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Stillness is not always peace: how wellness and illness intertwine in silence. Stillness invites clinical insight—and a deeper kind of presence.

The Global Wellness Institute defines wellness as the active pursuit of activities, choices and lifestyles that lead to a state of holistic health. It includes rest and rejuvenation, through mindfulness, meditation and sleep. As a care home nurse, I am intrigued by the subject of stillness – for patient and nurse - in the pursuit of wellness, and as a sign of illness.

There's a lot of stillness in illness - from the dense paralysis that can follow stroke or spinal cord injury, to the subtle weakness or stiffness in an arm that might signal the onset of motor neurone disease. Over half of people with Parkinson's experience 'freezing', feeling as if their feet are momentarily glued to the ground. Freezing is also a feature of stiff-person syndrome – the auto-immune neurological condition powerfully documented by Celine Dion in her film *I Am*. In so-called stone-man syndrome, muscle tissue is replaced by bone, an immobile 'second skeleton'.

The stillest still is seen in death itself. I've stood still with spouses and sons as their loved ones breathe their last. Alone, I've watched the hush between heartbeats until there exists only stillness beside sorrow. It's a stillness like no other, when breath becomes still air, and the only movement is through a window opened to let air in, and souls out, in time-honoured nursing tradition.

In memory of babies born still, a public education and awareness campaign has been launched in the US. "Stillness is an illness [2]" calls for families and healthcare providers to take seriously altered foetal movement in pregnancy, which is reported by 50 per cent of mothers who experience stillbirth. Stillbirth [3] is a tragedy insufficiently addressed in global agendas, policies, and funded programmes, according to the World Health Organization. Mothers in sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia are at highest risk, with nearly 1.5 million stillbirths in these regions in 2021.

Sometimes stillness manifests in more muted ways. When dementia robs the recall of person, place and time, residents no longer lift their head in response to their name, nor appear at their chosen place at the breakfast table

in the morning. Television presenter Fiona Phillips describes the late stages of dementia for her mother, when she "spent whole chunks of time just sitting and staring ahead, only able to give out a series of sounds." In care home nursing, I have brought stillness to an agitated mind. Therapeutic touch has relieved tension; creative activities have reduced restless pacing up and down. Music, movement, and medication can also calm a troubled mind.

In the further pursuit of patient wellness, the nurse may need to be still. The "CAREFUL" observation tool has been developed in nursing homes, in which the nurse sits still and discreetly watches a resident for a period of time, assessing their activities and interactions, working out what brings wellbeing, or ill-being, for that individual; residents in this case being our best teachers. Other times in dementia care, the nurse is still as they patiently wait for a resident to explore, enquiring into self-made mysteries solvable only by themselves, examining everything from door handles to another resident's buttons; or to slowly finish a meal, their swallow also affected by the disease.

Punctuating any frantic nursing shift are other moments of necessary stillness as the nurse performs intricate procedures, carefully inserting catheters, delicately taking blood from fragile veins, or applying prolonged pressure to stem bleeding caused by a catheter during cardiac stenting. In the operating theatre, the scrub nurse stands still awaiting a surgeon's call; the "honor walk" or walk of respect is a ceremonial procession in which healthcare staff line the corridor, in silent tribute, as a brain-dead patient is taken to theatre for organ donation.

There's a different stillness sought in nursing, and elsewhere, which runs very deep. Described by missionary and author Elisabeth Elliot [4] as a "perfect stillness…a great gift", it is, in her words, "not superficial, a mere absence of fidgeting or talking. It is a deliberate and quiet attentiveness—receptive, alert, ready". It's an *expectant* stillness in which we "put ourselves firmly and determinedly in God's presence, saying 'I'm here, Lord. I'm listening'." Writing for the Christian Medical Fellowship [5], nurse Sherin describes such a seeking during a stressful shift. "Overwhelmed, I stepped away to find a quiet place. I ended up in a washroom. It wasn't ideal, but there I cried out to God, asking for courage, peace, patience, and above all, love for that patient." And her prayer was answered. "That, to me, was the quiet, powerful presence of Christ," she writes.

Her role model was Jesus himself who often stepped away to be still, to seek spiritual sustenance. Just before he fed the five thousand, Jesus said to his tired and hungry disciples, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest." When grieving the execution of John the Baptist, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place; and in the hours before his arrest, Jesus withdrew about a stone's throw from his disciples, knelt down and prayed. An angel from heaven appeared to him, and strengthened him. We too are invited, in the book of Psalms, to "Be still and know God" when hard pressed and weary. Here, the words "be still" derive from the Hebrew *rapha* which means "to be weak, to let go, to release", or simply to surrender. It's a theme repeated in many of the great Christian hymns, hinting at an expectant, sustaining stillness, invoking God's promise of His presence in that stillness. Little-known hymnwriter Katharina von Schlegel, writing in the eighteenth century, captures it perfectly.

> Be still, my soul! the Lord is on your side;
> Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain;
> Leave to your God to order and provide;
> In ev'ry change he faithful will remain.
> Be still, my soul! your best, your heav'nly friend
> Thru' thorny ways leads to a joyful end.

I've sought this stillness, and it's brought me wellness. It's the reason why, despite some difficult days, I am a nurse. Still.

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Links
[1] https://www.seenandunseen.com/preview-link/node/1847/55f53db7-3984-439c-a558-7aad7f844b2f [2] https://www.pushpregnancy.org/stillness-is-an-illness [3] https://www.who.int/health-topics/stillbirth#tab=tab_1 [4] https://elisabethelliot.org/resource-library/devotionals/stillness-3/ [5] https://www.cmf.org.uk/publication/spotlight-summer-2025/