Self-Care Techniques for a Balanced Body and Mind

Adrienne Hartgerink, DNP, MSN CRNA, AANA Health & Wellness Committee Member

Jessica Switzman, MSN, CRNA, AANA Health & Wellness Committee Member

Let's face it, as CRNAs we are part of a wonderfully rewarding yet extremely demanding profession. Each day we provide safe, cost-effective, quality anesthesia services to thousands of patients. Maintaining this level of excellence is physically and mentally demanding as well as stressful! We know that the negative physical and mental consequences of prolonged stress can lead to disability, but it can also negatively impact patient care. According to The Code of Ethics for the Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetists, set forth by the AANA, anesthetists must be fit for duty to ensure that the high level of care can be delivered as promised. How can we do that if we don’t take good care of ourselves?

Resilience is the capacity to withstand stress and recover quickly from difficulties. It is a coping mechanism that anesthetists can use to manage stress. The ability to be resilient not only helps to improve personal well-being, but it has also been associated with increased patient safety and better patient care. In order to subdue stress, reduce the risk of illness, and develop positive patient relationships, it is essential that anesthesia professionals learn and regularly practice healthy self-care techniques that build resilience. Here are a few suggestions to get you started:

**Breathing:** A quick and easy way to reduce stress is through the breath. Exhaling activates the parasympathetic component of the autonomic nervous system, which is the calming “yin” to the sympathetic fight or flight “yang.” Practicing regular, mindful breathing can be calming and energizing. A great, simple breathing exercise for calming the overworked mind is a timed breath where the exhale time is amplified. When your exhale is steady and exaggerated a few counts longer, the vagus nerve sends a signal to the brain to turn up the parasympathetic nervous activity which reduces the sympathetic influence. Try one of these techniques and be sure to notice how you feel before and after.

- Exhale completely. Then take a large breath in and hold it for three to four seconds. Next let it out v-e-r-y s-l-o-w-l-y. As you exhale, think about blowing out all the tension, pressure, and staleness built up in your body.

- Repeat three to five times remembering to exaggerate the exhale slowly and steadily. Each time try to wring your lungs clean of all the breath before you take a new breath. Make each exhale slower, longer, and more complete than the last.

- Counting during the cycle helps to control the practice. Breath in for four counts, hold for seven counts, and exhale for eight counts. Repeat about ten times to achieve relaxation.

- Try to make breathing routine by incorporating exercises into your daily schedule such as when you are stuck in traffic, waiting in line, at your computer, or in the OR while monitoring the patient.

**Meditation:** Mindful meditation decreases stress, cortisol levels, blood pressure and the risk of heart attack. It helps to improve resilience and decrease inflammation, benefitting genes that control energy metabolism, insulin secretion and telomere maintenance, which are important in slowing cell aging and death. Mindful meditation is the practice of becoming a calm observer of one’s own thoughts and emotions. It stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system and quiets the frantic neurological activity in the amygdala by shifting activity to the neocortex, the executive center in the brain. When the brain starts to rely more on the neocortex and less on the amygdala, it begins to strengthen new neural pathways transiting the brain away from a reactive state and towards more calming, more constructive milieu. Here are a couple of simple mindful meditation exercises. Try these and see how you feel:

- Sit or recline comfortably. Close your eyes, relax your muscles and focus your attention on your breath. Notice how the air feels and smells in your mouth, nose, and throat. Concentrate on the sensations obtained from your chest and abdomen as they rise and fall.

- If you find your mind wandering, simply return to focusing on the breath. Perhaps just say to yourself, “Thinking,” as your attention falls back to your breathing.

**Rest/Sleep:** Another technique to quiet the body-mind’s stress response and support restoration and recovery is to relax and rest as deeply as you can. Prolonged rest charges up the “rest and digest” system, the antithesis of the sympathetic flight-or-fight system. This is achieved through an increase in quantity of sleep, generally 7-8 hours per night. An adequate amount of sleep has been linked to increased energy, strength, and mobility; and reduced tension, pain, blood pressure, heart problems, and infectious illnesses. Finding ways to improve sleep quality is also vital, but when in short supply, you can support the parasympathetic activity by taking short breaks or just a 30-minute nap. Remember the only way to truly reverse the physiological deficits of lack of sleep is to sleep! Don’t shortcut this self-care necessity.

**Exercise:** We all need some type of physical movement to stay stress-resilient, whether it is walking, biking, yoga, or shooting hoops. In addition to the obvious benefits of keeping your body physically fit, exercise produces positive mood elevators such as endorphins and serotonin, and breaks down cortisol in the blood stream. Cardiovascular exercise fosters the ability to take in deeper and fuller breaths as well as circulate the endogenous substances associated with good vibes!

**Nature:** Spending time outside in natural environments enhances positive emotions and can mediate the negative effects of stress. Adults in an outdoor immersion program reported a greater sense of peace and ability to think more clearly, as well as a reduction in anxiety, improved creativity, and cognitive reasoning.
In a literature review on “restorativeness,” light outdoor activity proved to greatly boost a person’s mood and energy. A walk can increase levels of norepinephrine, the brain chemical that helps us deal with stress. So try stepping outside for a breath of fresh air and view of some natural scenery.

**Nutrition:** A well-fed body is a resilient body, which is far better equipped to handle stress and recover from harmful hormonal influences. Keeping processed and refined snacks to a minimum while eating healthy fats, fruits, vegetables, and protein will help keep blood sugar at an equilibrium. Healthy food choices also support positive mental energy and clarity, and mood stability.⁸

**Music:** When feeling stressed, listening to a favorite song can instantly make you feel better. Studies have correlated music to alleviated stress through lower cortisol levels—the hormone released in response to stress. Of course, this is dependent on the type of music, with relaxing music being the most likely to be beneficial.

**Laugh:** It is no joke, laughter is a great form of stress relief. Laughter enhances your intake of oxygen-rich air, stimulates your organs, and increases endorphins released in the brain.⁹ Read or watch something humorous. Maintain or develop a sense of humor, including the ability to laugh at yourself.

**Be Here Now:** Focusing on present moment mindfulness can significantly reduce cortisol levels and provide other mind and body stress reduction benefits.¹⁰ If you start to rehash the past or worry about the future, try drawing your attention back to the present moment with focus on the sensations of your breath. Techniques, such as a body scan starting with toes and slowly working up to your head, can help bring you back to the here and now. Try this:

Craig your toes against the soles of your feet as hard as you can for 15 seconds, then relax them. Progressively move throughout your body, focusing on specific areas individually. For example, focus on body parts or regions such as tensing and relaxing muscles in your legs, stomach, back, shoulders, neck, hands, and abdomen.¹¹

**Brew Tea:** Theanine found in green tea can not only help lower anxiety, it has been shown to impact alpha brain waves which are associated with relaxation. Chamomile, another great choice, has been found to ease symptoms of stress and anxiety.¹² People who drank four cups of chamomile tea a day for six weeks had lower levels of cortisol after a stressful event than a control group.¹²

**Hobby or Craft:** Immersion in a craft, be it knitting, gardening or scrap-booking has promot relaxation, according to a Health Magazine online article citing a Journal of Nursing Scholarship study.¹³ Be creative; paint, play a game, or do a puzzle, as long as you keep it fun and enjoyable.

**Opt out or Log off:** Excessive texting and constantly replying to social media sites can be very taxing and stress evoking. Researchers at the University of Gothenburg found that those who constantly use a computer or mobile phone are more prone to stress, sleep disorders, and depression.¹⁴ Putting limits on your electronic time can help decrease stress and urgency that technology has infused into daily life. Unplug an hour before bedtime for a better night’s rest. Consider turning off your electronics for a 24-hour-off-the-grid holiday: no email, texting, television, or computer. See how much free time and energy you have after doing this; similar to a mini vacation.

Finally there are many available health and wellness resources for CRNAs and student registered nurse anesthetists on the AANA website.

www.AANAWellness.com and www.AANA.com/Stress

**References**


