



Whitney Benfield, BSN, RN
Student Representative to the
Education Committee

The Power of Balance in the Aspiring Nurse Anesthetist

With admission into our desired academic programs, we knew our lives from that moment on would be forever changed. Friends and mentors before us coach and prepare our minds for the enormity of the task, and we prepare our families to uproot their lives as we move across the state or country for the years ahead. Little did we

know that it takes more than just a “state of mind” to be conditioned for nurse anesthesia education. With the first week into the program, the startling reality sets in that it will be a complete lifestyle change. We are all “drinking from the fire hydrant” of nurse anesthesia didactics and simulation, because in just a few short weeks we will face the real challenge—the operating room.

As the weeks progress, you start to understand the method to the madness and develop a routine. You perfect your own method of studying, settle in with your study group, and plow through each exam that stands in your way. You are officially on the rollercoaster of highs and lows, as this week you had a great exam score and you are doing well in clinical; talk about on top of the world! However, no one told you how inadequate you would feel when you missed your intubations the following week, and to top things off you don't do so well on your next exam. You quickly begin to question yourself and the methods you have developed, and you doubt the long days committed of preparation and hard work. Then, something you hadn't anticipated: You begin to question your adequacy as a future nurse anesthetist. As you turn to your loved ones and friends for support and refuge, you realize that you have neglected them for weeks. You have missed dinner dates with your significant other, forgotten to return your family's phone calls, and somehow everyone else has assumed all of your responsibilities in the household. For the first time in a long time, you feel the weight of defeat on your shoulders.

Finding Your Balance: What Does it Take?

This story isn't uncommon among the nurse anesthesia community,

as thousands before us have had similar stories to share. This was just my experience the first few weeks into life as an SRNA. Everyone's experience is different. Hopefully, this story brings hope and an impetus for change, a change in the way we balance ourselves as aspiring nurse anesthetists. We all come from different critical care backgrounds and attend different types of institutions. We also all have different goals for ourselves, but we all have one universal commonality: becoming a successful anesthetist and surviving those years to get there. To be a successful student, family member, friend, and future nurse anesthetist there had to be a redistribution of the weight. I began to re-evaluate my tasks and time allotted for each and realized

To be a successful student, family member, friend, and future nurse anesthetist there had to be a redistribution of the weight. I began to re-evaluate my tasks and time allotted for each and realized that maybe it wasn't quite down to a science as I had thought.

that maybe it wasn't quite down to a science as I had thought. Focus areas were established based on the question, “How can I become the most successful student and future CRNA and still keep my sanity?” These focus areas will not be “perfectly balanced” as equal time and effort won't be allotted for each, but an understanding that didactic education, clinical experience, professional involvement, and personal wellness each play a vital role. Here are a few tips from masters of the “balancing act” of nurse anesthesia education and an SRNA's perspective.

Didactic Balance

“I have observed that students who maintain balance actually do better,

didactically. A short-sighted view is that the student feels they cannot afford to take time off of their studies for relaxation. However, exercise, relaxation, time with family gives concepts a chance to sink in, and allows the student to ponder them and then come back and sometimes think of them differently. If nothing else, even short breaks can rejuvenate the brain, increase energy and attentiveness, and aid studying.” *Michael Rieker, DNP, CRNA, FAAN, program director, Wake Forest Baptist Health/Wake Forest School of Medicine Nurse Anesthesia Program.*

Clinical Pearls

“Work ethic, pleasant disposition, and excitement to learn are fundamental attributes that are paramount to exhibit throughout clinical training. Everything in life is about mindset. Approaching every experience as an opportunity to grow, whether choosing to add pearls to your armamentarium or discarding behaviors you observe, will guide

your foundation that will support your future practice for years to come. Awakening the anesthetist inside and learning the art does not come with an easy price. The happiness achieved with this unique profession is limitless and worth every bit of poignant difficulty to become the master. Always recognize, throughout your rigorous training, the hardest judge you will ever encounter is the reflection in the mirror.” *Scarlet Hinson, DNP, CRNA, Program Administrator, Florida State University Nurse Anesthesia Program.*

Finding Success in Professional Involvement

“By getting some exposure to the 'really fun' part of anesthesia practice, it helps students to stay focused and excited when they are in the thick of grueling didactic work. Engagement in professional association activities can do the same for the SRNA. Having an opportunity to interact with fellow professionals and to see all the exciting things that exist outside of the program walls can help energize the student and keep them motivated.” *Michael Rieker, DNP, CRNA, FAAN, Program Director, Wake Forest Baptist Health/Wake Forest School of Medicine Nurse Anesthesia Program*

Tips for Student Wellness: Investing in You

“It goes without saying that anesthesia school is stressful: For many of us it is a major life crisis. It is unrealistic to think that we can eliminate stress during this time of our lives. However, it is possible to manage this stress, especially if we start before it spirals out of control. It is important not to fall away from those activities that keep us balanced. The four main coping mechanisms that I personally use to maintain balance are exercise, sleep, nutrition, and friends/family.

1. Try to maintain 30 minutes of activity four days per week. It is not easy to fit this into my schedule, but I make time because I know I will be more productive with it than I would be without it.
2. Nutrition is another struggle when you eat most of your meals on the run or at the hospital. I try to avoid fried food, soda, and fast food. I slip on the fried foods every now and then, and I feel physically terrible when I do. I don't have the energy, and I'm not as motivated to get after my homework.
3. Sleep is imperative during school. I have done plenty of experiments to prove I need sleep to be successful. During these experiments I have compared studying all night for an exam and getting less than four hours of sleep to getting at least six hours of sleep. I consistently do better when I get six hours of sleep or more the night before an exam, even if I didn't get an extra couple of hours to study.

4. Sadly, friends and family seem to get cut most drastically, at least for me. I really do my best to make time for socializing at least once per week, whether it is going out to meet some friends or having a date night, to letting the people you care about know that you are at least alive and still care about them. This also allows you some time to update them on your life so they understand why you have become so distant.”

Erik Swanlund, RN, AANA Health and Wellness Committee Student Representative

The Mindset

Once you have indentified your focus areas for balance, the last step is changing your mindset. One of the great silent benefits of nurse anesthesia education is the overwhelming dose of humility it brings. Prior to school, we were all top performers in our ICU settings as leaders and knowledgeable clinicians. At some point, whether it is early or late in your education, a game changing event will shake you to the core. However, in order to stay positive, it's imperative to view each short-coming as an opportunity for growth, no matter how hard the blow.

Before tackling your goals, get your mind right. Change your mindset, exhibit optimism, and internalize power in nurse anesthesia education by maintaining balance. ■

