

# EXPLORING COPING MECHANISMS USED BY NURSES TO MAINTAIN MENTAL WELL-BEING IN CLINICAL PRACTICE: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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## ABSTRACT

Nurses are frequently exposed to demanding workplace conditions that may adversely affect their mental well-being. Occupational stress resulting from heavy workloads, staffing shortages, long working hours, shift duties, and the emotional demands of patient care can lead to psychological distress and burnout. Therefore, this study aimed to explore the sources of stress experienced by nurses in their professional practice and the coping mechanisms they employ to maintain their mental well-being. A qualitative exploratory descriptive research design was adopted to gain an in-depth understanding of nurses' experiences. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, targeting registered nurses with at least one year of clinical experience. Data were collected through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews using an interview guide developed from the study objectives and relevant literature. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic analysis approach. The findings revealed two major themes: Sources of Stress and Coping Strategies. Sources of stress included workplace-related factors such as heavy workload and staffing shortages, long working hours, management of critically ill patients, administrative demands, and the psychological consequences of stress, including emotional exhaustion, anxiety, fatigue, work-life imbalance, and burnout. Coping strategies included personal coping practices, social support systems, spiritual and religious coping, and resilience-building through professional growth and experience. The study concludes that while nurses encounter substantial occupational stressors, they utilize a range of adaptive coping mechanisms to preserve their mental well-being. The findings highlight the importance of supportive workplace environments, adequate staffing, mental health support services, resilience-building initiatives, and opportunities for self-care. It is recommended that healthcare organizations implement comprehensive strategies to reduce workplace stress and promote nurses' psychological well-being, ultimately enhancing both staff retention and the quality of patient care.

**Keywords:** Nurses, Mental Well-Being, Occupational Stress, Coping Mechanisms, Resilience, Qualitative Research, Thematic Analysis.

## INTRODUCTION

For healthcare workers who are in charge of providing patients with safe, efficient, and compassionate treatment, mental health is a crucial aspect of general health (Kim, 2026). Nurses are the largest professional group in the healthcare industry and are essential to preserving the continuity and quality of healthcare services (Van Grootel, 2026). However, the nursing profession is intrinsically taxing and frequently exposes people to a variety of occupational stresses, such as severe workloads, staff shortages, long working hours, shift work, emotional labor, and constant interactions with patients who are in pain, suffering, or dying (Marco, 2026). Nurses' psychological health may be severely impacted by these difficulties, which may result in stress, anxiety, burnout, emotional weariness, and decreased job satisfaction (Chen et al., 2025; Mukhtar et al., 2026). As a result, authorities and healthcare institutions around the world now place a high priority on preserving mental health. Growing patient demands, a lack of workers, and increased standards for treatment quality and safety have all contributed to the complexity of the healthcare sector (Broesbøl Futtrup Gantriis, 2026). In difficult situations, nurses often have to juggle a number of obligations while delivering high-quality treatment. According to research, extended exposure to stress at work has a detrimental effect on nurses' mental health and can lead to absenteeism, worse productivity, worse patient care, and more intents to leave the profession (Al Yahyaei et al., 2025). Additionally, occupational stress has an impact on nurses' personal lives as well as their careers, leading to emotional exhaustion, a disturbed work-life balance, and a general decline in wellbeing (Helaß et al., 2025). Understanding the elements that support nurses' mental health has become crucial as healthcare systems continue to face mounting challenges. According to recent research, nurses use a range of coping strategies to control professional stress and maintain their mental health (Lai, 2026). The

cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and social techniques people employ to control stressful circumstances and lessen their psychological effects are referred to as coping mechanisms. Exercise, relaxation methods, mindfulness exercises, positive thinking, and efficient time management are examples of personal coping strategies that have been found to be crucial for controlling stress in nurses (Balakrishnan & John Cecily, 2026). These techniques improve nurses' capacity to manage their emotions, lessen psychological discomfort, and perform well in difficult work settings. However, individual traits, job circumstances, and available support networks can all affect how successful coping mechanisms are. Social support has been found to be a crucial component in fostering mental health among nurses, in addition to individual coping mechanisms. Support from friends, family, coworkers, managers, and professional networks can offer possibilities for stress release, practical help, and emotional comfort. According to research, nurses who feel more social support are more resilient and are less likely to suffer from psychological discomfort and burnout (Al Yahyaei et al., 2025). Improved mental health outcomes and increased job satisfaction among nursing professionals have been linked to supportive workplace environments that promote cooperation, communication, and peer collaboration (Helaß et al., 2025). These results highlight how crucial it is for healthcare institutions to create supportive environments. For many nurses, spirituality and religious convictions have become crucial coping mechanisms. During times of work-related stress, faith-based activities like prayer, meditation, and spiritual contemplation may offer solace, hope, and purpose. According to recent qualitative research, spirituality fosters a feeling of purpose and inner power, which helps nurses deal with difficult clinical situations and increases emotional resilience (Hassan & Elsayed, 2025). Additionally, spiritual coping can support other

coping mechanisms by giving nurses a framework for understanding and handling challenging situations they meet in their line of work. Building resilience via experience and professional development is another important part of coping. The ability to overcome hardship and bounce back from challenging circumstances is referred to as resilience. Through exposure to difficult clinical situations, ongoing education, and the development of professional abilities, nurses frequently build resilience. Research indicates that resilience helps nurses to better handle stress at work, preserve mental stability, and continue to perform professionally in the face of hardship (Chen et al., 2025; Gao et al., 2026). Resilience has therefore come to be seen as a protective factor against psychological discomfort and burnout in the nursing field.

Although nurses' mental health issues are becoming more well recognized, most of the study that has been done thus far has concentrated on quantifying stress, burnout, and resilience. These studies include important information about the frequency and causes of psychological discomfort, but they don't go into great detail about how nurses deal with stress and use coping strategies in their day-to-day work (Jansen, 2026). When examining nurses' viewpoints, experiences, and meanings related to coping and mental health, qualitative research is especially helpful. Healthcare organizations can create interventions that are sensitive to the requirements of nurses and promote the creation of good work environments by taking into account these experiences (Pelasoja, 2026). Thus, the purpose of this qualitative study is to investigate the primary sources of stress that nurses encounter in their work and the coping strategies they employ to preserve their mental health. The project aims to produce a deeper knowledge of the professional, social, spiritual, and personal strategies that support psychological well-being by looking at nurses' lived experiences. For nursing administrators, healthcare organizations, and legislators looking to create evidence-based programs that support mental health, resilience, and workforce sustainability within the nursing

profession, the findings may offer insightful information.

### Problem Statement

As nurses work in extremely challenging healthcare environments with high workloads, staffing shortages, emotional labor, long working hours, and constant exposure to patient suffering, mental health is crucial (Kodom, 2026). Nurses are more likely to experience psychological distress, burnout, anxiety, and decreased job satisfaction as a result of these professional pressures (Al Maqbali, 2026). According to recent data, occupational stress continues to be a major problem in nursing environments, negatively impacting nurses' wellbeing and the standard of patient care. High levels of burnout were linked to ongoing workplace stress and insufficient organizational support, according to a systematic assessment of Pakistani nurses (Mukhtar et al., 2026). Similarly, research has demonstrated that work-related stress has a detrimental impact on nurses' resilience, professional quality of life, coping skills, and retention in the healthcare industry (Chen et al., 2025; Al Yahyaei et al., 2025). Furthermore, because of the complexity and intensity of patient care needs, critical care and emergency nurses bear particular psychological difficulties (Hassan & Elsayed, 2025; Kamari et al., 2025).

It is still necessary to comprehend how nurses actively manage these stressors and preserve their mental health in routine clinical practice, even though the incidence of occupational stress among nurses has been extensively reported. Resilience, social support, emotional control, spirituality, and self-care practices may help nurses deal with challenges at work, according to emerging research; however, the efficacy and application of these strategies differ among people and environments (Chen et al., 2025; Helaß et al., 2025). The majority of current research has been on quantifying stress, burnout, and resilience; however, there is little qualitative data about nurses' actual coping experiences and the methods they take to maintain their mental health. Examining these experiences can help healthcare organizations provide supportive treatments, build

resilience, and encourage a workforce of nurses who are psychologically well. Thus, the purpose of this study is to investigate the main causes of stress that nurses face as well as the coping strategies they employ to preserve their mental health.

### Research Objective

To explore the coping mechanisms used by nurses to maintain their mental well-being in clinical practice.

### Research Question

RQ1. What are the major sources of stress affecting nurses in their professional practice?

RQ2. What coping mechanisms do nurses use to maintain their mental well-being?

### Literature Review

Because of the constant exposure to physical, mental, and psychological pressures, nursing is widely acknowledged as one of the most demanding healthcare occupations. Heavy workloads, staffing shortages, lengthy workdays, and the duty of caring for critically sick patients are commonplace in settings where nurses work. Nurses are more likely to experience stress, burnout, anxiety, and emotional weariness as a result of these work-related pressures. According to recent data, professional stress is still a significant issue for nurses and has a detrimental impact on both the wellbeing of nurses and the standard of patient care. According to a systematic assessment of Pakistani nurses, persistent workplace stress, inadequate organizational support, and excessive job expectations are all linked to a high prevalence of burnout (Mukhtar et al., 2026). According to Helaß et al. (2025), nurses believe that workload pressure and understaffing are major causes of psychological strain and stress at work. In recent years, there has been a growing focus on the psychological effects of professional stress on nurses. Long-term exposure to stressful work conditions has been associated with anxiety, decreased job satisfaction, emotional weariness, and greater intentions to leave. According to Chen et al. (2025), nurses who were under a lot of stress at work showed less resilience and worse psychological outcomes than

those who could cope well. According to Al Yahyaei et al. (2025), occupational stress also had a negative impact on nurses' professional quality of life and increased their intents to quit. These results imply that unmanaged workplace stress may have an impact on healthcare service delivery and workforce retention in addition to negatively affecting nurses' mental health.

Nurses use a range of coping strategies to manage job stress in order to maintain their professional and personal well-being. Coping mechanisms are behavioral, emotional, and cognitive techniques used to control stressful circumstances and lessen their psychological effects. Exercise, self-care routines, mindfulness, relaxation techniques, and positive thinking are examples of personal coping strategies that have been extensively documented as successful methods for handling occupational stress. In a mixed-methods study, Balakrishnan and JohnCecily (2026) discovered that nurses who maintained work-life balance and actively participated in self-care activities reported lower stress levels and higher emotional well-being. These results imply that personal coping mechanisms are crucial for fostering resilience and shielding nurses from the negative consequences of job stress. Another important aspect affecting nurses' capacity to handle work-related difficulties is social support. Support from family, coworkers, managers, and professional networks offers chances for stress release, practical help, and emotional comfort. According to Helaß et al. (2025), nurses' resilience and mental health are positively impacted by supportive working connections. Additionally, nurses who felt more social support showed more resilience and less burnout, according to Al Yahyaei et al. (2025). These results highlight how crucial it is to create cooperative and encouraging work environments in order to improve nurses' mental health.

Spirituality and religion coping are significant coping strategies found in the literature. Nurses may turn to spiritual and religious traditions for solace when faced with emotionally taxing situations involving suffering, death, and moral quandaries. According to Hassan and Elsayed (2025), critical care nurses' emotional stability and resilience were enhanced by prayer, introspection,

and religious convictions. Through spiritual coping, nurses can acquire a sense of purpose that promotes their mental health and find meaning in challenging situations. These results imply that spirituality could be a valuable psychological tool for nurses who work in stressful healthcare settings. A key idea in comprehending how nurses deal with stress at work is resilience. The capacity to overcome hardship, adjust to difficulties, and preserve mental health in the face of adverse situations is referred to as resilience. According to research by Chen et al. (2025), resilience lessens the detrimental effects of occupational stress on mental health by moderating the link between workplace stress and coping outcomes. In a similar vein, Gao et al. (2026) found that professional experience, adjustment to workplace difficulties, and ongoing education help nurses build resilience. These results show that resilience is a dynamic process that may be enhanced by experience and nurturing surroundings, in addition to being a personal trait.

The majority of the literature currently in publication depends on quantitative methods that concentrate on assessing stress levels, burnout, and resilience, despite mounting evidence on workplace stress and coping mechanisms among nurses. Although these studies offer useful statistical data, they don't fully explain how nurses deal with stress and employ coping strategies in their day-to-day work. Therefore, a more thorough examination of nurses' life experiences, attitudes, and coping mechanisms requires qualitative research. Healthcare organizations may be able to create customized interventions that promote nurses' mental health and improve workforce sustainability by having a better understanding of these experiences. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate the causes of stress that nurses encounter and the coping strategies they employ to preserve their mental health while working in clinical settings.

## Research Methodology

### Research Design

To fully comprehend the sources of stress that nurses encounter and the coping strategies they apply to preserve their mental health, a qualitative

exploratory descriptive research approach will be utilized. Because it enables participants to express their experiences, perspectives, and coping mechanisms in their own words, this methodology produces rich and comprehensive insights into the subject being studied. Understanding nurses' actual experiences in their typical clinical settings will be the main goal of the study.

### Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling was used in the study to find participants who can offer rich and pertinent data about job stress and coping mechanisms. Participants were registered nurses who currently work in healthcare facilities and have at least a year of clinical experience. The selection of participants was based on their capacity to offer significant insights pertaining to the goals of the study. Until data saturation is reached, which should happen with roughly 10–15 individuals, data collecting continued.

### Research Instrument

A semi-structured interview guide created from the study's objectives and pertinent literature was used to gather data. The interview guide included open-ended questions intended to probe into the main causes of stress experienced by nurses and the coping strategies they use to preserve their mental health. Individual interviews were performed, audio recorded with participants' permission,

### Ethical Consideration

Written informed consent was sought before to participation, and participants received comprehensive information about the study's objectives. Participants were free to leave the study at any moment without facing any repercussions, and participation was completely voluntary. Participants' identities were replaced with codes to ensure confidentiality and anonymity, and all information gathered was safely preserved and used only for study. Throughout the study process, the researcher made sure that participants are treated with dignity, respect, and consideration.

## Data Analysis

### Thematic Analysis:

#### Theme 1: Sources of Stress

This issue covers the range of psychological and occupational stressors that nurses face in their line of work. Participants talked about how the demands of their jobs, such as heavy workloads, a lack of personnel, working shifts, and being

around critically ill patients, put them under a lot of stress and had a detrimental effect on their mental health. The subject illustrates how employment conditions affect nurses' mental and physical well-being by highlighting both the exterior causes of stress and their internal psychological effects.



#### Sub-Theme 1: Occupational Stressors

The physical, emotional, and psychological pressure people endure when job demands surpass their coping mechanisms and available resources is referred to as workplace stress. Heavy workloads, insufficient staffing, lengthy workdays, managing critically sick patients, and stringent paperwork requirements are frequently linked to job stress for nurses. Participants frequently stated that these elements made it challenging to carry out their responsibilities efficiently while preserving their personal wellbeing.

*P1: There are days when we have too many patients and too few nurses, making it impossible to provide the level of care we want to give. P3: Working consecutive night shifts leaves me physically exhausted and mentally drained before the next shift even begins.*

The perspectives of the participants are consistent with current nursing studies showing that organizational expectations, staffing shortages, and workload pressures continue to be key causes of occupational stress among nurses. According to Helaß et al. (2025), high job expectations, inadequate staffing, and a lack of organizational resources are important workplace stresses that have an impact on nurses' well-being. In a similar vein, Chen et al. (2025) discovered that nurses' resilience and coping skills are negatively impacted by long-term exposure to occupational stress. According to the participants' testimonies, occupational stress affects nurses' mental health cumulatively since it encompasses not only direct patient care but also administrative

responsibilities and the emotional difficulties of caring for critically ill patients.

*P4: Managing critically ill patients while completing endless documentation often feels overwhelming and emotionally exhausting.*

In conclusion, workload demands, staffing limitations, shift schedules, patient acuity, and administrative duties have been identified as the main causes of job stress for nurses. These pressures led to emotional and physical strain in addition to having an impact on participants' job performance. The results indicate that in order to lower stress and foster a healthier work environment for nurses, healthcare companies must address systemic workplace challenges.

### **Sub-Theme 2: Psychological Stressors**

The emotional, cognitive, and physical effects that result from extended exposure to job stressors are referred to as the psychological impact of occupational stress. Nurses routinely face circumstances that test their emotional fortitude, which can result in burnout, weariness, anxiety, and frustration. Participants talked about how ongoing obligations at work interfered with their personal life and negatively impacted their mental health.

*P4: After particularly stressful shifts, I often feel emotionally exhausted and have little energy left for my family.*

*P5: Sometimes I become anxious before work because I already know the shift will be understaffed and overwhelming.*

Narratives from participants show the significant psychological effects of work-related stress. According to research by Helaß et al. (2025), when

occupational demands surpass available resources, nurses often face psychological anguish, emotional exhaustion, and mental health issues. Additionally, new research indicates that long-term stress at work is a major factor in burnout, worse job satisfaction, and worse psychological outcomes for nurses (Chen et al., 2025). The experiences of the participants show how occupational stress affects relationships, emotional stability, and general quality of life outside of the medical setting.

*P2: The constant pressure eventually makes you feel burned out, no matter how much you enjoy nursing.*

In conclusion, burnout, emotional exhaustion, worry, weariness, and work-life imbalance are only a few of the psychological effects that occupational stress has on nurses. These results emphasize the need of putting in place workplace measures that promote nurses' mental health and lessen the negative consequences of long-term professional stress.

### **Theme 2: Coping Mechanisms**

This theme examines the different tactics nurses use to manage professional stress and preserve their mental health. Participants discussed a variety of coping strategies that supported their ability to maintain professional performance, manage emotional stress, and develop resilience. Personal self-care routines, social support systems, spiritual and religious resources, and resilience-building experiences gained via career advancement were some of these coping mechanisms.



### Sub – theme 1: Personal Coping Mechanisms:

Individual acts and behaviors used to control stress and preserve psychological health are referred to as personal coping techniques. Participants talked about using self-care practices like time management, physical activity, relaxing methods, and preserving a positive work-life balance. Despite obstacles at work, these techniques allowed them to maintain their professional obligations, lower stress levels, and regain emotional control.

*P4: I make sure to set aside time for myself after work, even if it is just a short walk or some quiet time at home.*

*P2: Regular exercise helps me release stress and return to work feeling more focused and energized.*

According to the participants' testimonies, personal coping mechanisms are essential for reducing the detrimental impacts of professional stress. According to recent studies, nurses' resilience and psychological well-being are greatly enhanced by self-care routines, physical exercise, and emotional control (Chen et al., 2025). In a similar vein, nurses who actively participated in leisure activities and upheld work-life boundaries reported feeling less stressed and more emotionally stable (Balakrishnan and JohnCecily, 2026). The experiences of the participants show that deliberate self-care practices can operate as safeguards against emotional weariness and burnout.

*P7: Practicing mindfulness and positive thinking helps me stay calm, especially during difficult shifts.*

To sum up, personal coping mechanisms have become crucial instruments for handling stress at work. Participants were able to sustain their mental health and continue to perform well in challenging healthcare settings by practicing self-care, exercise, relaxation, and efficient time management.

### Sub-Theme 2: Coping Mechanisms Through Social Support

The term "social support" describes the practical, emotional, and informational help that one receives from friends, family, coworkers, superiors, and professional networks. Participants highlighted how having supportive relationships enabled them to discuss emotional burdens, manage stressful situations, and feel understood during difficult times in their careers.

*P5: Talking to my family after a difficult shift helps me process my emotions and feel supported.*

*P8: My colleagues understand exactly what I am going through, and their encouragement makes a huge difference.*

The results show that social support is a crucial protective factor against work-related stress. Strong interpersonal ties and supportive working interactions have been linked to increased psychological well-being, decreased burnout, and greater resilience among nurses, according to

research (Helaß et al., 2025). Additionally, research has demonstrated that by promoting a sense of belonging and lowering feelings of loneliness at work, cooperation and supportive leadership contribute to improved coping outcomes (Al Yahyaei et al., 2025). Participants frequently emphasized the importance of professional and emotional assistance in assisting them in overcoming obstacles at work.

*P9: Knowing that my supervisor is approachable and willing to help makes stressful situations easier to handle.* In conclusion, social support was found to be an effective coping strategy that improved participants' capacity to control stress and preserve mental health. During trying times, supportive relationships with family, coworkers, and superiors offered consolation, encouragement, and useful help.

### Sub-Theme 3: Coping with Spirituality and Religion

The application of faith-based principles, practices, and beliefs to reduce stress and find emotional solace is known as spiritual and religious coping. In order to deal with the demands of the workplace and preserve a feeling of optimism, purpose, and inner serenity, participants talked about turning to prayer, spiritual contemplation, and religious rituals.

*P10: Whenever I feel overwhelmed, I pray and ask for strength to continue caring for my patients.*

*P7: My faith reminds me that every challenge has a purpose, which helps me stay positive.*

The experiences of the participants are consistent with mounting evidence that spirituality and religious practices can support healthcare professionals' mental health and resilience. According to recent research, faith-based coping helps people find purpose in difficult circumstances, improves emotional control, and offers psychological comfort (Hassan & Elsayed, 2025). Additionally, among nurses working in demanding clinical settings, spirituality has been linked to increased resilience and decreased psychological distress (Gao et al., 2026). These results suggest that spiritual resources can be useful coping mechanisms in times of work-related stress.

*P5: Taking a few moments for spiritual reflection during the day helps me regain emotional balance.*

In conclusion, individuals' ability to manage occupational stress was much aided by spiritual and religious coping. Nurses discovered emotional fortitude, resiliency, and a revitalized sense of purpose in their work via prayer, faith, and introspection.

### Sub-Theme 4: Developing Professional Development and Resilience

The process by which nurses gain emotional fortitude, flexibility, and self-assurance by experience and education is known as "building resilience and professional growth." Participants clarified that over time, they were able to develop greater resilience and improved stress management skills due to frequent exposure to professional obstacles.

*P1: With experience, I have learned not to let stressful situations affect me as much as they did when I first started nursing.*

*P3: Every difficult situation teaches me something new and makes me stronger professionally.*

According to the participants' viewpoints, resilience is a talent that is gained via ongoing learning and adaptability rather than a fixed attribute. Nurses develop resilience through professional experience, reflective practice, and exposure to difficult clinical settings, according to recent qualitative research (Hassan & Elsayed, 2025). In a similar vein, Gao et al. (2026) discovered that nurses' enhanced confidence, emotional stability, and efficient stress management are all influenced by their ability to adjust to the demands of their jobs. Resilience, according to the participants, is a dynamic process that helps them better manage the demands of their jobs.

*P7: The challenges I have faced throughout my career have helped me become more confident in handling stress.*

In conclusion, professional development and resilience were found to be crucial coping strategies that allowed participants to adjust to obstacles at work and preserve their mental health. Nurses improved their capacity to handle challenging circumstances and carry on delivering

top-notch patient care through experience, education, and personal growth.

### Conclusion

The results of this study demonstrate that a significant amount of workplace stress is experienced by nurses due to a variety of factors, including severe workloads, staffing shortages, long working hours, managing critically sick patients, and numerous administrative obligations. Significant psychological effects, such as emotional tiredness, anxiety, physical depletion, work-life imbalance, and burnout, were observed to result from these occupational pressures. The study shows that the demanding nature of the nursing profession includes significant emotional and psychological demands in addition to physical responsibilities, which can have an impact on both professional performance and personal well-being. The experiences of the participants support the body of research showing that job stress is still a major issue in healthcare settings and that more organizational attention is needed to protect nurses' mental health.

Nurses use a range of adaptive coping strategies to preserve their mental health in spite of these difficulties. In addition to social support from family, coworkers, and superiors, personal coping mechanisms including self-care, exercise, mindfulness, and positive thinking have emerged as important tools for stress management. Additionally, nurses' capacity to adjust to the demands of the workplace was increased by professional development and acquired experience, while spiritual and religious practices offered emotional solace and resilience. When taken as a whole, these results imply that preserving mental health is a continuous process including social, spiritual, professional, and personal resources. Therefore, to improve nurses' well-being, increase job satisfaction, and guarantee the provision of high-quality patient care, healthcare companies should support mental health initiatives, create supportive work environments, and bolster resilience-building programs.

### Recommendations

- Maintain adequate nurse-to-patient ratios to reduce workload-related stress.
- Implement flexible scheduling and limit excessive working hours to improve work-life balance.
- Provide accessible mental health services, including counseling and psychological support programs.
- Foster a supportive work environment through effective leadership, teamwork, and open communication.
- Develop organizational policies aimed at preventing burnout and promoting nurses' mental health.

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