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WISPAN WELLNESS

Wisconsin Peer Alliance for Nurses Quarterly Newsletter

PROVIDING SUPPORT, ADVOCACY AND EDUCATION FOR NURSES WITH SUBSTANCE ABUSE DISORDER

WELCOME TO WISPAN - WHAT WE DO AND HOW WE HELP

by President and Founder, Kristin Waite-Labott, BSN RN

I am amazed at our growth this year! **We are reaching more of the nurses who need us.** In 2022 we averaged 4.5 nurses per support group meeting with a monthly average of 46 nurses per month. In 2023 so far, we are averaging 7.8 nurses per meeting and 82 per month! We had our first double digit attendance in April...11 nurses! While this is wonderful progress, we know there are many more nurses that could benefit from the support WisPAN offers.

Did you know? The American Nurses Association says that 10-15% of nurses have some form of substance use disorder and 6-8% of nurses are working impaired. Wisconsin has over 100,000 nurses and using the lower of those statistics means that about 10,000 nurses are struggling with substance use and about 6,000 are working impaired. As of 2021 there were about 400 nurses in the Wisconsin Board of Nursing/DSPS Professional Assistance Procedure and monitoring programs. This leaves up to 9,600 untouched nurses that need the support WisPAN has to offer. Will you help us reach even more nurses? **[see box graphic on page 2 for ideas]**

On June 8th we had the opportunity to meet with **Lieutenant Governor Sara Rodriguez** to share WisPAN with her and her office. If you weren't aware, the Lieutenant Governor is a nurse! We had a productive meeting and have plans for future collaboration. **[see page 2 for more info from this meeting]**

We are very excited about partnering with her office to further our efforts, grow our organization, and help even more nurses. **We will share plans in upcoming newsletters, so keep watching this space!**

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WISPAN MEETS WITH WISCONSIN'S LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR SARA RODRIGUEZ

Left to right: Kristin Waite-Labott, Lt. Gov. Rodriguez, Helen Saha (WisPAN Director at Large)

Participant feedback shared with Lt. Gov. Sara Rodriguez on the continued importance of our mission:

"In early January 2023 I was a nurse just starting a journey of healing and recovery from an addiction to prescription pain medication. I can still feel the overwhelming fear and shame I had as I joined my first WisPAN meeting. In addition to all the typical emotions people have as they begin recovery, I was also terrified of not knowing how my addiction and path to recovery would impact the career I love. Today I can say that WisPAN has had a profound and transformative impact on my journey toward healing. I am so grateful for a safe and non-judgmental environment where I can openly share my experiences, challenges, and victories with other nurses who understand the very unique challenges nurses with substance use disorders experience.
Overall, the impact of WisPAN on my recovery cannot be overstated. This group has provided me with a sense of community, accountability, knowledge, and personal growth that has been instrumental in my journey towards a healthier, more fulfilling life free from addiction."

"I am a nurse in recovery. I have been in the DPSP monitoring program for almost 2 years and found WisPAN just over a year ago while watching a Fox 6 News report. Thank you for taking the time to learn more about WisPAN, having this support group with professional peers has been an integral part of my recovery. Navigating the monitoring program and dealing with the stigma of being an alcoholic is challenging. This support group has helped me let go of the guilt and shame associated with my addiction. Further, I have a group of peers to whom I can relate, and that will provide me with strength and positive feedback whenever I am in need. Kristin has done amazing work bringing WisPAN to fruition, and hopefully, with further support, WisPAN will continue to grow, and help many more nurses in search of help."

If you have ideas on how we can grow, please reach out to us. We are having an impact and we will continue to expand our reach until every nurse that needs support has it!

HOW CAN WE SHARE OUR PRESENTATION WITH MORE NURSES?

Share this newsletter
Talk to your RN Manager
Email your alma mater
Make a donation to WisPAN
Talk to your RN friends

FEATURE ARTICLE: "MY STORY"

by Melissa, RN

Like many nurses, I was called to this profession. Despite the money and fame that comes along with being a healthcare provider, that is not why I chose to pursue this line of work (insert laugh machine clip here). All dry humor aside, I truly was born a caregiver.

From a summer spent caring for my great-grandmother 4 days a week when I was 10 years old, to my young adult self being there to hold each of my grandparents hands when their presence left this world, I have never questioned my decision to become a Registered Nurse. I graduated from nursing school in 2006 and naively accepted my first job in a 15-bed Intensive Care Unit at a Level 2 Trauma Center. I wasn't prepared for absolutely everything that came with being a nurse. I eventually learned how to actually perform a venipuncture on a real human being and learned that making a bed with a patient in the bed is not at all how it was demonstrated to me in nursing school. I threw sheets, pillow cases, dirty chucks pads, and soiled pillows all over the room while holding up a 250 lb man with just one arm.

I learned all the tricks of the trade and developed time management skills that I should have marketed for income on the side. I loved my job. All aspects of it. That was until I began experiencing the pieces of the profession that were not discussed in nursing school. The long hours spent in a shift, mandatory overtime, working each shift short at least 2 nurses, feeling pressured into picking up more shifts on my scheduled days off, the unruly and unforgiving presence of a seasoned nurse that hates their job, the toxic culture of nurses "eating their young" (which is really such a bizarre term, but whatever). There was the guilt I experienced when I attempted to say no and set boundaries between my work-life balance, etc. We can all list off these pieces that exist in the very fabric of our profession.

I was not prepared for what came next, and how I believe I contributed to the nearly 10 years I spent held hostage by opioids and alcohol as a means to self-care.

What began as a PRN (as needed) prescription for pain relief from occasional migraine headaches turned to daily use. As an asthmatic relies on an inhaler to survive, opioids became my "rescue inhaler." They provided me with an almost instant relief from the exhaustion, the pain, the overwhelming sadness, the injustice, and the toxicity I experienced through the culture of lateral violence that runs rampant inside the walls of some of the most prestigious academic medical centers in the nation. A culture you either join or fall victim to.

When I medicated myself, I no longer had to take home the baggage that I collected throughout my shift, nor did I lie awake at night thinking of what I could have done differently for the patient that circled the drain my entire shift and ultimately expired. I had found a solution to all of the emotions attached to my job and that solution was opioids.

"When I medicated myself, I no longer had to take home the baggage I collected throughout my shift."

Melissa, RN

For the next 9 years, I changed jobs and had the privilege of working at some of the best Level 1 Trauma Centers in the nation, caring for the sickest of the sick. I loved the fast pace, the excitement, the unpredictable nature of each hour, the business, and the level of skill I was required to have at every moment throughout my day. I was a charge nurse, a preceptor, and held multiple certifications in critical care that proved I was an expert in the field. What no one could see was how my daily experiences were directly contributing to what would later be diagnosed as compassion fatigue, burnout, and PTSD.

I had heard about the concept of debriefing in the healthcare community. To offer support to those caring for and witnessing the traumatic aspects of life first hand. For as long as I have been a nurse, I have never been a part of a debriefing. I was taking all of these experiences and compartmentalizing them, as any good nurse would do, because the work had to continue.

There were admissions to be assigned and discharges to be completed. This, coupled with the complete lack of coping skills I possessed, were fueling an immediate dependence on mind-altering substances as a means to numbing the tremendous stress and overwhelming grief I was exposed to 16 hours a day, 4-5 days a week as a nurse.

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All services offered by WisPAN are free. We are a 501(c)3 organization and donations are tax deductible.

We accept donations to support printing materials to share, travel expenses for our speakers, maintenance of our website, and other activities to promote WisPAN approved by our board.

DONATE NOW

WISPAN SUPPORT MEETINGS

Anonymous, virtual meetings led by Nurse Facilitators in recovery themselves - WE KNOW HOW TO HELP!

Mondays (1st and 3rd): 9:00 a.m. CST
Tuesdays: 7:00 p.m. CST
Thursdays: 7:00 p.m. CST

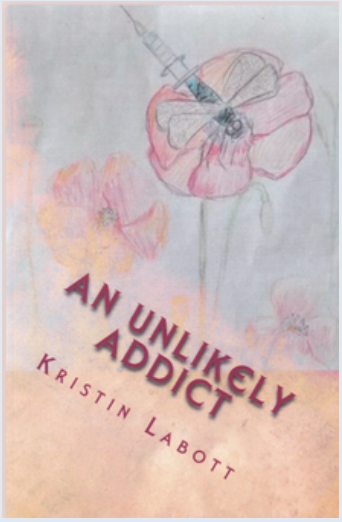
If you, a friend, or a loved one would like to attend virtually - PLEASE REACH OUT for the confidential weblink.

Huge thank you to our facilitators who volunteer their time to help fellow nurses in recovery

WISPAN SPEAKING ENGAGEMENTS

Our team can provide an educational presentation for your group about Substance Use Disorder (SUD). This is an important topic for ALL HEALTHCARE WORKERS.

If your club, class, nurse group, etc. are looking for an amazing topic that provides support to all nurses, please contact us for available speaking engagement dates!



"My Story" continued from page 3

As I reflect back upon my career, it is crystal clear to me how my substance use progressed parallel to the experiences I faced working in this capacity day in and day out. In 2015, I had been daily using opioids as a means to feel "normal." Any day without this substance would be filled with horrendous withdrawal symptoms and a desperate pursuit to find anything that would possibly, and immediately, rid my body of the withdrawals and my mind of despair.

I had reached a point where a 30-day prescription of pain pills was lasting me a day. I was unable to keep obtaining refills as freely as I had been and I was desperate for another solution. That was the point in my addiction where it was clear I was no longer in control. I began taking waste drugs from my place of employment.

It was IV Fentanyl and it couldn't have been easier to obtain. The thought crossed my mind that I could get caught, but arrogantly, I would find a way to explain it wasn't what it appeared to be. I mean at that point, nothing with me was what it appeared to be. I wasn't the coworker that everyone thought I was, I wasn't the wife that I said I was, and I didn't even know who I was. I just knew I couldn't even stand to look myself in the eyes in the mirror because I didn't recognize the person that was looking back at me. I was numb to every emotion except the one that hurt the most. Shame.

In early April of 2015, I had a moment of clarity while lying in bed with withdrawal symptoms. I couldn't stop shaking enough to sleep. **I needed help.** But how would I do this? I am a nurse. I cannot risk my career to get help, so I must find a way to help myself in secret. I made an appointment with my primary care provider and explained to him that I was concerned I may be developing a high tolerance for the pain medications and could no longer tell a difference of when I truly needed them versus whether I was using more as a means to control my anxiety over having a painful migraine. Then it happened, against all fibers of my being, I asked him to help me stay away from opioids for treatment of my migraines. "List it as an allergy or something," I said.

I needed his help to not fill a prescription if I contacted him tomorrow. He was on board and I left that day hopeful and scared to death. Three days later, when I couldn't see any possibility of making it through yet another day without opioids in my system, I contacted the clinic for a refill. My PCP was out of the office, but a covering provider was happy to provide me with a refill. There was no mention of my recent appointment, my request for no more, and my allergy list was certainly not updated per my request. The prescription was filled after work and 30 tablets were gone on my drive home. Everywhere I went, there I was. I hated myself for being so weak and unable to control this habit. I spent my free time googling stories of nurses who were caught and lost their licenses due to addiction. I felt hopeless. It was during one of my late night internet searches that led me to Nurses Caring for Nurses. This was a confidential peer support network for nurses in Wisconsin seeking assistance with chemical dependency. This seemed like the safest, and only, option for me to obtain advice on where I could turn for help. Desperate for support, I called and left a voicemail seeking a call back ASAP. My call would go unreturned to this day.

On May 3rd, 2015, I was caught diverting Fentanyl from the hospital I was working for. I was fired and my nursing license was immediately suspended. I faced legal consequences and was entered into a 5 year sentence through the Board of Nursing, placing several restrictions on my license. Life had forever changed as I knew it.

I was given a book from my mother titled; "An Unlikely Addict" by Kristin Waite-Labott. This was a story of a nurse who nearly lost it all to substance abuse, but had turned her life around when she found recovery. This book would be carried around with me and read any chance I was able. As alone as I felt in the reality I had created for myself, **there was another unlikely addict out there** who had persevered and had gracefully come out on the other side. She was now using her experience to help other nurses struggling with addiction, just like me.

I entered into a first offenders program and began attending intensive outpatient treatment for my substance use disorder. It was in treatment that I was led to my first meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous. It was in those meetings I would find the person I had been searching for my whole life. **Me.** Last month I celebrated 8 years of sobriety. One of my favorite quotes from the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous is the following; "That is the miracle of it. We are not fighting it, neither are we avoiding temptation. We feel as though we had been placed in a position of neutrality—safe and protected. We have not even sworn off. Instead, the problem has been removed. It does not exist for us. We are neither cocky nor are we afraid. That is our experience. That is how we react so long as we keep in fit spiritual condition."

In February 2021, I was granted my full, unencumbered license back. A few months after that, I was gifted an email from a co-worker inviting willing participants to an online forum to meet the author of "An Unlikely Addict" to discuss a new platform she was launching called WisPAN,

Wisconsin Peer Alliance for Nurses, a peer support group to support nurses dealing with substance use disorder. I immediately reached out to Kristin and shared with her both my gratitude for her and my commitment to offering my time to serve with her in any capacity to offer my experience, strength, and hope to as many nurses as possible through WisPAN. I currently serve as an Executive Board Member and Treasurer of WisPAN, as well as facilitator of the Thursday night virtual peer support groups. None of which would be possible without a life dedicated to absolute sobriety and an endless amount of gratitude for the storms that show up in life in order to clear a path for us and help us find our way out of the darkness.