

FANA SPOTLIGHT

Shining a light on Florida CRNAs making a difference

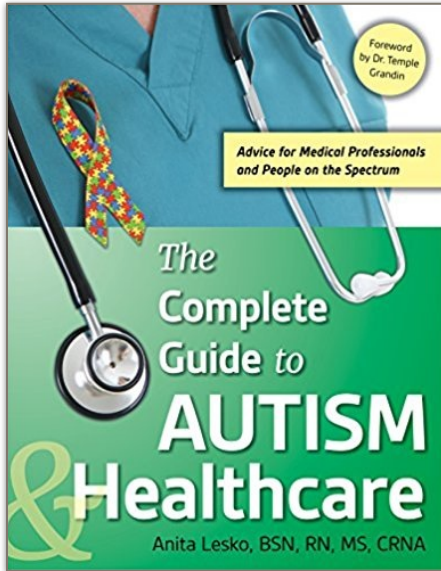
Anita Lesko CRNA

This FANA Spotlight is a must read for all CRNAs and an inspiration for everyone. Her story is powerful, moving, and insightful. “Still waters run deep” may be one of many sayings describing her but her own words share best the depth, character, and motivation that drives this truly inspirational person and CRNA that is Anita Lesko.

Hi everyone! My name is Anita Lesko.



I couldn't understand why I had endless sensory issues that others didn't have. I couldn't figure out why every social interaction was a struggle and frequently ended in a negative fashion. Despite it all, I graduated from Columbia University in New York City in 1988 with my Master's in Nurse Anesthesia. I've been working full time ever since as a Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetist. Considering that 85% of individuals with autism are either unemployed or underemployed, that's quite an accomplishment.



The Complete Guide to Autism Healthcare. Future Horizons Inc. Arlington TX. 2017, ISBN 9781941765449.

What Every Parent Needs To Know Before Their Autistic Child Gets Anesthesia



Anita Lesko, BSN, RN, MS, CRNA

One evening at work I had just walked into the lounge to eat my dinner, when one of my colleagues burst through the door in tears because her son had just been diagnosed with Asperger’s Syndrome. As she was blurting this out, I asked, “What is Asperger’s Syndrome? I’ve never heard of it.” She handed me some informational papers on Asperger’s that she was carrying. The top page was a questionnaire showing that if you have ten out of the twelve symptoms, you have Asperger’s. As I kept reading down the list, shock set in. I had all twelve symptoms. Suddenly, the pieces of the puzzle of my life fell into place and created the whole picture. I have Asperger’s Syndrome. With the latest DSM-5, Asperger’s falls in the same category as autism, which is a spectrum disorder varying from one extreme to another. Fortunately for me, I’m at the high end of the spectrum. Sadly, some are at the opposite end, while the majority fall somewhere in the middle.

So, that night after work I stopped at the book store and purchased literally every book they had about Asperger’s. I picked one of them, *The Complete Guide to Asperger’s Syndrome* by Dr. Tony Attwood. By the dawn’s early light, I knew without a doubt that I had Asperger’s. It was as if Tony knew me from the moment I was born. Three weeks later I went for a formal diagnosis to the same neuropsychologist that my co-worker took her son to. Now I was official.

In the initial days after this incredible revelation, my mind was in overdrive going through thousands of “pictures” in my mind. I’ve always thought in pictures, and I simply assumed everyone else did, too. As I learned, this is a trait common to many on the autism spectrum. This I learned from my now close friend Dr. Temple Grandin. One of the first books I read was her book *Thinking in Pictures*. So, basically, my entire life was playing in my mind,

every scene, every bad moment, every good moment. Everything. I then realized just how significant having Asperger's was, and how it dictated every breathing second, for better or for worse.

Sensory issues have been, and remain, a very significant aspect of my life. As a CRNA, there are non-stop "sensory violations" as I'll call them from the moment I walk into the locker room each morning until the time I'm walking out the door at the end of the day. A barrage of stimuli floods over me, most of which goes unnoticed by everyone else. I know that for a fact because after learning that I'm on the autism spectrum, I began doing little surveys of others around me. I'd ask them if the bright surgical lights bothered them. If being in the pre-op area in the morning, filled to capacity with patients, their families, pre-op nurses, surgeons, anesthesia staff, OR staff, and more, affects them. If listening to heavy metal in the operating room bothers them. If going non-stop all day overwhelms them. Their response was always the same: looking at me with a puzzled look as to why I'm asking that question, and a resounding "no." One person, in fact, got quite indignant when she replied. She stated, "Just tune it all out." When I replied, "I can't", she got very nasty and repeated herself, louder, "Just tune it all out!" I then stated, "When you have Asperger's, you *can't* just tune it all out." She snapped back, "That's ridiculous! Just tune it all out!" At that point I simply walked away. I can best describe my brain as a Google search engine that is constantly processing data, simultaneously. I typically run about 6 computer screens in my mind at the same time. If a seventh screen is added, then I start feeling like my search engine is going to "crash." That usually translates into bursting into tears once home, and letting out the sensory overload experienced all day at work. However, while still at work, the excessive stimuli will manifest itself into physical symptoms such as a raging headache.

Another issue I must deal with is mitochondrial dysfunction, common to many on the autism spectrum. Basically, it means I have only 60% of my "battery" charged starting out in the morning. As the day goes on, that energy dwindles very rapidly, as much of it is used up coping with the sensory overload. So, by the end of my shift, my "low battery" light is blinking, and it's just a struggle to get home, eat, and go to sleep. As I listen to others talking about going out to eat, or some fun activity after work, I just sigh

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Abraham Nilsson and Anita Lesko

to myself, thinking there's just yet another difference between me and *them*, meaning neurotypicals. I never knew why I had problems with extreme exhaustion until after I discovered I'm on the spectrum. We tend to be very deficient in vitamin D and magnesium, so I started taking those, which do help a little bit. My husband is also autistic and has the same mitochondria issue. He works as an AutoCAD draftsman, and although he doesn't have the vast array of stimuli at his job that I do, he's using his mind all day doing endless mathematical calculations, which has the same exhausting effect on him. We are simply drained physically and mentally at the end of each work day.

Music in the operating room has plagued me my entire career. In the early days, it wasn't really bad because surgeons seemed to only listen to softly played music, typically classical. Along the way, that all changed to loud heavy metal music. The sound of electric guitars does something to my brain that makes me feel literally hysterical inside. As I came to learn, it stimulates my sympathetic nervous system, causing the flight or fight response and all the physical responses that goes with it. So, it truly adversely affects me. When there is singing as well, my brain wants to process the words which again, is overloading my search engine. Surgeons and co-workers have done things ranging from laughing at me to cursing at me when I ask if the volume can be turned down or another choice of music be played. One of my silly Asperger ideals is that an operating room be a sacred, serious place where everyone is focused on the anesthetized patient and foregoes indulgences of fun and frivolity. Many others don't see it from my point of view. I often wonder how patients and their families would see it. I can answer that one for sure. They'd see it from my point of view.

When you are different in the workplace, you are a magnet for any bullies present. They make it a daily ritual of doing everything possible to make your life miserable or even to get you fired. In my 30 years as a CRNA, there were 4 individuals who engaged in this sport. I guess that's not too bad of odds. I've worked at 5 hospitals in total over the years, with 20 of those years where I'm currently still working. The 2 that were at this facility no longer work there. Since they left, so too did my problems. It took me awhile to get used to simply going to work without any problems or drama, all totally unrelated to the actual act of administering anesthesia. I know my boss is relieved to not be receiving emails of what the bullies did next. I just go to work, do my job, and leave. Getting bullied on the job is typical for autistic individuals. That's one factor in the statistics of only 85% employment/underemployment.

I still make social blunders. But since my discovery, they are becoming far less. Before I knew I have Asperger's, I'd say things that would put others into a tailspin. I had no idea why, or how to be any different. That was my normal. Once I learned all about Asperger's and autism, and the social challenges that go with it, I better understood what I was doing wrong, and how to make things better as best I can. I'll never be

neurotypical, so I can still be my "Aspie" self, but it's far better than I used to be. Oh, I never pretend to be normal. That would actually be literally impossible for me to do so. But I've taught myself how to look at situations from a new perspective and take other people's feelings into consideration. Things that many on the autism spectrum can't do, or don't learn how to do. It's a learning process, one I'm still working on. The older I get the better I'm getting at it.

Anxiety is something that most of us on the autism spectrum live with on a daily basis. On a perfectly good day my anxiety is hovering at low to moderate. Even something simple can set that soaring to high or extremely high. My mom used to say, "If there isn't something for you to be anxious about, you will find something to be anxious about!" She was very correct on that. Many people on the autism spectrum take anti-anxiety medications. My friend Temple Grandin says if she didn't take her low dose of Prozac each morning she'd never make it through the day because she too has anxiety. I don't take any medication except for Bayer aspirin. So, I must cope with my anxiety no matter how high it goes. My husband has become an expert at getting me to calm down, especially when we are flying, which is very frequently.

So, you are reading this and thinking, "Good grief! Anita is a mess!" I can bet that's what you are saying to yourself. The reality is, I've spent my whole life like this so it's all normal to me and I don't know any other way to be. There's one thing I forgot to tell you about, something also common to those on the autism spectrum. We get *special interests*. Things that are often rather unusual to be interested in, and we can zero in with a laser focus that others don't have. For me, this aspect has enabled me to achieve some pretty



lofty goals. How many people do *you* know who got to fly in an F-15 fighter jet?!

I have speaking engagements all around the country at autism conferences. One of my missions is to educate all healthcare providers about autism and how to best care for them. Using my new book, *The Complete Guide to Autism & Healthcare* I must accomplish this mission. All

CRNA's need to read this book, anesthesiologists, surgeons, nurses, therapists, everyone who comes in contact with a patient on the autism spectrum needs to have this knowledge. Please visit my website at www.anitalesko.com and learn more how we can better work with, and care for, those with autism spectrum disorder.

Links to some of Anita's Autism Spectrum Disorder advocacy activities:

United Nations presentation from World Autism Awareness Day 2017

<https://vimeo.com/user8733111/review/217532657/0a2069e1b3>

All Autism Wedding Video

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=USH3WLFaEuY&feature=em-share_video_user

The Mighty Blog. My Life as the Good Autistic Anesthetist. https://themighty.com/2018/01/the-good-autistic-anesthetist/#article_foot

