



Intelligence of the Heart: Building Emotional Resilience in a Pandemic

Jackie Stevenson, MSSA, LISW, BCC

Just before the outbreak of COVID-19, I underwent a scheduled minor surgery. I was fearful about the experience until a kind, compassionate anesthesiologist transformed my fear into a calm sense of well-being. His clear conveyance of information and his heartfelt presence put me at ease. He assured me that he would be present during my whole procedure and would take exceptional care of me. The last thing I remember before falling asleep was his gentle invitation to rest well and have a sweet dream. And it was so.

Today's COVID-19 pandemic has required anesthesiologists to evolve into so much more than the calming presence I appreciated during my surgical procedure. For many patients and their families, anesthesiologists represent a physical lifeline to breath by way of a ventilator, particularly for patients with COVID-19 who require intubation and ventilator support. When treating critically ill patients whose family members cannot be with them due to hospital visitation restrictions during the pandemic, a compassionate anesthesiologist can also serve as a much-needed emotional lifeline.

Just as anesthesiologists promote and protect the emotional well-being of their patients, they too require emotional support to persevere through the added stressors of this pandemic. Anesthesiologists of course need the proper medical and personal protective equipment to do their jobs, but they also need a wealth



of emotional tools to build resilience enough to combat compassion fatigue while courageously treating patients with COVID-19.

Intelligence of the heart

Our heart is amazing; roughly the size of two hands clasped together, it beats about 100,000 times a day, pumping blood through 60,000 miles of blood vessels. One of the most amazing facts about the heart is that it is a source of essential intelligence. An intelligent heart is one that takes in information from the body, mind, and spirit and makes compassionate decisions with care, calm, clarity, and confidence.

At Pebble Ledge Ranch in Novelty, Ohio, we incorporate scientific research from the HeartMath Institute into hands-on engagement with our horses – and one zebra – to help our guests achieve better emotional and physical well-being. HeartMath practices can help us more easily connect with our heart intelligence to strengthen resilience and promote recovery from trauma. In 2020, a group of local anesthesiologists from University Hospitals spent time with our horses to recover their calm, revitalize from their stress, and remember to listen from their heart to what most matters to

them. The silent heart-to-heart conversations attendees shared with the horses and with each other opened the possibility of a healthier state of being amid the COVID-19 crisis.

Healing with horses

The anesthesiologists learned heart-focused breathing (HFB), aided by the Pebble Ledge Ranch horses. The HFB technique is an easy, energy-saving, self-regulation strategy designed to reduce the intensity of a stress reaction and replace it with an alert calm. Connecting with their horse partners, the anesthesiologists experimented focusing their atten-



Jackie Stevenson, MSSA, LISW, BCC

Founder and CEO, Spirit of Leadership, Novelty, Ohio.

tion around the area of their heart. They imagined their breath flowing in and out of their heart or chest area, while breathing a little slower and deeper than usual, finding an easy, comfortable rhythm. The anesthesiologists reported feeling more connected to themselves, more at ease, and more energized.

Anesthesiologists can practice the HFB technique anytime they encounter COVID-19-related stress on the job. The HFB technique can help stop the impact of stress on the body, eliminate the energy drain caused by stress, remove the drama or significance of a situation, and neutralize emotional reactions in the moment.

Visit the HeartMath Institute online at heartmath.org for more simple yet profound exercises to access the intelligence of the heart.

Recognizing courage

Anesthesiologists have courageously met the challenges created by COVID-19 – additional emotional stress, longer hours, new skills development, and increased danger of infection with COVID-19 – and with intelligent hearts they remain resilient and calm in crises, working tirelessly to save lives. Those of us at Pebble Ledge Ranch thank you for your service. ■

Be a part of ANESTHESIOLOGY® 2021 in San Diego, California! Mark your calendar now and submit your work for one of the following opportunities:

- **December 14, 2020-February 8, 2021:** Problem-Based Learning Discussions
- **January 5-April 5, 2021:** Scientific Abstracts
- **January 5-April 5, 2021:** Scientific and Educational Exhibits
- **February 8-May 24, 2021:** Medically Challenging Cases

Learn more and submit at asahq.org/annualmeeting/education/submissions.