



Agapanthus

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Katherine Scott and Henry Willis contributed significantly to this chapter.

15.1 To the Families, Friends and Partners of Surgeons: “You’re All in It Together”

We’ve spoken to some of the friends and family of surgeons who have repeated their exams and pulled together some top tips that it might be worth sharing with your loved ones at the outset so they too, know what to expect as you begin to sit—or resit the exam.

The biggest thing you need to come to grips with is accepting that while your ‘student’ has put their life on hold to get these exams done—yours is on hold too. This fact is even more pertinent when they don’t pass the exam on the first run and the period of time goes from ‘just 6 months in the grand scheme of things’, to what feels like years on end—and the light at the end of the tunnel seems a lot further away. Here’s a few tips from friends and families we spoke to that might help to remember along the way:

- *Don’t underestimate the time needed to recover from failure:* The energy—emotional and physical—that has gone into sitting the exam is almost unfathomable to those outside the ‘bubble’ we are in. Recovering from a failure of any kind where you’ve put in this much effort isn’t easy—but then throw into that the ‘typical’ personalities of surgical students and that is magnified. Your once unflappable and composed student will need time to recover—to work through it, to come to terms with his or her own fallibility and to be able to stomach starting it all over again. Don’t underestimate how long this might take. Plan a holiday, lock the study door, and don’t encourage them to get back to it too early. They need to be really ready to start again afresh, and this will take different amount of time for different people. Just let it take its course and be ready to re-start your supporting role again with renewed enthusiasm too.
- *The support crew needs support too:* your role as chief cheerleader is relentless, often thankless and probably not one you’ve got much experience in. You too need an outlet for your frustrations, fears and pressure too. So make sure you have people you can unwind with and unload on, and can set aside time for you to take a break from the exams.
- *Always be ready with a set of ‘mood boosters’:* the life of a supporter can be very up and down—depending on how the day of study has gone. Your student isn’t just studying for this exam, they’re holding down a very demanding job, dealing with the pressures of surgery, sometimes trying to be a parent too. But you know them best and they need you to intuitively know when they need a boost. Have a bank of things you can pull out to break the circuit, change the direction of a bad day, give them a break (that they won’t feel guilty about taking). It could be as simple as their favourite treat food, a massage, a run or boxing session, something to brighten their study space ... whatever suits them.
- *Remember who they were before this all started—they’re possessed right now:* The person you knew is away for a while, but they WILL come back. This means that most things you demanded or expected of them are off the table. You have to lower and remove expectations around things like remembering birthdays,

returning phone calls, catching up for a spontaneous drink, replying to texts, turning up to family events, etc. For parents and partners this can be especially tough—but the last thing your student needs is to feel guilt or pressure from anything other than the exam. Passing it after having failed raises the stakes tenfold.

- *It's not about you:* This exam is the single biggest (career) thing your student will ever go through. In the main that means that whatever you have going on is—temporarily—of zero interest to them right now! But don't take it personally, they do really care, but just not right now. For partners going through their own family, work or friendship troubles this can be very isolating and you can mistake their lack of interest for something bigger than it is. Usually, it's just that it's not about you right now—it will be again, but not until they've passed and shaken the stigma of failure! Refer to the above point about having alternative support people for you.
- *Don't call them, they'll call you:* Every free moment for your student is probably being spent studying, thinking about studying or feeling guilty for not studying. So if they aren't studying then it's probably something else essential to life (eating, showering, sleeping!). Think about your contact with them—let them know you're there if they need, but leave them to contact you. There is nothing like a full inbox of unopened texts and emails from family and friends to make your student feel like they are losing control of their life. If you do get to spend precious time together, make it count!
- *At the end of the day, just get on with it:* Very wise words from a male partner of a surgical student! It's not your exam, but it is your life too. While some big things might be on hold you're the one who has to keep the wheels turning, the house functioning, the bills paid, the family on track. So your student just needs you to get on with it—and you need it for yourself too. When you're faced with their failures and disappointments they need sympathy and empathy, but they also need you to keep a stiff upper lip. You'll be disappointed too—but trust us—nothing you feel can eclipse their own internal feelings. Be pragmatic, let them know that you've got this and just get on with it.