

Ep #68: Greatest Hits #2: Don't Give Up: The Journey to Becoming a Stress-Free Nurse Practitioner



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With Your Host

Sarah Michelle

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Welcome to *Becoming a Stress-Free Nurse Practitioner*, a show for new NPs and students that want to pass their board exam the first time and make that transition from RN to NP as seamless as possible. I'm your host Sarah Michelle. Now, let's dive into today's episode.

Hey everyone, it's me, Sarah Michelle. Today we are going to be starting a string of episodes over the next few weeks of our greatest hits. So our greatest hits are our top 5 most listened to episodes by students and new nurse practitioners that have helped you along your real deal nurse practitioner journey as I'm currently out taking maternity leave.

But once we get through these greatest hits episodes we will go back to our normal schedule and cadence of all the good things that you guys have come to expect from this podcast. So I'll be talking to you live soon.

Hey friends, this is Sarah Michelle. You know, starting this podcast has really been a long-term goal of mine to try to connect with you guys on a more personal level. While some of you may feel like you already know me from my Facebook groups or my board review courses, I think a podcast is going to allow me to reach out to you guys in a few new ways.

Number one, you're really going to get to know me and the inner workings of my somewhat OCD brain. But number two, I hope to provide resources that will not only benefit you as a nurse practitioner student, but also when you make that giant leap into becoming a brand-new nurse practitioner and truly start that difficult time of transitioning into practice.

My ultimate hope and vision is for this to be your go-to resource revolving around all things related to being a nurse practitioner. Whether that be things like interview tips or practice guideline updates, or even just how to pass the board exam.

Many of you guys listening have been with me for a while now and supported me as I've grown. And now, I really want to give back to each of you and support you as you continue to grow as well.

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My word for this year in 2021 is actually "Growth." And I really see that growth taking root in a lot of ways this year; growth in my career, growth in my business, and 100% growth as an individual. I am seeking an absolute explosion of growth in every way this year and I really hope, through this podcast, to help you do the same.

And that's why I thought I would spend this first episode talking about my very own growth within this profession and how I even ended up here. I think this topic is a great welcome episode and introduction to this podcast, and really just me as a person.

Because I think most of my students have this assumption that I have it all together and I've always had it all together. But to be really blunt with you, I was at one time almost very narrowly a nursing school dropout. I wanted out of this profession before I ever really got into it.

So, I've had a little bit of an interesting journey from being a 17-year-old girl starting nursing school to becoming a nurse practitioner before the age of 30. To really start this story, I think you have to know the fact that I've always been a good student.

I mean, it was essentially ingrained in my soul by having teachers for parents. I always wanted to succeed. I always wanted to do well because I was, and I still am in a lot of ways, an absolute perfectionist.

But the thing is, when you get into nursing school, things are not always perfect all the time. You guys know nursing, just as a whole, is messy and wild and, in many ways, completely unpredictable. Now, that doesn't really mean that perfectionists can't be a nurse. It just means that you have to work a little harder to find your own niche in the nursing world.

But while that's something I very much know now, that is not something I knew in any capacity back then. When I was in nursing school, I was as anxious as could be. And you also have to think too here, when I started college in general, I was only 17 years old.

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I was young and naïve and frequently totally unsure of myself as most young college students are. And about halfway through my Bachelor's Degree, that self-doubt really started to creep in and take over and wreak a little bit of havoc in my life.

You know, getting the grades that I was accustomed to throughout life just became harder and harder the deeper that I got into nursing school. Meeting the expectations of nursing school while juggling a full-time job, which I'm sure many of you know this life, was also incredibly difficult.

And then, finally, I failed an exam for the first time ever by just one question at the halfway point of school in my junior year. And suddenly I found myself focusing on that stark contrast between expectations and reality.

College wasn't the experience I'd hoped for, but nursing school wasn't what I had expected or hoped for either. It was a really hard shift for me to begin thinking to myself, "Okay, maybe I made the wrong decision here. Maybe I should have went into teaching or something else entirely." And really, to put it as kindly as possible, I felt really lost.

And then came my deciding moment, and a moment that I think, in a lot of ways, shaped everything that came after it, as a nurse, as an eventual nursing educator, and even as a nurse practitioner today. When I got into my third year of college, it was really the toughest set of courses I'd ever taken and, on top of that, I started working overtime at my job to be able to keep up with life itself.

At this point in time, I was actually a student manager in my college's student center. And I used to carry around flash cards everywhere. And I do mean everywhere. I studied them on the bus. I studied them in the shower. Yes, I studied them in the shower. I literally studied in what felt like every free moment.

Now, when you're living like that and you're hustling to make it to the next moment for months and months on end – which is a life that I am positive many of you are accustomed to if you're on this nurse practitioner journey –

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you really start to lose sight of what it means to adequately care for yourself.

And then that negligence of really taking care of myself just came so much unwavering and building anxiety. My little perfectionist brain was on hyperdrive, working and working and working without taking a moment, and sure as heck without taking a breath.

So, about halfway through that semester, I showed up to my clinical rotation one day and I was given what really sounds like a simple task. It was going to be my turn to give medication, supervised by my instructor that day.

Now, while it's really not worth diving into all of the nitty gritty details of this situation, the rundown of what happened is this. I was asked to perform a medication skill that I hadn't learned and hadn't performed in school or in the clinical setting up to that point.

And I really want to stop and point out here that a lot of my fellow students had done the skill along the way, sometime during school. But for me, it was really just something that hadn't popped up yet. So, in that moment, I'm pulling the medication out of the medication cart, I turn and I ask my instructor for help.

I also want to stop here and include a small caveat. You know, there's always three sides to every story. We've got the two versions from the people involved, and then we've got what actually happened.

But in that moment, from my side of things, I didn't feel like I received the help and the guidance that I was looking for to honestly complete what, in a lot of ways, is a really simple skill. Instead, I felt rushed. I felt pressured. And I definitely did not feel supported.

And as a culmination of this moment, I began to panic a little bit. And as the intensity of the situation continued to escalate because I just couldn't seem to provide what my instructor was looking for, I actually ended up having a

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panic attack. And this, for me, was very sadly the first panic attack I had ever had in public.

It was embarrassing. And in a lot of ways – I'll be totally honest with you – I felt totally defeated. My only saving grace that morning was an incredibly kind nurse on that unit who I sincerely in every way wish I could thank today, who pulled me aside to take care of me.

She talked me through how to do the skill step by step so I could perform it correctly with my instructor. And after that brief reprieve with that nurse away from my instructor entirely, I was able to continue on about my morning, accurately do the skill, due to that nurse's specific guidance, and finish up my clinical day.

I thought that that moment of panic was the end of it because I didn't really get any feedback throughout the day. You know, that little episode of mine had occurred in the morning. But unfortunately, for me, that wasn't going to be the case. I just didn't know it then.

And as a sidenote here, I am very purposeful now, when my real-life students make errors and make mistakes, to always address them right away. Because I never want a student to feel ambushed like I did later on in that clinical day.

So, at the very end of clinical that day, I'm packing up my belongings and, all of a sudden, I'm asked into this meeting with two of my instructors. And they're going to talk about my overall progress as a nursing student. And to be honest with you guys, I've really thought about this conversation a lot over the years, especially now being a nurse educator myself in the clinical setting.

And I can see now that here's what they were looking at; a young girl, high anxiety, already failed one exam, very narrowly passed the second exam, and then in clinical practice didn't know how to do a skill and crumbled.

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So, I guess the next step in this conversation was going to be logical to them. Not to me, but to them. They asked me to consider leaving nursing school altogether and to think about pursuing a different, less anxiety-provoking career path.

They felt that my anxiety was going to be a hinderance, and so I could potentially be an unsuitable fit to go into the nursing profession. They didn't see what had actually transpired, which is that I had asked for help that I didn't feel like I received. And that's what precipitated that panic.

And to be painfully honest here, to say my world was shattered would have been a vast understatement at the time. You know, didn't really feel like my nursing instructors believed in me and I sure as hell didn't believe in myself at this point.

And for a few days, I felt like my life stopped in a lot of ways. I was so torn. Do I continue this path that I was already starting to doubt myself on or do I start over from scratch and maybe even pursue a degree in higher education this time around?

I consistently asked myself over and over, do I really want to be a nurse? And if I do, do I have what it takes? Can someone be anxious and still be a nurse? Is that even allowed in the nursing world?

And the question that I really played over and over in my head over those few days was this; is this a profession that would even want someone like me in it? Do I belong here?

Well, here's the thing. Something I always share with my real-life students and my virtual students today is the simple fact that anxiety can make you a really fantastic nurse and also, by the way, a really fantastic nurse practitioner.

And the reason behind that is because that anxiety can fuel you to be better and to do better for your patients. That hypervigilance makes you much more attuned, just by trait, to the subtle clues and shifts so you can

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be on you're A-game with your patients. And I am absolutely positive that my anxiety has prevented patients from fully deteriorating before when they easily could have.

It just really makes me pay attention at a different level and it makes me strive for excellence every single day within myself and ultimately within this profession. And once I decided that little fact for myself, that my anxiety was a gift and not something to be stuffed down and hidden underneath the surface anymore, and also once I decided that self-care was something that needed to be more of a priority in my life, that's when my whole perspective on nursing changed.

Now, would it have been really easy to leave nursing school and start over? I mean, probably. But would I have been happy knowing that I let my anxiety run me instead of me running my anxiety? No way. And when you have that level of determination, no nursing school, and definitely no nursing instructor can shut you down.

I had finally decided for myself that I truly believed in me and what I could accomplish. It didn't really matter what obstacle they were going to throw at me to stay in the program or whatever else they claimed about me, I was going to be just fine.

And believe me, to stay in that nursing program, they definitely threw an action plan of obstacles in my way and, in a lot of ways, really made me prove my commitment. But I proved to myself and to them that I could do it because I passed that class with a B. And I never failed an exam again.

Now, I'm not going to lie to you and tell you that overnight I grew that confidence I lost back. Because for a while, that was honestly really a struggle in itself.

However, I had just finally made the realization, but also the true decision for myself that my anxiety was a component of my life that I could utilize. Luckily for me, I had determination and drive and sheer ambition from being told that couldn't and shouldn't do something. That literally set me on

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fire. And I harnessed that fire until one day, my confidence levels did actually come back again.

And that actually happened for me the very next summer. You know, despite that initial struggle, I was accepted into a highly selective summer internship program where they really pair you up one on one with a nurse to ingrain those skills and your knowledge base and essentially train you to be a nurse someday.

And what a beautiful opportunity it was for me to be able to prove myself. You know, not even to anyone else necessarily, but really deep down to me. I just needed to be with a nurse who was patient and kind and allowed me to work through my anxiety when things didn't go as planned.

I'm so grateful in every way that I was paired with an incredibly kind nurse named Hannah, who guided me through my own journey of anxious student to confident novice nurse. This is exactly the same type of guiding that I provide to my nursing and my nurse practitioner students today.

In so many ways, Hannah did not even realize it, but she cemented to me what I hoped to be true, which is that I could be a nurse and that I would be a good and safe nurse too.

That summer experience with her was worth more than all of my schooling combined. It showed me what students can be capable of when they're given the necessary time and the unwavering faith that they can do it.

And as an aside to this little mini life story, Hannah worked on oncology. It was only fitting that I would work in oncology one day too as a new nurse, just one unit away in hematology.

So, that defining moment halfway through nursing school, along with Hannah's belief in me, is really what, in a lot of ways, led me to nursing education. First and foremost, I hated that as a student, I felt a little shame for being anxious. And that is something I vow to never do with my students today.

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Being in nursing school, or nurse practitioner school for that matter, is a very stressful time all the way around. Honestly, if you're not a little anxious, I'd almost be a bit worried about you.

What really brought this picture full-circle for me though was when I was asked, my final year of nursing school, to tutor someone. Obviously, I had eventually figured out that notoriously tough class, and so maybe I could offer some guidance for someone who is initially struggling.

Within just four months of that first one on one tutoring session, I quit my full-time job because I went from tutoring one student as a side hustle to tutoring over 30 students per week and making it my full-time job.

And now, here we are today. I'm the course creator and the CEO of Sarah Michelle NP Reviews, both the first nurse and the very first nurse practitioner in my family, despite it all.

But oh my gosh, what an up and down ride it has been to get to this moment. When I created that first rendition of my nurse practitioner review courses, I thought maybe this little confidence-boosting course could help out a few of my fellow classmates and friends.

I never could have imagined that I would have now sold these courses literally across the world and have helped thousands of students pass their board exam. My courses, and truly all of the resources I create for my students, are so that I can be a cheerleader for each and every one of you during your transition from anxious nurse practitioner student over to being a real deal nurse practitioner.

Everybody needs somebody in their corner telling them they have made the right choice to be here and they can actually do this. That's why my vision for this podcast is to bring you everything you're wanting to know and just put it all in the same spot for you.

Each week, we're going to work through our problems together because not only am I rooting for you, I am one of you. I'm going to help guide you

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through this process and bring in lots of interviews and resources along the way to supplement the knowledge I've already obtained throughout this process.

You can learn from my own mistakes and my board preparation and job-search process. You can increase your knowledge when we review practice guidelines that update. And you will always feel like you're supported in whatever phase of a nurse practitioner journey that you are currently in.

As I said earlier, my word for 2021 is "Growth." And I believe we can all do that together this year through not only my groups, but also through this podcast. We all need a community behind us to survive not only school, but the reality of being a nurse practitioner. I cannot wait to do that with you and alongside you.

As an extra bonus, friends, if you're looking for support no matter what phase of your nurse practitioner journey that you're currently in I have communities available for both students and new nurse practitioners. In these communities, we work to uplift one another and grow this profession together every single day. Links to join will be included for you in the show notes.

Thanks for listening to *Becoming a Stress-Free Nurse Practitioner*. If you want more information about the different types of support we offer to students and new NPs, visit stressfreenp.com. See you next week.