



TIP SHEET

IMPROVE YOUR TEST TAKING STRATEGY **Focus Errors**

The only nursing school exam and NCLEX questions you should miss are questions that you don't know the question content.

The three most common test taking strategy errors are

1. Reading errors
2. Analysis errors
3. Focus errors

When you lose focus during an exam you are likely to incorrectly answer a question. For that reason, it is important to address strategies to improve your well before exam day.

What contributes to Focus Errors?

Life! And the way we all live our lives.

There is little in our day to day cultural norms that support focus. Distractions and multitasking are a regular part of our lives. Our brains cycle through an ongoing stream of thoughts that hijack our ability to concentrate and stay on track with one idea or topic.

Your brain is constantly processing these multiple short bits of information that come at breakneck speed in 3 second sound bites. When you take an exam, you need to focus for two to three hours. Your brain cannot go from 3 second sound bites to three hours of focus without practice.

Adopt Lifestyle Practices that Improve your Ability to Focus

Relax your Mind

Being busy is a cultural norm. You are busy all the time and multitasking much of the time. This busy lifestyle interferes with your ability to focus and concentrate.

When you let your mind relax you actually change the structure of your brain, building up gray matter that enhances your brain performance.

Just *15 minutes a day* of intentional practice like meditation is enough to stop the cycle of brain chatter and change the structure of your brain. When you first practice a calming activity like meditation, it will be difficult because your brain is not wired for calm. It takes commitment and practice. With time and practice, you will find it becomes easier because you have restructured your brain.

Limit the “scroll”

Social media “scrolling” provides intense brain stimulation that interferes with your brain’s ability to rest. When you check your social media and there’s a message or video for you, this releases a feel good surge of dopamine. This is why we are frequently moved to check in on social media accounts. Our brain wants that dopamine!

The urge for dopamine overrides whatever else you are processing in your brain and it is why changing your “scroll” habits is so difficult. It takes intention and commitment to make this change.

Limit screen time

Excessive screen time is detrimental for optimum brain function. Even if you use blue light blocking lenses or filters, screens stimulate your brain in ways that elicit brain activation, decreasing your attention span and ability to focus. Because of this brain activation, screen time also contributes to sleep disruptions.

Much of your work during nursing school and in NCLEX preparation requires you to be on computer screens. Because you will not be able to eliminate screen time you can help your brain function by cutting down on non-essential screen time.

Get Adequate Sleep

It is essential to make adequate sleep a priority. How much sleep is “adequate”? Six to eight uninterrupted hours per night, every night. If you’re not anywhere near that routine of sleep, consider what changes you need to make to adopt better sleep habits. You cannot quiet your brain enough to stay focused without good sleep.

Practice Mindfulness

You can improve your ability to focus when you allow yourself to do one activity at a time and focus on that one activity while you are doing it. Multitasking is the opposite of mindfulness. You can’t be mindful about your time, learning, and retrieval of learning materials during testing unless you practice being mindful as a lifestyle.

Adopt a routine of putting your phone away when you are learning (in class, in simulation, etc.) so that you can improve your concentration and focus. Be mindful also in your daily activities; focus on eating while you are eating, focus on being outside when you are outside, and focus on being present with your family and friends when you are with them. Just like making changes to relax your mind, this will be challenging at first because your brain is satisfied by the surges of neurotransmitters it gets when you are multitasking.

Staying Focused While Taking Exams

After you have addressed lifestyle factors that help you stay focused, you will find it easier to keep your focus during test taking. When you lose focus during testing, find a “stop technique” to bring you back. It may be a breathing pattern, rolling your shoulders, closing your eyes for a 30 second imagery. Whatever works for you, practice it, and use it.

Assess and Address your Test Taking Strategy - Focus

When you learn how to practice with focus, you will be better able to focus throughout your exams when you practice.

If you are struggling to decipher what your test taking strategy errors are, or need help fixing them, consider [scheduling a coaching session](#) to get you on the right track for success.

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