Occupational Stress and the Resilience to Overcome

Nurse anesthetists are immersed in occupational stressors that are not only unavoidable, but encountered virtually every day. From the first classroom lecture as a student registered nurse anesthetist (SRNA), anesthetists are bombarded with pressures inherent in a job characterized by patients entrusting their lives into their care.

This occupational stress underscores a keen sense of vigilance, intense focus, and precise action. Nurse anesthetists need a degree of occupational stress, in the acute state, to maintain mental sharpness. Some CRNAs say that certain stressors elicit the feelings of exhilaration and excitement that attracted them to the profession. Workplace stress, in the short term, may also boost motivation to surmount challenges and support healthy competition where ample resources, positive leadership, and perceived self-worth are present.

However, prolonged stress can overwhelm even the most resilient CRNA to the point of physical and emotional exhaustion. This type of occupational stress, with its harmful physical, emotional, and mental effects, can cause feelings of excessive pressure or create unmanageable conditions beyond one’s control, capabilities, or knowledge. Production pressures, heavy workloads, high-acuity patients, irregular shifts, and conflicts with staff, patients, and families can push CRNAs to the edge of burnout. Long-term, this leads to chronic physical and psychological illness.

Insights from Wellness Expert William Baun

Workplace wellness expert William Baun, EPD, CWP, FAWHP, wellness officer at the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center, was asked to provide some insights into occupational stress as it applies to nurse anesthetists. He will present the 2015 Jan Stewart Memorial Wellness Lecture, Empowering Calm Through Engaged Resilience, at the AANA Annual Congress in Salt Lake City, Utah.

Baun refers to CRNAs as “pilots of the OR” who possess a high degree of physical and mental fortitude. CRNAs must make instant decisions, react quickly, and maintain an intense focus every day. “No matter how much occupational stress they incur [CRNAs] have no choice but to be resilient,” he said. It is this resilience that ensures the capability to deliver safe, compassionate care and uphold the clinical and leadership expertise to guide the healthcare team. For nurse anesthetists, “up and ready to go every day” is a state of “being” not simply “doing.”

So what exactly is resilience, the state of “being,” and how do we acquire and maintain it? Baun states that all nurse anesthetists have the ability to synthesize resilience. Resilience is often described as the ability to bounce back. More accurately, it is a repository of stored energy. Everyone possesses such a storehouse, but the amount within determines our resilience, or ability to overcome occupational stressors.

Baun says the following triad of constructs that help recharge and restore resilience: (1) Optimism, (2) Positivism, and (3) Belief in self. The triad of psychological tools, when correctly applied, can mitigate occupational stress. Baun also places great emphasis on his idea of “being” and not just “doing.” Resilience is a state of mind, building upon one’s passions and presence in life. It is about mindfulness and awareness of the here and now rather than a mere physical existence. Mentally referencing the triad during the most intense and fast-paced moments is also a key to resilience.

Baun says that others can inspire resilience, and it is promoted among a culture of like-minded positive and optimistic self-believers. Connecting with colleagues to foster a collaborative, team-oriented work environment is an especially important healthy prevention and protection strategy. It is a passion for the profession and internal beliefs that CRNAs are good at what they do combined with support and reinforcement of the external environment that solidifies anesthetists’ resiliency. It’s a mantra, a state of “being” that is reinforced through practice and must be infused in one’s daily life, throughout each day, to ensure the ignited internal flame remains strong and bright. We have to “do” to “be” resilient.
Learn More at the Lecture!
Learn more about resilience and techniques to mitigate occupational stress encountered in practice by attending Baun’s lecture at the AANA Annual Congress on Sunday, Aug. 30, 2015. For more info see: www.AANA.com/JanStewart.

References

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