

Dealing with Stress: A Student Nurse Anesthetist's Perspective

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As anesthesia providers, we have all experienced the stress of anesthesia school, and whether we are currently practicing or are in school, the stress associated with anesthesia practice can, at times, be overwhelming. In 2009, as a first-year student registered nurse anesthetist at the Gooding Institute in Panama City, Fla., I experienced stress levels that would have previously been unimaginable to me. Fortunately, however, I have discovered a way to conquer stress and endure the rigors of anesthesia school.

My Personal Story: Learning to Cope Effectively with the Stress

As the first few weeks of class went by, I began to understand the harsh reality that others had warned me about. The quantity and quality of sleep that I was getting started to gradually decline. I began spending hours and hours of my time after class and clinical rotations studying for exams and written assignments. I was spending long and stressful hours in the operating room and taking on the responsibilities of an anesthesia provider, an unfamiliar role with life/death consequences.

Student nurse anesthetists experience many lifestyle changes when they begin. A large percentage of anesthesia students move away from familiar surroundings, including their families and close friends. Some student nurse anesthetists are fortunate enough to move their entire family with them to their new locale, but this too, opens the door to an abundance of stressors. Perhaps their spouse had to quit their job and move children to different schools, disrupting their children's social lives and relationships with peers. Most people, by nature, are uncomfortable with new surroundings following a move. The changes that involve the entire family can send stress and anxiety levels soaring long before the first anesthesia textbook is ever opened.

Some of my classmates tell me that their family members cannot understand their stress and are unable to provide them with adequate support. Others have found that the financial challenges associated with paying tuition, bills, and purchasing necessities like food and clothing were only compounded by the loss of income when they became a full-time student.

There are nights when we are lucky to get even a few hours of

sleep. There just isn't enough time in the day to read and study. Most students by nature are highly goal-oriented and demand a lot from themselves. The self-imposed stress to perform well in the clinical setting and meet personal expectations as well as those of faculty can be overwhelming. Some of us feel guilty for missing out on our child's birthday or an annual family tradition. Our marriages are strained and our relationships tested. This is the life of a student nurse anesthetist.

I am sure my experiences in anesthesia school are very similar to those of most nurse anesthetists practicing today. The prolonged and demanding workload can, at times, be overwhelming, and often leads to dissatisfaction with job performance, burnout, and unfortunately, even substance abuse.¹

Managing the Stress

During the first few months of my anesthesia program, I realized that I needed to develop an outlet to relieve stress. In the past, running always seemed to diminish my stress levels and free me from the worries of the world around me. I decided that a jog on one of the local running trails would be a good idea. It would allow me to burn calories, improve my cardiovascular health, and decrease my stress levels.

A few of the nurses from my clinical rotation directed me to a running trail along the scenic Hathaway Bridge that spans the St. Andrew's Bay. The backdrop was breathtaking, with the beaches in the distance, the sound of seagulls flying overhead, and the smell of the sea in the breeze. Little did I know this would be the start of an enjoyable and helpful routine that would help me to navigate my way through some of the most difficult months of my life!

I was so pleased with how I felt and with the satisfaction that I received from my discovery that I soon decided to invite my classmates to join me. After all, they were experiencing similar negative stress in their lives as well.

Eventually, a couple of my colleagues decided to join me on the run. It was not long before they also began to realize the benefits reaped from a little run near the beaches of Florida. Even some non-runners began joining the group! They soon began to notice their levels of stress decreasing and their ability to function in the clinical setting improving. Their performance in the classroom seemed to improve as well. This weekly running activity soon became a big success, with as many as 15 students joining me during any given week.

Since our group of Gooding students began running back in the late winter of 2009, we consistently meet every Thursday evening, just before sunset. There is something special about our running trail, a nice three-mile run over Panama City Beach's Hathaway Bridge that



Gooding Institute students gather before their weekly run. Pictured in the first row, l to r, are: Brian Thomas, RN; Joni Deen, RN; Talia Latini, RN; Brittany Martin, RN and Jacob Hartig, RN. Pictured in the back row, l to r, are: Chris Buchanan, RN; Kelli Shivel, RN; Kerry Varner, RN; Jake Buckley, RN; and Jessica Griffin, RN.

frees the mind from the rigors of anesthesia school. The vast majority of the group will, in fact, run, while other group members choose to walk. No matter what their chosen pace, everyone is welcomed for their willingness to show up and help better their overall health. The participants all agree that running seems to noticeably diminish our levels of stress while boosting our self-esteem. With a greater self-esteem and a more positive mindset, we leave the run feeling more mentally and physically refreshed. Our physical and mental wellness is improved. Suddenly, anesthesia school does not seem so stressful!

None of us are surprised that running and other cardiovascular exercise reduces the stress in our lives. Any physical exercise can help, and many of us find our own outlets and methods of relieving our minds and bodies from the things that tend to wear us down mentally, physically, and spiritually.

Unfortunately, some anesthesia professionals adopt maladaptive behaviors in order to cope with the stress they experience in the operating room. Substance abuse, primarily with opioids like fentanyl and sufentanil, continues to be a major problem. The stressed anesthesia professional might also turn to alcohol, prescription drug use, and smoking in order to cope. Behaviors such as these negatively affect the body and mind of the user, ultimately leading to poor job performance and threatening the integrity of their family.

It is imperative for anesthetists to understand the importance of embracing healthy coping strategies, such as regular exercise, eating a healthy diet, and getting enough sleep. Taking the appropriate measures to minimize the untoward effects of the stresses of life in the anesthesia world is critical for preserving the well-being of the professional and may also translate into improved patient safety as well.

Stress is a part of every student's life. Recognizing the signs of stress allows us to mediate the ways in which it affects us. Dealing with stress in positive manner, such as a running or other physical activity, allows us to maintain healthier lives and promotes better care for our patients.

The AANA has numerous resources that can be accessed by the anesthesia provider who may be struggling to maintain a healthy lifestyle and a high level of wellness. The AANA Wellness Committee is here to provide assistance and resources as a courtesy to all AANA members. I encourage you to visit our website and take advantage of the resources that are available to all AANA members. Visit our website at <http://www.aanawellness.com> for more details. ■

1. Nyssen, AS, Hansez. Stress and Burnout in Anesthesia. *Curr Opin Anesthesiol.* 21(3):406-411, June 2008.
2. Tunajek S. Student Stress: A Question of Balance. *AANA NewsBulletin* in the Wellness Milestones column; May 2006: 20-21.



Gooding Institute students take advantage of a scenic running trail along the Hathaway Bridge in Panama City, Fla.

A complete index of Wellness Milestones Columns can be found on the AANA Wellness Program homepage at www.aanawellness.com