Critical Thinking for Nurses

For you to become a successful nurse, you will need to learn how a nurse thinks on the job. In nursing school, you will learn how to do an IV, dress a wound and to save lives, but there is more to being a nurse than just having good clinical skills. Standard protocols in nursing will work 99% of the time, but what about that 100th time when they don’t work? That’s when your critical thinking skills can either save or cost a life.

What is different about the thinking of a nurse from an engineer or dentist? Mainly it is how the nurse views the patient and the sorts of problems nurses have to deal with in their work. Thinking like a nurse requires you to think about the entire world and content of nursing, including ideas, theories, and concepts in nursing. It also is important that we better develop our intellects and our skills so that we become highly proficient critical thinkers in nursing.

In nursing, critical thinkers need to be:

- Precise
- Complete
- Logical
- Accurate
- Clear
- Fair

All of these attributes must be true, whether the nurse is talking, speaking or acting. You also need to do these things when you are reading, writing and talking. Always keep these critical thinking attributes in mind in nursing!

Nurses have to get rid of inconsistent, irrelevant and illogical thinking as they think about patient care. Nurses need to use language that will clearly communicate a lot of information that is key to good nursing care. It is important to note that nurses are never focused in irrelevant or trivial information.

Key Critical Thinking Skills

Some skills are more important than others when it comes to critical thinking. Some of these skills are applied in patient care, via the framework known as the Nursing Process. The skills that are most important are:

- **Interpreting** – Understanding and explaining the meaning of information, or a particular event.
- **Analyzing** – Investigating a course of action, that is based upon data that is objective and subjective.
- **Evaluating** – This is how you assess the value of the information that you got. Is the information relevant, reliable and credible? This skill is also needed to determine if outcomes have been fully reached.
Based upon those three skills, the nurse can then use clinical reasoning to determine what the problem is. These decisions have to be based upon sound reasoning:

- **Explaining** – Clearly and concisely explaining your conclusions. The nurse needs to be able to give a sound rationale for her answers.
- **Self regulating** – You have to monitor your own thinking processes. This means that you must reflect on the process that lead to the conclusion. You should self correct in this process as needed. Be on alert for bias and improper assumptions.

**Critical Thinking Pitfalls**

Errors that occur in critical thinking in nursing can cause incorrect conclusions. This is particularly dangerous in nursing, because an incorrect conclusion can lead to incorrect clinical actions.

**Illogical Processes**

Critical thinking can fail when logic is improperly used. One common fallacy is when one uses a circular argument. A nurse could write a nursing diagnosis that reads ‘Coping is ineffective, as can be seen by the inability to cope.’ This just makes the problem into a circle and does not solve it.

Another common illogical thought process is known as ‘appeal to tradition.’ This is what people are doing when they say ‘it’s always been done like this.’ Creative, new approaches are not tried because of tradition.

Logic errors also can happen when a thinking makes generalizations and does not think about the evidence.

**Bias**

All people have biases. Critical thinkers are able to look at their biases and do not let them compromise their thinking processes.

Biases can complicate patient care. If you think that someone who is alcoholic is a manipulator, you might ignore their complaint that they are anxious or in pain, and miss the signs of delirium tremens.

**Closed Minded**

Being closed-minded in nursing is dangerous because it ignores other points of view. Also ignored is essential input from other experts, as well as patients and families. This means that fewer clinical options are explored and fewer innovative ideas are used.

So, no matter if you are a public health nurse or a nurse practitioner, you should always keep in mind the importance of critical thinking in the nursing field.