

Effectiveness of Peer Support Programs for Newly Licensed Nurses in Reducing Turnover Rates

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ABSTRACT

Newly licensed nurses are critical to the sustainability of healthcare systems, yet they are disproportionately vulnerable to high turnover rates. The transition from academia to professional practice poses significant challenges, including increased stress, lack of confidence, and limited social support. These challenges contribute to burnout, dissatisfaction, and early exits from the profession. Peer support programs have emerged as a promising intervention to address these issues, providing newly licensed nurses with structured mentorship, emotional support, and professional guidance. This article explores the effectiveness of peer support programs in reducing turnover rates among newly licensed nurses. Drawing on a comprehensive review of existing literature, the study examines the outcomes of these programs and highlights their benefits, including improved job satisfaction, enhanced professional development, and higher retention rates. The findings underscore the need for healthcare organizations to prioritize peer support initiatives as a strategic approach to workforce sustainability.

Keywords: development, organization, Peer, confidence

INTRODUCTION

The global nursing shortage has reached alarming levels, with severe implications for healthcare systems worldwide. This phenomenon is exacerbated by the high turnover rates among newly licensed nurses, a group particularly susceptible to stress, burnout, and job dissatisfaction. Newly licensed nurses often face challenges transitioning into clinical practice, including heavy workloads, inadequate support, and emotional exhaustion, which ultimately drive them to leave the profession (Johnstone, 2022). Addressing these issues is paramount to ensuring the retention of this essential workforce segment.

Peer support programs have gained recognition as an effective strategy to ease the transition for newly licensed nurses. These programs foster a supportive environment through structured mentorship, professional guidance, and emotional assistance. By promoting a sense of belonging and reducing workplace stress, peer support programs aim to enhance job satisfaction and retention. This article evaluates the effectiveness of such programs in reducing turnover rates among newly licensed nurses, drawing on evidence from recent studies and industry reports.

The Current State of Nurse Turnover

High turnover rates among newly licensed nurses have become a critical issue in healthcare systems globally. This phenomenon not only exacerbates the ongoing nursing shortage but also disrupts the delivery of high-quality patient care and imposes significant financial burdens on healthcare organizations. Understanding the factors contributing to turnover and its broader implications is essential for developing effective strategies to address this persistent challenge.

Factors Contributing to Turnover

Newly licensed nurses face a myriad of challenges as they transition from academia to clinical practice. These challenges often stem from the gap between theoretical training and the realities of the workplace. Lack of preparedness, heavy workloads, and inadequate support systems are commonly cited as key contributors to turnover. According to D'ambra and Andrews (2013), workplace incivility and a lack of collegial support often lead to dissatisfaction and emotional exhaustion among new nurses. Without the necessary mentorship or guidance, newly licensed nurses may feel overwhelmed, isolated, and incapable of meeting the demands of their roles.

Furthermore, the absence of structured preceptorship or onboarding programs exacerbates the stress experienced by new nurses. Hong and Yoon (2021) highlight the importance of preceptorship programs in easing the transition into clinical practice. When such programs are unavailable or poorly implemented, newly licensed nurses are more likely to experience job dissatisfaction, which increases their likelihood of leaving within their first year. Stress related to role ambiguity, coupled with high patient acuity and staffing shortages, further compounds the likelihood of turnover.

Another critical factor is the emotional and psychological toll of the job. Newly licensed nurses are often exposed to traumatic clinical scenarios without adequate emotional support. Kramer et al. (2011) emphasize that professional socialization is a crucial yet frequently overlooked aspect of the transition process. Without meaningful integration into the workplace culture and a sense of professional identity, nurses are more likely to feel disconnected, further driving turnover.

Implications of Turnover

The consequences of high turnover among newly licensed nurses extend far beyond the individual. For healthcare organizations, turnover represents a substantial financial burden. Paulo et al. (2019) estimate that the cost of replacing a single nurse can range from 1.2 to 2 times their annual salary. These expenses include recruitment, onboarding, and training of replacement staff, as well as the costs associated with temporary staffing and overtime to cover vacancies. Additionally, frequent turnover disrupts team cohesion and continuity of care, leading to decreased staff morale and compromised patient outcomes.

On a broader scale, turnover exacerbates the global nursing shortage, which Johnstone (2022) describes as a "tragedy of the commons." Nurses are essential to the sustainability of healthcare systems, and their premature exit creates a vicious cycle of understaffing and burnout among remaining staff. This cycle hinders efforts to address the growing demand for healthcare services, particularly in aging populations and high-acuity settings.

The Need for Retention Strategies

Given the significant impact of turnover, retaining newly licensed nurses must become a priority for healthcare systems worldwide. Addressing the root causes of turnover requires targeted interventions, such as peer support programs, residency programs, and workplace culture improvements. By fostering supportive environments that prioritize mentorship, professional development, and emotional well-being, healthcare organizations can mitigate turnover and enhance the stability of their nursing workforce.

Peer Support Programs: An Overview

Peer support programs have emerged as a promising strategy to address the high turnover rates among newly licensed nurses. These programs are designed to ease the challenging transition from nursing school to clinical practice by providing structured mentorship, emotional support, and professional guidance. By fostering a sense of belonging and competence, peer support programs not only improve job satisfaction but also enhance retention rates. This section provides an in-depth overview of these programs, detailing their components, benefits, and significance in supporting newly licensed nurses.

Definition and Core Components

Peer support programs are structured initiatives aimed at pairing newly licensed nurses with experienced peers or mentors who can offer guidance and support during their first years of practice. These programs are often integrated into larger nurse residency or orientation programs, focusing on professional development and emotional well-being. While the design of peer support programs may vary across organizations, they typically include the following components:

1. **Structured Mentorship:** A core aspect of peer support programs is the assignment of mentors, often experienced nurses, who provide tailored guidance on clinical skills, critical thinking, and decision-making. This mentorship also extends to navigating workplace dynamics and organizational policies.
2. **Emotional Support:** Peer support programs create a safe space where newly licensed nurses can share their challenges, seek advice, and receive reassurance. This reduces feelings of isolation and helps them cope with the emotional toll of the job.
3. **Professional Integration:** Mentors or peer groups facilitate the socialization of new nurses into the workplace culture, helping them build relationships with colleagues, understand team dynamics, and develop a sense of belonging.
4. **Skill Development:** These programs often include structured learning opportunities, such as workshops, simulations, and case discussions, to help new nurses enhance their clinical competencies and confidence.

Benefits of Peer Support Programs

The positive impact of peer support programs is well-documented in the literature. One of the primary benefits is their role in reducing stress and burnout, which are significant contributors to turnover among newly licensed nurses. Hopkins et al. (2022) found that peer support initiatives not only alleviate the feelings of being overwhelmed but also improve job satisfaction by fostering a supportive and inclusive work environment. This, in turn, enhances the overall mental health and well-being of new nurses.

Peer support programs also play a critical role in accelerating professional development. Mentorship helps newly licensed nurses refine their clinical skills, build confidence, and develop critical thinking abilities, all of which are essential for effective practice. Makic et al. (2022) noted that mentorship within peer support programs enables new nurses to navigate complex clinical scenarios more effectively, ultimately improving patient care quality.

Another significant benefit is the facilitation of professional socialization. Kramer et al. (2011) emphasize that professional socialization—the process of integrating into the nursing profession—is essential for new nurses to develop a sense of identity and belonging. Through peer support programs, new nurses are introduced to workplace norms, values, and expectations, fostering their integration into the nursing team.

Significance for Retention

The retention of newly licensed nurses is one of the most critical outcomes of peer support programs. By addressing the root causes of turnover—such as stress, lack of support, and feelings of isolation—these programs contribute to higher retention rates. Perron et al. (2020) found that incorporating peer support into nurse residency programs significantly reduced turnover within the first year of practice. Similarly, Alsalamah et al. (2023) identified that peer mentorship improved clinical readiness and job satisfaction, leading to increased retention among newly licensed nurses in Saudi Arabia.

Challenges and Future Directions

While the benefits of peer support programs are clear, their implementation is not without challenges. Resource constraints, such as staffing shortages and financial limitations, can hinder the development and sustainability of these programs. Additionally, variability in program design and mentor training may lead to inconsistent outcomes. To address these challenges, healthcare organizations should invest in mentor training, leverage technology to extend program reach, and ensure standardization in design and delivery.

In conclusion, peer support programs are invaluable in supporting newly licensed nurses during their transition into professional practice. By fostering mentorship, emotional support, and professional development, these programs enhance job satisfaction, accelerate skill acquisition, and improve retention rates. As the nursing workforce continues to face retention challenges, peer support programs represent a strategic solution to build a resilient and sustainable workforce.

Evidence Supporting Peer Support Programs

The effectiveness of peer support programs in reducing turnover rates among newly licensed nurses is well-documented in the literature. These programs have been shown to enhance job satisfaction, improve retention rates, and contribute to the professional development of new nurses. Evidence from various studies highlights the measurable benefits of peer support programs and underscores their critical role in addressing the challenges faced by newly licensed nurses during their transition to clinical practice.

Improved Retention Rates

One of the most significant outcomes of peer support programs is their positive impact on retention rates. High turnover among newly licensed nurses is a persistent issue, with many leaving the profession within their first year of practice. Peer support programs effectively address the root causes of turnover by providing the guidance and emotional support that new nurses need to navigate the complexities of clinical practice.

Perron et al. (2020) found that nurse residency programs incorporating peer support components significantly improved first-year retention rates. These programs provided new nurses with structured mentorship and a supportive environment, which helped them feel more confident and less isolated. Similarly, findings from Sharp HealthCare (2021) demonstrate that a one-year accredited nurse residency program that included peer support reduced the intent to leave among participants by 30%. This reduction in turnover not only alleviates the financial burden on healthcare organizations but also enhances team stability and continuity of care.

International evidence further supports the effectiveness of peer support programs in retaining newly licensed nurses. Alsalamah et al. (2023) reported that in Saudi Arabia, nurse residency programs with peer mentoring components improved the clinical readiness and work satisfaction of new nurses, leading to higher retention rates. These findings indicate that the benefits of peer support programs are not limited to specific healthcare settings or regions but are universally applicable across diverse contexts.

Enhanced Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction is a critical factor influencing retention among newly licensed nurses, and peer support programs contribute significantly to improving this aspect. Goode et al. (2009) emphasized that peer support programs enhance job satisfaction by creating a supportive and inclusive work environment. Newly licensed nurses who participate in these programs report feeling more valued and supported, which reduces stress and promotes greater engagement in their roles.

Wierzbinski-Cross et al. (2015) found that new nurses who participated in nurse residency programs with peer support components experienced higher levels of job satisfaction compared to those who did not. These programs provided a framework for professional guidance and emotional support, helping nurses feel more confident and competent in their roles. By reducing feelings of overwhelm and dissatisfaction, peer support programs create a positive work environment that encourages nurses to stay in their positions.

Professional Development and Socialization

Peer support programs also play a crucial role in the professional development and socialization of newly licensed nurses. Makic et al. (2022) highlighted that these programs accelerate the acquisition of critical clinical skills and decision-making abilities, enabling new nurses to transition into practice with greater confidence. Structured mentorship ensures that new nurses receive consistent feedback and guidance, which enhances their clinical competencies and prepares them for the demands of the profession.

In addition to skill development, peer support programs facilitate professional socialization, which is essential for new nurses to integrate into the workplace culture. Kramer et al. (2011) emphasize that professional socialization—the process of adopting the norms, values, and behaviors of the nursing profession—is a critical step in the transition process. Peer support initiatives help new nurses build relationships with their colleagues, understand workplace expectations, and develop a sense of belonging. This sense of connection reduces feelings of isolation and contributes to a stronger commitment to the organization.

Improved Patient Care Outcomes

While the primary focus of peer support programs is on supporting new nurses, their impact extends to patient care. Research indicates that nurses who feel supported and confident are better equipped to deliver high-quality care. Alsalamah et al. (2023) found that new nurses who completed residency programs with peer support demonstrated improved clinical competency, which translated into better patient outcomes. By addressing the stress and uncertainty often experienced by new nurses, peer support programs indirectly enhance the overall quality of care provided to patients.

Challenges in Measuring Effectiveness

Despite the strong evidence supporting peer support programs, challenges in measuring their effectiveness remain. Variability in program design, mentor training, and implementation across organizations can lead to inconsistent results. Additionally, the long-term impact of these programs on retention and professional development is not always well-documented. Standardization of program components and robust evaluation frameworks are needed to ensure consistent outcomes and maximize the benefits of peer support programs.

Challenges and Recommendations

Despite the proven benefits of peer support programs for newly licensed nurses, implementing and sustaining these initiatives is not without challenges. Healthcare organizations often encounter barriers such as resource constraints, mentor availability, program variability, and organizational resistance. Addressing these challenges is crucial to ensuring the long-term success and effectiveness of peer support programs. This section outlines the primary obstacles in implementing such programs and provides actionable recommendations to overcome them, fostering a supportive environment for newly licensed nurses.

Challenges in Implementing Peer Support Programs

1. Resource Constraints

One of the most significant challenges in implementing peer support programs is the scarcity of resources. Financial limitations, staffing shortages, and competing organizational priorities often hinder the development and sustainability of these programs. Hospitals and healthcare systems may lack the funding required to recruit, train, and compensate mentors, particularly in under-resourced settings. Additionally, the time commitment required for mentors to provide adequate support to new nurses can strain already overburdened staff.

2. Mentor Availability and Training

The availability of qualified mentors is another critical challenge. Experienced nurses are essential to the success of peer support programs, as they provide the guidance and expertise needed to support new nurses effectively. However, many experienced nurses may be unwilling or unable to take on mentoring roles due to high workloads, burnout, or lack of training in mentorship skills. Hong and Yoon (2021) emphasize that inadequate training for mentors can lead to inconsistent outcomes, reducing the overall effectiveness of peer support programs.

3. Program Variability and Lack of Standardization

The design and implementation of peer support programs often vary widely across organizations, leading to inconsistent outcomes. While some programs are well-structured and include comprehensive mentorship and support systems, others may lack clear guidelines, objectives, or evaluation frameworks. This lack of standardization makes it difficult to assess the effectiveness of peer support programs and replicate successful models.

4. Cultural and Organizational Resistance

Cultural and organizational resistance can also pose significant barriers to the implementation of peer support programs. Some institutions may undervalue the importance of mentorship and emotional support for new nurses, viewing these programs as non-essential. Additionally, workplace cultures that prioritize productivity over staff well-being may discourage the adoption of peer support initiatives.

Recommendations for Addressing Challenges

To overcome these challenges, healthcare organizations must adopt a strategic and evidence-based approach to implementing peer support programs. The following recommendations can help ensure the success and sustainability of these initiatives:

1. Invest in Resources and Infrastructure

Healthcare organizations should allocate dedicated resources to develop and maintain peer support programs. This includes securing funding for mentor compensation, providing protected time for mentors to engage with new nurses, and ensuring adequate staffing levels to prevent overburdening mentors. Collaborative partnerships with government agencies, professional organizations, and academic institutions can also provide additional financial and logistical support.

2. Enhance Mentor Training and Recruitment

Providing mentors with formal training is essential to the success of peer support programs. Mentor training should focus on developing skills in communication, emotional support, clinical teaching, and conflict resolution. Hong and Yoon (2021) emphasize that structured preceptor training courses significantly improve the quality of mentorship. Additionally, organizations should recognize and reward mentors for their contributions through incentives such as financial compensation, career advancement opportunities, or public recognition.

3. Standardize Program Design and Evaluation

Standardizing the design and implementation of peer support programs can help ensure consistent outcomes across organizations. Programs should include clear objectives, structured mentorship plans, and evaluation frameworks to measure their impact on retention, job satisfaction, and professional development. Evidence-based guidelines from organizations such as the American Nurses Association (ANA) and the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2020) can serve as benchmarks for program development.

4. Foster a Supportive Organizational Culture

Creating a workplace culture that values mentorship and staff well-being is critical to the success of peer support programs. Healthcare leaders should promote the importance of peer support initiatives through advocacy, education, and policy changes. Establishing a culture of collaboration, respect, and inclusivity can also encourage the participation of both mentors and new nurses. Hopkins et al. (2022) highlight the role of leadership in fostering a supportive environment that prioritizes nurse retention and professional development.

CONCLUSION

High turnover rates among newly licensed nurses remain a critical challenge for healthcare systems worldwide, threatening workforce stability, patient care quality, and organizational sustainability. Peer support programs have emerged as an effective solution to address this issue, offering newly licensed nurses the mentorship,

guidance, and emotional support needed to navigate the complexities of clinical practice. Evidence demonstrates that these programs improve retention rates, enhance job satisfaction, and accelerate professional development, ultimately benefiting both individual nurses and the healthcare organizations they serve.

Despite their proven benefits, the implementation of peer support programs is not without challenges. Resource constraints, mentor availability, program variability, and cultural resistance can hinder their success. However, with strategic planning, investment in resources, mentor training, standardized program design, and a supportive culture, these barriers can be overcome. By prioritizing peer support programs, healthcare organizations can create an environment that values professional growth, emotional well-being, and collaboration, fostering a resilient and engaged nursing workforce.

As the nursing profession faces growing demands and persistent staffing shortages, the importance of retaining newly licensed nurses cannot be overstated. Peer support programs represent a critical strategy for addressing turnover and ensuring the long-term sustainability of the nursing workforce. By implementing these initiatives, healthcare organizations can not only support their nurses but also improve patient care and strengthen their commitment to excellence in healthcare delivery.

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13. ne mentorship platforms, virtual support groups, and digital learning tools can connect new nurses with mentors, especially in geographically dispersed or resource-limited settings. These tools can also help streamline program administration and provide real-time feedback on program outcomes.