Succeeding in Mental Health
An Interview with Dr. Janice Aloi, DMH, RN, CNE

Q: How long have you been teaching Mental Health?
A: I’ve been teaching psych-mental health nursing for a long time; much too long to disclose in this newsletter! Lol! I must say though; never in all the years that I have been doing this, have I found it boring.

Q: Why do you enjoy teaching Mental Health?
A: When it comes down to it, psych is all about life, love, and the pursuit of happiness. In psych-mental health, you are working with people who are trying to make sense of their everyday lives. What’s more fascinating than the workings of the mind?!

Q: Describe your teaching style?
A: I realize that students learn differently so I try to utilize a variety of strategies in the classroom and on-line. This is a 5 credit course which means that we are in class for a few hours. I like to mix it up with some lecture, case studies, games, maybe a video. I encourage students to share clinical experiences that relate to the class content. I have added audio to some of my power points. This has proven to be a great help for students since they can listen to the lecture over and over again at their leisure.

Q: What is the biggest misconception about Mental Health?
A: The biggest misconception is that the clinical area is a dangerous place. Yes, things sometimes happen, but nothing compared to what goes on in our city streets. Patients do not want to lose control and staff members are well-prepared to maintain a safe environment.

Q: Name three things students can do to improve their performance in Mental Health?
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Succeeding in Adult Health I
An Interview with Renée Kurz, MSN, FNP-BC

Q: What is the biggest misconception about Adult Health I?
A: Some students think the course is designed to weed them out of the program. We really want to see them succeed. We are not interested in weeding, we are interested in succeeding.

Q: Name three things students can do to improve their performance in Adult Health I.
A: The number one thing students can do is practice answering a set amount of questions per day. They think of concepts in linear silos and doing practice questions helps them integrate everything together.
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Succeeding in Mental Health (continued)

A: The accelerated BSN program requires a tremendous amount of time and energy. It is a huge undertaking. Students who are employed often have inadequate time to devote to learning. Another potential pitfall is the inability to organize effectively. Students need to be very regimented in order to stay on top of the vast amount of material.

Q: What advice would you offer new students to help them prepare for their exams?
A: I advise students to study alone first, then meet with their study group and go over all the notes. Students are amazed at what they miss when they go over notes together. I recommend getting an NCLEX review book early in the program to practice answering NCLEX style questions. I remind students to look at the rationale for all the incorrect responses. It describes the principle that was violated and provides great insight. Lastly, utilize all that ATI has to offer.

Q: Why is it important to celebrate the little successes?
A: Because everything is about confidence. If they believe they can succeed, they’re going to succeed.

Q: What is your philosophy on study groups?
A: I think students do well in groups. In a group, you can sometimes cover more ground than you can cover alone. Some students like the lone soldier kind of approach but there is so much to cover. If you study in groups and different people are good in different areas, they can share their strengths.

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Succeeding in Adult Health I (continued)

Q: What are the top reasons students do not pass Mental Health?
A: They listen to what I say and heed my advice!

Q: What are some of the top reasons students do not pass Adult Health I?
A: The number one reason students pass Adult Health is because they do an ample amount of practice questions and because they memorize concepts, not isolated facts. If they understand the Pathophysiology and they can put the pieces together, then they don’t need to memorize a whole bunch of different facts. They’re better at higher end questions and they pass the course.

Q: When meeting with students individually, what is your personal strategy for encouraging their success?
A: When students come to see me, I encourage them to set smart goals for themselves. I have them take out a calendar and I have them map out the things they can reasonably achieve. They could reasonably complete 20 minutes of studying per day and answer a certain amount of questions. I try not to overwhelm them. I try to break things up, so they can celebrate the little successes.

Q: Why is it important to celebrate the little successes?
A: Because everything is about confidence. If they believe they can succeed, they’re going to succeed.

Q: What advice would you offer new students to help them prepare for their exams?
A: First, attend every class. Class is where it happens. Second, read the textbook. Pay special attention to the material in the boxes. Students often overlook important learning opportunities by skipping the boxed-in areas of the text. Third, form a study group.

Q: What are the top reasons students pass Adult Health I?
A: Earlier in the course and earlier in the program.

Q: What are the top reasons students pass Mental Health?
A: They listen to what I say and heed my advice!
When I tell people I am in a nursing program, do freelance work, tutor, and run a household, I get reactions like, “Wow! You are super busy!” As I start my final semester in the nursing program, I thought I’d share some of the things that have helped me survive life as a nursing student.

1. Be Organized: Get a planner or use the calendar app on your Smartphone. Plan out what you will do and on what days. I write down deadlines on a wall calendar in my office so I can just glance at it quickly to see if I have a project due or something to read before my next class.

2. Find Study Time: If you have children finding time, especially quiet time to study will be difficult. I study while my child is at school or when he goes to bed. I also keep my son busy by enrolling him in all sorts of activities, such as swimming, fencing, or music lessons and I use that time to study as well. You learn to be very productive when you have those moments to study!

3. Don’t Clean Your house: As long as my family has clean clothes to wear and they are fed well that’s all that matters to me. I’ll get around to cleaning the house after I pass the NCLEX.

4. Find Balance: Don’t study every day. Take a night or two off. Work it into your schedule and spend quality time with your family. I’ve had to accept that this might mean that I’ll get a B+ instead of an A in a class because I need to hang out with my family and that’s okay with me.

5. Ask for Help: This is hard for me to do, but there comes a point in every semester when I need more time for schoolwork. That’s when you ask for help, whether it’s your brother taking the kids out for a few hours on a weekend so that you can study or getting a friend or family member to help prepare meals ahead of time.

6. Plan Ahead: On Sundays I cook several dishes and put them in the freezer. No one goes hungry in the house, unless it’s my 13 year old who has a bottomless pit for a stomach. I have to have additional healthy snacks because he’s constantly grazing.

7. Make Your Children Part of the Experience: My son and I do homework together. He checks my med math and I check his assignments. My fellow classmates have assessed him for practice and he can now perform a perfect lung assessment! Your children will appreciate being part of your life at school and may even begin dreaming of the day when they will follow in your footsteps.

Finally, just know that you can be a great student and still be a great parent!

Evelyn Obando was a student in the ABSN program at Rutgers School of Nursing. She completed her coursework in December 2013 and is currently studying for her NCLEX.

Managing Test-Taking Anxiety
By Faithann Brown, Director, Center for Academic Success

It’s important to remember that some level of anxiety before an exam is normal. Physical or cognitive symptoms of stress however, can be managed to help you perform effectively on exams. The first step in managing test anxiety is to recognize the signs before, during, and after an exam.

Some signs of test anxiety include difficulty concentrating, racing thoughts, a pounding heart, cold sweaty hands, dry mouth, dizziness and more. General tips for relieving test anxiety include the following:

1. Understand the course expectations: Read your syllabus. Understand the value of each assignment and exam. Be clear about what type of exam you will have. Know the location, start time, and duration of your exam.

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Succeeding in Adult Health I (continued)

Q: You spoke of the lone soldier mentality. What are some of the drawbacks of students isolating themselves and not studying with other students?

A: The whole profession of nursing is a camaraderie. You have to work with different people to achieve the greatest goal for your patient. So it’s good to start studying like that now. When you study alone, you get overwhelmed and you don’t realize what you don’t know until you get to the test. If you study in a small group sometimes those [problems] are identified earlier.

Q: Do you have any tips or suggestions that would assist students in forming their own small study groups and sticking with them?

A: You need diversity in a study group. You don’t want to form a study group with a couple friends that are not performing as well on the test themselves, because you may have all the same questions. You want to form a study group with people who you’re not always used to sitting next to, people who have different backgrounds and different grades. Diverse skills sets and diverse level of understanding and comprehension of the material will really help you do better on the test.

Q: What is your opinion on teachers assigning study groups as opposed to students forming their own study groups?

A: I see a value in both, truthfully. Our students are adult learners and they know who they work well with and they know who they are most comfortable studying with. [However,] I think it’s of value for teachers to assign groups because they may have insight regarding students’ strengths and weaknesses which they utilize to form groups [that] affect the greatest change.

Q: What was the best piece of advice you ever received as a student nurse?

A: While you’re in the program, it’s one of the hardest times of your life. Once you get out of the program, however, there are so many opportunities and so many areas to explore, it’s all worthwhile.

Managing Test Anxiety (continued)

2. Understand the parts of a multiple choice nursing exam: Every exam question consists of 4 parts:
   a. Case (description of the patient or scenario),
   b. Stem (the part of the question that asks a question),
   c. Distractors (feasible but incorrect responses), and
   d. the Correct Response.

3. Join a study group: Meet with people in your class who learn differently and who have good study habits. Your learning differences will work together to bring greater clarity to the course material, thereby boosting your confidence before an exam.

4. Employ relaxation techniques: Studies show that muscle relaxation, controlled breathing, and positive visualization can reduce test anxiety before, during, and after an important exam. Consider taking a yoga or Tai Chi class. Be sure to sign up for a massage during the next Wellness Day.

5. Avoid sitting near distracting people: Moaners, mumblers, knuckle crackers, and people who just can’t seem to keep still may easily distract you during an exam. Choose your seat wisely.

6. Reward yourself: When the exam is complete, no matter what your score, find a way to reward yourself. Even the smallest indulgences can make a big difference. So, buy a latte, watch your favorite TV show/movie, plan an hour of fun with your family, or take a nice hot bath to unwind.