



Identifying and managing test taking anxiety for nursing students

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Identifying and eliminating student test anxiety

For decades, researchers have confirmed what nurse educators see in the classroom and on the floor: nursing students experience high levels of stress and anxiety. In fact, it is said that **nursing students experience more anxiety, especially test anxiety, than students from any other healthcare discipline** (Turner & McCarthy, 2017).

Considering the high-stakes testing nature of the NCLEX®, the fact that the test adapts itself to match the performance of the test taker, and the uncertainty of the upcoming changes to the exam, it is no surprise that this anxiety can have a significant impact on student performance in the classroom, clinical and on their exams. Sadly, the worry about performance can lead to increased stress and anxiety, creating an unfortunate cycle that often extends to other areas of a student's experience.

Yet, as much as students and educators are aware of the impact of test anxiety, knowing how to identify and address this anxiety can be difficult.

Understanding test anxiety

It is not uncommon for students to experience stress and some anxiety in nursing school. However, students who experience test anxiety are often experiencing physical and mental effects of this stress that goes beyond a typical student experience. These students are often worriers, who may be

The most reported causes of nursing student stress are: fear of failure, lack of confidence, doubt about future

preoccupied with negative thoughts, doubting their academic ability and intellectual competence (Leiner, Scherndl & Ortner 2018). Furthermore, they are more likely to overemphasize the potential negative results and feel helpless when in testing situations (Buck, 2018).

These feelings of anxiety can manifest in both physical and mental symptoms. Students may experience increased heart rate, headaches, nausea, cramping, and muscle tension. They may also experience loss of focus, difficulty recalling known information, racing or negative thoughts.

These negative thoughts can directly impact study habits. Students with test anxiety may find themselves procrastinating before high stakes exams, having difficulty with recall, or spending unnecessary energy trying to anticipate what will be tested, instead of engaging in effective study behaviors (Custer, 2016).

Simulating the test environment

Test anxiety feeds off of uncertainty. Students who experience test anxiety report feeling anxious around the unknown elements of the testing experience. To combat this, nurse educators and faculty have turned to preparation components that give students the opportunity to experience simulated exams, prior to test day.

A common tool is the use of question banks. Students are given access to test-like questions and have the ability to test their recall and knowledge of specific topics. Another approach that's growing in popularity is to simulate the actual exam.

Simulating the NCLEX is not as simple as placing 265 questions in front of a student and giving them six hours to complete the exam.

The test is "adaptive". This means that the test changes based on the performance of the test taker.

TIP: Help students identify when they have crossed the line from good stress to negative stress by having conversations around the mental and physical effects of test anxiety.

According to Kaplan research,* nursing students say practice questions are among the most important factors in an "ideal" NCLEX® prep solution.



As the test taker answers questions of greater and greater difficulty, the test adjusts “knowing” that the student is adept and will continue to provide questions above the passing standard/level. On the flip side, as students answer questions incorrectly, the exam attempts to test their competency by giving them more questions. Proficient students may only see a minimum of 75 questions, while others may see up to 265.

The adaptive aspect is not only stress-inducing for the student, but also difficult for nursing schools to simulate prior to the test. That’s why test-prep experts like Kaplan have developed adaptive practice tests.

“The goal of creating Kaplan's CAT (Computer Adaptive Test) exams was simple: to provide students with an opportunity to truly feel what sitting for the NCLEX is like—to experience the function of a CAT, plus practice managing the anxiety-provoking realities that occur during the testing.”

Susan Sanders, DNP, RN, NEA-BC

The simulated exams mimic the NCLEX-RN® and raise test-takers’ confidence. Students experience alternative question types, with explanations for every question. The practice tests, like the Kaplan CAT, adapt to the student performance just like the real thing.

These simulations address common tactical concerns that drive anxiety including unfamiliarity with the test, and content mastery. By exposing students to simulations they see what the exam is like, in the format of real, test-like questions. Detailed performance reports help students build confidence in their study plan so they can focus on specific aspects of clinical judgment based on their performance feedback.

The CAT also addresses broader anxiety-inducing aspects of the exam such as managing negative thoughts and focusing on the “rumors” of the test experience. By experiencing a simulated exam, the uncertainty of test day is reduced and students typically see improvement with each test experience simulation.

The Results: The Student Experience

The CAT tests are amazing and students love them. Faculty also enjoy having the additional questions, especially in the format of an NCLEX experience.

-Rebecca L. Potter MSIDT, MSN/ED, RN



Since launching this suite of products in 2017, nursing students across the country have benefitted from CAT. Students find the greatest success when institutions implement CAT experiences as part of a comprehensive NCLEX® preparation plan, but students (and faculty) are given the flexibility to take these exams as they best fit into their program.

The best results have been seen when incorporating multiple practice exams throughout the student NCLEX® preparation. Students can use the experience and their results to implement real-time performance feedback into their study plan and take one final practice CAT shortly before they sit for the actual NCLEX® exam.

“... a school in the midwest saw passage rates rise from 70% to 90% and another increased passage rates to 97% after implementing the CAT practice exams in their curriculum,” Rebecca L. Potter MSIDT, MSN/ED, RN

Schools with the highest pass rates incorporate NCLEX® preparation throughout the final semester of nursing school, and incorporate the 3 simulated CAT exams throughout their study. These schools couple the benefits of reducing test anxiety through test exposure, with the opportunity for remediation in real time.

For more information about Kaplan’s CAT Simulation, and additional student testimonials, please visit Kaplan Nursing’s website.

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