

## Specific Study Techniques

### Memorization/Repetition:

On an index card, you can list the steps of a procedure. This can be carried with you to study and pulled out to study during "hard core" study times or any convenient time:

- ❖ On the front of an index card you can write a word and on the back, define the word.
- ❖ Make a learning wheel: Cut a piece of cardboard into a circle and draw pie-shaped wedges on the front and back. On a front wedge, write units of measure, such as 30 mL, and on the corresponding back wedge, write its conversion to another unit of measure, such as 1 ounce. Then on individual spring clothespins, write each of the units of measure that appear on the back of the wheel. When you want to study approximate equivalents, mix up the clothes pins and try to match each on to its corresponding unit of measure. You can turn the wheel over and check your success by determining if the clothespin you attached to the wheel matches the unit of measure on the back of the wheel.

### Alphabet Cues:

Each letter serves as a cue that stimulates the recall of information such as:

- ❖ **The three P's** for the cardinal signs of diabetes mellitus are: **P**olyuria, **P**olydipsia, and **P**olyphagia.
- ❖ The **ABC's** of cardiopulmonary resuscitation are: **A**irway – clear the airway; **B**reathing – initiate artificial breathing; **C**irculation – initiate cardiac compression.

### Acronyms:

An acronym is a word formed from the first letter of a series of statements or facts. Each part of the acronym relates to the information it represents. It is useful to learning because each letter of the word jolts the memory to recall information. For example:

- ❖ Early warning signs of cancer can use the acronym of **CAUTION**  
C hange in bowel and bladder habits  
A sore that does not heal  
U nusual bleeding or discharge  
T hickening or a lump  
I ndigestion or difficulty swallowing  
O bvious change in a wart or mole  
N agging cough or hoarseness

### Acrostics:

An acrostic is a phrase, motto, or verse in which a letter of each word (usually the first letter) prompts the memory to retrieve information such as:

- ❖ When studying the fat-soluble vitamins, recall this motto: "**All Dieters Eat Kilocalories.**" This should help you remember that **A, D, E,** and **K** are the fat soluble vitamins.
- ❖ When studying apothecary and metric equivalents, remember this verse: "**There are 15 grains of sugar in 1 graham (gram) cracker.**" This sentence should help you remember that **15 grains** are equivalent to **1 gram**.

*Other ideas can be found in the following book:*

*Nugent, P.M. & Vitale, B.A., (2004). Test Success: Test-Taking Techniques for Beginning Nursing Students (F.A. Davis Company)*

## Studying for Exams

### Step 1 – Evaluate and Plan

One week prior to the exam, evaluate what you need to do to prepare for your exam:

1. Are you up-to-date on all reading assignments and homework?
2. How well do you know the material?
3. Make a list of what you need to do to prepare for the exam.
4. Estimate how much time you will need to prepare.
5. Schedule your study time and activities specifically on a calendar or planner.

### Step 2 – Studying

There are many methods of studying for exams. Some will be more helpful than others depending on your learning style. Generally, it is most effective to combine a few different study techniques.

1. Plan to begin studying at least five days before an exam and study every day.
2. Study in a quiet area without distractions.
3. Break study time into smaller one-hour sections, then take a few minutes to stretch, walk around, get a drink of water, etc....but then...get back to work.
4. Plan your study time so that you will still be able to get plenty of rest....cramming doesn't work!

Choose from these **activities** which will help you to prepare for your exam:

- ❖ **Re-write notes** – be sure to add details that you may have missed during lecture; draw pictures or diagrams; perhaps organize the information into charts (see example chart).
- ❖ **Read text** and other materials as needed– add important information from the text into your chart or re-written class notes. Don't try to take notes on the WHOLE book!
- ❖ Read the text using the **class notes and/or course objectives as a guide**. Be sure that you can answer the objectives for the course material prior to the exam.
- ❖ **Review notes daily** and quiz yourself on the material....or have someone quiz you orally.
- ❖ **Activate your memory** –Use repetition; create acronyms and acrostics (see attached “Specific Study Techniques”). Relate the material to your personal experience.  
Draw pictures - use different colors.
- ❖ **Study groups** help some students – In a small group, discuss difficult concepts, write on the board, take turns explaining concepts to each other; quiz each other.
- ❖ Utilize **resources** such as the text tutorials, Meds Pub, and sources in the skills lab to practice taking tests.
- ❖ Have a **positive attitude** about being a successful test-taker!

## Active Reading

Textbooks are an important source of information for your nursing courses. Successful students are able to extract key facts, understand the material, and memorize important information. The following methods for reading your textbook will not only help with the above tasks, but will help you stay focused while you are reading:

1. Before reading a chapter, take a few minutes to **preview the chapter**; look at words in bold, subheadings, picture, and charts.
2. Read the summary at the end of the chapter. If there are questions at the end of the chapter, read the questions and keep them in mind while reading the chapter. Or, **use the course objectives** as questions and let them guide your reading. Answer the objectives as you read.
3. If you **take notes** as you are reading the book, add them to your lecture notes and/or charts, using a different color so that you can distinguish between the class notes and the text book notes. Keep the notes brief, utilizing key points.
4. **Look up unfamiliar words**, and write the definition in the margin of the textbook.
5. If it is helpful, **read out loud**.
6. Whenever possible, **draw pictures** to illustrate the material and put important information into charts.
7. DON'T try to read the material and memorize it one day before the test. It will not work. You need time to move the information to your **long-term memory** bank! Remember....you will be using the information you learn in nursing school during your career....you will need to retain it!
8. Enjoy your reading time!

## Test-Taking Strategies

- ❖ Read questions **carefully**.
- ❖ Look for **key words**.
- ❖ Watch out for words like “**except,**” “**always,**” and “**never.**”
- ❖ Read **all** of the choices and look for **clues** in the question and responses that makes the answer the MOST CORRECT.
- ❖ Allow the **test question** to be a **stimulus** for your response.
- ❖ If you are stumped by a question, **move on** with the exam and come back to it. Sometimes ideas will come to you as you work the rest of the exam.
- ❖ **Budget your time** as you take the exam so that you don't spend too much time on a few questions, and then are forced to rush to complete it.
- ❖ Wear **earplugs** if you are distracted by noises in the classroom or outside.
- ❖ Use **relaxation techniques** during the exam if you start to feel anxious.
- ❖ Before and after the exam, try to **avoid discussing** the exam with other students....that only adds to feelings of anxiety.
- ❖ **If you are allowed to write on the exam, circle or underline key words** in the question such as the age of a patient, the word “except,” or other key information that would have an impact on picking a correct answer.
- ❖ If two answers seem to be correct, choose the **MOST specific** one. For example:  
“A triangle has 3 sides,” is more specific than “a triangle has more than 2 sides.”
- ❖ Make sure that you have **filled in the scantron correctly** and that if you erased an answer, you have made it clear on the scantron which answer you picked.
- ❖ Try not to “over-think” the answer. Go with your “**gut feeling.**”
- ❖ **Try not to change too many answers.** Most of the time your first response will be correct!
- ❖ Get plenty of **rest** before the exam....don't “cram” the night before.

## Coping With Test Anxiety

Some causes of test anxiety are past negative experiences, fear of failure, insufficient test preparation, poor health habits, and inadequate test-taking strategies. Every student usually feels some anxiety while taking tests, however for some students, the feeling is so intense that it affects their performance.

**Here are some suggestions that may assist in decreasing test anxiety:**

- 1.) Developing effective study skills will give you more confidence:**
  - ❖ Develop a study schedule and implement it plenty of time before the exam.
  - ❖ Don't procrastinate.
  - ❖ Use study tools that work for YOU.
  - ❖ Attend all classes and labs, take good notes.
  - ❖ Get help when needed from your instructor, mentor, or in the skills lab.
  - ❖ Practice taking tests using text book tutorials, Meds-Pub, or in the skills lab.
  
- 2.) Don't let your emotions interfere with logic:**
  - ❖ Recognize self-defeating thoughts, such as "I could never study enough for this test," and reframe your thinking to include positive re-enforcing statements such as: "I am a capable student!" or "I can do this!" Post one of these positive affirmations on a 3 x 5 card and put it where you will see if often.
  
- 3.) Learn to say STOP!**
  - ❖ As soon as you begin to distract yourself with negative thoughts or worry during the exam say "STOP!" to yourself. Then, re-frame your thinking to include the positive re-enforcing statement you have previously chosen. (see step #2). This process will help to keep you focused and stay on task without allowing your anxiety to spin out of control during the exam.
  
- 4.) Use relaxation techniques during the exam:**
  - ❖ Use P.B.S. and/or other relaxation techniques during test taking as needed to reduce anxious feelings and to re-focus your thoughts. (See handout: "P.B.S.: A Calming Technique")
  - ❖ If you are distracted by other students, wear ear plugs.
  
- 5.) Use good test-taking skills.** (see "Test Taking Tools" handout)
  
- 6.) Develop healthy life-style habits:**
  - ❖ Eat properly and get adequate rest.
  - ❖ Don't stay up and "cram" the night before an exam.
  - ❖ Find time in your schedule to exercise ---you need the endorphins!

Remember... almost all nursing students feel some anxiety regarding exams, however, you can learn to harness that emotional energy into positive results as you practice these suggestions!

## **P.B.S. (Posture, Breathing, Self-Talk)**

An "On-the-Spot" Calming Technique

This calming technique can be used whenever you confront annoying or stressful situations. As you practice using P.B.S, it will become second nature for you to relax your posture, breathe deeply, and review a positive self-statement. With practice and time, it will become automatic, and at this point, the relaxation of your skeletal and smooth muscle systems will be automatic and your body will no longer be locked into a tense reaction to stress.

Instructions for how to use P.B.S.:

### ***P = Posture:***

Become aware of the tension posture that indicates stress in your body, and shift your body so your spine is straight. Let your shoulders slouch forward slightly; relax shoulder, chest, and abdominal muscles.

### ***B = Breathing:***

Breathe in deeply, slowly and evenly. Then breathe out slowly. As soon as you finish inhaling, begin exhaling, trying not to pause at the top of your breathing cycle. Duration of inhalation and exhalation should be approximately equal.

### ***S = Self Talk:***

Self-defeating thoughts can increase your feelings of stress; therefore, re-frame negative thoughts with a positive thought framework. Choose a word or phrase that best helps you to re-frame your thoughts such as:

"I can handle this."

"Relax."

"Let go."

Become aware of the physical tension release you feel.

## How to Take a Test

1. Identify the key words and concepts
  - a. Key words usually appear in the stem. Look for those that indicate negative polarity or set a priority.
  - b. Examples are **most, first response, earliest, priority, on the first visit, on a subsequent visit, common, best, least, except, not immediately, not, except, and initial.**
  - c. Ask yourself “What is this question really asking?” Restate the question in your own words.
  - d. Avoid reading into the question
  
2. In communication-based questions
  - a. Always look for the therapeutic response that acknowledges the patient and validates the patient’s feelings first.
  - b. Identify the person who is the focus of the question (patient, nurse, family)
  - c. Identify the choice that empowers the patient
  - d. Identify and rule out options that deny the patient’s feelings or needs
  - e. Identify the non-judgmental response
  
3. Determining the Best Response
  - a. Assessment always comes before diagnosis and treatment
  - b. The key word “initial” usually implies the need to assess
  - c. Remember Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (physiologic needs before safety, before higher-level needs)
  - d. In teaching and learning situations, learning is contingent upon motivation so must assess readiness to learn, including emotional status.
  - e. Meet patient’s needs before tasks or anyone else’s needs
  - f. Prioritize A-B-C
  - g. Prioritize safety
  - h. Don’t select an answer until you have read all the options
  
4. Selecting the Best Answer when you don’t know the answer
  - a. Eliminate incorrect options
  - b. Select the most global response option
  - c. If two options say essentially the same thing, neither can be correct
  - d. Eliminate options that contain words like “always” or “never”
  - e. Look for words or phrases in the answers that are similar to those in the introductory statement or stem.
  - f. Be alert to relevant information from earlier questions
  - g. Watch for grammatical inconsistencies between the stem and the options.
  - h. Look for the longest option, which is often the correct response.
  - i. Examine options that are opposites. Usually one is correct.