Self-Assessment Tool for Diagnosing Difficulties  
in Passing Licensure Examinations  
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It is quite common for a person not to pass one of the licensure examinations when taking it for the first time. Often individuals do not take test preparation courses and have little knowledge about what areas they need to study prior to sitting for the examinations. Most of these individuals are successful when they try again as they are armed with new knowledge that comes from a little more preparation, having experienced the examination conditions firsthand, and/or having taken a structured test preparation course.

There are some individuals, however, who have repeated difficulty in passing the licensure examinations despite frequent attempts. In some states, there are limits placed by the states’ licensure boards on the number of times that one can take each examination, while in other states, these restrictions are not present.

When speaking with individuals who have repeatedly failed the same examination, one thing becomes obvious, they are extremely frustrated by their situation as they are at a loss from diagnosing their difficulties. Printouts given out by the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) to those who have not been successful outlining which areas they have passed and which need additional study have not usually proven to be helpful. Their lack of usefulness stems from the finding that answering most of the questions on the examination requires knowledge of more than one domain or that many questions could be classified into one of several content areas. Thus, individuals who have used them as strict study guides are frustrated when they find that they are again unsuccessful – perhaps finding completely different areas of deficiency in subsequent attempts.

With little else to guide them, individuals usually follow the same methods of study that they have done previously, even when these have not yielded the desired result.

This guide aims to give individuals better insight into the difficulties that they may be experiencing in passing the licensure examination. Making a good assessment of the problems should not be underestimated. Assessment is the key to effective intervention. In medicine, you can have a very effective medication, but it does no good unless it prescribed for the right ailment. The same is true here. Continually studying or memorizing the same material will be futile if the problem is not the mastery of content, but instead related to anxiety related with having to pass the examination. Thus, diagnoses of the underlying reasons for not passing the examinations are essential and should be given the same time and careful attention that is paid to reviewing content material.

Problems associated with passing the licensure examinations usually can be identified as related to one or more of three following:
1. Lack of Knowledge about Essential Content Areas;
2. Difficulties in Problem-solving; and/or
3. Anxiety Issues.

It is essential to determine which one or more than one of these is at the core of the problem as the remedy for addressing each is quite different.

Below are some questions which may be used as indicators for problem identification.

**Lack of Knowledge**

1. Are there words or terms that are unfamiliar?

**Problem-Solving**

1. Are you clear about what is being asked in the question after having read it in its entirety?
2. Are you staying with the material in the question?
3. Is it difficult for you to locate qualifiers and key words?
4. Do you have trouble prioritizing answers?
5. Are you confused about who is the target of the intervention in the question when multiple consumers are mentioned?

**Anxiety**

1. Do you feel rushed for time?
2. Do you notice any physical, emotional, or cognitive reactions when you are preparing for or taking the examination?

Once the reason for an individual’s difficulty has been identified, an appropriate solution can be selected. The goals for interventions to address each of these 3 problems are quite different.

**Lack of Knowledge**

Goal of Intervention: Enhance familiarity with required material

**Suggested Activities:**
- Identify deficient content areas and focus on them for additional study.
- Obtain supplemental materials in these areas in order to master key concepts and terms.
- Study with others who have different expertise that you do to facilitate the sharing of knowledge.
- Break unfamiliar material into sections. Study each section until an understanding is obtained.
• Take continuing education courses and workshops in areas of need (such as psychopathology and psychopharmacology).

Problem-Solving

Goal of Intervention: To develop skills which enhance reading comprehension and critical thinking.

Suggested Activities:

• Spend study time mastering what is being asked for in the question. Work with others to see whether your thoughts about what are being asked are consistent with their assessment.

• Reframe and relabel the question material in order to summarize main points (“What they are asking for here is...” or “This is a question about......“)

• After summarizing question, look back to wording to make sure that you have not added more to the question than is being asked.

Anxiety

Goal of Intervention: To reduce stress associated with test-taking experience.

Suggested Activities:

• Identify activities (such as breathing) that will assist with taming the tension while studying and taking the examination.

• Study for only short periods separated by breaks of fun-filled activities which will completely take your mind off of the examinations.

• Avoid putting additional pressures on yourself – such as taking the exam on a day when you have to pick up your children from school in the afternoon or other commitments later.