How to Survive (and Thrive) in Nursing School

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A basic how-to article aimed at making nursing school as painless and stress free as possible, based on my past experiences as a student nurse and my current experiences tutoring nursing students.

As a new(Ish) nurse, I still like to browse through the "student nurse" section of allnurses.com from time to time. What constantly strikes me is that I see the same questions and concerns over and over again. "I'm failing, and I don't know why", "I feel nervous in clinicals", and "I don't have time to do anything other than schoolwork" are all common themes. While there are some great answers from some wonderfully knowledgeable and patient nurses (rip Daytonite) out there, I thought a go-to guide with every tip and secret I can think of, plus some more that I've only read about, would be an excellent resource for student nurses to have.

**Tips for Pre-Nursing Students**

#1 get a job! The very first tip that I give to anyone who is even considering nursing school is to get a job in the healthcare field. You can be a CNA, a patient care assistant, a unit clerk, or even a patient transporter with little to no experience needed. Be sure to mention on your job application that you are considering going to nursing school, hr people love that.

There are many reasons that this is the first thing I tell people who ask me about becoming a nurse. First and foremost is that no matter what you may think you know about being a nurse, there is nothing like observing what nurses do from day-to-day in the real world rather than on tv to help you decide if it's really for you. Consider it an anthropological study. Every different field from banking to food service has its own culture, it's own set of unspoken rules. The sooner you learn what they are, the more likely you are to be successful down the road as a nursing student and as a nurse.

Other great reasons to get a healthcare job before nursing school? Um, let me see... Professional contacts, possible tuition assistance, and oh let's not forget having a paycheck while in school. Don't tell me you don't have the time either. You can work per diem most places by just putting in a couple of shifts per month.

#2 get your pre-requisites done before you start actual nursing courses. The requirements vary from school to school, but even if your school will allow you to take microbiology, etc. While you are matriculated as a nursing student, it's just not a good idea. Your grades in one course or the other will suffer. Believe me and the others on this website when we say nursing school will dominate your life. (I will give you some good ways to keep it from doing so later on, but for now, just believe us)

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On to the Meaty Part: Academic Tips for Student Nurses

#1 Go to class and pay attention while there. It sounds so very simple, yet for so many reasons, just doesn't happen. Let's go over some big-time distractors, and what to do about them: the cell phone. If you really can't sit in a lecture hall for two hours without texting or updating your facebook status, then for heaven's sake leave the phone in your car! If you need your phone with you for emergencies (and by emergency, I mean actual blood, tears and vomit do not count) then leave it in your bag on vibrate. You will hear it.

Friends. You've gotta have them, but you don't have to sit with them during class. If your friends tend to goof off and talk during lecture, do one of two things. Either sit somewhere without them, or get them all to sit in the very front row of the lecture hall with you. No one goofs off in the front row.

Sleep. I have a friend who failed her third semester of nursing school because she just couldn't stay awake during class. She was working full-time night shift, so it was a tough situation. But everyone has obstacles they must overcome to be successful. If you can't stay awake during classes, here are some suggestions: try and switch to a class that better reflects your sleep schedule. My friend requested evening classes but was told there was no space. You know what? The lecture classes were so big that no one would have noticed an extra face in the crowd once or twice. She could have easily gone to the evening lecture if she fell asleep during the day one to find out what she missed. Another good option is tape recording the lectures. Actually, this is a good idea even if you aren't a sleepy head. Record the lecture and play it back in your car, on your headphones while working out, etc.

In my experience, 50-75% of the material covered on exams is covered ad nauseam in lecture.

#2 Don't do the reading. Okay, I don't really mean that. What I mean is if you have time to read 500+ pages a week, by all means, do so, but if you don't here are some tips: what you really need to get out of the reading are the nursing responsibilities. While it's great to know the in-depth pathophysiology of the diseases you are studying, you are going to nursing school, not medical school. The things you will be tested on are the nursing diagnosis(s) associated with the disease, the nursing interventions, and the patient education required. Get some little tiny post-it notes and label the pages in the reading that cover these, and refer to them PRN.

Get some NCLEX review books now. "but I'm not even close to graduating yet" trust me. They're like cliff's notes for nursing. "but I don't have the money to buy extra books right now" buy them used on eBay, borrow them from someone at work (see #1 in pre-nursing section) who's already passed NCLEX , or just go to Barnes & Noble and sit and read them there. Once I discovered these wonderful books, I rarely even brought my actual textbooks to nursing school anymore. They're much lighter to carry around and they cut out all but the most important things that a nurse needs to know for each disease process. They are, in short, a godsend.

#3 Do NCLEX questions. There are tons of resources for them online, and most of the review books that you will be getting anyway (see #2) come with cd's that have thousands of them. Don't believe your teachers when they say they write all of their own questions. They are getting their questions or at least the basic formats for them from these very same resources. Nursing school questions are unlike anything you've ever experienced before. I hear from people all the time that they aced their pre-requisites and are barely maintaining a c average in nursing. It's because the questions are different, and the very best way to know how to answer them is practice. Answer a set number of questions, then go back and review the rationales for the ones you got wrong. Figure out why you got it wrong, go back and study the material again if you need to. Repeat. Plan on doing 100+ questions a week during your first year of nursing school, and increase it during your final semesters. By the time the NCLEX rolls around, you should be doing at least 500 practice questions a week.

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Wading in: Survival Tips for Clinicals

#1 Be a goody two shoes. Not in a brown nosing, teacher's pet sort of way, but in a way that shows that you are a professional who knows how to behave in a professional setting sort of way. I hated going to clinical when I was in nursing school. I was out of my element, I didn't know where things were, I didn't know who people were, and I wasn't familiar with the facility's documentation system. And I'm just not a morning person in general. But I treated it like a job. I showed up at least 15 minutes early every morning to get my assignment and ask the night nurse (if I could find him or her) how the patient's night went, what was new, and get report. And you know what? Because my instructor knew that I could be counted on to do these things, by the end of the semester not only was I getting the choice assignments, I was also the one sent to help out other students with things they were unfamiliar with when the instructor was too busy. I also usually had my care plans and other paperwork done before I even left for the day, because I was able to use the time in the morning to get it started.

#2 Be nosy. Find out what is going on on the floor that day. Are there any bedside procedures like a tee, or a picc line placement being done? Even if it's not on your patient, ask if you can observe (check with your school's policy, and get the patient's permission of course). Be nice to the floor nurses, tell them you are interested in learning just about anything, and if they invite you to help them out or watch them do something like an iv start, or a dressing change for god's sake don't say "I've already done/seen that." even if you have.

#3 If you have downtime, try and help out your fellow students. Not only is it just the right thing to do, you may find that you learn something, or see something you hadn't seen before just by going in a room to help another student do a bed bath. And next time you are in the weeds someone will owe you a favor!

#4 Refer to #1 under tips for pre-nursing students. Being comfortable touching, talking to, and just being around patients is one of the biggest obstacles that many nursing students have to overcome when they start their clinical experiences. If you have already done that, it will be that much easier for you.

The Final Act: Being a Graduate Nurse

For those of you who are still with me, bravo! I never anticipated this article becoming this long. To think I was actually worried about getting to the minimum 500 words! But anyway, a few tips on being a graduate nurse:

#1 start applying to jobs early. This has become so much more important with the economy in the toilet like it is now, but even in the good times, if you are going to be a may graduate, start applying no later than February. That's right, I said February. Facilities only have so many resources to train new graduates, and so will orient them in stages. If you are counting on having a paycheck coming in June, you want to be one of the first new graduates hired. If you heeded my pre-nursing advice and already have a job in a healthcare facility, consider it a foot in the door, but don't count on being hired by that facility. Apply early, follow up, and above all, be professional. Have your resume and cover letter proofread by as many people as you can. Ask your instructors and nurse managers if you may use them as professional references. Dress appropriately for the interview. If you have difficulty knowing what appropriate is, look at what your nurse manager wears to work. If he or she wears khakis and a button-down, you should wear khakis, a button down and a jacket. Always go one step above what is expected.

#2 a few more interview tips: know where you want to work, and why you want to work there but be flexible with your expectations. If you want to work ICU or another sought-after specialty, have some good reasons why you want to do so, and also some good reasons why you will be the best candidate for the job. Don't say "because I need the ICU experience to get into nurse anesthetist school". And if you are interviewing for a med-surg job when what you really want is labor and delivery, be honest without being too honest. A great phrase is "I want to work on this unit because I know that having a solid med-surg background will serve me well in whatever specialty I go into eventually"

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#3 on the NCLEX. You are already doing 500+ NCLEX questions a week. You already have all of the review books. You have essentially been studying for this test for the past two (or four if you are a BSN graduate) years. You are ready. If you don't believe me, take a review class. If you want to pay for Kaplan or something like it, by all means, do so, but there are plenty of other options. Many healthcare facilities offer free review classes to their new graduate nurses, so that is something to look into before you pay for one yourself. What you should definitely not do is wait. Statistically the longer you wait to take the NCLEX the higher your odds are of not passing on the first try. It's true, look it up. Take it within three months of graduation at the longest. And don't listen to everyone who tells you it's the hardest test they ever took. For me, it was the easiest test I'd taken in two years.

That is it. I have spilled my wealth of knowledge regarding nursing school, and everything that comes before and after. If you really do take my advice, I don't think there is any way you could not be successful. And for my parting words, I will quote my friend Abby, who once told me that "c equals degree man, don't sweat it!"

Feedback from real nursing students...

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