In 40 years specializing in stress and burnout, one thing is clear to me - burnout is the result of people working in conflict with their deepest values.

Nurses have the capacity to work tirelessly and hard for years when they feel good about themselves and the value of their work. However, working for prolonged periods with no personal satisfaction from the effort, is a situation ripe for burnout. While physical stress is tiring, the spiritual stress of being out of harmony with your truth and your values is devastating.

In the fast paced, short staffed, techno world of medicine, it is easy to go for days without having those special, vital moments with patients you treasure. Moving fast and attending to tasks, rather than people, is a sure set up for nurse burnout.

When nurses don’t feel they have the time to take an extra moment to listen, to make eye contact, to touch a hand with compassion, it hurts at a deep level. Both nurse and patient satisfaction suffer.

You can prevent burnout by knowing what is truly important to you in the human connection with your patients. Then, creating and taking the time to be present to notice those moments when you made that connection.

What is the most important value you hold about nursing? What is important to you when it comes to patient care? Is it connecting with that unique human being? Is it relieving their suffering? Is it the smile of thanks, or gratitude of a patient or family?

Think about a day when you came home exhausted, yet felt really good inside about something you did for a patient. What is it that stands out in your mind at those moments that make them special to you?

In workshops, I ask nurses to draw a picture of what nursing is about for them. Rarely do those pictures contain pills, IVs, charts or even hospital beds. Nearly all the pictures contain hearts, hands clasped with one another, smiling faces, symbols of connection between human beings. This is what nurses value most.

Nurses, while technically competent, also have strong values for human life; caring, support, love, comfort, listening, connecting and more. Acting on these values is what makes nurses come alive.

Take time to notice the moments you are connecting and living your value for meeting human need. Be aware of being present with the other person while you are also busy doing the tasks of the day. Breathe in those moments and feel your heart expand. Feel the difference you are making.

You cannot burn out when your heart is aflame!

Nurses, do you feel burned out? Visit NurseTogether’s Decompression Room for a non-judgmental, supportive outlet to decompress after a grueling, taxing, and challenging shift.

By Aila Accad