



American Society of
Anesthesiologists™

Central Line
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VOICE OVER:

Welcome to ASA's Central Line, the official podcast series of the American Society of Anesthesiologists, edited by Dr. Adam Striker.

DR. ADAM STRIKER:

Hi. Welcome back to Central Line. My name is Dr. Adam Striker. I'm your host and editor. And today we have a friend of the show back with us, Dr. Mohammed Rafiq. Dr. Rafiq is the guest editor for December's ASA Monitor on a subject I think we can all appreciate gratitude. We're recording this show in November to post during Thanksgiving week, which is certainly a good time to delve into why gratitude matters, what it looks like, and how we can all be more intentional about being grateful. I'm looking forward to this one. So welcome back, Dr. Rafiq.

DR. MUHAMMAD RAFIQUE:

Thank you very much, Dr. Striker. Glad to be back.

DR. STRIKER:

Really briefly, why do we need to talk about gratitude? I have a whole Monitor devoted to this.

DR. RAFIQUE:

Practicing gratitude helps us to be resilient and mentally strong and positive. And there's a whole host of research which supports this statement. This is what research has shown. And one of the features of this month's, you will see that Dr. Gustin argues that gratitude towards your patients, your colleagues and everyone around you is a very effective way to combat physician wellness and burnout. And happy and healthy physicians are definitely a very important piece of the puzzle to enhance the patient safety and patient care. So that is the common goal of all the health care providers. So

that is why gratitude and practicing gratitude is very important for all the practicing physicians and practicing anesthesiologists.

DR. STRIKER:

As we talk, I'm sure there's a lot of layers that don't seem quite as apparent. And when you first hear that term as to what we can discuss when it comes to gratitude. And so let's start off by defining it. Webster's Dictionary defines gratitude as the quality of being thankful, ready to show appreciation. But physiologically speaking, what is gratitude? How does it impact us holistically?

DR. RAFIQUE:

Gratitude is unique among all the emotional responses because most emotions like pride and joy or anger, etc., can be self-centered, but one has to be thankful to someone or something else. It can be a colleague, a spouse, somebody who made a piece of technology or the ultimate gratitude to the divine being or deity. It is accepting the humility that recipient could not achieve a certain task or benefit without help of others to whom one is thankful. One has to be thankful.

In last few decades, a lot of research has been conducted for this, for its psychological effects on the human behavior, human well-being. And gratitude even changes our brain neural connections in a very unique way. It is well known that area of the brain, which you can call Gratitude center, is located in the ventromedial prefrontal cortex, anterior cingulate cortex.

A fascinating study which came out from Indiana University and was published about seven years ago. They recruited a group of patients who were entering therapy for anxiety and depression. They divided them into two groups. One group was therapy as usual, and the other was Intervention group labeled Gratitude Group. In this intervention group, the participants wrote a letter of gratitude to someone of their choice. Every week for three months. After three months, all the participants, both the control group and the gratitude group, had a functional brain MRI while doing a pay forward activity, and the Gratitude group exhibited neural activity in the medial prefrontal cortex of the brain and was not seen in the standard therapy patients, which shows us that although we may not think that, but when we are practicing gratitude, our brain definitely changes in a very special way, which is more permanent than just for a few seconds.

DR. STRIKER:

Okay. And then how does that translate to how we feel, whether we should engage in gratitude or not, specifically the studies?

DR. RAFIQUE:

There's another very fascinating study by expert in this field, Dr. Emmons. And he and his colleagues recruited volunteers and not the patients and divided them into three groups. Before the start, everybody underwent a very thorough evaluation for their mood and mental condition, as well as health. And for ten weeks, they had three groups. One group, they called it Gratitude Condition, where they were supposed to write down five things they were thankful to in the previous week or grateful in the previous week. Single sentence. It didn't have to be something heroic, just whatever they felt. The second group was a condition they called it, and they had to write five things which they had which had bothered them in the last week. And the third group, which was kind of control group for them, they said events, condition, they called it where they were supposed to write something which they thought was significant in the last week. And the results were amazing. The gratitude condition were, according to their measurements, 25% happier. They had very few physical complaints or symptoms compared to the other two groups. Also, people in the gratitude condition were naturally exercising about one and one half more per week, more than the other two groups. And they did a follow up study where they pretty much kept the same activities and instead of doing it every week, did it every day. And after 21 days they again evaluated their mental condition and all of those things. And they found that the people who were writing the gratitude things, they were much more joyful, enthusiastic, energetic and all the good emotions and physical attributes compared to the other two groups. So it shows that being actively grateful has definite positive effects on the practitioners or humans in general.

DR. STRIKER:

It's nice to have some objective evidence to show what I think a lot of us know, which is that you're happier if you're grateful for things in your life or at work or in your professional life. So as we move forward, though, is it harder or easier given the last couple of years for anesthesiologists specifically to find gratitude, to look for those pockets of things to be grateful for, especially given what has happened in the past couple of years, which shows no signs of slowing, whether it's workforce shortages or increased workload and burnout.

DR. RAFIQUE:

As we all can relate, it is very easy to be grateful when we are healthy and happy and prosperous. But it is probably much more challenging to be grateful when facing difficulty. If we turn to the religious texts, probably the story of Jobs, in Arabic they call Prophet Ayub, has a lot to teach us. As the story goes, he was grateful in prosperity and health, as well as when he faced a most challenge in the health and wealth. He remained grateful despite he was incited to do otherwise. And it is a great question which philosophers, thinkers and theologians have been trying to answer -- how to be grateful in times of adversity. Actually in this Monitor the article by Dr. Williams actually reflects on this aspect and argues that a difficult circumstance like recent pandemic brings an opportunity for growth and invites us to change our perspective to one of gratefulness and bringing peace to life. It is fascinating to read. I am very thankful for his contribution.

DR. STRIKER:

So are anesthesiologists uniquely positioned in some ways to find gratitude. We deal with some of the most stressful moments of any patient's life and many times in our own lives taking care of these patients. It's incredibly stressful. But does that provide for an opportunity that many other practitioners do not have to find gratitude?

DR. RAFIQUE:

It is all about perspective. As we said earlier, as anesthesiologists, we see patients coming for a trivial procedure to the heart or brain surgery. So it all depends on perspective. If we are able to focus our attention to the positive emotions and see the brighter side, it can help us to be better physicians. Actually, I was just looking last week ASA sent out a survey, I think it is being conducted by researchers at Harvard, which aims at understanding the very question of burnout and how to combat it and increase physician awareness. I think we probably all have received it and we should respond so that we can know more about what physician wellness and burnout conditions are at this time and how we are going to become better at it.

DR. STRIKER:

Before we move on, I can hear, I'm sure, plenty of anesthesiologists out there or some of our listeners, they're listening to this and they're saying, you know, this sounds awfully similar to what my administrators tell me. I should just go about my work and be happy and go take some yoga classes, meditate, get a free granola bar in the lounge, and I should just then move on with my work and see this as validating what I've been told. How do you respond to those individuals?

DR. RAFIQUE:

Gratitude is an essential, emotional, emotional act that needs to be practiced more frequently at the workplace. It is a lifelong process to cultivate and learn gratitude and be able to practice it more than other negative emotions. As we know from psychology, research, that behavior change is a slow process and everyone has a learning curve. Dr. Emmons, in his famous book Thank You, has given a list of actionable tasks which can help to grow and establish a habit of gratitude. These are keep a gratitude journal. Use visual reminders to help with the gratefulness, for example, involves reminding of gratefulness. Be careful with words. Choose what you say and how you say it. Self-reflection by asking questions too, like what I received from others today. What I give to others. Did I cause any trouble? Learn to give gratitude in the form of prayers, etc.. These are the actionable things which, if we start practicing, may help us to be grateful in the long run. And as I was pointing out, that behavior change takes time, and practicing gratitude constantly over time definitely has positive effects, both on our emotional health and on our physical well-being. So probably these are the actionable items and you can see more detail in the article.

DR. STRIKER:

Certainly it's not the end all, be all to burnout or wellness, but certainly can be a valuable tool in any physician's belt. Well, I want to discuss a little bit more about gratitude, so please hang tight. We're just going to take a short patient safety break.

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DR. ALEX ARRIAGA:

Hi, this is Dr. Alex Arriaga with the ASA Patient Safety Editorial Board. Preoperative critical event debriefings are important for patient safety and the provider experience. Yet research suggests only a fraction of perioperative critical events are followed by any form of debriefing. The time, shortly after a critical event, presents a valuable opportunity to reflect, provide feedback, identify systems gaps, and look out for each other's well-being. At a local policy level, there are crisis checklists, emergency manuals and other tools that can be a starting point to discuss events where debriefing may be most supported. Medical simulation may be a way to generate rare events and facilitate debriefing training in a safe space. Leadership support for a critical event debriefing can improve buy in. Efforts to improve critical event debriefing practices can benefit the individual team and overall health system.

VOICE OVER:

For more information on patient safety, visit asahq.org/patientsafety22.

DR. STRIKER:

Well we're back. Some of us learn very differently. Is gratitude something that can be taught? Is it something that has to have a special methodology to learn?

DR. RAFIQUE:

We all lack training in this domain. Now it is being included in medical curriculum because the research clearly indicates that emotional intelligence is a very useful tool in a doctor's armamentarium, and physicians trained in this regard have better patient satisfaction scores and better emotional health for themselves. And it should be part of residency curriculum in anesthesia. And as a matter of fact, all specialties.

DR. STRIKER:

In residency curriculum. Is that something that we are not spending enough time on?

DR. RAFIQUE:

Probably not. I don't remember, when I did my residency, I don't remember anything like that being talked about or considered. It was all about work, work, work and learning new techniques and getting to this conference or that conference. But I think I have seen recently in our program actually here, at our residency program, that these things are being talked about. And once one starts talking about these things, then the more time and resources are devoted to it and they ultimately lead to some action and probably betterment of the overall community.

DR. STRIKER:

The articles in the December Monitor are unique in some respects. There are several personal stories from anesthesiologists about how and why they've intentionally cultivated gratitude and what it means to them personally. What did you take from these stories and what do you hope the readers will take from reading these stories?

DR. RAFIQUE:

You are right. We had some amazing authors who written excellent feature articles for this. If we go from the articles we have, Dr. Gustin's article emphasizes on the use of

gratitude as a tool against burnout, and he argues in this article in a very good manner that if we are grateful even to our patients, because these are the patients who are giving us the opportunity to have an impact on their life and realizing and acknowledging that fact is a very good way to start and is a very good tool to combat the burnout. In the article by Drs. Williams, a husband and wife duo, they talk about unique perspective of reflecting on the blessings and difficult times and finding strength and learning from the experiences. The feature by Dr. Sabina Khan is really unique. It describes her experiences as being a physician and training to the highest level and practicing cutting edge anesthesia. But she concludes that we could be the best of the best in the world, but to find the real peace and harmony, we have to learn the art of gratitude. Dr. Jaworwicz has written a beautiful biographical account, and he finds gratitude for his parents and wife and family the most. And in the end, Dr. Dutton, who is a pillar in our specialty, has a very unique article showing our day-to-day life and how finding little things in place during clinical practice are priceless for safe care. And he thinks only with gratitude we can be successful professionally.

DR. STRIKER:

I'm really looking forward to reading those stories in the December Monitor, but it kind of gets to the heart of why a lot of us chose to be physicians and finding gratitude in our professional lives, I think what we haven't really covered as much is receiving the gratitude from patients we take care of or coworkers that we help out or administrators that we're helping. I just want to get your take on how much receiving gratitude is beneficial. How do you see that? The other piece, the other direction.

DR. RAFIQUE:

I think we are still learning about it. There is some research that if, at a workplace, the leadership are the people around you show gratitude, it increases our happiness, our productivity, and even productivity at the job with the gratitude. It is a ongoing process to learn how we are going to find more and more ways to be grateful and more and more ways to receive gratefulness. I would say throughout my journey to be here, there are countless people who have helped me, so if I want to name a few, I would say my first thank goes to Allah Almighty, then my parents, who made a lot of sacrifices for me, my wife Maryam. And in a professional world, my mentors. I want to mention Dr. ... at Southwestern and my former chairman, Dr. Heinrich Worm. Also everyone around us who made the day possible for us residents, nurses, or even the environmental services workers. Without each and every one of them, we are unable to accomplish what we do on a daily basis. And also I'm thankful to ASA staff for making this activity possible.

DR. STRIKER:

It's wonderful to hear that, and I think it's a good lesson for a lot of us. What you've just articulated about yourself is that in spite of the difficulties and despite the burdens we're all placed under, there's always some ways we can find to be grateful and should strive to do that, as evidenced by what we've talked about here today, don't you think?

DR. RAFIQUE:

Yes, definitely. Finding gratitude in small things, finding help from others and acknowledging it has a very big role in the social fabric we are in and more we acknowledge than I think better we are as a society.

DR. STRIKER:

Dr. Rafiq, is there anything else you'd like our listeners to think about regarding gratitude or anything else you'd like to leave us with before we wrap up the discussion?

DR. RAFIQUE:

Having a active mind out that everything matters and we are all dependent on others to be able to function and to be able to do a good job and to be able to take care of our patients. So if we give thanks to others who are helping us, probably they will be more happy and healthier and probably they can play their roles in a better way and make our jobs even easier. So it is a two way traffic if we start doing things, being a health care provider and a health care leader, probably people around us will realize more and more that their work is valued and their lives matter and probably they will be more productive and more helpful.

DR. STRIKER:

As we wrap up here, I think hopefully we provided a little bit of positivity for the month of Thanksgiving for all our listeners, given all the stresses were placed under and something that doesn't take a lot of effort but can potentially provide a lot of high yield in terms of helping in terms of wellbeing. So Dr. Rafiq, thanks for joining us today on Central Line.

DR. RAFIQUE:

Thank you very much for having me. It was a pleasure.

DR. STRIKER:

And for all our listeners, be sure to check out December's ASA Monitor, which has all the articles on gratitude that Dr. Rafiq has alluded to. And please tune in again next time on Central Line. And if you feel like it, drop us a review. Tell a friend about our podcast and we'll talk to you again soon. Take care.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

VOICE OVER:

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