

Helper Secrets

The demanding and emotionally complicated nature of caregiving can trigger self-doubts and arouse strong emotions that may be embarrassing, or even mortifying. All helpers probably have some troubling thoughts and feelings related to their work that are difficult to share with others. When these troubling thoughts and feelings are kept inside and not confided, they can become invisible, internal stressors, which I call "helper secrets."

Here are some of the helper secrets I presented in *The Helper's Journey: Working With People Facing Grief, Loss, and Life-Threatening Illness*

I have "distanced" myself deliberately from some patients and families as a form of self-protection when I've felt emotionally overloaded--even though I felt they needed emotional support themselves.

I feel guilty that my caregiving has become more emotionally distant. Seems I'm protecting myself. I don't want to give so much of my energy to others' lives or my work.

I have always tended to avoid saying good-bye to my patients. I sometimes make myself do it, but am glad if they slip into a coma before I make the time to tell them how I feel about them.

Right now I feel as though I don't want to commit myself to a new patient. I'm not sure I want to take time away from my family, which is very emotionally satisfying at this time. I feel guilty about this.

I became friends with one of my patients and we often had lunch together and talked on the telephone. Then her doctor told me that she was terminal. I went on vacation and when I came back, I never called her or returned her calls. That was over a year ago and I wonder now whether she is dead. Her doctor does not know because she changed to a doctor who is with a different hospital. A week ago, I called her number, no answer. Is she dead? I feel guilty.

My inadequacy is my most personal secret and it is very frustrating to be constantly in the company of so many talented capable people.

I wish I had more confidence in myself. I feel everyone is smarter and more

knowledgeable than me.

I often feel inadequate to say those wise and empathetic things that can be so comforting. I wish I could say those special words/phrases that are "just right."

I'm always scared I won't have the technical skills to handle the patients' needs. This makes me really feel like an incompetent, bad nurse. Everyone sees me as capable, but I am afraid. I seem to do OK when faced with new situations, but I panic inside. I'm afraid of being seen as incompetent by patients--that's where it hurts most.

I feel I've really fooled the world. That I'm in this position and people think well of me. I've fooled them! I'm not that great.

I feel like I am an impostor--at work everyone looks up to me for the "latest" or "how to do it best" information. So far I have been able to wing it or come up with an acceptable answer, but I live a lot with the fear of making a big mistake in front of everyone.

I am really uncomfortable--I've been put in charge of developing a hospice program; I don't think I know enough about it; I feel like a fake trying to pull off a bubble about to burst. On top of that, if the bubble did burst, and I was exposed as a fake, I would deserve to be ridiculed, laughed at, scorned, fired, burned at the stake.

I'm afraid that if anyone found how much I don't know they'd head for the door.

There are times when I'd like to shake some of the people I work with until they scream and cry. I hate detachment as a coping mechanism. I can't reach them and I don't feel like they can hear me...So how on earth can we deal deeply with patients, family and each other?

There are times when I feel like screaming or kicking or hitting something--like I'm about to lose control--but I usually just make tight fists, breathe, and then return to the situation looking and hopefully acting calm, in control, and like a nurse.

A couple of weeks ago, I was feeling really burned out and I had a newborn who wouldn't eat, and when I gavaged (tube-fed) him, he spit all the formula back up, and I gritted my teeth and became so angry at the baby, it really scared me because I felt like I could have hit him for not eating. I waited about 15 minutes and then tried to feed him again, feeling much better, but I really felt guilty for a long time.

Sometimes I feel like I'd really like to tell a few certain arrogant doctors to stop feeding their egos through their ill patients, and that their patients aren't the only sick patients in the hospital.

Sometimes I wish I weren't a nurse--because I don't want to give anymore and don't want to have to keep constantly learning. I resent it. I want to be taken care of--me.

Sometimes I get angry and disgusted with myself for being afraid to discuss my feelings or communicate intimately and effectively about things in my life that really bother me. I always give in and never insist on being heard and cared about. I never think my feelings are as important as other people's.

I sometimes get to the point where I can't pick up a baby and hold him/her because I can't "give" any more. I'm the one that needs to be held and rocked!

I resent being the everlasting strong cheerleader and eternal caregiver and having the staff think that when I call for help---verbally and/or through body language (drooping posture, face), I'm doing it to be one of the gang. Short version: I feel misunderstood. I'm human, too!

I encourage you to look at chapter four of *The Helper's Journey* and at my other articles on helper secrets for a more complete discussion of these experiences:

Larson, D. G. (1987). Helper secrets: Internal stressors in nursing. *Journal of Psychosocial Nursing and Mental Health Services*, 25, 20-27.

Larson, D. G. (1985). Helper secrets: Invisible stressors in hospice work. *American Journal of Hospice Care*, 2, 35-40.