Resiliency and Mentorship for Nurse Anesthetists

Life as a nurse anesthetist is stressful. Ancient wisdom, mentorship, and several virtues are the keys to turning stress into growth. Dedicating a small amount of time to learning how to use stress towards living a better life may pay off as you master anesthesia.

Practicing Resiliency
As with anesthesia, practicing resiliency is an art rooted in ancient wisdom and passed down through mentorship. Resiliency is described by reference material and professional organizations as maintaining flexibility and bouncing back from stress and pressure. Wellness expert William Baun drew from research on resiliency by Bennett, Fredrickson, and Everly to add to that definition—that resiliency is bouncing back to be the best we can be through perseverance, positivity, and adaptation. Baun launched his 2015 AANA Jan Stewart Memorial Lecture on resiliency stating, “It’s all about you recognizing those things that you’ve been through in life. It’s looking at your role models and what they’ve given you. It’s all about stepping up one more time.”

Moving through pain and hardship is different than bouncing back to the pre-hardship version. If done right, the former offers opportunities for improvement and strength. Compare it to the physiology of weight-lifting, where torn muscles become stronger through proper recovery. Where the body requires things like proteins and water, proper mental recovery from hardship requires virtues such as humility and gratitude. Starting each day being grateful for what is right will help identify the good things that can be multiplied. Being humble enables the nurse anesthetist to pursue each encounter as an opportunity to discover what another person knows. Baun draws from the research of Joel Bennett, PhD, to explain why we must fail in order to grow. We were designed to be transformed by our life experiences, but often the process is fatally halted when one is so wrapped up in the failure that they cannot move on. To grow from failure, we must be able to step back, listen to the lessons, learn, and have the will to grow and move forward.

Grounding humility and gratitude in a solid foundation of a sense of purpose may be as simple as asking yourself “why?” Why devote yourself to the practice of anesthesia with so much passion? Baun proposed that we continue to step up, even on the hard days, because we remember the thrill, the adventure, of doing something we love. These feelings give us the passion and purpose of life.

Finding Mentorship
Now that we’ve secured a solid foundation in resiliency, it’s time to identify a mentor. Nurse anesthetists are familiar with building knowledge from books, but mastery of the practice can only come through mentorship. You can have different mentors for different essential questions, such as “how do I master being a student,” “how do I transition to the culture of a new workplace,” or “how do I master practicing anesthesia?” Developing a mentoring relationship takes time because it requires the mentor to understand the mentee as well as their challenge, and the process goes beyond the teacher/student relationship.

A mentor respects and loves the work with so much passion that they will be drawn to a resilient mentee. The mentee is alert for a mentor that can explain complex concepts in the simplest of terms, not dumbing it down, because the mentor understands the mentee and anesthesia so well. The level of understanding required to accomplish this is often rooted in experience. The mentor has developed mental models of scenarios, which develops precision in identifying critical details and predicting outcomes. Understanding the mentee and the anesthetic challenge allows the mentor to guide the mentee’s attention through the chaos in ways other teachers cannot. All the while, the mentor recognizes his or her own experience is only a small part of the bigger picture of anesthesia. Teachers are always valuable resources in learning anesthesia; however they may not be a mentor without the passion, understanding of the mentee, and/or anesthesia experience.

Final Thoughts
Finding mentorship is vital for building resiliency as a nurse anesthetist, but it also offers much for life in general. We never want challenges that threaten to break our spirit, but, when they come, the resilient will move through the hardship and live better lives for it. It may seem daunting to take on learning resiliency while trying to learn so much in anesthesia, but it makes sense to do so, and we all love when things just make sense.

References