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A New Year: A New You

The start of a new year brings forth a myriad of resolutions for many of us. Perhaps it's spending more time with family each day, a weight loss goal, or breaking a bad habit. For nurse anesthetists, it's an opportunity to reflect on our personal practice and ask "How can I be a better CRNA in the year 2017?"

As practicing CRNAs, we often forget that in order to provide excellent care for our patients, we must first provide excellent care for ourselves. This self-care goes much further than just being physically active and practicing healthy nutrition. Emotional well-being, through stress-reduction, various forms of meditation, and proper sleeping habits are not only necessities for our health, but advantageous to job performance.

Get More Sleep!

Nurse anesthetists excel at providing our patients with quality sleep, but what about our own sleep? A division of sleep medicine at Harvard University explains that sleep deprivation can negatively impact our mood, ability to focus, and high-level cognitive functions, all of which are important in our daily practice. According to Harrison and Horne, the quantity of sleep obtained is individualized to each person and less important than the quality.¹ Their data also concluded the prefrontal cortex, the portion of the brain responsible for logical reasoning and complex thought, is particularly vulnerable in individuals who are deprived of sleep. So how much sleep should we be getting? The American Association of Nurse Anesthetists' Practice Considerations document, which correlates with the National Sleep Foundation's data, recommends that adults should receive 7-9 hours of sleep each day.² Lack of sleep often leads to poor judgment and clinical error in the workplace, placing our patients at risk and leaving CRNAs liable. These AANA guidelines also offer practice guidelines and assist with policy development for anesthesia practices and individuals in regards to workplace fatigue, safety, and overall wellness.

It is without question that there is a definite correlation between sleep and exercise. In a 2013 poll conducted by the National Sleep Foundation, participants who considered themselves "vigorous exercisers" were almost twice as likely to report a good night's sleep.² A person less likely to sleep is also less likely to be physically active, which repeats the cycle. Those who participate in frequent physical exercise are about half as likely to exhibit signs of sleep apnea, which correlates with heart disease and stroke.

Get More Exercise

For many years, exercise has been proven to be beneficial to the human body and psyche. In addition to boosting levels of high-density lipoprotein (HDL), the Centers for Disease Control and

Prevention states that exercise also decreases triglycerides, the risk of cardiovascular disease, cerebrovascular disease, metabolic syndrome, diabetes, depression, and various types of cancer.⁴ An article from the U.S. News & World Report suggests that burning at least 350 calories at least three times weekly can reduce symptoms of depression almost as effectively as antidepressants.⁵

Meditate More Often

One of the most commonly forgotten tools in any stress-relieving arsenal is the art of meditation. There are many common misconceptions about meditation, leading many to ignore its potential benefits. So how does one effectively meditate? According to Arjun Walia, meditation can be as simple as getting into a comfortable position and allowing your thoughts to "just flow."⁶ One of the many benefits of meditation is that it can be practiced almost anywhere, only requiring a comfortable position. This position does not have to be a seated one, as one can meditate while walking alone quietly or just before going to sleep at night.

Avoid Stress and Burnout

Our profession, like many others, can often lead us down the destructive path that affects so many: job burnout. This occurs slowly over time and can be difficult to detect until it's too late. Many long hours during the week and nights on-call can slowly drain us of our passion for the job we love. Psychology Today defines burnout as "a state of chronic stress that leads to: physical and emotional exhaustion, cynicism and detachment, and feelings of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment."⁷ This unfortunate situation can become so severe that functioning on a personal or professional level can be completely lost.

Recognizing the signs of burnout is very important and can be helpful should a coworker or friend show similar signs. They may include chronic fatigue, a lack of sleep/difficulty falling asleep, forgetfulness, difficulty focusing, and headaches. Illnesses become more common. Loss of appetite and weight can occur, as well as depression and becoming easily angered. Persons affected by workplace burnout will often lose enjoyment in their job, isolating themselves from coworkers.

Overcoming burnout can be difficult, but is not impossible. Psychology Today, in another article by psychiatrist Dr. Sherrie Bourg Carter, uses a step-by-step approach in overcoming this phenomenon.⁸ First, make a list of stressors. Take care of each anxiety one at the time. Second, avoid taking on further tasks or responsibilities until the current situation or stressor has been resolved. Third, be sure to delegate tasks to others who are responsible and can ensure that those tasks get done (even if you feel that you would do a better job). Finally, contact a support group, preferably a group with members of a different background away from the work environment, who can provide a different point of view on the situation.

Support and Mentor Students, the Future of our Profession

As CRNAs, we are fortunate to have a longstanding legacy that dates back to the Civil War era. We pride ourselves on providing any type of anesthesia to anyone in any setting, including on the field of battle. It is imperative that this legacy and tradition continue. It can only be accomplished through ensuring that our students receive the emotional support that is needed during their strenuous education. Over 47 percent of the responding students stated that they felt as if they were depressed, while 21.2 percent had experienced suicidal ideations. The primary cause for this depression was stress. Data also shows that students have a significantly higher stress level than do their CRNA counterparts.⁹

As we celebrate CRNA week this month, it is important to remember the things that have helped our profession become one of the strongest, most satisfying in any field. By making sure that we better care for our emotional and mental health in 2017, as well as our physical health, we are affirming an optimistic and hopeful future for all nurse anesthetists.

The AANA provides numerous resources specific to CRNA and student nurse anesthetists' health and wellness including physical and emotional/mental well-being, stress and coping, workplace wellness, student wellness, and peer assistance support for substance use disorder at <http://www.AANAWellness.com>.

For other helpful resources:

- www.AANA.com/fatigue
- www.AANA.com/gettinghelp
- www.AANA.com/mentalwellbeing
- www.AANA.com/physical
- www.AANA.com/stress
- www.AANA.com/studentwellness
- www.AANA.com/workplacewellness

References

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