

Ep #3: Picking Yourself Back Up with Jennifer K.



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With Your Host

Sarah Michelle

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Welcome to *Becoming a Stress-Free Nurse Practitioner*, a show for new NPs and students that want to pass their board exam the first time and make that transition from RN to NP as seamless as possible. I'm your host Sarah Michelle. Now, let's dive into today's episode.

Hey friends, this is Sarah Michelle with an episode of *Becoming a Stress-Free NP*. Today we're going to be talking to one of my previous students who had a little bit of a unique path to getting those official letters and title behind her name. I wanted to bring Jennifer on the show to address a topic that I don't talk about very often, which is what the reality of failing your board exam looks like.

I think to even say those words out loud that we almost need to take a deep breath together. But we have to be realistic and while those pass rates are currently in that 85 to 87% range, students still do fail. Now, my personal opinion, that usually relates back to anxiety instead of poor preparation, but we'll dig into all of that later.

Really, when I was selecting who I was going to do this episode with, Jennifer made a comment that really resonated with me, which was this, "Be patient with yourself and study at your own pace. There's no need to do any comparing to anyone else."

I knew right then and there that I absolutely had to bring Jennifer on the show. So here we are today. Jennifer, why don't you just give us a little introduction to you and your recent success on the board exam.

Jennifer: Thank you Sarah. And I appreciate you giving me this opportunity. So, I have been a nurse at the bedside for about 10 years now. And I laugh when I tell everybody that I took the Institute of Medicines 80 by 20 literally. So I started out as a two-year associate's nurse and went back and got my bachelor's degree. And later got a master's degree, and a second, and just got my third, obviously.

So, I am busy, as most people are with COVID. So I'm still at the bedside right now and I just got done with my board exams, which is why we're

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Ep #3: Picking Yourself Back Up with Jennifer K.

here. Did have a very rocky start, but wanted to thank you for all your help and everybody in the Sarah Michelle community for pulling me through and lifting me up. So, excited to be here.

Sarah: Yeah, absolutely. I'm excited to have you. You know, I think that will really resonate with a lot of our listeners today, is doing all of that schooling. Because I know a lot of people in the page like did a DN then did BSN and kind of worked their way up. And even though I started with my BSN I got my master's in nursing education and I got my post-master's certificate, and now I'm going back for my doctorate.

So that seems to very much be the realm of nursing. People are always learning, people are always evolving. I absolutely love it.

Jennifer: Yes, yes.

Sarah: So, let's just kind of jump right into your exams since you did fail both the first time around. Which I'm very grateful that you're here to talk about today. You know, how were you just feeling mentally going into those exams the first time around?

Jennifer: So, the first exam that I took was AANP, and I felt pretty confident going into that first one. But I think looking back I was a little bit too big for my britches I guess you would say around here. I felt a little cocky going in, that I had worked hard for it, I earned it. But I felt pretty good about the material that I knew.

The second one that I took was ANCC, and I felt a little bit more prepared for that exam than I did for the first one because I had done a medical surgical nursing certificate through them. So I knew how that test was kind of going to formulate and how that platform looked. But what I wasn't prepared for was the variation of the exam.

So, I felt a little bit more confident in the second one. However, I realized very soon that I was not prepared for either as much as I had hoped for. But I felt that I studied enough that I would be ready. But I honestly feel that

Ep #3: Picking Yourself Back Up with Jennifer K.

there was no level of confidence, I don't know that I was ever going to really be there. Even on the last time, I still felt like there was a lot that I wasn't getting. So, I still felt a little bit more unprepared, but a little bit better prepared, if that makes sense, for what the uncertainty of the exam was going to hold.

Sarah: Yeah, absolutely. And there definitely is a lot of uncertainty, and kind of figuring it out, and do I really know this content that I've spent all this time in school trying to learn? You know, how do you feel like you kind of managed your anxiety differently going into that third attempt where you finally did pass?

Jennifer: The biggest thing that I done was that I made sure I was able to calm my own nerves. That was my biggest thing. I had a lot of test anxiety and by the time I took it the third time there was even more anxiety because it was, "Hey, this is it, make or break." I mean, so it was a lot of stress. Do I really want to fail this a third time?

So, there was a different level of stress. I felt more confident in the material but I had to get over my own nerves about taking the test. And that was the biggest thing. I done a lot of research and listened to a lot of advice that you had given on different occasions. And I did take the beta blocker, I did not take any caffeine that morning. I chose to not test at 9 o'clock in the morning. I chose to do an afternoon test that way I knew I was well rested; I wasn't rushed. You know, I drove an hour earlier just so that I knew that I wasn't going to be rushed or hit a traffic delay or anything like that. And I sat in the parking lot.

6:01-6:46 And so I just prepared a little bit better just to calm my own nerves down. And when I got in there it was, "Okay, what have I been told? I've been told to take a deep breath, look away. Take a breath, get up, stretch." So just used every little bit of information that had been laid out for me and, you know, wrote down, "Okay, you got this. You're going to pass. Take a deep breath, you know this."

Ep #3: Picking Yourself Back Up with Jennifer K.

So, the third time definitely was when I started actually listening to what was being said. The first time I didn't pay any attention. The second time I said, "Okay, I'm going to roll." And the third time I actually listened.

Sarah: Well, I'm glad you were finally able to hear it for the third time around. You know, I think it's kind of crazy, and I know a lot of students won't believe me but, beta blockers, you know, for the right person of course. Everyone has got their own individual things. For some people a beta blocker is not going to be a good fit. There are other options out here by the way. But it's crazy just what a simple beta blocker can do, if that's the right fit for you.

And you made a really good point, and something I hadn't even really considered myself, about taking the exam during your best time. And, you know, that's something even in the course creation realm, I try to create courses during my best time of the day where I feel like my brain is the brightest and the freshest. And so definitely you want to be taking your exam during that optimum time too.

What did you feel like you focused on the most in your preparation time prior to actually passing AANP here recently?

Jennifer: 7:40-7:59 So, I had done a couple of different things but this last time what I really focused in on was doing what you said. Take as many questions as possible. And you were dead on, there's only so many ways they're going to word it. And I felt wholeheartedly when I walked out of there, I remember that question in a video. I remember that question in the ear, nose, and throat video.

So a lot of the information that you had shared in your courses, I could hear your voice speaking to me and I said, "She said it that way. She said it's this. She said we are absolutely going to do this." And so, your videos kind of helped tie everything in.

The biggest thing that I done was a lot of questions... Looking back through questions that I had in my coursework, googling questions. I done mock

Ep #3: Picking Yourself Back Up with Jennifer K.

questions, I had people question me randomly. Flash cards, things like that, but just as many questions as I could squeeze in through the middle of the day while I was at work or while I was at home.

Sarah: That right there is how you know you're prepared really well. I love it when people say they can hear me because I know if you can hear me during your test that you watched my videos over, and over, and over until you had it, you know? I preach over and over in my courses and I know all the reviewers have different perspectives.

But just like you said, and just like I said in my courses too, there's only so many ways to ask a question. So if you just do practice question after practice question after practice question you are so likely to see something just like that on your exam. And then when you get that question on your exam that you already feel like you've seen before, it boosts your confidence when you go into that next question too.

So, I am all about the practice questions in every single way. And I'm really glad that they helped you out.

Jennifer: They did. It got to the point where my daughter was actually reading the questions to the best of her ability. But she was asking me questions and I already was formulating in the first two lines what the answer was going to be. And when she read out the answer choices I said, "That one right there." And she's like, "Good job mom, good job mom."

So it got to the point where I was doing them so much that I knew the answer without having the answer choices in front of me. And so it wasn't necessarily just knowing it, it was able to comprehend, this is where this is leaning. And even if I got it wrong, I was in that realm of where I needed to be. And so reading the rationale and stuff, so definitely as many questions as I could definitely helped me.

Sarah: And that is absolutely the level of confidence that you want before going into your exam too. You know, if you feel like you really know it at

Ep #3: Picking Yourself Back Up with Jennifer K.

home and you can kind of spit it out before the question is even done, then really you know you're ready.

Now, just kind of as like a little extra question here, because I know anxious minds out there are going to be wondering, how did you feel about AANP versus ANCC? Because we know that that is a hot topic of discussion on the student page.

And I want to point out to, you know, you were just within like mere points of passing the ANCC when you took that exam too.

Jennifer: I was. As I said, I felt a little bit more confident going in to ANCC only because I knew previously how that exam was going to be set up. And they were the only ones that really had mock questions for free because, let's face it, we're graduate students, we're on a budget at this point.

So, the one thing that I felt was different and kind of hindered me was while I was answering the questions and kind of felt confident in how they were worded for ANCC, they threw those pictures in there on me. And a lot of them were very similar. But I think what hurt me was probably some of the select all that apply. Because where I may have felt more comfortable with two or three of them, I don't know if it was a fourth one or a fifth one that I left off, or matching. So they threw different test strategies in there that I wasn't necessarily prepared for.

With the other exam, the difference was is they were just worded. It was one question, one answer choice. But I did feel a little overwhelmed with the ANCC having more questions and I sat there a little longer. So I prefer not AANP, yeah.

Sarah: And see, I'm on the opposite end because the way my brain works my brain gets kind of bored a little bit. And so when I took AANP and it was all just black and white and just straight questions and nothing else to look at my brain was so tired even though it was technically a shorter exam.

Ep #3: Picking Yourself Back Up with Jennifer K.

And then with ANCC I kind of liked the variety of questions, almost because it almost woke me up a little bit. But everybody has totally different feels about AANP versus ANCC, which is part of why I asked this question too.

I think ultimately with ANCC kind of why I picked it the first time around, before I decided I was going to take both, was just the sheer factor of renewal options in the future.

So, if anybody out there is listening and you're kind of torn about what kind of exam you're going to take definitely, definitely, definitely watch my AANP versus ANCC video or you can search in the study group too because I promise you it's debated at least two to three times a week.

So, to kind of branch out a little bit from the test, you know, what do you feel like would be your best piece of advice for a student who has failed before to kind of pick themselves back up again and really just finish this thing out strong?

Jennifer: So, I was very disheartened when I failed the first time. And I was very disheartened when I failed the second time. But I had to take a step away and really think about myself. Okay, what are my weakest areas? I was so caught up with where everyone else was that I really didn't pay attention to where I was lacking.

And so the best piece of advice I can give anybody is to do what you have to to study. I am a very hands-on learner. And I get very sleepy reading and I chose to take my time and not worry about my peer who I was in clinicals with who were passing before me. Or what my coworkers were going to say if they knew that I had not passed.

So, I just put it all aside and just said, "You know, what? I have to do this for me and my family, and this is what I've worked for. What's the best thing to do?" And I sat down and made a study guide out and said, "Okay, this day I'm going to do this many questions." And did I do that? Maybe not, maybe that day was crazy because I got tied up and had four admissions and couldn't read my flash cards on my lunch break. But when I got home it

Ep #3: Picking Yourself Back Up with Jennifer K.

was, “Okay, I love you kids, mommy needs to study. I promise, let mommy study and I promise I’ll have a life after this. Give me a minute.”

So my best piece of advice is to just do what you have to do and not worry about what the person next to you is doing, or who took it before you, or even worry about what anybody is going to think about you for having failed. Because I don’t think no one had shamed me or put me down and I’ve been very honest with my friends and they knew and they said, “You know what? You’ll get it next time, it’s okay.”

Sarah: And I think even the group a little bit kind of encircled you and they were like, “You’ve got this. Like here’s 75 pieces of advice on that post you made.” Like everybody truly wanted to see you succeed.

And I think you made a really good point too, like number one nobody is going to know that you failed. Number two, you’ve got to focus on you. You’ve got to focus on what you need to get through this exam and pass this thing so you can actually be a nurse practitioner, right?

Jennifer: Yes, and to piggy back off that, you are exactly right. The Sarah Michelle world is a great group of followers and they are very loyal and very, very supportive. I had multiple people, not even publicly on the group page, trying to give me words of encouragement. But ones that had messaged me privately and were helping me along the way.

There were several of them who paid it forward and sent me study material and flash cards, and you know, said this is what I did. And you know their stipulations where, obviously, that I pay it forward. And so I have, and sent it over to someone I know that had not passed her exam as well.

And so everybody was very uplifting and I was very honest and said, being a part of your group, it was very rewarding to see, “Okay, it’s done.” Everybody comes from different backgrounds and they practice in different areas. And to see that it’s one exam that is for family nurse practitioners, that we’re all coming together from different areas and to see everybody passing.

Ep #3: Picking Yourself Back Up with Jennifer K.

And the double side of that was like, “Okay, where am I going to be?” But there were ones that came out and said, “Thank you for coming out because I failed the first time and I didn’t post that.” So, everybody was very, very loving and supportive of me. So I appreciate everyone out there who helped me because it was definitely my own little world of support.

Sarah: I love our group in every way. And just like you said with the loyalty and everybody is so positive all the time, it doesn’t matter where you come from. I mean we’ve had people in the group that have failed five or six times just because they weren’t in the right space to take the exam, and it’s been a long time, and whatever that looks like, and whatever space they’re in at that moment. And we can all just kind of rally behind these people and be like, “You’re going to pass your exam and we’re going to help you along to do that.”

And I just think that is so powerful and so cool. And when I say I love that group, I genuinely love that group. I love participating in the group and being able to pick people back up again. I think it’s so special.

Anyway, so what do you feel like got you through those long days of studying? You said the group really helped you out, did you have anything at home that kind of helped you get through that time too?

Jennifer: I did. And I don’t make it as publicly known as I have privately, but I have a special needs child that put me on the path of being a nurse to begin with. And every night I would try to study I could hear him laughing and I just kept telling myself, “This is for him.” And my son is 13 years old and he is a total care patient. And I have been very blessed to have him in my life and to be rewarded that he’s here every day.

And so days after I worked 12 hours and I’d come home and do things for the other kids, with helping with homework. In the middle of COVID everyone in my household was on a laptop and doing their remote learning.

So, you know, we just made the best of it but at the end of the day I just looked at my husband and said, “I’m doing this for him. This is what I need

Ep #3: Picking Yourself Back Up with Jennifer K.

to do, I need to prove to him that his mom is able to take care of him when the time comes. That I can help support him and know holistically everything I can to provide for him.” Even though legally I can’t, but that I know how to navigate the healthcare system and what’s going on for him because he has been my biggest supporter even though he can’t tell me we have that connection. So my son Bradley has been the one that really has been the root of everything I’ve done in my career, even to this day.

Sarah: I think that’s absolutely beautiful in every way. And you did do it, you did show Bradley, you know, also just kind of the importance of being committed to and that dedication level. And so to be able to do all of this for him I think that’s really, really special.

Jennifer: Well, thank you.

Sarah: Yeah, absolutely. What do you kind of feel like is next for you now that you have this darn thing behind you?

Jennifer: That’s the million-dollar question. So, I have been looking for employment and it’s a long road. They need to have a course on that alone because it’s not what they put in writing. It really is a real long, drawn out process.

So, I actually just accepted an offer as a cardiology nurse practitioner. So I’m very excited about that. I’ll take some time off and spend some time with my kids before I jump right into that venture. But, you know, I’m a life-long learner so I have reluctantly already considered going back at some point. I don’t know that I’ll do it now. As long as there’s no board exam attached to it, I’m all in.

I’m just excited to see what this next journey holds. It’s going to be a big transition going from the bedside to being a provider. I know there’s going to be a definite learning gap there, so I hope I can adjust accordingly. And I have no doubt that I will have the backing of many of my colleagues that will help support me and lift me up. But just excited to branch out and finally see this thing to fruition.

Ep #3: Picking Yourself Back Up with Jennifer K.

Sarah: And I'm sure the new nurse practitioner Facebook group is so excited about your new job in every single way. You should be so excited, and a super congratulations to you for finding a job too. Because that's kind of a feat all on its own, kind of like you were talking about.

Jennifer: It has been and I probably put out 30 applications. And it's not even really applications, it's just resumes and cold emailing, and it's, "Hey, do you have an opening? Do you have one in the future? Do you see anyone who knows one?" And everything I got back was, "We don't have anything right now. Or we're not looking to graduates." And in the time of COVID it's they want physicians and they want everything like that.

So it was really hard. And this one particular job I sent a thank you email and three weeks later I sent another follow-up and said, "Hey, if you're still considering me let me know." and I think I bugged them enough to where he finally called me and said, "Hey, okay, we'll meet." And it just kind of went from there.

But I have some friends who were just now getting it. And I've had some friends who have said, "Hey, it's a pandemic and I'm making as much as I can at the bedside right now. I'm not going to go." And that's fine, I'm right there with them right now. So, everybody will find it when it's their time and it will come back.

But it's a very competitive market in some areas and I live in a very rural community and it's a lot on who you know. And so I've had to branch out and drive, and that was something that me and my husband had considered is you might have to drive a little bit. So it's not ideal but it's an hour and fifteen minutes, but it's not unrealistic. You know, I'm not going to get anything local right now, but with experience and time it may come.

Sarah: And a huge kudos to you for staying on top of it. I mean, a lot of people kind of leave that piece out when they're on the job search. But just staying in contact and trying to make that connection again really can push

Ep #3: Picking Yourself Back Up with Jennifer K.

you along in the job search process too. And I think people kind of underestimate that a little bit.

And I really hope, this is a little bit of like insider knowledge, but I hope throughout the remainder of this year to kind of put out some more courses for you guys about what does the job search process look like. You know, I already have that free guide on like, you know, this is your credentialing, you need to get your DA number, all that sort of stuff.

But I hope to be able to kind of transition with you guys too and show you along the way of like here are the steps that you need to take to now get into practice. Okay, now I'm in practice, like where do I go from here? I think this is a constant evolution. And like you said earlier about bring a life-long learner there's always more courses to do too.

Jennifer: Oh yes, they have been very adamant that I'm going to have to take a lot of courses. And obviously each state is different in what their Cs look like, so while I have some downtime I'm going to go ahead and start getting a jump start on those so I'm not procrastinating. And, you know, just excited to absorb as much as possible. And since it's a specialty I'm going to dive in to cardiology.

Sarah: Brave soul, cardiology was never my favorite. Well, you will definitely have to keep me posted on how it goes. You know, I know you're in my new NP group and all that.

And I 100% too want to thank you for sharing your story today. I know it can be really hard to talk about a topic like this, you know, it's kind of feels like bad juju in the air or something like that. But I genuinely hope that you know there are currently probably several listeners out there today that really needed to hear this story and really kind of need to pick themselves back up again. So I just really, truly wanted to thank you for your generosity today too.

Jennifer: Not a problem at all. And thank you for having me. And for those that are listening that have failed once, or twice, or even more, there is no

Ep #3: Picking Yourself Back Up with Jennifer K.

shame in that. Sarah mentioned that nobody's going to know. Nobody's going to ask you did you fail? So think back to when we were nurses, you know, how many failed their nursing boards for the first time? It doesn't matter, it's what gets you there. And I'm a firm believer in it's the journey.

So, take and learn something about yourself and do it at your own pace. It will be much more worth it and you'll appreciate it more when you really put the effort into it and not underestimate yourself.

Sarah: Absolutely, it's one heck of a journey, but it is worth it in every single way. And I just want to thank you one more time. And to everyone out there listening, I'll see you next week.

Now, to celebrate the launch of the show, I'm going to be giving away a Medelita gift card which will allow you to go buy a gorgeous white coat when you're ready. Now, I'm going to be giving away a gift card to two lucky listeners who subscribe, rate, and review the show on iTunes. It doesn't have to be a five-star review, although I really do hope you love the show. I want your honest feedback so I can continue creating a show that provides tons of value for you guys as nurse practitioners.

Visit stressfreenp.com/podcastlaunch to learn more about the contest and how to enter. And I'll be announcing the winners on the show in an upcoming episode.

Thanks for listening to *Becoming a Stress-Free Nurse Practitioner*. If you want more information about the different types of support we offer to students and new NPs, visit stressfreenp.com. See you next week.