

Exam Preparation Strategies for Healthcare Students

Reading time:

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High-stakes testing and long-term learning are commonplace in any healthcare practitioner's educational journey. Exam results and performance benchmarks often serve as roadblocks to admission into different programs. However, the broader goal of health professionals' education is to develop self-directed, and meaningful lifelong learning. Therefore, identifying and establishing strong support structures that foster profound and interconnected understanding, as opposed to focusing solely on exam scores, is needed to develop learners who have the knowledge base to become excellent healthcare practitioners¹.

Learning how to learn

The ability of your brain to create, strengthen, and eliminate unwanted neural connections underpins the act of learning new information. Neural bonds weaken if they remain inactive for extended periods, making the new information harder to retrieve.

The stronger the connections between brain cells in a network, the higher your chance of recalling the information represented by that network.

Consequently, as a general rule, you should test yourself while learning, actively recall the information, and retest the facts at expanding time intervals to make your learning most effective.

Useful tips

- Plan your study blocks and space them out.
 - Identify what you need to learn in each session. Write down learning outcomes for each study block.
 - Schedule review sessions
- Understand your dominant and most effective learning style
 - Ask yourself: how do you learn best? Reading? Listening to information? Watching a video? Discussing ideas with others?
 - Use active methods of repetition and free recall as opposed to passively repeating the facts.
- Focus on your knowledge gaps.
 - Be specific. Write down what you don't understand. Find the ideas/topics you're not clear about.

- Test yourself in the same way you'll be tested on the exam.
 - Self-reflect after each retrieval practice
 - What is it that I needed to answer this correctly?
 - Where did I fail, where is my knowledge gap?
 - What do I need to know or do to close the gap?
- Ask yourself:
 - Do I really know the exam format? and, Do I know it way in advance?
 - Do I know what the pass mark is?
 - Do you know exactly what is on the syllabus?
 - Are there mock papers available?
 - Does your tutor have any tips?
 - Do your senior peers who have already sat this exam have any tips?
 - Have you timed yourself?
 - Break it into chunks to see how it should unfold over the months that it takes you to study.
 - Try the Pomodoro method
- Utilise different study techniques (this may change throughout your career).
 - Active reading
 - Ask yourself: what question is the author trying to answer in this paragraph?
 - Q cards
 - Audio lectures
 - Study groups
 - Practice questions
 - Notes
 - Wall charts/planners

Implications for you

Mastering the right exam techniques and knowledge are equally important aspects of preparing successfully for high stakes testing. Just knowing everything front to back and absorbing the textbook and lecture notes will not be sufficient for you to pass the exams. For all exams, there is a technical element.

It is about demonstrating your knowledge to the examiner in the way they want. It is quite a different skill set than knowing the material itself.

Multiple choice questions

- Generally, it is your ability to discriminate and identify factual information that is assessed.
- Pay close attention to the words "not, always, never". Answers that include 'always' must be irrefutable. Therefore, if you can find a single counterexample, the answer is incorrect. Same for the word 'never'.
- Pay careful attention to close-alike options. If two of the options are similar, one is likely to be correct. Discard options that have the same meaning and therefore cancel each other out.

Essay exams

Designed to assess your ability to summarise and organise information logically, accurately and coherently.

Be mindful of the wording of the questions. What exactly are you being asked to do? The following terms: compare, illustrate, evaluate and describe all have different meanings and thus invoke a different answer.

- Plan your response before you start writing.
 - A useful structure to consider is:
 - an introduction

- several body paragraphs
- a conclusion.
- Example of Introduction paragraph structure:
 - Background information (context)
 - Purpose (what the essay will argue; is a direct response to the essay question)
 - Outline (main ideas to be discussed, tells the reader what to expect)
- Example of Body paragraphs structure:
 - Topic sentence (an opening statement that identifies the main aspects of the paragraph)
 - Supporting evidence sentences and examples (provide further evidence supporting the topic sentence)
 - Analysis sentence (analyse the information presented above; compare/contrast, ask questions)
 - Concluding sentence (outline the different aspects discussed in the paragraph. This is optional, not all paragraphs need a conclusion)
- Example of conclusion paragraph structure
 - You do not need to add new information, arguments or citations in a conclusion.
 - Restate the topic and summary of your response
 - Link back to the broader context
 - Suggest directions for further research

How to manage exam stress

- Positive self-talk and supportive psychotherapy
 - Speak to yourself the way you were taught to speak to your patients
 - Celebrate the small wins
- Take regular breaks when studying
- Nurture interests and hobbies outside medicine, especially parasympathetic stimulating activities to bring down the unhelpful adrenaline, cortisol, and bring you back to a state where you can concentrate. Aim for the right amount of pressure.
- Aim to have the right amount of pressure that keeps you motivated but still staying healthy and functioning optimally.
- Write down a contingency plan. What will you do if you fail? This exercise can help you focus on the preparation and avoid panicking.
 - "I will sit the re-test..."
- Do not neglect your physical health.
 - Sleep
 - Nourishment
 - Hydration
 - Exercise
 - Avoid drugs and alcohol
- Take accountability for failures
 - Own it with humility and kindness. Moving forward, how are you going to be proactive and, what will you do differently?
- Talk to yourself the same way you'd talk to somebody you care about (family member, friend, a patient) with empathy, compassion, and kindness.

If you missed the webinar on this topic, you can catch up in our [On-Demand](#) portal.

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