

Ep #151: Creating a Study Plan That Works for You: NP Board Exam Prep with Kaitlyn D



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Anna Miller

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Welcome to the *Real Deal Nurse Practitioner Club*, the podcast for nurses who are ready to pass their boards and thrive in their careers as real deal nurse practitioners. I'm Anna and I'm the Director of Nursing Content at Blueprint Test Prep. Whether you're deep in exam prep or stepping into practice, I've got you. It is time to become the confident, knowledgeable NP that you're meant to be. Let's dive in.

Hey, hey everyone. Welcome back. Now, if you are in the season where you are starting to study, this is a perfect episode for you because we're talking all about creating a study plan that works for you and works with you instead of really working against you.

And if you've ever looked at your study materials or you've just even started thinking about how you are going to prep for your upcoming exam, and then you're thinking, where do I even start? This episode is for you. And this topic really comes up constantly. And you all have met Kaitlyn before on the podcast. I have her here again with me today.

Kaitlyn: Hey everybody. I'm so glad to be here for this one. So I have to be honest, this topic kind of brings me back to my own study days. When I was getting ready for boards, my school required a review course, of course, and instead of just calming my nerves, I feel like it just made me more anxious.

I already felt like I was cramming all the time and every time I finished another lecture, I was kind of left feeling like there was more I needed to know and I felt like, oh, there's just so much that I don't know because there's just so much included in those classes. And so, I just remember feeling like I was chasing content and I never felt like I was really catching up. So if you have been there too, wondering how you're supposed to fit it all in, you're definitely in the right place and you're not alone. This episode is definitely for you.

Anna: Yeah, board prep can feel super overwhelming. We have both been there. I remember just trying to figure out what prep am I going to do?

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When should I start it? And everyone around me seemed to be doing something different and nobody really knew what we were supposed to be doing. I remember one person was studying 8 plus hours a day every single day. Another one of my friends was color coding all of their notes and their textbooks.

Somebody else is on their third cup of coffee and just re-watching their lectures on double speed. Yes, that third one may have also been me with my coffee and my double speed lectures.

But when I really sat down and really started intensely studying, I realized that those long lecture days, they just were not going to work for me. And back when I was taking my certification exam, I feel like I'm sounding so old here, but there was really nothing like SMNPReviews available at the time.

So I ended up putting in a ton of time to make my own study calendar for myself with lectures and practice questions and days off and all of the things. And man, if I had the study planner that our courses offer, I would have saved so much time and so much stress, especially when I needed to adapt or move things around. I was manually moving everything. And life happens, right? We all have to adjust that calendar.

Kaitlyn: Yeah, that adaptability piece is so key because I learned very quickly in my prep that there's no single perfect study plan. I had friends that were doing all the things, just like you said. It's really more about what you'll actually stick to and what fits your life because we're all juggling different things, right?

We have work and clinicals and families and I had a one-year-old, right, when I was graduating. So all the things. And so yes, the best plan is the one that you know you can realistically follow. And that's where we come in. So we have got all the tools and study plans that you need to be successful.

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Anna: Yes, absolutely. I did not have a one-year-old, but I was moving. I was pregnant, like very pregnant. I think I was 35 weeks pregnant when I was graduating and testing. And we were moving and it was the height of the pandemic had just hit. It was all of the things. And so you really need to have that game plan. And having a set plan, no matter what is happening in your life, really helps you avoid burnout, be efficient, get all of that studying in, and actually feel in control of your prep instead of feeling like it's controlling you.

So, to start here, I'm going to give you all a really, really easy answer and solution if you're primary care, so that's FNP or AGPCNP, or if you're a PMHNP student. And yes, this is actually one of those few things that has an easy way out for you.

And it is literally just do one of the SMNP courses, because if you do that, our study planner gives you everything you need to succeed. It keeps everything organized and in manageable chunks. And it allows you to schedule days off. And then if you get behind or things happen, it literally adapts with the click of a button.

Kaitlyn: Yeah, and one of my favorite parts is that you can totally personalize it. You can plug in your practice sets, you can schedule a full length exam, you can drop little reminders. So for example, review peds vaccines or just mental health day because we all know we need one of those. It's all right there in your planner. But if you're not ready to grab a course yet, there's no worries there. We've still got you covered. So, Anna, you're talking about that study planner, your study calendar that you made. When you were setting it up, where did you even start?

Anna: Yeah, that's a really great question. And I'd say you have to start by figuring out what your baseline is. So I would just ask myself, what am I using to prep? What resources do I have? Did my school provide anything or what was I interested in doing? And then I also just took a step back and I thought, okay, what do I already know well? And what areas really make me hesitate?

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And if you have taken a diagnostic test as part of your exit exams in school or maybe you've used a Q-bank before, look at your performance data from those and that can really help you gauge those strengths and weaknesses. Maybe you're really solid in women's health and pediatrics, but cardiac or psych makes your head spin. Again, that was exactly me.

And that information can just help you guide your study plan and plan your time a little bit better. You never want to completely skip over areas in your prep even if you feel good about them. But when I was prepping, I realized I would waste hours re-studying my strengths because it felt really comfortable and it boosted my confidence because I knew it. But ignoring those harder areas obviously was not setting myself up for success. And you want to study smart, not just study more.

Kaitlyn: Exactly. And if you're using one of our SMNP Q-banks, you don't even have to guess where your strong or weak areas are because it tracks them automatically. So you'll see which systems you're crushing it and which ones might need a little bit more love. And it's such a time saver and keeps you from spreading yourself too thin.

And before you get too deep in the details, figure out your timeline. How long do you actually have to study? So most people do best with about 6 to 8 weeks. So find your test date and then work backwards from there.

Anna: Yeah, absolutely. And just friendly reminder here to definitely set that test date. It's going to give you that tangible finish line and it really gives you some needed motivation to just get started.

Kaitlyn: Yeah, exactly. And then when you know how many weeks you have left, you just have to be honest with yourself about what you can commit to each day because remember, quality beats quantity every time, which is why that 6 to 8 week study time is that sweet spot of keeping information fresh, but also allowing yourself to just do a couple hours a day and even take days off.

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Anna: Yeah, especially if you're still in school or you're in clinicals or working, you might only have small focused hours some days and that's completely fine. In fact, it's even encouraged. Right? That key is consistency, not cramming. And you want to plan your heavier study days, when you want to do a full length exam, for example, and have time to review all of the rationales. You want to plan those when your energy is the highest. So for me, for example, that was Saturday mornings.

And we've said this a million times already, but please schedule your days off. You cannot pour from an empty cup. And I used to think that taking breaks meant I was slacking until I realized that those breaks were really when my brain actually consolidated what I've learned, and it made me way, way more efficient when I was studying.

And you also want to make sure you're matching your studying to how you actually learn best. So find a review course that works for you. Everyone's brain processes information a little bit differently. So if you're more of an auditory learner, listen to reviews like our courses on your own time or re-listen to the videos while you're walking or driving. You can listen to our content episodes of this podcast. If you're more of a hands-on learner, teach the content out loud or quiz yourself using flashcards after you've done those videos.

Kaitlyn: Yeah, I totally agree with that. Man, I can promise you that consistency is better than cramming every single time. And you can also use our practice quizzes at the end of each module, like we offer in all of our courses, or fill out the study guide as you go.

Anna: Yeah, absolutely. So when you're looking at a review course, just look into what kind of resources you're going to be getting and find and pick what works best for you. If you need more accountability or structure or more personalized support, that's where our live study group excels.

And when I was studying, this is going to sound really silly, but when I was studying, I would teach my dogs or my husband all about hypertension. Out

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loud, in my living room, I'd explain it to them like I was teaching a class. And that's really what helped it stick for me. And so don't be afraid to talk it through, even if it's to your house plants.

Kaitlyn: Yeah, you might look a little bit crazy, but I did the same thing. I used to teach my husband and it's kind of funny looking back now because clearly I didn't realize at the time that teaching was really going to be such a passion. So yeah, big surprise that both of us ended up in board prep, right?

But truly, I've always loved teaching. My study group and I would trade off topics. I would say, okay, I'll take cirrhosis if somebody else will take pneumonia. It kind of just kept things fun. It forced us to really know the material because when you have to explain something out loud, you quickly find that what actually makes sense in your head and what doesn't. So that's active studying and it beats just re-reading notes every single time because your brain learns by doing, not just staring and reading.

So just start mixing in practice questions early, even from week one. So after every question, pause and say, okay, why was this answer correct? Why were the others wrong? And that is how you start thinking like the exam wants you to think. So if you're using our SMNP courses, that's exactly how we walk you through it. So step by step, we break down how to approach each question and then we use detailed rationales to help you connect all of those dots.

Anna: Yeah, absolutely. And don't forget about Blue. So Blue is our AI tutor bot. And it's really cool. It walks you through step by step how to approach each question if you're unsure. And so if you're reviewing a question and you're really not sure how you're supposed to get to the answer, you can open Blue and it'll just help prompt your thinking and help you learn how to critically think through questions.

Kaitlyn: I feel like Blue is so underrated. I get questions from students all the time. So they'll send in a question about a topic or a tricky question.

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And then I remind them they also have Blue to walk them through it and they're always so blown away. Wait, Blue can actually explain it clearly. And honestly, it usually does an even better job than we could one-on-one because it's available immediately. It's 24/7 and it's tailored right to how you're thinking through that question.

And of course, as you're going through your study materials, do not forget your anxiety plan for exam day. You want to find and practice what works for you. And if you have no idea where to start, we actually have a brand new free PDF guide for this on our website at npreviews.com.

Anna: Yeah, and ultimately, you all, no matter what you are doing, you want to make sure that you're studying smart. So that means finding and sticking to a plan, but also allowing yourself some flexibility, right? Allow yourself enough time to not cram all day, every day for that exam, right? Doing that, it's only going to lead to a mushy brain. We do not like mushy brains here. It leads to overwhelm, and it ultimately leads to you starting to question everything you know.

Kaitlyn: Yes. When I hit that point where I would start forgetting things that I knew I knew, that was definitely my clue to take a break. Or when I would start going down all those rabbit holes, turning every simple topic into a gray zone debate, that's when I knew I had to step away.

And every single time, I would come back the next day or a few hours later and just realize it really wasn't nearly as hard as my tired brain made it seem, because sometimes the best study tip is just go take a walk, go take a nap. You will be amazed at how easy some of the content seems when you're not overwhelmed.

Anna: Absolutely. And that brings up a really great point, which is use short study blocks, maybe 45 minutes of focus, 15 minutes to just stretch, refill your water, or go on a walk. And really protect your sleep. Seriously, I know it is hard, but sleep is when your brain organizes and stores all the information that you have worked so hard to learn.

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And if you start to feel that test anxiety creeping up, it doesn't mean that you're doing it wrong, okay? It means you care. And, right, we don't need to completely eliminate that test anxiety, but we do need to learn how to study with it.

Kaitlyn: Yeah, I totally agree. And just to wrap all of this up, your study plan should feel doable, not dreadful. So please, like Anna said, protect your rest, give yourself room to adapt because life happens. It will happen. Build in those buffer days. Life doesn't just stop because your board exam is coming up.

And seriously, start those practice questions early. Don't wait until the last two weeks because the earlier you start, the more natural that test style thinking becomes. You really want to be integrating them from day one.

Anna: Yeah, absolutely. And if you are just at the beginning of this process, I know that it can feel so, so overwhelming. I have been there. But remember, you have graduated nursing school, right? You have passed the NCLEX. And now, you've survived NP school and you're gearing up to take this exam. You've already done the hard part.

I promise you that you've learned this material within your years of NP school. And if you can graduate NP school, you can pass this exam. It's really about creating that structure and creating that confidence around it. And it's really about refreshing what you know and tying all of those loose ends together. And of course, using our fun memory tricks because sometimes some content just does not stick without those.

Kaitlyn: Yeah, and you don't need to know everything at once. So you just need to show up, stay consistent, trust the process because every question you miss is teaching you something new. Every small win counts. Every day you sit down to study, even if it's just 20 minutes, you are building momentum that will carry you straight into exam day with confidence.

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Anna: Absolutely. So to recap, sign up for your test. Figure out how long you have to study, be that 6 to 8 weeks, that's really that sweet spot. And then start mapping out doing different topics on those days, adding in practice questions from the very beginning. Figure out what topics you think you might need to spend a little bit more time on versus ones you feel more confident about, and kind of mix those together too.

I really liked doing some of the harder topics and then finishing my week with one of my more confidence building topics that I knew really well. And that way at the end of every week, I was starting to feel really good. I wasn't just doing hard topic after hard topic and really struggling through.

Give yourself a lot of time, expect the unexpected, make sure you are flexible and you are able to adapt. And really just take a deep breath, build your plan, or better yet, let us do that for you and just know that you've got this.

And if this episode helped you, share it with a classmate who might be about to study or tag us in your study setup on Instagram @smnpreviewsofficial or on TikTok, which is @smnpreviews. I really love when we get tagged and seeing how you all are making our different strategies or our test taking tips or our mnemonics your own. But I will see you in our next episode.

Thanks for listening to another episode of the *Real Deal Nurse Practitioner Club*. If you want more information about the different types of support that we offer to students and new nurse practitioners, you can visit npreviews.com. We'll see you next week.