

Ep #40: How to Overcome Exam Failure



Full Episode Transcript

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 there friends. Today I'm going to be revisiting a tougher topic, but I know it's one you needed to hear before and definitely need to hear again.

In the first few episodes of the podcast we had Jennifer K. come for an interview and really deep dive into her experience of failing her board exam. And now I want to give you my perspective on the best way to tackle not passing your exam so you can move forward, learn from your mishaps along the way, and put yourself in your very best position to pass.

While the passing rate between the two exams is somewhere between 84 and 89% currently there are still students out there who fail. And I wanted to start this episode off with the reassurance and validation that failing is okay. All that it means when you fail your exam is it you need to tweak the approach or strategy for that next time around, which we are going to be discussing throughout this episode together.

Even if you haven't failed your exam, I would encourage you to listen to this episode anyways, as you will likely gain some introspection into some key factors that can influence whether you pass your exam. And you want to be sure to not fall into those traps on your own exam day.

And so my first tip after you've failed is to feel your feelings. Failing your exam says nothing about you as a person, or even anything about you as a future provider. And so I really want to start there. Don't beat yourself up, definitely don't be embarrassed. By no exaggeration, one of the absolute best and most solid nurse practitioners that I personally know failed her board exam the first time around.

And so failing doesn't mean that you're never going to be able to be a provider. It just simply means that you have to take a second attempt to prove your competency. Nothing more than just that simple fact.

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And I really encourage you to take the first day or two off after failing your exam to work your way through all those feelings of disappointment and sadness. So that you can then show up as your best self to reboot that studying process and figure out that brand new game plan.

If you try to skip this step, those feelings won't stay suppressed for long and they'll start lingering throughout your continued board preparation process. And ultimately, what's going to happen is those feelings are going to wreak havoc on your second attempt.

And for that next attempt we want you to go in as clear and levelheaded as possible. Once we have managed our feelings, then that's when we can really do some soul searching and digging into what went awry for your initial attempt. It's incredibly difficult to have that insight though when you're lost in your feelings. And so it's best to reach out or make that next plan when you are able to have the clarity and the introspection to do so.

The next step after feeling your feelings is to do a deep dive of your testing experience. Is there anything that you can pick out that derailed you on your exam day? Just as some example questions to ask yourself, did something happen at the testing center? Was there a language barrier during your exam? Did something happen in your personal life in the 48 hours before your exam and you couldn't reschedule?

Really take a long hard look at your entire experience and tease out whatever your main issue was. Then dedicate some time to figuring out how to put yourself in a better position for the next time around based on that root issue if you had one.

Was it having to wear a mask at the testing center, for example? Sometimes that can really fluster those who are already super anxious. And at least currently, this may change in the future if you're listening to this podcast episode later, a backup option would be to take ANCC online at home were you wouldn't have to wear that mask.

Was it a language barrier issue? This one breaks my heart because those students typically absolutely know the content and they truly just struggle

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with the language itself. If so, how about we see if we can get the put into your native language to give you your best shot at true comprehension of what those questions are asking.

I even had a student once who took her exam 15 hours after her husband had a heart attack and was in the intensive care unit. And she literally, the first time I talked to her, she didn't even bring that up. She's like, "Oh, you know, I wasn't feeling like super anxious, I thought I went in okay."

And then it was about a week later, I was talking to her again, and she brought up that. How could she possibly pass in that mental state? Due to that 48 hour rule though, she really didn't feel like she had an option but to go ahead with the exam.

So any single one of these items can derail your focus and your ability to pass. These are what I really consider to be external factors affecting a student's exam success. And sadly, these external factors and distractions can most definitely override excellent board preparation.

They disrupt your ability to think clearly, and therefore you likely start to misread questions and answer choices. And then everything starts to jumble together on you and it's really difficult to pass that exam.

Next up we need to look at some more internal factors that can impact your ability to pass. This is when we start asking the harder questions to answer. Which are things like, did you simply not know the content well enough? Did your anxiety take over? Did you try to cram before your exam thinking that would be enough, et cetera?

I found for most students it's not even a content issue, even when they think it's one. And truly it boils down to an anxiety issue. Did those first five questions seem really tough and then that left you frazzled for those easier questions when they came? Because that definitely happens. Did you think that your anxiety was under control, but then when you got into the exam, you started to panic?

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I once had a student tell me after failing, they didn't have any anxiety, but they hyperventilated twice in the bathroom while taking their exam. And so there was definitely underlying anxiety there, they just weren't even able to recognize it for themselves.

And that's why these questions can be the harder ones to answer. Because you really have to be able to look inward at yourself, your emotions, and your brain. But the good news here is that we can absolutely get the anxiety in check for your next time around with great test taking strategies, an anxiety game plan, and maybe even some medication if your anxiety is severe enough. The awareness of your anxiety alone will change the game for how you proceed moving forward.

Another question that I ask these students is how did they prepare and how many practice questions that they do? This is not a blame game of saying a student didn't do enough. But what it does do is it gives me and my team insight into how to instruct you best on how to move forward.

And more often than not a chunk of those who fail actually did 3, 4, 5 review courses of all different types. But right alongside that, they typically say they only did a few practice questions, or they didn't really feel practice questions were important and therefore they didn't do any. And that's a huge red flag to me.

But once again, no blame game. It's just really good news because it allows us to give you a target and a tangible plan for moving forward. With practice questions you can give yourself a tangible score to hold on to. So you can have a mini confidence boost, but also and likely more importantly, you can prove to yourself that you do actually know that content and how to apply it versus just simply memorizing.

And that can be another area where students fall into a hole, trying to memorize instead of truly understanding that material. You have to be able to apply the information you've learned in school and throughout board preparation in order to pass, no matter what. At this level we are past the point of just memorization, we have to show our exam that we can use that

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information in order to be safe nurse practitioners when we're starting our careers.

And so for those of you out there listening and have only failed once, my personal suggestion moving forward is to take the other exam. And what I mean by that is if you failed AANP, take ANCC the next time around. And on the flip side of that, if you felt ANCC then take AANP next time. Certain students respond better to certain testing styles. And these exams are quite different from one another in presentation and in question format.

In addition to that, part of the reason we recommend this as well, is because you're not going to have a waiting period or the need to do continuing education credits in order to take the other exam. And that piece is huge as it will allow you to get scheduled to take that other exam faster, and ideally become the real deal a lot faster too.

We find that most students who fail one exam and then really figure out where that core issue was, do not have any problems passing the second exam. Now, if you fail both, I definitely suggest taking the one again that you scored the highest on, so that's a little caveat to this section.

And the last step here is to not give up. Failing once or even more than once never negates all the hard work that you have put in to achieving this goal. So even if you need to take some legitimate time to re-calibrate, don't hesitate to do so. I know it's hard to try and pick yourself up again, especially those of you out there that lost a job opportunity due to failing your exam. But you can still do this, and I promise there will be another job when you do.

How you recommit yourself to this goal will determine whether you are successful or not. Which by the way, if you're struggling to overcome those negative thoughts about yourself or the exam after failing, definitely listen to a podcast episode of mine from earlier on thought shifting because just that mental detriment alone can derail your next attempt if you can't get a grip on it.

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And I say all of this to say make a new plan. Ideally make a new plan with my team's help and commit yourself to it. Whatever your root cause issue was for your failing, it's time to overcome that obstacle so that you can be successful on your next attempt and finally get this exam behind you, instead of just lingering over you like a dark cloud.

And so I throw this episode out here to say, if you fail, my team and I are here to support you. Sometimes students feel weird about reaching out to me and my team if they didn't do my review course initially. But do not let that hold you back from doing so.

We will absolutely welcome you with open arms if that's the case, as we are all here wanting every student who has made it through nurse practitioner school achieve that dream of becoming a nurse practitioner by passing their exam. That is why we have been diligent to meet every student where they're at if they email and say they have failed.

Our vision is to bring new nurse practitioners into practice feeling safe, supported, and nurtured. And after failing it can be difficult to find or feel any of those things. But we're here to help you through it. Everything that you have heard in this episode will be reiterated to you if you reach out to my NP success team. You will have us rooting for you and have an endless cheerleader in your corner to reach this goal.

And so to those of you who have failed, get that plan in place, and go tackle that exam. And we cannot wait to hear about your success and what helped you the most the second time around. So you can do this if this is you. You can absolutely pass this exam. And that's it for this week as I'll talk to you soon.

As an extra bonus, friends, if you're looking for support no matter what phase of your nurse practitioner journey that you're currently in I have communities available for both students and new nurse practitioners. In these communities, we work to uplift one another and grow this profession together every single day. Links to join will be included for you in the show notes.

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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.