Helping Patients Cope with Surgery

Problem

Regardless of how small or large a surgical procedure may be viewed by the healthcare provider, it may be monumental, life-altering experience for the patient. The nurse is critical to the assessment and intervention to ensure that a patient’s self-concept and identity is maintained after the surgery.

Consequence

The nurse can make a difference in how the patient experiences the surgery, their perceptions of body image, and the speed and completeness of their recovery.

Solution

Here are some considerations related to helping patients cope with surgery.

- As patients are prepared for surgery, there are required to take off all their clothes, change their normal appearance by removing makeup, nail polish, body hair, and dentures, put on a funny cap, and dress in a thin, unattractive hospital gown.

- After surgery, the patients look even more different than normal with swollen faces, swollen hands, drool, dry mouth, crusty eyes, drains, tubes, dressings that ooze body fluids, and often the inability to get out of bed to go to the bathroom.

- Surgery-related experiences are very frustrating and demoralizing for those that are usually very independent and care about their personal image / looks.

- The surgery experience can impact the self body image for the short, and perhaps long, term.

- If the patient is impacted long term, the nurse must be constantly aware of, and assess for, the behaviors related to self-concept.

- Some indicators that patients are struggling with their body image include not looking at themselves in the mirror, not looking at incisions, and refusing visitors.
Another concern may be related to how well they will be able to go to work, take care of their family, or participate in the activities they once enjoyed.

The nurse must talk with the patient about these concerns and make the necessary referrals to social workers and psychologists.

The patient’s family is critical in the assessment and maintenance of the patient’s self-concept.

A preoperative assessment can also help the nurse keep in tune with any changes in self-concept that may occur as a result of the surgery.

Here are some suggested nursing actions to help patients deal with their self-concept:

- Maintain privacy
- Keep the patient clean
- Empty drains frequently
- Keep the patient environment clean and organized
- Talk with the patient about his or her concerns
- Talk with family to support them as they help their family member.

References

*Avoiding Common Nursing Errors*, Lisa Marcucci, MD, Editor, Lippincott Williams and Wilkins, 2010