



My MD-to-Be

YEAR 1, WEEK 4: STARTING ANATOMY LABS

IN THIS ARTICLE

- What is the Anatomy Lab?
- How Do Medical Students Experience the Anatomy Lab?
- How Can I Support Maya with the Anatomy Lab?
- Extra Credit



This week, Maya will dissect a cadaver for the first time.

WHAT IS THE ANATOMY LAB?

Medical students dissect (cut apart and separate) cadavers (dead bodies) in order to study human anatomy in detail. Students build a foundation of understanding how the human body is put together by identifying muscles, nerves, and blood vessels, as well as by examining major organs (such as the liver and the heart) within a human body. Over the course of six months, students work in groups of four per cadaver, meeting twice a week for sessions that last several hours.

Each session begins with a lecture from the anatomy faculty, detailing the "roadmap" for that day's dissection. Following the lecture, students prepare for the dissection and relocate to the anatomy lab, where they are guided by teaching assistants (more advanced medical students).

The first session begins with cutting open the chest and exploring the chest cavity. Over the course of six months, students move from the chest and abdomen to the arms, legs and back. Later in the course, students dissect the head and neck.

HOW DO MEDICAL STUDENTS EXPERIENCE THE ANATOMY LAB?

For many students, dissecting a cadaver is their first encounter with a dead human body. Many students experience a sense of awe and humility at the privilege of opening and looking inside a human body, while simultaneously experiencing an unsettling feeling of depersonalization as they grow comfortable performing invasive procedures on their cadaver.

Perhaps more than any other early experience in medical school, cadaver dissection is a time when medical students learn to look at the human body as a clinician would, rather than as a layperson. As they prepare for their first session, students are often nervous about how they will react to their cadaver, and more than one student will be visibly faint or deeply uncomfortable. As sessions progress, many students find the experience to be manageable and even exciting or fascinating, albeit intense and somewhat surreal.

At some point over the six months of dissection, most students find they have a strong visceral reaction to some part of the dissection process. Some students are surprised to find that dissecting the muscles of the hand or the eye is deeply unsettling. Other students react strongly to finding evidence of a cadaver's C-section or tumor. While students cannot always predict which element of the dissection will move them emotionally, it is safe to say that the vast majority of students will have a strong emotional reaction at some point of the dissection course.

HOW CAN I SUPPORT MAYA WITH THE ANATOMY LAB?

- If you speak before Maya's first anatomy lab, you can ask Maya about how she feels regarding the upcoming first anatomy lab.
- When you speak after her first session, invite Maya to share her experience of anatomy class with you.
- Keep in mind that anxiety, excitement, awe, and unsettledness are equally valid. Students normally experience a broad range of feelings associated with cadaver dissection, a situation that most students have never encountered in the past.

Remember that, at times, Maya will probably feel excited or fascinated by her experience in the anatomy lab. This fascination is normal and, for a budding physician, an important part of forming a professional identity.

- Keep in mind that students can't always anticipate what their feelings will be, and that feelings may shift from day to day and week to week.
- Remember to take care of yourself, too. If Maya shares details that make you uncomfortable, it's okay for you to tell her that you would prefer not to hear all the gory details. Instead, you can focus on Maya's experience and feelings as she goes through this intense process.

EXTRA CREDIT

Many medical students have written thoughtful articles about this powerful and deeply meaningful experience. Here are some of our favorites:

- [Learning Empathy From the Dead \(The Atlantic\)](#)
- [The Secret Lives of Cadavers: How Lifeless Bodies Become Life-Saving Tools \(National Geographic\)](#):
- [\(audio\) First-Year Med Students Enter the 'Gross' Lab \(NPR, All Things Considered\)](#)