Coping with Disaster

urse anesthetists function in an atmosphere of intensity and stress on a daily basis. While they are experienced in dealing with a broad range of emotions, working long hours while helping patients understand and manage the stress of the surgical experience, they often need to be reminded that attention to their own health and welfare is important.

Some 2,600 AANA members, their families, and friends, are dealing with displacement, stress, and loss created by the Gulf Coast devastation. As they struggle to put their lives, jobs, finances, and communities back together, the sustained stress on their physical and mental health can be significant. Trying to live up to their own expectations and the perceived reputation of the “in-control CRNA” further compounds the pressure and stressors on their personal health.

The psychological consequences of hurricanes and other natural disasters have been studied extensively. Mild to moderate stress is a “normal reaction to an abnormal situation,” according to the U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs’ National Center on Post-traumatic Stress Disorder. However, 74 percent of the studies found some evidence of post-traumatic stress disorder among the populations in the aftermath of hurricanes. In addition, nonspecific distress was identified in 39 percent of the sample populations. Self-reported psychosomatic complaints such as sleep disruption, fatigue, loss of appetite, anxiety, mood swings, decreased motivation, and difficulty in problem solving and decision making were common reactions. However, as a general rule, the symptoms tended to improve as time passed in a vast majority of the studies.

One of the most difficult challenges for caregivers is to maintain the balance between the demands of the crisis situation and their own needs and the needs of their families.

Several studies have shown that many of those affected most by a disaster do not believe they need professional help, despite having significant emotional distress. This may be the result of pride or because they think distress indicates a weakness of some sort. Many are more comfortable seeking informal support from family and friends who may also be experiencing problems as they seek to regain control of their lives.

Knowing when to seek help is paramount. Coping means recognizing and taking actions to improve things. According to studies, individuals who experience the following symptoms for more than a month should seek professional assistance:

- Recurring thoughts or nightmares about the event.
- Having trouble sleeping or changes in appetite.
- Experiencing anxiety and fear.
- Being on edge, being easily startled, or becoming overly alert.
- Feeling depressed, sad, and having low energy.
- Feeling “scattered” and unable to focus on work or daily activities. Having difficulty making decisions.
- Feeling irritable, easily agitated, or angry and resentful.

Certainly, there are normal emotions everyone experiences when faced with overwhelming situations, and there are well-recognized ways to cope with those circumstances. Some recommendations are:

- Give yourself permission and TIME to grieve.
- Give yourself permission to feel rotten. You’re suffering from loss. And, it’s all right to be angry and grieve for the loss of material things. You wouldn’t have obtained them or kept them around if they didn’t have some meaning to you.
- Eat healthy, regular meals.
- Get enough rest to preserve your strength.
- Educate yourself and family about normal reactions to a disaster.
- Talk to your children. Be supportive. Set an example by expressing your feelings.
- Remember that you’re experiencing normal reactions to an abnormal situation.
- Talk to people. Talk is healing medicine.
If you feel overwhelmed or unable to cope it is important to seek additional assistance by speaking to a health professional who can help you better understand some of the stress and reactions you or your family members or friends may be experiencing. AANA is offering access to confidential counseling for you or your families. AANA Gulf Coast members who are dealing with the aftermath of Katrina may access the AANA Employee Assistance Program (EAP) by calling (800) 466 6327 or by visiting the website www.perspectives.com and entering the user code AME007 and the password “perspective”. The program is confidential and offers screening and referral services to CRNAs, their families, and friends. For additional information or questions contact Sandra Tunajek at stunajek@aana.com or (847) 655-1115.

Remember you are not alone.

The Council on Public Interest in Anesthesia (CPIA) promotes patient safety through consumer education and practitioner risk reduction strategies. AANA Director of Practice Sandra Tunajek, CRNA, DNP, is the primary staff responsible for the all the CPIA activities and the Wellness Project as well as the staffing for the AANA Peer Assistance Advisors Committee. Questions and comments may be addressed to stunajek@aana.com or (847) 655 1115.