How to Succeed in Nursing School
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Getting into nursing school requires hard work and perseverance — it’s an accomplishment to be proud of! Still, *succeeding* in your nursing program is the achievement that will move you forward to a rewarding career. A nursing education is an adventure, and like many adventures, it will present you with challenges you may not have anticipated. That said, with thoughtful planning, you’ll be able to overcome any hurdles and thrive in your nursing program and beyond.

**What Nursing School Does (And What You’ll Do in Nursing School)**
The overarching goal of nursing school is to provide students with the knowledge and skills to deliver safe, effective care to their patients. Students who complete an undergraduate nursing degree, either online or at a two- or four-year college, are considered generalist nurses once they pass the NCLEX-RN and are licensed in their state. Because the RN license indicates broad-based knowledge, this level of nursing education will cover a wide range of health care job opportunities. The bulk of undergraduate coursework will be in the medical/surgical care of patients, but there are also classes in pediatrics, women’s health (obstetrics), psychiatry, and community health. Beyond these core requirements, there are additional classes that students take in areas such as pharmacology, research, legal and ethical issues in nursing care, and the professional role of the nurse.

**Why Broad Knowledge Matters**
Many students enter nursing school with the goal of working in specialty areas such as pediatrics or emergency medicine, and ideally these options will be in your future (if you want them to be). Still, the knowledge and skills you gain from your early nursing classes will lay the foundation for your success as a well-rounded health care provider — so take them *all* seriously, even if you think you won’t use them in your specific future position! You never know when that obstetrics patient will end up on your cardiac floor — or if you’ll even end up becoming a cardiac nurse as you’d originally planned.
Although you won’t choose a specialization as an undergraduate nursing student, you will likely do a preceptorship (or nursing apprenticeship) rotation during your last semester in school. Typically, students elect to do these in the specialty in which they would eventually like to work, such as emergency-room nursing or psychiatric nursing. But keep in mind when preparing for the NCLEX that it is a generalist exam and will assess all scopes of nursing practice, not just the specialty area you pursued in your preceptorship.

**The Challenges of Nursing Exams**
One of the most significant hurdles that nursing students face is the type of testing they encounter in their programs. Prior to nursing school, students will have often been assessed on their understanding of specific content. While content questions still arise in nursing school, nursing exams focus heavily on testing students’ ability to apply nursing knowledge and to think critically about health-care problems and situations. This style of assessment can be difficult to master, but becoming comfortable with it early in your education will help you advance in your career. In addition, much of what is tested on the NCLEX-RN uses this applied-skills approach, so think of your courses as practice for that exam. Many students even purchase a well-regarded NCLEX review course or book, such as Saunders Comprehensive Review for the NCLEX-RN Examination, to help familiarize themselves with these types of tests and get a jumpstart for this critical licensing exam.
Mastering the Content
In nursing school, students are presented with enormous quantities of new content to learn — from anatomy, physiology, and disease processes to effective practices of patient care and management. Tackling the subjects you’re learning in chunks — or small, manageable amounts — as you go along will enable you to master and retain knowledge more effectively than trying to recall it after a single intensive study session. Students cannot succeed in nursing programs by “cramming” because each new set of content builds on earlier units. More importantly, students should not attempt to take shortcuts. After all, you will be taking care of people’s lives — this is serious business, and you should treat it as such. Become the nurse you would want caring for your loved ones — not the one who crammed just to pass a test!

The Clinical Component
In addition to tests, your nursing education will also include a clinical placement, which is the component in which you get to apply your nursing knowledge. You’ll spend time in your school’s lab being introduced to new skills and will then proceed to your assigned patient-care areas to practice your newly-acquired skills. Even though you may be scared in the beginning, seek out as many opportunities to practice as you can. Trying out a new skill may have seemed easy to do on your healthy classmate in lab, but practicing on strangers (who are sick) is a completely different experience. Be proactive and brave in your education, and never let an opportunity to develop your abilities pass you up. And don’t hesitate to go back to the lab to practice more — your patients (and instructors!) will appreciate it.

When You Struggle
Nursing school is challenging; it requires diligence and commitment. Sometimes, though, even those traits won’t seem to be enough, and you may find yourself struggling. If this occurs, reach out to your instructors early. They can help you develop a successful plan forward and connect you with resources to help you overcome hurdles. The faculty want you to succeed, but you have to be proactive and part of the solution.

Balancing Your Education and Personal Life
Between learning about new diseases, acquiring new ways of thinking, honing new skills, and investing time in required reading, you won’t have much time left. You will likely need to make sacrifices outside of school. As with all good things in life, the benefits will be worth the sacrifices. Supportive loved ones will understand and be there when you are done. Re-evaluate your responsibilities and leisure activities to figure out which of these can be shared or postponed, even if only temporarily.

The Importance of Friends
One of the best supports for nursing students is an awesome set of friends. If you are lucky, you’ll develop lifelong friendships in your program. Making peer connections can be your greatest strategy for success — not only will you study together and share tips for success, but you’ll also understand mutual struggles. In my experience, students are better able to face the academic and emotional challenges of nursing school when they have a strong community of support. Besides, you’ll spend so much time together anyway that you’ll start to feel like family!
While nursing school will be one of the most challenging endeavors you’ll ever take on, it is possible not only to survive, but also to thrive. Being aware of the challenges and developing a good plan to face them will help set you on the path to success.