Discuss Effective Problem Solving Techniques for Nursing Case Managers in the Hospital

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Every job can be stressful. Managing stress is an important factor to get the job done efficiently and effectively. Relieving stress and preventing burn out is an important part to any job, but especially Hospital Case Managers. Hospital Case Managers are professional Registered Nurses who work in the hospital setting, whose job is to make sure that patients are admitted and given the appropriate level of care, have an appropriate plan of care and are receiving necessary treatment, and act as an advocate for services and plans needed during and after their stay. A case manager working in the hospital has a huge responsibility and can be a very stressful job. If not managed well this can be problematic to the career of case management. The authors Suzanne K. Powell and Hussein A. Tahan of Case Management: A Practical Guide for Education and Practice defined stress as “the perception of threat or an expectation of future discomfort that arouses, alerts or otherwise activates the individual’s affect or behavior in an undesirable way” (p. 349). Stress affects the “physical, psychological, emotional, social and mental health” (Powell and Tahan, 349). Hospital Case Managers may need to employ several techniques to reduce stress and prevent damage to their health and mental well being. There are several stressors found in the hospital setting that contribute to stress for the Case Manager. There are also several effective problem solving techniques.

**Concept**

Throughout the course of this paper I will identify effective problem solving techniques in Nursing Case Managers, specifically those employed in the hospital setting. Stress as defined above is caused by stressors. Stressors identified for this culture of case managers may include managing the cases of numerous patients, working with an ever increasing workload with no end in sight, inability to obtain insurance coverage for requested services, having to find alternative treatments when services are not covered, working as a patient advocate across the interdisciplinary team, and dealing with the concerns of the patient and the patient’s family.

A Case Manager may deal with multiple patients. The ration of client to Case Manager can vary as much as 10:1 or even 20:1. (Case Management Caseload Concept Paper: Proceedings of the Caseload Work Group, 2009) The ratio of client to Case Manager is usually dependant on the severity of the care needed. An example would be Case Managers in a stable ambulatory surgery department dealing with 20-30 clients, while the Case Manager in the Intensive Care Unit may only have 6 clients depending on the healthcare system and location of the facility. In an urban setting such as New York City, the busy and ever growing healthcare system may leave the Case Manager handling a large number of clients. Some Case Managers may be so busy dealing with this many clients that they may not even necessarily remember all the details of the client’s case or even remember meeting the client. In some cases, the Case Manager may not even meet the client directly, and just manage the case based off of the client’s information found in their chart. The Case Managers found in the hospital setting will generally have a large client to case manager ratio and therefore will cause stress for the Case Manager.

Techniques for managing this type of stress identified above may include requesting the assistance of a Supervisor. As found in a study found on the online peer reviewed website PubMed, “Routine monitoring of caseload, especially by a workplace supervisor, maybe effective in reducing work-related stress and enhancing case manager personal efficacy.” (Case Load Management p. 454) By utilizing a supervisor to ensure that the Case Manager is not being overwhelmed by the sheer number of clients, the Case Manager is able to properly care for their clients. The Supervisor may be able to reassign or delegate tasks to other staff, offer peer social support for the Case Manager when they are stressed, and may also be able to share some of the workload with the Case Manager.

Another cause of stress for Case Managers in the hospital is being unable to obtain insurance coverage for services requested by the patient’s medical team and having to find alternative treatments for when these services are not covered. The text gave an example, “Sincere questions to specialty nurses or attending physicians usually elicit enough information to allow the case manager to speak to families and insurance company representatives and to plan alternative levels of care.” (Powell and Tahan, 352) Once a treatment is ordered by a physician or another member of the patient’s care team, it does not necessarily mean the patient will receive that treatment. Many treatments may need prior authorization from the patient’s insurance company and some treatments may not be approved. As the Case Manager, it is part of their job to either obtain payment from the patient or seek out an alternative treatment that is covered. This process can be stressful for the Case Manager as they may have to break the bad news to the patient and the patient may project their anger at the Case Manager. Finding alternative treatments may also be stressful, as the desired treatment may be the ideal treatment for the patient. The other care providers may also become angry and project their anger at the Case Manager, as their desire care plan now has to be altered. Finding an alternative treatment may be as simple as having the patient prescribed generic instead of brand name medication or as difficult as getting approval for a long term care facility when the approval is for a short term rehab.

Techniques for managing this type of stress are to remain calm and not react in anger. The anger being projected at the Case Manager may not necessarily be because the client or healthcare provider is angry at the Case Manager, but rather they are frustrated at the situation of having to wait for treatment or change their plans. The Case Worker should remain calm and explain that while the treatment is not going as planned, they are working on a solution that is within the best interest of the patient. The best asset for the Case Manager when dealing with finding alternative treatments is a good Social Worker (Powell and Tahan, 352). A social worker may have access to many alternative resources that the Case Manager can utilize to find an appropriate solution. Along with the social worker, a comprehensive resource book is the “trend in most case management programs today.” (Powell and Tahan, p.352)

Another cause of stress for Case Managers may be being a patient advocate and dealing with the patient and the patient’s family. Case Managers are advocates for the patient and may communicate with the interdisciplinary team to meet the patient’s needs. This can be stressful for the case manager as they will have to deal with all providers and have to make sure services are scheduled and provided at the appropriate times, without delay to another service. “The role of patient advocate is one of the most important of the case manager’s charges; it is also one of the greatest challenges.” (Powell and Tahan, p.41) Having to juggle this challenging task can be a very stressful situation for the case manager. Dealing with the patient and the patient’s family’s needs may also be a stressful task. Many patients and families can be very demanding and may be impatient. They are under a great deal of stress themselves and may project that to the case manager.

Techniques to solve this type of stress include reassuring yourself. A simple method to do so is found in the text. Powell and Tahan state, “The best way to deal with such dilemmas is by asking yourself, “What is in the best interest of the patient and family?” (p. 43) A journal found on PubMed that studied stress in healthcare workers goes on to state, “Health workers could be trained to employ relaxation techniques and stress management strategies.” (The Impact of Healthcare Workers Job Environment on Their Mental-emotional Health. Coping Strategies: The Case of a Local General Hospital, 2015) This article states that healthcare workers, specifically the nursing staff and case managers, were the most stressed. The journal suggested that active relaxation techniques be employed such as meditation and counseling.

**Cultural Competence**

The culture chosen for this assignment is the Nursing Case Managers in the hospital setting. This culture of hospital based case managers is directly related to the case management concept of effective problem solving techniques in Nursing Case Managers. This culture tends to be the ones with the largest workload and number of clients, be in a busier setting than private practices, and face more life or death decisions. This makes this culture of hospital based Case Managers more susceptible to stress.

When dealing with patients of other cultures, the Case Manager has to have a basic understanding on how to deal with these patients. For example, patients of Chinese culture may not make eye contact and communicate with their head slightly down as a sign of respect. Other cultures such as Jewish religion, do not allow women to touch the men or vice versa other than their spouse. Having a basic understanding of many cultures allows for a more effective case manager and client relationship and assists in expediting healthcare.

**Case Management**

The culturally competent Case Management concept can improve Case Management practice by improving several things. Effective problem solving for nursing case managers in the hospital can improve the practice. As the case managers reduce stress and prevent burnout, they can better serve their clients. This also leads to longevity in their position and prevents case managers from leaving their position. The case managers found in the hospital are especially prone to high levels of stress and by utilizing techniques to reduce stress they can manage their large workloads more effectively. While this culture will always be exposed to high levels of stress, the effective problem solving techniques outlined throughout this paper can help reduce the amount of stress the case manager actually feels.

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