LEARNING TO COPE

With careful planning and implementation of the right coping strategies, the personal challenges faced by anaesthetic trainees are not insurmountable, writes recent FANZCA graduate and Welfare of Anaesthetists Special Interest Group member, Dr Cath Purdy.

The ANZCA training program is designed to lead and assist us as anaesthetic trainees through the five years of training required to become a practising anaesthesia consultant. Those five years, while certainly rewarding, are often extremely difficult. Recognising the inherent challenges of training allows us to prepare ourselves for future hurdles, as well as develop coping strategies.

In 2013, a survey of New Zealand trainees highlighted the nature and degree of stress leading to potential burnout. Out of 250 trainees contacted, 49% responded and, from those responses, a lack of knowledge of available supports was identified. The primary and secondary exams were seen as the most difficult aspects of training overall, followed by criticism from colleagues. Since then, Australian mental health initiative, beyondblue, conducted a national survey of the mental health of medical professionals and students, the results of which mirrored many of the themes of the New Zealand trainee survey. In the beyondblue survey, anaesthetists performed poorly, with the highest rating of any medical profession in terms of stress relating to exams, the second highest rating of suicidal thoughts in the last 12 months and the third highest rating in experiences of depression and psychological distress.

The personality traits that may serve us well academically, make us good anaesthetists and help us to pass exams – conscientiousness, agreeableness, neuroticism and low self-esteem – are unfortunately, not those that enable us to be resilient. Conversely, those traits that are predictive of resilience – extroversion, gregariousness, assertiveness, the ability to form interpersonal relationships and playfulness – are also those associated with a high early exam failure rate.

Thankfully, there are a great number of support systems and strategies available to us; and their implementation during our training years will aid in the development of our long-term careers.
The anaesthetic exams are the greatest challenge most trainees will face. The key is to find a balance between studying hard and living healthily. It is important to look after your mental health and wellbeing. Simply put, if you are mentally healthy and know how to manage stress, you will study more effectively. If you lack mental stamina and the ability to recognise and manage stress, your studies may suffer. Even if you study best alone, link in with the other trainees sitting near you. You will become each other’s greatest support.

Engaging in a mentoring program, whether formal or informal, is a great way to create a space for dialogue, resulting in reflection, action and learning for those involved. The mentor can provide a listening ear, feedback, guidance and advice (if solicited) in many areas, as well as acting as a role model, teacher, resource facilitator and coach.

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Keeping your Grass Greener is a publication written for medical students, but the advice it offers is just as relevant to us in anaesthesia-specific training. The central advice from author, Dr Sally Cochrane, to “get a GP, get a hobby and get a life” encompasses three of the most important strategies for maintaining a satisfactory work-life balance.

If you have a family GP, keep them. If you don’t have a GP yet, find one. Take the time to find the right GP for you – someone you can be a patient with, confide in and obtain support from. Simply being a patient is something you need to work at and it gets more difficult the longer you are a doctor. It is good medical practice to have your own GP, rather than to prescribe for yourself and family and self-refer for specialist appointments.

Maintaining friendships and hobbies outside of medicine is also important. By keeping connected with people, we increase levels of wellbeing, confidence and opportunities to participate in physical activities, all of which aid in achieving a healthy work-life balance.

The Welfare of Anaesthetists Special Interest Group was formed to heighten awareness throughout the anaesthesia community about the importance of personal health and wellbeing and ways to achieve it. The Group has developed guidelines for assisting and supporting anaesthetists, from training and exams through to recognising depression and anxiety in colleagues and dealing with the aftermath of an anaesthetic catastrophe.

Across Australia and New Zealand, formal bodies such as the Doctors’ Health Advisory Service, the Victorian Doctors Health Program, beyondblue, as well as other employee assistance programs, offer confidential support and advice to anaesthetists. These non-judgemental services are dedicated to improving the health and wellbeing of those within the profession.

While your future career may seem like a long time to plan for financial health, having a plan to manage debts at both ends of your career (student debt repayment and planning for retirement, respectively) also needs careful consideration. We are doctors trained in anaesthesia, pain medicine and intensive care – we do not receive specialist training in financial matters, so it is sensible to seek expert advice. I would advise others to have a financial plan for both your professional and personal life and to review those plans and your options on a regular basis. Many organisations, including the ASA, have guidelines about how to choose a financial advisor and what questions to ask of him/her.

Finally, in recent years there has been an explosion of research regarding mental resilience. It is very similar to being physically fit. Being resilient allows us to withstand the stressors, frustrations and annoyances that beset medical doctors. Elements of ‘positive psychology’ such as mindfulness, gratitude and compassion can change our attitudes and help to develop skillful means in order to flourish. For more information on these techniques, see www.calm.auckland.ac.nz.

References

WHO TO CONTACT

Doctors’ Health Advisory Service:
http://dhas.org.au/

Victorian Doctors Health Program:
beyondblue:
http://www.beyondblue.org.au/