

# The Depths of Despair: Nurse's Reflect on the COVID-19 Pandemic

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## Problem

- Nurses during the COVID-10 pandemic experienced high stress situations daily.
- According to a recent survey by the Alabama State Nurses Association (ASNA), nurses indicated that they are exhausted and stressed out to the core.
- Leaders are challenged to recruit and retain nurses.
- The mental health of nurses has reached a critical level and a plan for assistance must be considered.

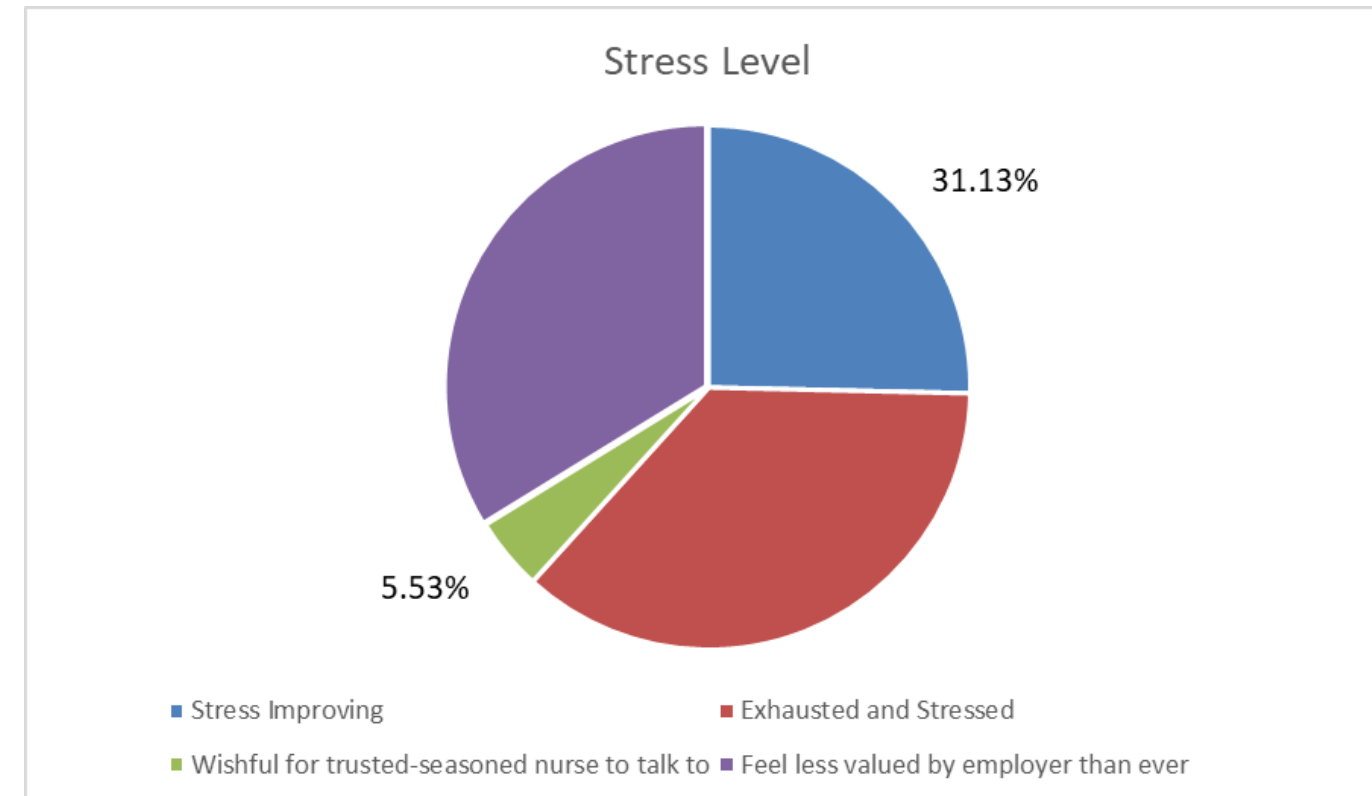


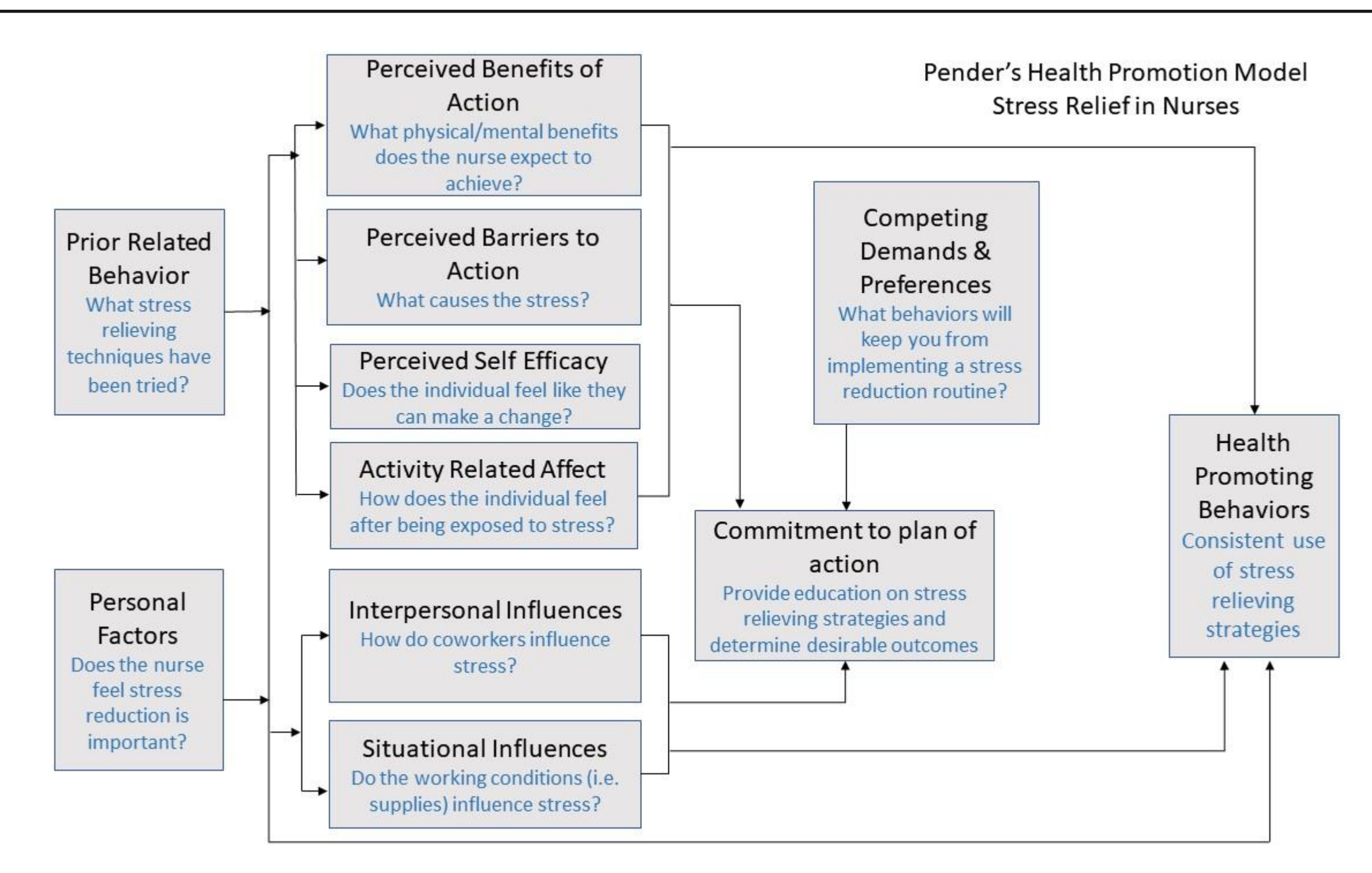
Figure 1. Q1. At this point in the pandemic, how would you rank your stress level?  
Alabama State Nurses Association. (2020). COVID-19 nurses needs assessment survey. (Unpublished survey). Montgomery, Alabama.

## Purpose

The purpose of this project was to complete a secondary qualitative analysis of survey findings from ASNA surveys taken from July 2020 to February 2021 to:

- Identify areas of stress that nurses faced during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Provide proposed recommendations to leadership to combat the negative effects of stress and improve the work environment.

## Framework



## Methods

- The ASNA performed a mixed methods survey consisting of a total of 16 quantitative and qualitative questions regarding their work experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey was offered online to active members of the ASNA from 2020 to 2021. This content analysis included only the qualitative data.
- Perform a content analysis on the qualitative data from the ASNA COVID-19 survey.
- Evaluate survey responses to extract themes from qualitative data.
- Identify causes within each theme.
- Research evidence-based practice changes.
- Provide recommendations for change to Alabama State Nurses Association.

## Acknowledgements

Team Leader, Dr. Ellen B. Buckner, PhD, RN, CNE, AE-C, FNAP  
Team Member, Mr. James Hardin, MSC, BSN, RN, NE-BC, Alabama State Nurses Association

## Results

### Mental Health

**Fear**

"Calling home every night telling my children to leave the living room, put garbage bag at the door, close all the doors, and don't come out until I'm in the bathroom. I strip down at door inside the garage bag and run to the bathroom. Once in my 17 years old comes out with lysol and sprays everything I may come in contact with. I pray my methods are safe enough."

**Burnout**

Feeling a sense of panic, due to the fact that I am at the very beginning of my career as a nurse, and am experiencing burnout even as a new grad. "fewer opportunities for decompressing activities, movie, concerts, festivals/parades/ community events, sporting events. nothing to look forward to." "I have been working OT for over a year now, I'm exhausted."

**Despair**

"That it will never end."  
"It's never going away."  
"That it is NEVER going away because people will not stay home, wear a mask, wash their hands and social distance"

**Anger**

"After having Coronavirus, my employer stated that they are not liable to pay for 20 days that I was off! It's pitiful that I have risked my life, and caught the virus at work, and want to be compensated."

**Anxiety**

"I am concerned about contracting COVID-19 while providing patient care, so many are not being paid for being off work, and I am worried about being able to support my family. I feel that the shortage of nurses is affecting the quality of care that is being provided to the patients. During the crisis I feel that we need more access to more mental health resources."

**Exposure to Death**

"Death. Death. Death. I've tagged and bagged more bodies in the past 6 months than I imagined I would in a lifetime."  
"The never-ending deaths we are seeing."

### Work Environment

#### Staffing

- Unsafe patient ratios! So unsafe! Our med surg nurses have around 8-10 patients. Ridiculous. No laws for patient safety. Disgusting."
- "Nurse to patient ratios that are dangerous for the patients and put my nursing license at risk."

#### Compensation

- "Increase pay to retain nurses instead of paying more for outside help."
- "They are giving large incentives to new people to come work here and it would be better if I left and came back later. That makes no sense. It doesn't value loyalty."

#### Supplies

- "We are still being asked to reuse single use N 95 masks, and disposable stethoscopes are only occasionally available."
- "We reuse gowns for days, and we have not had isolation stethoscopes in months."
- "We use the same N95 the whole shift then it's sent for sanitization ...up to 5 times."

#### Teamwork

- "Seeing nurses, doctors, and ancillary staff do what we do. Work with what we have, make the best of things, create small moments of happiness for our patients, and come back the next day."
- "How it has made us interdependent, and we have come to value our core people as family. Working together to do the right thing with excellence brings synergy. We need more nurses, but synergy (the whole is greater than the sum of its parts) helps us get the job done."

#### Satisfaction

- "We have been asked to do more and more. We go to save and help as many as we can and are given very little to nothing in return. We risk our lives and our families lives to help others but with no compensation for our efforts. We are told we are "abandoning" our state when we leave to travel so we can be fairly compensated. What is happening to us, the nurses, is wrong on so many levels. There are not many days when I leave work emotionally and physically exhausted only to lay awake struggling to think of how I can make it better for my patients."
- "Feeling undervalued by my employer"
- "Feeling like my hospital does not value me as a professional"

## Results

**Personal: Family**

- "The long term mental and emotional impact on nurses. I worry about my own mental health after being surrounded with so much death."
- "Constant worrying am I being safe enough. Will my employer understand that I'm late because school open later now?"
- "I am 69 and still working as a school nurse. I take a risk everyday. It is stressful, I even think about going on and retiring."

**Community**

- "The lack of social distancing and mask use that I see across my area of Alabama. Members of our communities do not seem to feel that they have a role in limiting the spread."
- "The most rewarding experience has been seeing that people care enough to stand outside our hospital in the cold and rain and pray for the people who are sick and dying inside."

**COMMUNITY HEALTH WORKER**

## Discussion

After reviewing this survey, we feel it is evident that the current generation of nurses is at a significantly increased risk of mental health struggles including depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. It is our responsibility as leaders and fellow nurses to advocate for mental health surveillance and assistance, healthy work environments and adequate compensation. These issues must be addressed, or the healthcare industry will suffer a greater shortage than previously predicted.

## Future Practice Recommendations

The following recommendations were presented to the ASNA leadership:

- Incorporate a proactive approach to screening the mental health of nurses by partnering with the employee assistance program or administration to include a non-punitive screening as part of employee evaluations.
- Investigate and implement safe patient ratios for Alabama based on recommendations from the American Nurses Association and National Nurses United.
- Invest in healthy work environment standards identified by the American Association of Critical Care Nurses including:
  - Cultivate interpersonal collaboration through formal training such as TeamSTEPPS
  - Boost morale by promoting meaningful recognition to all staff members.
  - Offering competitive pay and compensation comparable with the average national salary of nurses in the United States
- Offer stress relieving activities for healthcare associates through unit-based activities and quarterly workshops.



Figure 2. Proposed federal RN-to-patient safe staffing ratios. National Nurses United. (2023). Proposed federal RN-to-patient safe staffing ratios. [Chart]. <https://www.nationalnursesunited.org/ratios>

## References

