



Critical Thinking Skills: Working Smarter

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After reading the newsletter, the nursing assistant should be able to:

1. Identify practices that promote effective thinking and increase productivity.
2. Discuss how the concept of "thinking about your thinking" can be applied to improve decision-making.
3. List the steps in effective decision-making.

As Shauna, the nursing assistant, was reviewing her assignment sheet, something caught her eye. The nurse had just told her that Mrs. Tucker in 514 would be taking in only clear liquids today, in preparation for a diagnostic test. On the assignment sheet, however, it was noted that Mrs. Vincent in 516 would be on clear liquids today. Were both patients supposed to be on clear liquids, or was an error made? Shauna asked the nurse for clarification. After checking the charts, the nurse realized that she had noted clear liquids for the wrong patient, and that it was Mrs. Vincent who was having the diagnostic test. In this situation, Shauna's alertness and critical thinking skills prevented a possible error.



Critical thinking involves analyzing information to draw sound conclusions and make effective decisions. This newsletter will discuss critical thinking skills, as well as strategies to support these skills, to help you work smarter, not harder. This can help you to provide better care, be more productive, reduce errors, and increase job satisfaction.

Better Thinking, Better Decisions

As a busy nursing assistant, you have multiple demands for your attention that typically occur simultaneously—a call light is on, the nurse is asking you for information, a co-worker needs help... and that's just a few seconds in a busy day. This can

adversely affect your thinking processes and decision-making. Consciously apply some of these skills and techniques to help manage your time and promote effective decision-making:

Practice healthy lifestyle habits: You cannot be your sharpest at work if you are sleep-deprived or have poor nutrition. Aim for at least 7-8 hours of sleep per night, and eat a healthy diet based on lean protein sources, whole grains, fruits and vegetables. Eat something, whether a meal or snack, every 3-4 hours to help keep blood sugar stable, if needed. Daily exercise and avoidance of tobacco or heavy alcohol use also promote optimum functioning. Also, learn to manage stress, if this is a problem for you. It's difficult to do a good job at work when you are stressed and worrying about home or family situations.



Prepare for your day: When you arrive at work each day, spend a few minutes planning for your day. What issues are likely to crop up today? (one patient is leaving the unit for a test). What tasks must be done today? (vital signs and weights must be done and there is an inservice at 1:00). A few minutes spent planning will help your day to go more smoothly and reduce the likelihood that something will be overlooked.

Take breaks: Do you ever work through lunch and breaks, trying to get more done? Studies have shown that taking time for breaks can

actually make you more productive. When eating or drinking on break, avoid large amounts of caffeine, sugar, or other substances that can interfere with your concentration. Breaks that include exercise are even better, and can help to get your brain re-focused. Take a brisk walk whenever possible, even if it's just through the facility or around the grounds.



Communicate effectively: Effective communication assists you to give good care, accomplish goals, and meet patient needs. Much time can be wasted “cleaning up” the fallout of a communication problem. For example, the nursing assistant thought that the nurse asked him to obtain a “catheter bag” (urinary drainage bag) for a patient. He was “pretty sure” that’s what the nurse said, but both were in such a hurry that he didn’t double-check. What the nurse asked for was a condom catheter. The time spent retrieving, transporting and returning the wrong item is wasted—more work was created for the nursing assistant and the patient’s care was delayed. The message here is to ask for clarification any time you are unsure of directions or procedures. Better to ask than to re-do!

Training and education: Take advantage of any seminars, classes or courses that will help you to work smarter. It’s much better to spend an hour at an inservice to learn about a new policy, piece of equipment, or computer program than it is to derail an entire morning trying to figure it out, and possibly creating additional problems.

Avoid multi-tasking: Do you try to do too many things



at once? Numerous studies have shown that multi-tasking does not improve productivity or decision-making. In fact, it promotes errors and wastes time. Focus on one task at a time, whenever possible. If you typically work with another nursing assistant, it may make more sense for you to split some tasks, rather than to work on whatever crops up for you both. If you work by yourself, try to group activities into certain periods of the day. For example, you might check on all of your patients before breakfast and help them with morning care and meals, then proceed to linen changes, etc. This allows you to concentrate on a task, even though you’ll also need to meet the needs of patients and take care of other matters as they occur.

Think for yourself: Have confidence in your own thoughts and beliefs. Don’t allow yourself to be blindly led by others when your brain or gut is telling you otherwise. For example, if you are unsure of a written nursing or medical order because it is difficult to read, persist in getting the order clarified. Think for yourself, even when your co-worker is sure he or she can read it.

Also, whenever a situation is not as you expect, recognize this as a red flag that an error may be in the making, and investigate further. Do not make assumptions. For example, the nursing assistant places a labeled urine specimen at the desk, and is called away briefly before processing it. When she returns a few minutes later, the specimen is gone. Rather than assume, “Someone must have sent it to the lab”, she needs to determine exactly what happened to it. Perhaps the specimen was sent to the lab, or maybe it was moved or inadvertently discarded.



Think about your thinking: Do you have to be “born” a great thinker in order to develop great thinking skills? Absolutely not. Practice and focus make critical thinking skills stronger. Think about decisions you’ve made that turned out well. What factors did you consider in making these decisions? Why do you think the decisions were successful? How about decisions that didn’t turn out as well? Analyze those, as well.

Components of good decision-making include:

- *Determining what the problem or issue is*— Focus on the issue so you understand it clearly. Sometimes decisions aren’t successful because the root issue has not been identified. For example, Kathy is a nursing assistant who is considering going back to college, but she’s not sure if she should. What exactly is Kathy’s issue? Is this a difficult decision because she doesn’t know if she can afford it, or because she isn’t sure what she wants to study, or because she has family commitments? Only Kathy can answer those questions.
- *Collecting facts about the issue*— Seek out information that will help in the decision-making process. Once Kathy has identified the issue, she should collect information, such as sources of financial aid or career testing.
- *Looking at possible choices related to the issue*— Kathy should look at all possible options. What will be the outcome if she goes back to school, both good and bad? What will happen if she doesn’t?
- *Making the decision*— This can be very scary, but remember, even if you don’t make a decision, that’s still a decision. In Kathy’s case, failing to make a decision means she stays right where she is, which means a decision not to return to school.
- *And later, evaluating the decision*—Was it a good one? What would you have done differently? This step is helpful to strengthen skills and guide future decision-making.

By strengthening your critical thinking skills, you can make effective decisions and choices that will enhance your work life, as well as your personal life.