very way the care for everybody else.

TAP is structured so that it's a 12-week program. There's group coaching, and then there's one-to-one coaching. Both are 12 weeks long. In the group program, we also build community. So we keep it to small groups, and we have five pillars in the [coaching program. Those are enjoy food, move more, sleep soundly, build resilience, and practice self-care. So what we do in the beginning is we do a pretty thorough intake for each person. We have a one-to-one call, even though it's a group coaching program, and we reflect on the intake that I've received, together we co-create goals for each pillar for each client in the program, and then as we move through the program, we have group calls so they're able to build community.

And the reason why it's different is that wellness coaching, general wellness coaching is great for everybody. Nurses have this crazy life. They may work three or four or twelves in a row, and when a

coach will tell you to sit down and eat your 45-minute lunch, that doesn't happen in nursing. Or exercise before you go to work in the morning. Well, they have to be there sometimes at 6:30 in the morning. And the reason I did this specifically for nurses is as a nurse, I've been there, I've done that. The way we work is that we all understand exactly where everyone's coming from in the program and understand the challenges and the opportunities and what we could do in that environment to improve our wellness. And we spend the first two weeks kind of slow and steady, and then we focus two weeks on each pillar, and then at the last two weeks, we tap back to any areas that maybe the client struggled with, and then we set everyone up for success at the end.

In addition, the difference with TAP is we have a TAP app, which is available on Google Play or the Apple store. I know there's other wellness apps out there where you can get inspirational and informational information, but again, the majority of the daily messages that you will get from me are all, again, geared towards nurses and healthcare professionals. But more importantly, besides getting messages each day through the app, it's a way for each client to directly message me and communicate with me at any time. So, you may not always be in front of a computer, everybody has their phone on them, so, if they're out to dinner or they have a question or they're struggling with something with food prep or how to get in more movement, they can just direct message me through the app and we could communicate that way.

And the one-to-one coaching is a similar format, but obviously much more a deeper dive. And I just put out there what I've experienced and what others around me have experienced that have told me what's helpful. It's decades of me just focusing on, what can I do to make myself feel healthier? What did I do in a similar situation when I was a nurse at the bedside, when I was a manager, when I was an administrator? And what helped me?

[I feel like we all know we should take better care of ourselves, but we find it easier said than done. What wisdom can you share with nurses who are struggling with the self-care concept? How do you find your own work/life harmony?]

[Terri Ann Parnell]: First and foremost, self-care is not an extra, it's not special; it's essential. That's number one, to know that don't feel guilty about scheduling self-care for yourself. Again, I think self-care can start when you're leaving your shift. I sometimes would bring my comfy slippers or comfortable pairs of shoes, and when I got in the car, I would slip those on, I would put music on. That drive would be my decompression, my self-care. People who commute can read a book or find other ways to disconnect. I think trying to start that disconnect on the way home is helpful, instead of calling their friend, talking about how that shift went or that patient, and kind of just re-living it all over again, is not helpful for when you go home. I would discourage that. There's always time to and there's always a need for a debrief for certain things, but I think when we can disconnect as we leave so that when we get home, we've kind of already started to separate a little bit.

So I create work/life harmony for myself in a few different ways. I like to meditate while I'm making my bed in the morning. I try to start my day off like that. I go through this, not a mantra, but I had set my tone for the day. And that's my 10 minutes of meditation, when I make the bed. I try to get movement in probably four to five days a week, and I schedule it and I put it in my calendar. I mean, I'll put everything in my calendar because then it's part of my day. So, if I'm going to walk or go out for a walk or if I'm going to run or do the Peloton or something, it's in the calendar and the time. But it's just

scheduling it and making sure somehow you get it in, and I think a good way to do that is habit stacking. So something that you do every day. You brush your teeth every day, so what could you do while you're in the bathroom brushing your teeth? Someone said they shower with the glass so it steams up, so they write their word of the day on the glass in the shower, they reflect on that. So it's like doing it while you're doing something else, it's more likely that you'll be able to continue with that on a regular basis. It doesn't have to be an hour at once each day; it could just be moments throughout the day that kind of bring you back to yourself and your purpose.

I love to be outdoors. For me, self-care is just going outside. I'm an early morning person, so, it's not uncommon for me to be up at 5:00, 5:30, quiet, you listen to the birds. I just love the mornings, it's like a fresh start, it's a clean slate. Go outside, get some natural light. Stand outside for a few minutes, take a few breaths. No matter the temperature or the weather, just get that air, greet the new day, just grateful for a new day. I try to look at it that way. I got to see a new day. I have a pretty standard bedtime, which is really important, if you could schedule a fairly regular bedtime.

People say that they have trouble falling asleep at the end of the day because they're going all day. Nurses, certainly, even on their days off, are very busy as well. Everybody's so busy, and so take five minutes, 10 minutes before you go to bed, and I call it a brain dump, write down all these things that are going through your head and put your thoughts to bed on paper, so to speak, and get them out, you don't have to worry about remembering them. Put it to bed, and then go to bed.

I like to read, I love listening to podcasts, I love my coffee, probably too much. I struggle with getting water, enough water, like many others. But I'm working on that. But I usually have a pretty good balance. My challenges with self-care are shutting off somewhere. I love what I do. I love working with nurses. I love wellness, I love everything about it, and I think there's so much that we can do to help ourselves. I really feel that there are so many things that we can do for ourselves that just can help us build our resilience and deal with challenges that we may be experiencing in a better way.

While the healthcare system's figuring out the best that they can do for the staff, it's not an excuse, that environment that they work in, they should be paid enough, they should have the resources, they should have safe patient ratios and safe staffing. But that's kind of a ... We can influence it, but it's out of our control, right? That's the organization. So, what can we do? Since we do have to show up for work. Some people have more flexibility where they can change their role a lot easier, go into different areas of nursing. And some don't have that flexibility. So if you don't, while the health system is figuring itself out, what can they do to show up and feel better about themselves each day and stay healthy?

Start to make small changes each day, and then consistently stick to them, and then see the difference that it makes. It just makes you a better person all around. When we're in a better state of mind and we're feeling better physically, mentally, emotionally, it's restorative. Self-care is restorative, and it's so important.

So this year, as we celebrate Nurses' Week, I think it's really important for nurses to pause and reflect and take a moment to really focus on their self-care. Use this week and the recognition of nurses this week to focus on yourself. Take a moment, look at your typical daily habits. You can look at them through the pillars of TAP, with enjoy food, move more, sleep soundly, build resilience, and practice self-care. Pick one thing for the week that they can do, and try to do that one item that will help them force to self-care each day for the week of Nurses' Week. And then carry that on throughout. Don't stop after Nurses' Week is over.

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