



# Intermittent Reinforcement

Improving Morale and Professionalism among the Nursing Staff

BY GENEVIÈVE M. CLAVREUL, RN, PHD

**LAST ISSUE, WE DISCUSSED HOW “LITTLE things”** can cause a nurse to reach the breaking point. In this article, I will show how little things can also work to reinvigorate a demoralized staff. One technique I have used successfully is known as intermittent reinforcement. This is a very simple, common-sense approach that doesn't require a training manual to implement. It is the practice of noticing and commenting on the positive behavior that one wants modeled in the unit. We all need to feel

appreciated, and when our manager or fellow nurses reinforce certain behaviors, we are more likely to repeat them.

It is not uncommon for managers, such as charge nurses, head nurses, DONs and even CNOs, to get caught up in the daily minutia of running the floor and focus only on correcting what is wrong. Constant criticism can push a staff to the edge of demotivation or burnout. On the other hand, rewarding positive behavior leads to a strong, supportive nursing staff.

Be genuine in your comments and observations.

A phony compliment will taint all future compliments, rewards, and kind words.



You can practice intermittent reinforcement by noticing the good things a nurse or group does during the course of their daily work, and offering rewards that range from verbal praise to a plate of homemade cookies for the staff or a bouquet of flowers to brighten the nurses lounge. These actions should be done when they are least expected. They serve to make the staff feel appreciated and can soften a challenging, hectic night on the floor. The reinforcement needs to be intermittent, otherwise people come to expect it and it's not as effective.

**You do not need to be a manager** to affect positive change. Nurses as individuals can also employ these techniques amongst themselves, and many do. You find this technique being used in units that have spontaneous potlucks for the

entire unit, or when one nurse brings in something sweet to share with everyone, or when a group of nurses have a night-cap at a favorite watering hole or eatery on a ongoing basis. These units have a higher morale than those where none of this occurs.

Is intermittent reinforcement 100 percent effective? No, but it can have a high level of effectiveness. Best of all, it is often contagious and the results can be striking when all the nurses "buy in" to this concept.

**When I became the new Director of Nursing** of a hospital in the mid-west, the staff was hard-working but came to work in uniforms that were dirty, wrinkled, mismatched, or even too-tight. This condition seems to occur far too often in hospitals these days. The appearance of the nursing staff is very important, and it is not about beauty or vanity. As nurses, we represent the quality of care to our patients. If we are slovenly and unclean, then our patients have every right to be concerned that the care they receive will be equally sloppy. Nurses whose hair, uniform and fingernails are neat and clean inspire confidence.

The hospital's CEO challenged me to do something, anything, to encourage the staff to show pride in their appearance, and by extension, pride in the hospital and their profession. I decided to implement my intermittent reinforcement technique. Over a period of time, I made an effort to notice and compliment nurses when they wore a particularly crisp, attractive uniform, or if they'd had their hair restyled, or came to work a pair of new shoes or clogs. Improved looks were always complimented, and I thanked these nurses for exhibiting pride in their profession. Gradually, there was an improvement in how the nurses presented themselves when they came to work.

At one of the first team meetings that new year, several of the unit leaders commented that the general milieu of the staff had changed. I was asked what my secret was and I shared my intermittent reinforcement technique. One of my more outspoken unit leaders commented that my technique might work well with the nurses but it wouldn't translate to the staff at large.

"Au contraire," I retorted in my native French. "Intermittent reinforcement applies to everyone." My unit leaders argued that there would always be at least one who would prove completely unresponsive to any stimulus to change. They told me about a hospital employee who, though a conscientious worker, was always in a state of dishevelment. Some of the nurses referred to him as a slob. He was on the transport staff and I had little interaction with him, but I was willing to take the challenge of helping a valuable employee develop greater professionalism.

David worked as a "gopher" in our hospital. He was kind, very gentle and rather beloved by the staff who embraced the

fact that he was mentally challenged. My opening salvo was to compliment him on his work and express my pleasure on how attentive he was to his responsibilities. Some time later I noticed that he had bought a new pair of shoes and I commented that those shoes really looked sharp, and he shyly thanked me for noticing.

Then one day as he saw me in the hallway he told me that he was going on vacation for a few weeks and I suggested that sometimes when people go away on vacation they use that time not only to relax but to try something new, like a new haircut, glasses, maybe even an updated outfit. David returned from vacation in a brand new uniform, and he told me that he had bought several so he could always be neat at work.

I was thrilled to witness David's progress, but there was still one area that needed attention: his hair, which could only be described as a rat's nest. After David had been back to work for a week or so, I made sure to compliment him on his new uniforms, his new shoes, and his general spiffy and professional look. I explained the importance to the patients that the hospital staff look clean and professional, and thanked him for doing his part. Then I gently suggested that he might want to consider a haircut in order to complete his new look.

Sometime later that week my Assistant DON called me out to the hallway in front of my office, and asked if I'd talked to David about his hair. "Well, that explains it then!" she said, just as David rounded the hallway, sporting a brand new haircut—an afro, which was an interesting look on his striking Nordic features.

**If you are ready to try your hand** at this morale and self-esteem building technique, remember the following:

- Be committed to putting forward a sustained effort – remember staff morale did not crumble in a day, so you can't expect to build it back up in a day.
- Be genuine in your comments and observations. People can spot a phony compliment, and once it has been labeled as phony, it will taint the perception of all further complements, rewards, and kind words.
- Be cognizant that there may be one or more members of the staff with a perverse need to attempt to thwart your improvement efforts – remember not to let the few spoil the positive attitudes of the many.
- Don't overuse the compliments or they will become meaningless. Hence, the term intermittent.
- Set a good example. Be the change you wish to see in your staff. **WN**



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