

Ep #50: The Truth About Other People's Exam Day Advice



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 friends, for today's episode I want you to come into it with an open mind and with a willingness to hear me out before you jump to your own conclusions. This episode is definitely one that's important to me for you to hear because it can definitely impact not only your studying process as a whole, but also your actual exam day and how you are feeling walking into your big exam.

So at the core of today's episode here's what I want you to know right from the jump, every single person's exam experience is different. You and your friend who went to the same school so you got the same preparation, studied for boards together, could even get the same version of the exam on the same day at the same testing center at the same time, and still both feel entirely different about how that exam went.

And I think this is crucial to write a podcast episode about because when you're a student and you're anxious it is so easy to get trapped in what everyone around you is saying about the exams. You're going to hear so many different things like this exam is harder. This exam was easier. I walked in my exam, and I knew nothing. I walked into my exam, and I knew every question, I was out super quick, et cetera.

So with such vastly different experiences out there, then student anxiety jumps up even more. Who do you listen to? And how do you fade out that background noise? And I know it's so hard to do. These are tough skills, but I'm going to walk you through in this episode why this happens in the first place, and what you can do about it moving forward to not get lost in the same trap.

I want to start off this episode with a little bit of a story about my first encounter with exam feedback that didn't exactly match up. And also how

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easy it would have been for me to accept their feedback as the truth and just assume someone who had done it before me knew better than me.

So the very first time I ended up in this trap was actually at my first nurse practitioner clinical rotation. The subject of the big board exam came up one day in between seeing patients. And when it did my preceptor immediately interjected saying that she took ANCC because she knows it to be known to be harder, and therefore more prestigious.

I wasn't even at a point yet where board exams had really been discussed during school because it was still so early. And so I started asking lots of questions, I got overwhelmed immediately. What makes ANCC harder? What makes it more prestigious? How does she choose between the two exams? Why are there two exams? I didn't even know that was a thing yet.

And what she told me is that ANCC asked about a lot of policy and legal content, that she felt it was probably at least half of her exam. But that information was crucial to her role as a nurse practitioner and so it was definitely worth studying and knowing. She also told me that employers prefer that ANCC certification, which is why she deemed it to be more prestigious and more sought after.

These two things right here were my two big initial pieces of misinformation. But I had no one around me to ask, and that really is the problem when it comes to this entire process. How do we find out who to trust and who not? And so that night when I went home I did what I do best when I'm confused and I want to know more, and I started doing my own research.

You would be surprised how many rumors can be easily squashed by even just doing a quick Google search. And here's what I found guys, ANCC, at least at present time only asked 15 nonclinical questions for the FNP exam. AANP can also ask that nonclinical content, also known as professional content. It's a really common misconception that they won't, but they tend to ask even less than that.

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In addition, ANCC is not technically more prestigious. But the caveat there is it can be preferred by magnet institutions specifically. And most of us in the primary care field are not going to be working for magnet institutions anyways. And that's the only difference there.

So why did my preceptor feel like the non-clinical content, for example, was half of her exam? Well, when she took ANCC, she took an older version of ANCC. The version that definitely asked about a lot more nonclinical content than it does today. But I would have made that same assumption about my own upcoming exam, had I not done my own research on the side.

That's why when we start talking about exam feedback we have to take everything with a grain of salt and be willing to do our own investigation. We cannot blindly trust that what we're being told is correct. People always mean well when they share their experiences with us, I know my preceptor did. But it doesn't necessarily mean everything they are saying has to be held as 100% true either.

So with all that being said, I would like to pause before we move any further and squash the eternal debate of one exam being harder than another. You will hear this again and again. Some are going to say AANP is harder because the questions are lengthier and wordier. Some are going to say ANCC is harder because it has those varying question types.

But at the end of the day, guys, these are all just opinions. The only facts that we have to look at are passing rates. And for the last released year of data, ANCC did have a slightly higher passing rate than AANP. This is a fact, this is something we know. But it was still only a marginal difference, between 86% and 89%.

There is no such thing as a harder exam. These are both equally difficult exams that require rigorous preparation and mental work to be successful. You will prepare for both in the exact same way. Both will require you to be on your A game and be able to critically think.

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And a tidbit I will add in here too is the fact that you will commonly see in students who take both exams, almost all of them, literally every time, it almost never fails, almost all of them will say whichever exam they took second was harder. So if they took ANCC first, they'll say AANP was harder and vice versa.

Typically, the reason for this is the fact that the studying pressure is off for the second exam. They're already a real deal nurse practitioner, they've already passed one, right? And so they do smaller amounts of studying in comparison and walk in just a tad less prepared than they did the first go around. So don't get lost in those posts either. It's truly still all opinions and not based in facts. We're looking for facts, right?

So now we have to figure out how to both understand and manage those vastly different exam experiences. It can be so difficult to read online when one person says it was the easiest exam they've ever taken in their entire life. And then the very next post behind it reads that it was the hardest exam of that person's life. And it felt like everything on their exam was gibberish.

When you start reading these posts, these are the concrete things that I want you to remind yourself of before you start spinning in your own anxiety. Number one, you have no idea how that student prepared. Did they study for three days or three months?

Even if their post said three months and it was a solid three months of studying, how much were they actually studying day to day? Did they have to work full time? Did they have a family on top of it? Did they just buy one small review course? Did they do some practice questions along the way? Did they have dedicated studying time?

These are all questions that only the person who took the exam is able to answer. You can never have a true transparent view into how any of them really prepared. And that is why these exam experiences vary so widely. Everyone is doing something a little bit different. Everyone has their own

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life factors at play. So even if they use the exact same preparation materials and the exact same amount of studying time, you're still going to have different experiences between students.

In addition to that, even if you and your friend who prepared the same way took the exact same version, there are going to be topics that you're stronger at and weaker at versus your friend. So that can definitely impact how you feel about your exam as well. Did you get a lot of topics that you knew that you knew well? Or did you get a bigger variety with things you knew really well and things you've always struggled with?

Another super important point is that when your anxiety spirals out of control, it can make even the easiest exam in the world feel and seem absolutely impossible. Even if you were super prepared, you did thousands of practice questions, you did several review courses, et cetera. If that anxiety is not in check, suddenly the material that you've always known starts to slip away as you answer questions.

This is what I found to be a real source of student feedback when they say they feel like their exam was all in gibberish and they weren't sure they were even in the right exam. Many of these students who are high anxiety will do multiple review courses. So if you see a student say nothing in their review courses was covered on their exam. That would almost be virtually impossible.

For me, when I see that feedback, that is a huge red flag that anxiety was taking over for them during their exam. What we harp on in my courses is not only anxiety management, but anxiety awareness. If you're not aware that you're spiraling into anxiety in the first place, it makes it really difficult to be cognizant enough to stop, take a break, and utilize your strategies.

In my head I always go back to this one particular student who said she had no anxiety during her exam, we were talking after she failed. And she had two panic attacks in the bathroom. So she just didn't even have the

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awareness that her anxiety was on overload and how that could impact her exam.

And so those students that keep barreling through are the ones that typically either fail, or very narrowly pass. It's just so hard to be successful in your exam when you're not totally in the game and ready to critically think through questions. You can't critically think through even the simplest question if you're in that panic level anxiety that we always talk about.

If this is something that you know you're prone to doing, make sure that you're practicing that anxiety plan ahead of time. Try it out on a couple of full-length practice tests to be sure you're ready to go for your big day. The last thing you want is to be absolutely blindsided by it when you're already in your exam without a real plan of attack.

So I know this will be a little bit of a controversial episode, and not everyone's going to agree with me about exam day experiences. But I plead with you, if you haven't tested yet, don't listen to the horror stories. Make your own opinions about the exams. Don't let other's opinions on this exam scare you into postponing your test date, panic buying more review materials, any of that.

Here's what I want you to focus on instead and keep coming back to, at the end of the day the only thing you can personally control is how you prepare. If you prepare well, you should do well as long as you can keep that anxiety in check. I wholeheartedly always believe that statement, the overwhelming majority of test takers pass their exams. And that is another fact that you can cling to when you're reading posts and feeling unsure of yourself.

And the last fact I'll leave you with is this, and it's one of my favorites for those about to take their exam. You are not expected to know 100% to pass this exam. Not even close, it's actually around 70%, right? And 70% is a lot of leeway when it comes to a 150 or a 175 question test you guys.

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So don't let a tough question or even a couple of tough questions on your exam get you down or make you feel like you can't be successful. Odds are you will definitely still know the majority of those questions as long as you don't fall into that anxiety spiral.

So deep breaths, my friends. Your time to pass is coming. Don't get lost in what everyone out there saying because you've got this. And that's it for this week guys, 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.

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.