

## **10 Step Survival Guide to CRNA School**

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My hope with writing this blog to you is not to alarm you or make you rethink your decisions. CRNA school has been one of the best experiences I've had in my life. I have learned more than I ever knew I could, and I LOVE anesthesia more than I ever thought possible. My goal is to prepare you with tools that I have learned on my journey that will help you to successfully join, continue through, and/or complete a CRNA program while maintaining personal health (mentally, emotionally, and physically) along the way. No matter where you are in the CRNA schooling process (applying to school, newly accepted, or a current student) your efforts will be worth it.

### **A little bit about me...**

I started my DNP-Nurse Anesthesia program in August of 2023, and I wish I could say that I was completely prepared for this journey. However, as all great things often come with hard work and stress, CRNA school comes with an overwhelming amount of hard work and the maximum amount of stress it seems that school could cause. Granted, I am married and a dad of two toddlers, so those beautiful additions to my life may also add more stress than the average student. Nonetheless, CRNA school will come with 20-40+ hours of clinical per week along with intense classes both in-person and online. Your mind will be tested in many different ways. You will lack adequate sleep at some point in the program - if not throughout the entire three years. And you will feel like you are drowning.

### **With that, let's dive into the 8 Steps of Survival that I use to get myself through school:**

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**1. Master Time Management** - When I first started the program, I asked my mentor for the most helpful advice he could give me. He said, "Stay Focused. Time Management. Don't be lazy." He said that as long as I do those three things then I'll pass the program. I wrote this mantra on a note and stuck it to my wall. It keeps me motivated when I want to slack off because he was definitely right; time management will determine one's success in the program. CRNA programs are intense, and time is your most valuable resource. You have to remember an immense amount of information, pass your tests, be on time to class and clinical, and make sure you have enough sleep to not mess up your cognitive function. In order to accomplish that, time management is a necessity. My favorite way to manage my time is with a planner I buy every year from Amazon.com ([Link Here](#)).

Additional Resources:

- **Apps & Tools:** Todoist, Focus Booster (Pomodoro app), Planner

- **Academic Centers:** Check out your school's academic centers—some offer HUGE semester-long calendars and expert planning support.
  - **Time Blocking:** Schedule study, clinical, self-care, and social time in advance.
  - **Batch Tasks:** Group similar tasks together to maximize efficiency (e.g., dedicate one block for notes, another for practice questions).
  - **Daily Prioritization:** Identify the 3 most important tasks to complete each day.
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**2. Organize Your Study Materials** - When coming to CRNA school, I knew it would be critical for me to have my own designated study space in my house. This space allows me to keep my study materials organized and away from my children. It also gives me a place to escape to for quiet study time among the chaos in a house of kids. Staying organized saves time and reduces stress. If you are going to stay focused and be able to manage your time, you will need to be organized.

Additional Resources:

- **Digital Organization:** Notion, Evernote, Anki Flashcards, Quizlet, Notability, GoodNotes
  - **Structured Note-Taking:** Cornell method, concept mapping, or summary sheets
  - **Sync Across Devices:** Use cloud-based storage (Google Drive, OneDrive)
  - **Declutter Regularly:** Remove outdated notes and reorganize files monthly
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**3. Build Strong Study Habits** - One of the hardest parts about being in school, for me, is to have to dedicate hours upon hours to my studying, even if it means I have to miss out on valuable time playing with my kids or spending time with my wife. Remembering that this phase is only temporary is crucial. Passing your program on-time and on-track will allow you to give your family the life you have dedicated so much time and effort towards. Dedicate adequate time to clinical preparation. Study test materials every extra minute you are given. Make sure you understand all of the information you are given so you can become a competent and amazing CRNA by the end of your program.

Additional Resources

- **Timing Strategies:** Pomodoro method, 90-minute deep work blocks, spaced repetition
- **Active Learning:** Set study goals, teach-back method, whiteboarding
- **Multimodal Learning:**
  - **Visual:** Quizlet, Picmonic, Ninja Nerd, Khan Academy
  - **Auditory:** ACCRAC, Dr. Matt and Dr. Mike

- **Reading/Writing:** UptoDate for clinical summaries, CRNA Exam Prep for board reviews
  - **Peer Collaboration:** Study groups, teaching each other, case discussions
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**4. Develop a Solid Support System** - CRNA school is one of the most intense challenges you'll face — academically, emotionally, and personally. Having a reliable support system can make all the difference.

Whether it's your spouse, parent, classmate, mentor, or even a group chat — you need people in your corner who you can lean on without feeling judged or misunderstood. Emotional support during long clinical days, exhausting exams, and sleepless nights is crucial for your well-being and success.

For me, I've found it helpful to keep a few people on speed dial. I often call one of them on the long drive home from clinical — my mom, who's always up for listening and helping me decompress, or one of a few close classmates who are in the trenches with me. Our classmates named us *the Dad Group* — we all have kids, marriages, and the shared challenge of balancing family, studying late after bedtime, and trying not to burn out. Talking with someone who *gets it* — really gets it — can be more helpful than venting to someone outside of school, even a spouse. Sometimes it's just easier to be honest when the other person is walking the same road.

Your support system doesn't need to be big — it just needs to be solid. Whether it's one person or five, find the people who give you strength, remind you of your worth, and allow you space to be human.

Don't try to do this alone. You're not supposed to.

#### Additional Resources

- **Stay Connected:** Schedule calls with family and friends during commutes or breaks.
  - **Study Together:** Engage with your cohort—lean on each other!
  - **Avoid Negativity:** Stay off toxic forums (Reddit doom scrolling).
  - **Seek Help Early:** Therapy takes time to arrange; consider it preemptively.
  - **Professional Support:** NCANA Peer Assistance and Wellness Committee.
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**5. Practice Self-Care** - Avoiding burnout is essential to sustain your focus and mental health. This is a marathon, not a sprint. The cool thing about self care is that it is all about what helps you to reset. I enjoy resetting with a good movie after a hard test. It motivates me and allows me to reset so I can feel ready to tackle more schooling. I am also an advocate for good therapy. It is

okay for us to admit when we need help. There will be lots of stress and anxiety inducing times throughout CRNA school, and having a professional to help is always a good idea.

#### Additional Resources

- **Mindfulness & Relaxation:**
    - **Apps:** Headspace (student discount), Calm App, Finch App
    - **YouTube Resources:** The Honest Guys, Wim Hof, Yoga with Adriene
    - **Therapy:** BetterHelp and similar apps
  - **Sleep Hygiene:** No screens before bed, sleep-inducing tea, blackout curtains, eye mask, sound machine
  - **Exercise:**
    - **Essential for well-being and burnout prevention**
    - Schedule runs, walks, stretches between study blocks
    - Strength training for bone health
  - **Mental Health Awareness:**
    - Substance Use Help: AANA Wellness and Peer Assistance | 1-800-654-5167
    - Second Victim Support: *The Second Victim Phenomenon: A Harsh Reality of Health Care Professions*
    - Suicide Prevention: 988lifeline.org | Dial or text 988 anytime
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**6. Use Resources Wisely** - The right tools can make learning more effective. In my program, the most valuable resources we have are recorded lectures, textbooks, powerpoints to review, and quizlets that our classmates make and share about these lectures. Apex Anesthesia is another tool we use frequently in my program. It costs money, but it is worth every penny. Also, the SmartBank for additional questions is worth considering. With the help of these tools, I can take each test knowing that I have maximized my study time.

#### Additional Resources

- **Board & Clinical Prep:**
  - Apex Anesthesia Review
  - Prodigy Anesthesia
  - UpToDate for evidence-based practice
- **Textbooks:**
  - "Miller's Anesthesia" (gold standard)
  - "Nurse Anesthesia" by John Nagelhout
  - "Clinical Anesthesia Procedures of the Massachusetts General Hospital" (quick reference)
  - Jaffe's Anesthesia

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**7. Prepare for Clinical Rotations** - Rotations are where you apply your knowledge and build confidence. I personally love my clinicals. They allow me to get hands-on practice with the job I have been working for YEARS to achieve. Plus, I get to actively learn from my preceptors the techniques that they like/dislike while developing my own patterns for success. To prepare for clinicals, I like to review my cases ahead of time (when permitted) and make care plans to take with me into the hospital. It helps me keep a clear mind on my strategy throughout the day. I also ask questions when needed and actively seek feedback from my preceptors. I write down little notes on my care plans of key takeaways I learn from preceptors. I have compiled them into a cheat sheet of sorts on Google Docs that I can reference later if I haven't done a specific case in a while.

#### Additional Resources

- **Case Preparation:** OpenAnesthesia, Jaffe's Anesthesia
- **Drug Knowledge:** Create a drug list and keep it updated.
- **Clinical Notes:** Keep a running list of things to research after clinicals.
- **Apps & Quick References:** Vargo App for case prep, pocket guides for anesthesia procedures.
- **Ask Peers & Faculty:** Don't hesitate to ask for guidance.

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**8. Medical Issues aren't Something to be Embarrassed About** - Take care of yourself — seriously. That includes seeing a doctor when something doesn't feel right, whether it's physical or mental. CRNA school is demanding, and it puts your mind and body through a lot. You are not alone if something comes up.

Just about everyone I know has started a new prescription or dealt with a health issue while in the program. Some began taking antidepressants or anti-anxiety medications. Others started blood pressure meds. A friend of mine even went into atrial fibrillation with rapid ventricular response during the first semester. I developed a gastric ulcer. These aren't rare exceptions — they're common realities.

Having a medical issue doesn't mean you're weak — it means you're human. And you're in good company.

Your health is a priority. If you need therapy, medication, time off, or medical treatment, don't hesitate. Taking care of your health is part of being a responsible and resilient provider.

#### Additional Resources

- **Your Primary Care Provider:** If you haven't already, build a relationship with a PCP who knows your schedule and stress level.
  - **BetterHelp / Talkspace:** Online therapy services that fit into a tight student schedule.
  - **Physician Support Line:** 1-888-409-0141 — free & confidential support line run by volunteer psychiatrists for healthcare workers and students.
  - **Medicaid:** There's no shame in getting assistance when you need it. Plus you'll pay it all back in taxes in no time after you graduate
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**9. We are All in This Together** - CRNA school is intense — academically, emotionally, physically. And one of the hardest parts is feeling like you're the only one struggling.

I can't tell you how many times I felt completely out of place — like I didn't belong, like I was the one falling behind while everyone else was effortlessly excelling. But then I'd have an honest conversation with a classmate and realize... they felt the same way.

That's when it clicked: *everyone is struggling in their own way — we just don't always see it.*

You are not alone. You are not the only one who feels unsure, overwhelmed, or afraid of messing up.

It's easy to compare yourself during clinicals and assume everyone else is already perfect — but behind the scenes, they're probably asking the same questions, doubting the same things, and wondering if they're doing okay too.

Even our preceptors, many of whom are incredibly supportive, have been through it. They remember what it was like, and most genuinely want you to succeed.

It helps so much to find people you trust — classmates, mentors, maybe even upperclassmen — and open up. Talk about your insecurities. Share the OR mistake that's eating at you. Let someone who *gets it* remind you that you're not the only one making mistakes, learning the hard way, and showing up to keep going.

You don't have to be perfect to belong here. You just have to keep going — together.

#### Additional Resources

- **Reddit: r/CRNA & r/StudentNurseAnesthetist:** Honest, anonymous threads where people share their struggles and victories. You'll quickly see you're not alone.
- **School Group Chats & Peer Mentorship:** Ask your program if there are second- or third-year students open to mentoring or answering questions. Even a monthly check-in can be game-changing.

- **CRNA Facebook Groups:** “CRNA School Support,” “SRNA Hangout,” or your school’s private group. Great for sharing stories and asking, “Has anyone else felt like this?”
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**10. Keep Your “Why” in Mind** - This might be the most effective of all the survival tips since it is the core to your decision to be in, and stay in, school. Without a good “why” to drive you, you may not have the energy or motivation to finish the program. CRNA school will make you question whether or not the hard work, lost sleep, and time spent is all worth the degree and job in the end. I use vision boards and meditation to keep my mind focused on my goals. The mind is powerful, and it can change your future.

I want to be, and I will be, a CRNA so I can have my dream job that allows me to spend more time with my family with a salary that supports the life I want to live without money-induced stress. I want my wife to be able to live her dream, which is to stay home and raise our children. I want to be able to be a philanthropist and make a difference in the world. With all of this being my “why” I can honestly say “YES, it is all worth it!”

#### Additional Resources

- **Affirmation-Based Passwords:** Use motivating words in logins.
  - **Celebrate Small Wins:** Recognize your growth daily.
  - **Reframe Failures:** Every mistake is a learning opportunity.
  - **Visual Reminders:** Sticky notes, vision board, motivational quotes in study space.
  - **Mindset Shift:** If you were meant to be perfect already, you’d be a CRNA today—this is part of the process!
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CRNA school is hard and will test you every step of the way. With these 8 survival tips, I truly believe you can make it through school. If you were accepted into a program, it is because the admissions team believes in you and your success. Believe in yourself and achieve greatness.