

The Exam Game Plan

Wessex Trainee Pack

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Introduction

Exams are the main risk to progression in medical education and training but it is a necessary one to take. There is an ongoing debate in education as a whole as to how best to assess competence and readiness for progression to the next level. The pandemic has refocused minds on this issue but whether we agree or not, exams are here to stay as part of doctors' assessments.

There are so many factors at play and we know from data and evidence that there are differential attainment gaps by ethnicity, gender and full time/less than full time work patterns. We also know that it is not the exam itself that can be a risk to progression but rather the preparation and prior experiences within the learning environment. Single exam failures are very common in medical education and training and are a painful experience to go through, however, repeated ones can be detrimental to confidence and psychological wellbeing. It can be difficult to stick to a growth mindset or even see them as just another challenge.

*I trained in Wessex and had to do three exams during that **time**. The first one was great and I scored very high only to come crashing down after the second one which I failed three times (only four attempts were allowed). It was like hitting a brick wall and what opened a door for me was an honest conversation that restored my confidence and allowed me to try different tactics in order to understand my "**exam game plan**" well. I did not look back after that and the third exam was a doddle.*

With the right support, anybody can do what I did and I hope the information and advice we have gathered in this document can help you to think positively and realistically or perhaps differently about exams. You have come this far for a reason and we want you to achieve your full potential and enjoy a growth journey for your sake and for your patient's sake.

We want you to see every exam as an opportunity to pause, reflect and progress regardless of the outcome. Remember life sometimes has an alternative plan for us and this is usually better than what we plan for ourselves. I wish you the very best of luck whatever happens!

Dr Fatima El Bakri

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Introduction

Competency in healthcare and clinical practice does not always reflect itself in exam pass marks. Many of our most successful healthcare professionals failed an exam at some point during their training. Passing exams is an essential aspect of your training and unsuccessful attempts can affect your confidence, your stress level, and your wallet. Either way, preparing for exams will undoubtedly help your long-term professional development.

Therefore, this pack has been designed to help you with everything from exam preparation, revision methods and managing exam day nerves. It offers generic advice, tips, strategies, templates, and short activities enabling you to select areas which will help you succeed. We hope you find new ways of thinking about revision and discover (or re-discover) approaches that accelerate your learning and help you pass your exam/s.

We recommend you seek guidance **early on** by reading your college website for specific advice on specialty exams.

The Game Plan

The Oxford Dictionary describes a game plan as, *'A strategy worked out in advance, especially in sport, politics, or business'*. The Collins Dictionary states, *'Someone's game plan is the actions they intend to take and the policies they intend to adopt in order to achieve a particular thing'*.

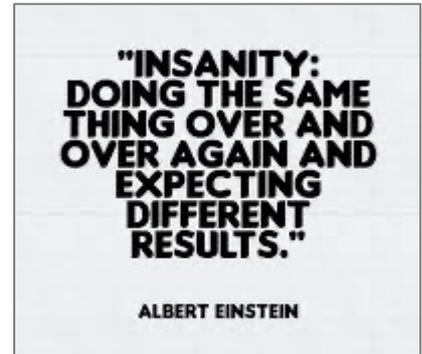
In following the ten categories in the Game Plan we hope to help you proactively put actions in place that enable you to clearly understand what the examiners expect and select approaches that get you a pass. And remember, that's all you need – a pass.

Game Plan = Achieve a 'Pass'

{Hidden Game Plan = Better Understand Yourself}

Game Plan 1: Reflect upon your approach

If you have previously failed an exam, spend some time working out the reasons why and consider factors that affected the outcome. Perhaps the reasons were multi-factorial but whatever they were, acknowledge them before you start so you can adapt and develop a more suitable approach this time around.



Some common reported factors for failing exams include...

- cramming revision in to too short a timeframe
- entering an exam when you are relatively new to the NHS and UK exam structure
- ignoring how to maximise your own ability to memorise and learn new material
- insufficient practice of skills and/or behaviours
- insufficient revision on topics where there was known knowledge gaps, or the topic was perceived as dull or difficult
- insufficient testing of knowledge and comprehension
- investing too long on topic details that were not required or you were already good at
- lack of a realistic study plan and revising in an ad-hoc way without variety
- lack of familiarity with the exam structure, type of questions, marking criteria etc.
- lack of research on the exam guidance
- relying on the same old notes, from the same old books ignoring knowledge gaps
- relying solely on superficial question bank rote learning for MCQ style exams
- revising in an unsuitable environment
- revising solo without seeking support of study friends or groups, peers, and colleagues
- trying to revise in the way you did when you were a full-time student (where work commitments and family life were not an issue to studying)
- using revision techniques that don't suit your learning style

Activity: which issues resonate with you?

Game Plan 1: Reflect upon your approach

Take time to reflect

Take time out to reflect. Understanding yourself, how you learn and what helps and hinders your revision is a key component to making sure you create the right study plan. Answering the questions below can help you to unearth revision issues or identify areas that require a fresh approach. So, stop and take-stock. By doing so, you could develop a more efficient plan which reflects your development needs, learning style and suits your current circumstances.

Activity: Self reflection

1. When you have previously struggled with exams, what sort of areas posed the most difficulties?
2. Think about any differences in your upbringing and undergraduate/postgraduate training compared to your peers. What challenges does this bring? Who can you discuss this with?
3. Are your revision strategies realistic and what you would expect for the exam?
4. Are you using past papers and focussing on specific areas of development?
5. Are you linked in with other trainees sitting the exam or in a (virtual) study group?
6. Have you got advice from other trainees in similar circumstances who have successfully passed the exam? If so, what do they say? If not, who can you contact, and when?
7. Is your workplace knowledge at the expected level or do you have knowledge or skills gaps? We all have some gaps, so do you have a targeted action plan?
8. Do you feel you get over stressed during the exam to an extent that impacts on your performance?
9. Are you reviewing results from previous exams with an experienced supervisor to draw out areas of success versus areas that require focus?
10. Have you started revising for your next exam sitting from afresh or are you repeatedly using the same notes and past papers?
11. How do others perceive your ability to articulate and justify your decision-making? What feedback have you received, and what have you done with it?
12. What do you feel the main issue is?

Game Plan 2: Organise yourself

Check exam dates, venues, and other logistics

At the beginning of your training and at the start of each new training year, check the dates of your exams. The organisation which runs the examination will have a website which will provide information on dates, eligibility, the application period, venues, fees, how to apply, how to request any required reasonable adjustments and publication of results.

The application period can be short, therefore place a reminder task in your calendar to ensure you don't miss the booking window.

Consider your work commitments and home commitments to set the most **realistic** timeframe for committing to a block (approximately 3-6 months Full Time Equivalent) of varied, efficient, highly valued and protected revision time. Discuss this with your educational supervisor **early** in your placement.

Check your study leave entitlement can be used to attend the exam as well as any exam preparation courses. Check your work rota and ideally avoid a week of late shifts, or night shifts, during the week running up to your exam date. This can be hard to organise, but with forward planning it is often possible to arrange shift swaps to help you have a more restful work week in the lead up to the exam. It may be helpful to discuss this with your rota-coordinator **as soon as** you book your exam.

Choose the right environment

Find an environment that enables you to concentrate and offers little distraction. Everything is fighting for your attention, the tasks you do, the people around you, your to-do list, the devices you use etc. It's easy to become distracted especially if we perceive the competing task to be dull, difficult or overwhelming. Continually being distracted can dramatically affect your personal productivity and your motivation. Therefore, focus on where your attention is at each given moment and engage in the study-task at hand. Decide where your priorities lie and avoid making excuses. Ultimately, pay attention to your attention. "I just checked in to see what condition my condition is in!"

It is better to work well, when energised, for a short period of time than spend long hours while tired not retaining information and getting frustrated.

Game Plan 2: Organise yourself

1) Study location

Choose study locations that are conducive to concentration. Decide if the location creates comfortable learning conditions - consider light, temperature, sound, seating and distractions from people (including children). Some places to study might include:

- a specific room in your home
- a friend or family member's home
- library, hotel lobby, coffee shop
- classroom, lecture theatre, education centre
- an office at work
- on the bus/train
- garden or park
- walk and talk

Assess if the location really is suitable – a coffee shop may be great however if it's the one where all of your friends meet then becoming distracted is highly likely.

2) Distracting habits

Procrastination is about managing emotions not time. Decide upon personal habits that hinder you e.g. do you check your phone every 10 minutes or do you stop what you are doing when an email alerts? It's amazing how attractive desk tidying and to do lists can become when the alternative is studying something you find challenging or dull. Therefore, find remedies for anything that might affect your concentration e.g. remove email alerts, leave your phone in another room, do the housework the night before etc. Importantly, at bedtime, discipline yourself to sleep without technology. Create habits that enable 6 – 8 hours of sleep per night.

3) Organise resources

Decide upon your study resources; look online to see if there are reading lists, videos, podcasts, links to other sites for resources provided by the organisation who runs your exam. Collect everything you need (but not too much). Book a recommended study course but don't waste money on multiple conflicting opinions.

Also, ask peers who have recently taken the exam which resources they found most useful. This will save you time and possibly money too.

Use social media e.g. follow relevant organisations on Twitter to get quick and simple information updates.

Game Plan 2: Organise yourself

Prepare everything you need to be as effective as possible during your study time:

- Books, articles, papers, website links, pre-papers, mock exams
- Money, layers of clothing
- Pens, notebooks, flash cards, post-it notes, device and charger, library card
- Physical exercise
- Sleep, mindfulness and wellbeing
- Syllabus and college exam guidance
- Water and food

This includes speaking with people who can support you e.g. Educational Supervisors, senior colleagues, senior clinical colleagues who understand the exam, local examiners and, in particular, peers who have passed the exam (also see pages 19 – 23).

Can your training program director signpost you to an exam study buddy, Education Fellow or Mentor?

How can you access or set up regional/national remote working with peers?

Make a list of people you need to speak to (also see page 25)

Game Plan 3: Review exam guidance

Understand the exam structure

Remember the game plan is about working out how to efficiently achieve a **pass** by determining what the examiners want and how to demonstrate or evidence it.

Start by visiting your examiners website; find the syllabus and any candidate guidelines for the exam. You can expect to find information such as:

- subjects covered
- type of questions e.g. multiple choice, best of five, extended matching questions, simulation
- structure of the exam e.g. it's in two parts (multiple choice questions followed by extended matching questions)
- marking criteria and awarding of marks
- allocated duration for each test
- additional specialty specific advice or guidance

1) Examiner's guidance

Some organisations provide 'examiner's guidance' which can help you understand the focus, structure and question style of the exam. Examiner reports offer feedback from previous papers and provide comments on common issues and pointers to what the examining team are looking for.

Areas causing difficulty for candidates

Evidence Based Practice, Research and Sharing Knowledge (Professional Topic)

Items concerning communication of risk were not well answered in AKT 40. Candidates should be able to understand and share with patients issues around risk, including the use of risk assessment tools, and understand concepts such as absolute and relative risk well enough in order to be able to explain these to their patients.

Improving quality, safety and prescribing (Professional Topic)

Safe prescribing is a key part of general practice. We expect candidates to be very familiar with serious side effects and interactions related to commonly used drugs. In AKT 40, candidates were not aware of some significant interactions between antidepressant drugs and other commonly used medicines. There was also a lack of knowledge around drugs which may be nephrotoxic.

Example from:

<https://www.rcgp.org.uk/training-exams/mrcgp-exam-overview/mrcgp-applied-knowledge-test-akt.aspx>

Game Plan 3: Review exam guidance

Understand the exam structure

Example: Royal College of Psychiatry – Paper A

Preparing for Paper A

MRCPPsych Paper A is a written paper on the scientific and theoretical basis of Psychiatry.

Length of exam and question type

Paper A is a 3 hour exam worth 150 marks, comprised of 150 questions.

It is made up of approximately:

- two-thirds multiple choice questions (MCQ) and
- one-third extended matching item questions (EMI).

What does it cover?

Paper A covers the following sections of the syllabus:

1. Behavioural Science and Sociocultural Psychiatry
2. Human Development
3. Basic Neurosciences
4. Clinical Psychopharmacology
5. Classification and Assessment in Psychiatry

On Paper A, the percentage split/marks on a 150 mark exam is/would be:

Behavioural Science and Socio-cultural Psychiatry	16.67% / 25
Human Development	16.67% / 25
Basic Neurosciences	25.00% / 37 or 38
Clinical Psychopharmacology	25.00% / 37 or 38
Classification and Assessment in Psychiatry	16.67% / 25

Further information

- Current syllabus (PDF)
- Sample questions from Paper A (PDF)
- How the written papers are marked



<https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/training/exams/preparing-for-exams>

Game Plan 3: Review exam guidance

2) Identify the type/s of exam questions

Familiarise yourself with the type of questions in the exam. Use websites, books and previous papers to become closely acquainted with the questioning style.

Multiple Choice Questions (Multiple True/False)	Provides a problem (known as a stem); lists possible options (known as alternatives); the correct or best alternative is placed amongst other distracting but false alternatives. Assesses basic recall to application, analysis and evaluation.
Best of Five (Single best answer)	Provides a clinical scenario; the correct option is the most plausible amongst a list of five possible options. Assesses application of knowledge and problem-solving.
Extended Matching Questions	Gives a theme topic; adds a lead-in statement to the theme; presents clinical scenarios; lists possible options for the scenarios. Assesses problem-solving and clinical reasoning.
Short-Answer Questions	A question format requiring single word lists or bullet point answers. Assesses basic recall and application of knowledge.
Constructed Response Questions/Essays	Range from single word free text to essay writing. Assesses application of knowledge, problem solving and evaluation.

3) Complete past papers and mock exams

Exam practice is vital. Look on your examiner website and other relevant organisations to see options for past exams and mock papers. Completing mock papers can help you gauge the breadth and depth of knowledge required which can help you when developing your study plan. Simply repeating mock papers until you get a high score can be falsely reassuring.

Beware of the myth to 'just focus on doing as many MCQs as you can'. You need to balance your practice papers with reading, ensuring you are focussing on deep learning of the material. The practice papers are excellent for practising technique, timing, identifying strengths and identifying gaps in your knowledge.

Game Plan 3: Review exam guidance

4) Check guidance for simulated exams

Look on your college website to see how long you have at each station and seek details of the scoring criteria. Read the guidelines well in advance and determine the topics, skills and behaviours they are looking to assess (see the example below from the Royal College of Psychiatry). Your exam 'patients' may be real patients, fellow medical students or professional actors. Regardless which you encounter, respond to them as real people and fully demonstrate your range of knowledge, application of procedures, clinical skills and professional behaviours.

Example: Royal College of Physicians – PACES

PACES

MRCP(UK) Part 2 Clinical Examination (Practical Assessment of Clinical Examination Skills (PACES) is designed to test the clinical knowledge and skills of trainee doctors who hope to enter higher specialist training (ST3). You must have passed the Part 1 written exam within the last 7 years before taking PACES. The exam sets rigorous standards to ensure your competence across a range of skills and you are ready to provide a high standard of care to patients.

- How to apply for PACES
- Apply for PACES online
- Find out your results
- What's happening in 2020

For details about dates, fees and where you can take the exam see:

- Dates and fees
- PACES centres

What's involved in PACES?

You are assessed on your ability to carry out essential clinical skills. There are five clinical stations where there are either patients with a given condition, or trained stand-ins (surrogates). At each station, there are two independent examiners who will observe and evaluate the candidates' performance.

PACES at a glance

- Half-day examination
- Takes place in a clinical setting (hospital or clinical skills centre)
- Assesses seven core skills
- Five stations (see carousel diagram)
- Eight patient encounters

Game Plan 3: Review exam guidance

4) Check guidance for simulated exams continued...

Remember what the simulator is paid to do – provide you with the cues you need to pass the exam. So listen to them and respond to what they are saying as your primary activity and consider your performance very much as a secondary activity. Yes, you need to cover ICE, and need to reach a shared decision etc, but listening to the patient will help you do that at an appropriate time in a way that will help you pass your exam. Worrying about whether you have covered everything will distract you from passing it.

Graham Rutt - Director, Postgraduate School of Primary Care HEE Northeast and North Cumbria / Vice-chair COGPED / Visiting Professor, University of Sunderland



Activity: check the guidance for your exam

Look **now** at your Royal College exam website, refer to the syllabus and see what is available.

1. How is the exam structured (e.g. in two parts with multiple choice questions followed by extended matching questions)?
2. Which subjects does the exam cover?
3. What is required of you...
 - a. demonstrate knowledge and comprehension in writing?
 - b. verbally articulate your comprehension?
 - c. apply a protocol, process or procedure?
 - d. exhibit certain behaviours?
 - e. avoid exhibiting certain behaviours?
 - f. anything else?
4. What type of questions can you expect and what is the scoring criteria?
5. How much time is allotted for each part of the exam?
6. Is there any examiner's guidance and/or feedback to candidates available – what can you learn from these?
7. What other study resources are available? (e.g. your peers, Training Programme, College, Deanery, web-based or private organisation)
8. Are past papers or mock exams available?
9. Look at the Wessex PSW <https://wessex.hee.nhs.uk/wellbeing-and-support/psw/> and PDU website <https://wessex.hee.nhs.uk/learning-and-development/wessex-professional-development-unit/>

Game Plan 3: Review exam guidance

Reasonable adjustments

All Exam Boards must comply with Equality and Diversity legislation and ensure that protected characteristics are not unfairly discriminated against. Reasonable adjustments are an important part of levelling the playing field. Many standard adjustments do not have to be matched in the work place as it is clearly understood that postgraduate, career defining assessments are stressful events.

There will be website statements for each speciality exam outlining a deadline for requests prior to each exam sitting and what additional, professional evidence needs to be submitted prior to the granting of any reasonable adjustments.

Standard adjustments might include:

- additional time
- different font, background and screen size
- screen overlays
- a separate (quiet) room
- headphones
- rest breaks
- appropriate seating and adjustable desk height
- permission to take drinks or type 1 diabetes self-monitoring equipment into an exam

Non-standard adjustments will be considered on a case-by-case basis. Always make sure early enquiries are made in order to ensure there is time for you to provide any additional supporting evidence and for the exam board to put in place what is agreed.

Have you received reasonable adjustments in the past?

Do you know what is 'reasonable' and what your exam board can offer?

If you have been unsuccessful at an exam already, have you been screened for dyslexia?
(See page 43)

Do you need to consider any reasonable adjustments for your forthcoming exam? If so, contact your exam board as soon as possible.

Game Plan 4: Create a realistic study plan

Estimate your revision needs

Now that you have reviewed the syllabus and exam guidance consider the range of topics which you need to study and estimate the amount of time you think you need to learn each topic or sub-topic.

1. Create a list of topics; break them in to sub-topics (where necessary).
2. Decide upon the breadth and depth required for each topic. All topics are not equal - is an overview sufficient or does the syllabus suggest in-depth comprehension?
3. Rate your existing knowledge on the topic (0 = low and 10 = high).
4. Estimate how many hours study you may need to satisfy your learning needs, so if there are topics you find challenging, allocate more time to these (it's usually wise to over-estimate the time you need rather than under-estimate).
5. Concentrate on your weaker areas interspersed with easy but essential 'low lying fruit'.
6. Ensure that topics you regularly forget are re-revised closer to the exam.

The list will help you see which topics require the most study. It should help you to allocate study slots in your Study Plan according to the amount of challenge the topic brings you. It can help you recognise topics that you feel confident about (perhaps you scored them an 8). It is hoped you then avoid being indulgent by studying topics that you either enjoy or find easy.

Activity: estimate your revision needs log

	Topic or sub-topic	Breadth of learning required? <i>(detailed, in-depth, generic issues, overview)</i>	Existing knowledge <i>(rate 1 – 10)</i>	Estimated hours of study required?	Completed (Tick)
1.					
2.					
3.					
4.					
5.					
6.					
7.					
8.					
9. <i>etc</i>					

Game Plan 4: Create a realistic study plan

Evaluate work and home life commitments

Managing your time over the forthcoming months will be integral to you achieving your game plan and passing the exam. A realistic approach, where you consider all aspects of your life, will help you.

Studying full-time whilst at medical school is very different to studying whilst you are carrying out a demanding clinical job and a busy home life. The stressors of domestic life can be overwhelming, adding significant layers of challenge to finding both the physical and mental space for study, as well as the time. Juggling family life often means seeking short windows of opportunity to study, subsequently the timeline for revision is **significantly** longer.

The section to follow helps you consider the realities of your world to help you estimate and develop a realistic study plan. It covers:

- B1)** your work commitments
- B2)** your home life commitments
- B3)** time stealers/savers
- B4)** a calculation of how much time you have available for revision

As you work through this section, use the Study Plan template (page 16) or produce your own; alternatively, the internet provides many styles available to download for free, so find one that suits you. What challenges do you face in the workplace? What can **you** change at work?

1) Plot work commitments

On the Study Plan template (page 16) plot your work commitments:

- exam date
- rota
- training courses
- conferences and meetings
- teaching commitments
- opportunities for learning that exist in working hours (these count as revision!)

Try and keep both your work and home commitments to a minimum the week before the exam. Also, check your rota and make swaps, where necessary, to free up time before the exam. Be politely confident and negotiate. This is your career and all doctors have to go through high-pressure postgraduate assessments. Discuss this with your educational supervisor and rota coordinator, as needed.

Game Plan 4: Create a realistic study plan

2) Plot home life commitments

If you are planning a wedding or a house move, if you have a surgical procedure ahead, or if you are in the midst of a relationship break up, either reconsider the timing of your exam date or the timeline of your study. On the Study Plan, plot any daytime and evening commitments:

- annual leave, holidays and trips
- appointments (dentist, hospital etc.)
- hobbies and associated events
- other family commitments and
- social events with friends
- special occasions/celebrations/annual events
- your children's school events

You may need to prioritise these commitments during your exam study period. Do, however, try and continue with your hobbies - these are often natural stress-busters and can help create the right mind-set for study. Remove them completely, and you could find yourself even more stressed – a balanced approach will help you. Do set aside time for exercise, relaxation and a healthy lifestyle.

Identify time savers

For the duration of your study plan consider things that might get in the way of your revision and decide upon some remedies that might realistically suit your work and home life. This may mean getting family and friends on board and negotiating chores, spending money or perhaps doing things differently in the short-term. For example, you could:

- accept that things won't be perfect during this time
- arrange for babysitters to gain extended study time
- arrange or pay for someone to prepare meals
- ask friends and family to support you with ad-hoc situations that occur
- batch cook and freeze
- choose *not* to do any cleaning, ironing, car washing etc during this time
- create a family schedule
- explain to friends 'how' they can best support you
- find help to do cleaning, ironing, car washing, window cleaning, gardening
- find ways to reduce commute time or use the time to listen to revision material
- pay your children to do chores around the house or pay for a dog-walker
- place your study plan somewhere where household members can see it
- say "No" to requests and demands that encroach upon your time
- shop online for groceries, birthday presents etc

Game Plan 4: **Create a realistic study plan**

Find the little moments for study

Everything counts and even five minutes of study at the bus stop is beneficial. Six twenty-minute mini study sessions over a month is an additional 2 hours' study – so don't dismiss these seemingly insignificant opportunities, for example:

- Read or listen to podcasts whilst commuting
- Listen to podcasts whilst out running or at the gym
- Watch videos or webinars whilst cooking dinner
- Do practice questions on your phone between operating cases
- Walk and talk – can someone else read questions from flash cards or a mobile phone?

Calculate available revision time

Now decide how much time you can realistically dedicate to revising each scheduled day. Then create daily, weekly and monthly totals and calculate a final overall total. Ideally the study time will be distributed evenly over the study timeline to avoid periods of 'cramming'.

In addition, when creating your study plan, try and get a balance between the time that is available and what is realistic. Things crop up in life and even the best laid plans may need to be altered, so build in some flex and prepare to be flexible. Ensure there are some revision-free days in your life.

Finally, look at your 'Estimate your revision needs log' (page 12) and assign topics according to the time slot available. For example, if you only have short twenty-minute slots on a Saturday – allocate a topic where you require only 'top-up' revision or where you have already found the relevant resource and don't need to waste time looking things up before you can start. Subjects that you find challenging will be best suited to lengthier slots.

Remember your Game Plan = Achieve a 'Pass'

Game Plan 4: Create a realistic study plan

Study plan template

Below shows an example of a study plan; the number of weeks would need to be extended for the full study timeline. Consider your work and home commitments and estimate the realistic hours available for study.

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday	Total Study Hours
Week 1	Work rota: Home life: Hours to study: Topic:							
Week 2	Work rota: Home life: Hours to study: Topic:							
Week 3	Work rota: Home life: Hours to study: Topic:							
Week 4	Work rota: Home life: Hours to study: Topic:							
Week 5	Work rota: Home life: Hours to study: Topic:							
Week 6	Work rota: Home life: Hours to study: Topic:							
							TOTALSTUDY HOURS	

Game Plan 4: Create a realistic study plan

Weekly study plan template

Here is an example of a weekly planner; you could create your own or alternatively there are many designs available on the internet.

Week Commencing:	AM	PM	Total Study Hours
Monday	Topic: Learning and testing methods: Resources:	Topic: Learning and testing methods: Resources:	
Tuesday	Topic: Learning and testing methods: Resources:	Topic: Learning and testing methods: Resources:	
Wednesday	Topic: Learning and testing methods: Resources:	Topic: Learning and testing methods: Resources:	
Thursday	Topic: Learning and testing methods: Resources:	Topic: Learning and testing methods: Resources:	
Friday	Topic: Learning and testing methods: Resources:	Topic: Learning and testing methods: Resources:	
Saturday	Topic: Learning and testing methods: Resources:	Topic: Learning and testing methods: Resources:	
Sunday	Topic: Learning and testing methods: Resources:	Topic: Learning and testing methods: Resources:	

Game Plan 4: Create a realistic study plan

Revision log template

Some people like a detailed revision log so they can track what they have studied and identify areas of further study.

It can feel good to see what progress you have achieved while at the same time focussing your mind on what is outstanding.

Date	Duration	Topic	Learning resources	Content covered	Estimated percentage understanding of the topic =	Next session...

Game Plan 5: **Actively generate support**

Preparing for exams can be a challenging time for many, especially when juggling a demanding job and busy home life. Having people on your side who can support you either emotionally, practically or with your learning is hugely beneficial and possibly even essential. Therefore, map out those who can offer you support and actively speak to them about how they might support you in the short-term, until your exam date. Give people the chance to support you – people genuinely like to help others.

Emotional support

Family and friends can offer huge support during your revision timeline. Discuss with them the type of support you need - be explicit. If it is empathy you want, then say so. Otherwise they may say things which they think are helpful e.g. *“Stop worrying, you’ll be fine”*, *“Think positive”* yet unwittingly their comments may frustrate or upset you.

Consider the following:

- How do you generally behave when you are stressed and who is usually on the receiving end of the behaviour? How can the person support you when you feel stressed – what can they do or say?
- What is the most supportive thing they can do for you over the forthcoming months?
- What thinking patterns can hinder you when you feel stressed e.g. negative thinking, self-doubt, self-pity, self-sabotage, generalisation, catastrophic thinking? How do you want the person to respond when they hear you communicating in this way?
- Who knows you best and who can offer a listening ear?

Practical support

- What practical support would ease things for you in the short-term?

Examples might include: a lift to work, babysitting, help with the kid’s homework, walking the dog, less/more telephone calls or texting, review of household chores and grocery shopping, allocated quiet time, decrease/increase social activity, help with testing your knowledge etc.

Exam specific examples might include: reading out questions from the back of a revision card or randomly rotating keyword Post-it notes/questions around the house.

Also see page 15.

Game Plan 5: **Actively generate support**

Learning support

- Actively seek out feedback from peers with recent, or senior colleagues with lengthy, exam experience
- Check to see what revision courses are available.
- Consider your clinical and professional network (those from the past and present) – who could you contact to ask advice about useful learning resources and materials, general topic advice, learning strategies or study approaches?
- Do you have colleagues who have already passed the exam – what advice would they give on preparation, useful resources, on-the-day tips etc?
- If you are worried, voice your concerns early. Speak with your Educational Supervisor and develop an action plan together to tackle the areas that worry you most.
- Speak with your Clinical Supervisor and other colleagues – explain that you wish to apply and embed newly learnt knowledge whilst on shift and that you will actively ask questions, communicate your understanding and seek clarity.
- Whenever there is something you don't understand – actively seek clinical clarification; speak to anyone who is best placed to help you with the issue.
- Which colleagues could help you on topic areas which you find challenging?
- Who, within the multi-professional team, has a useful network of contacts whom you could ask to be sign-posted to?

Study Groups

Studying with others can be an enjoyable and highly efficient way to study and can bring an air of competitiveness which can stimulate revision engagement. Share out major revision topics, type up clear summaries for everyone and articulate important/difficult areas concisely to each other to cement your own understanding. This can be a great boost to your motivation too and help avoid procrastination.

Learning by discussion is highly valuable when the learner imposes their own meaning through debate, critical inquiry, and reflection. If this concept is culturally new to you, speak to others to see how they benefitted.

Listen to others who have successfully passed the exam and try to ensure a study group includes people with a range of approaches to revision and different backgrounds including experience and cultural.

Game Plan 5: **Actively generate support**

Study Groups (continued)

- Are any of your peers studying the same exam – could you study together?
- Could you arrange a study group or is there a study group that you could join?
- Share information about useful resources including reading materials, website links, videos, podcasts, ways of testing knowledge etc.
- Talking out loud has been found to benefit memory recall. Select topics for each group member and meet to share and discuss your understanding of the concepts.
- Share study approaches, talk through areas of challenge, brainstorm ideas and discuss cases.
- Discuss issues that require argumentative reasoning and elaboration – move beyond the textbook. Hold exploratory discussions to hone analytical skills; offer personal opinions, suppositions, and assumptions, then consider alternative explanations in different real-world settings.
- Continually test each other's knowledge using a variety of methods (see pages 29-30).
- On-line video conferencing means that it is easy to work with peers across the world studying for the same exam as you. How can you make this happen?

External support

If you are feeling overly stressed during your study timeline and it is affecting your ability to function in your job, consider some of the following:

- Contact your GP
- Counselling
- Coaching services
- Hypnotherapy
- Alternative medicine
- On-line cognitive behavioural therapy
- Mindfulness
- Exercise to relieve emotional distress
- Free NHS support <https://www.dutytocare.info/>

Ultimately, be kind to yourself – remember your game plan - a **'pass'** is all you need.

Game Plan 5: **Actively generate support**

Activity: support network - who can help and how?

Family:

Friends:

Current Colleagues:

Past Colleagues:

Study friends/groups:

Game Plan 6: Maximise your learning

Shallow-learning versus deep-learning

Learner intentions play a large part in whether learning is deep or shallow. Intentions, and the subsequent level of learning, differ if the learner's intent is to perhaps pass a test versus engage in and evaluate a topic for practical use. Recognising that many of the exam skills you are rehearsing can help you throughout your working and personal life can be motivational.

Shallow learning is associated with tasks such as reading, memorising and recalling information – which can help in learning facts e.g. the who, where, when and what of a topic.

Deep learning is associated with creating meaning, organising information, building connections, and developing critical analysis. The learning strategies go beyond the simple rote learning of information and question 'why?' or 'how?'. They help to build connections to existing knowledge, experiences, people and life-events which help to make sense of the information and ultimately deepen comprehension. The strategies help to embed learning e.g. by comparing, critiquing the information and formulating ideas on how the new information can be applied in different or new ways. How can you apply this to improve your day-today work?

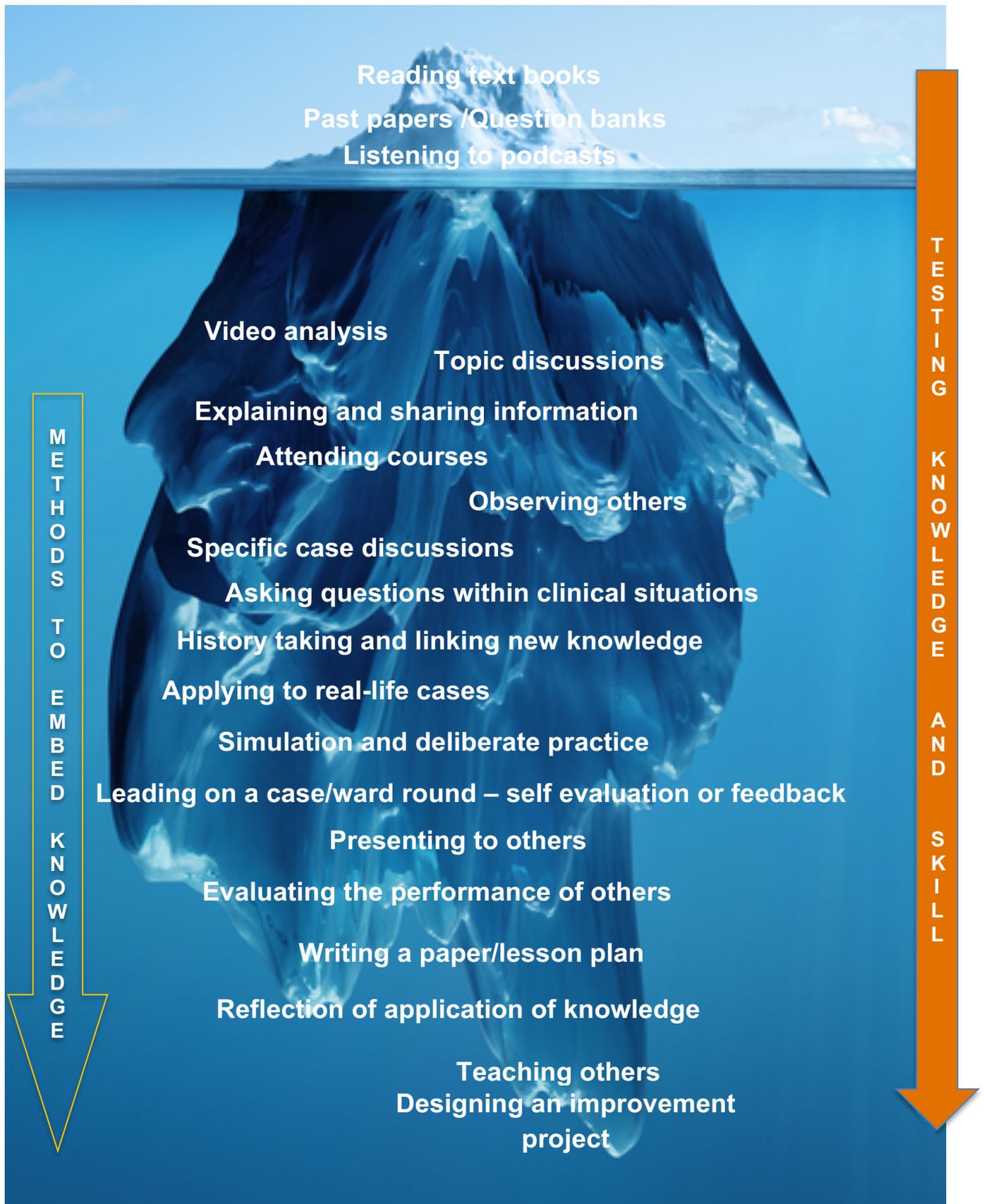
When reviewing your syllabus and exam guidance, look at your study plan - decide upon the required level of learning – some exams may simply require that you recite the information whereas others may involve Extended Matching Questions or simulation which may need you to explain how, why, and critically analyse aspects within the topic and to consider extended ways of using the information.

Consider how you prefer to learn (visual, audio, reading, kinaesthetic) and tap in to learning strategies that accelerate your learning. For example, if you are an auditory learner using mind-maps and coloured pens may have less impact on developing your comprehension of a topic compared with listening to podcasts or working in groups and discussing case studies. Find a combination of strategies that work for you – don't just use the same old revision strategies because that's how you have always revised.

Crucially, don't just do what worked for your friend. Tailor strategies to suit **your** learning.

Game Plan 6: Maximise your learning

Levels of learning and revision strategies



Game Plan 6: Maximise your learning

Revision strategies

Read...but build schema

Cognitive theory describes schema as patterns of thought that are organised in a way that relationships are created between new and existing information. Therefore, rather than just reading something and trying to store it to memory, decide how you would use the knowledge in practice. Find the links to what you already know or to experiences you have had or even imaginative situations that could occur. Look to connect the knowledge - consider patient cases you have worked on - how would this new knowledge apply to this situation e.g. cause, diagnosis, management plan, treatment? Try to make the knowledge come to life by using real-life or even invented cases.

Write

Some people find repeatedly re-writing notes helps to embed knowledge particularly by writing information by hand but also by typing. Reorganising your notes into themes, consolidating large amounts of information into bullet format, using mnemonics (both published or personally created to suit your own style e.g. comedic) or writing and then answering quiz type questions can help some people with memory recall. Beware though of simply re-writing the textbook, so take care to summarise and assimilate the information as well as ordering your notes.

Mind Maps

The Mind Map structure helps to build schema by visually presenting logical connections between ideas or facts. They help to create clusters of information; patterns can emerge, and links can easily be seen which increases association plus the ability to visually locate and recall information and the surrounding data.

Elaborative Interrogation

Simply put this is the technique that asks why something is the way it is. Studies have shown that if comprehension questions are asked in advance of reading a text, then retention is greater. Therefore, 'meaning' is found in the text by asking yourself 'why?' or by asking yourself 'how might I use this information?'. The answer can help to make sense of the information and as a result learning goes beyond memorising and moves to comprehension.

Case studies

Using case studies can help you to convert theoretical ideas in to real-world scenarios. An article in Medical Education (2013) on self-guided learning stated, "*Lack of familiarity with a case seems to stimulate medical students to engage in more extensive thinking during self-explanation. Less familiar cases seem to activate students' biomedical knowledge, which in turn helps them to create new links between biomedical and clinical knowledge, and eventually construct a more coherent mental representation of diseases. This may clarify the previously found positive effect that self-explanation has on the diagnosis of unfamiliar cases.*"

Some websites offer medical case studies with questions that you can work through.

Game Plan 6: **Maximise your learning**

Revision strategies

Record yourself

Audio or video recordings on a mobile phone (with consent of colleagues if needed) are simple to do. Record yourself articulating your own response to an exam question or difficult topic. Listen to your own clarity and structure. What is your body language separately saying about you in contrast to the content of your wording? Is there a mismatch?

For example, consider the pace and tone of your voice, whether you pause effectively, what your eye contact is and how your hand gestures or facial micro-expressions translate to the person on the receiving end of these multiple communication channels.

On-the-job observation and practice

Get as much exposure as possible in clinical settings to align knowledge to day-to-day patient care. Where possible, speak with patients; do your own data gathering, examination and management plan. Then compare these with a more experienced colleague's interpretation.

Start the habit of reading around a case. Find cases from the regular to the complex and fully explore the range of medical knowledge and procedures plus clinical and professional skills. Every time you meet a new patient, read everything relevant you can in the short time available and make conscious links of medical theories, the clinical case and the individual patient – this will build schema and aid your recall.

Observe role-models and analyse what they do and how they do it; make notes; ask questions; align everything you see and hear to aid deep learning on a specific topic. Recall these role model's mid-exam to think back to 'What would X do now?'

Be curious and actively seek opportunities to embed your knowledge and learning. Ask lots of questions to supervisors, senior colleagues, peers, patients, and members of the multi-professional team. There will always be someone around you who can help embed complex knowledge by explaining, showing, or demonstrating something. You simply need to 'ask'.

Put into practice everything you possibly can and seek feedback from those who are competent at the task at hand. Continue to practice until you feel confident and competent in the knowledge and skill.

Game Plan 6: **Maximise your learning**

Revision strategies

Teach

Find formal or informal opportunities to teach others the knowledge and/or skill. Many people find that imparting knowledge to others greatly helps their own level of understanding or mastery. When you have to explain something, you often find that you have to think more deeply about it. It forces you to both organise your thoughts and question things and therefore reinforces your own comprehension.

Teaching does not need to be in a classroom setting, it can be a question-and-answer discussion on a ward with a more junior trainee whereby encouraging them to think of the reasons, complications etc. Coaching or mentoring those who know less than you often helps to deepen your understanding. Remember, learning comes in many forms, and you may learn something of value from someone less experienced than yourself.

If you decide to conduct some *formal* teaching it will force you to read more, observe more, consider real cases, complexities etc. The desire to set a good example will help you to spot any gaps in your own knowledge and you will probably be more motivated to fill this gap if you think a participant might ask a question or challenge you. Ensure you get constructive feedback on any teaching you do (see page 34). What worked well and what was still unclear in the minds of others?

Game Plan 6: **Maximise your learning**

Test your knowledge and test it again

Research suggests that recall can increase by up to 80% through repeated, on-going, self-testing. Therefore, whether you study alone, with others, or both, select testing methods that suit you and use them throughout your revision timeline, not just towards the end.

Online question banks

Online question banks (if available) may provide options to compare modules and track your progress. You can also choose to answer questions which you've previously answered incorrectly. **'Health warning'** – don't rely exclusively on question banks. Even when revising for an MCQ style exam apportion ~ 40% of your revision time to question banks. Use them to practice your exam technique and test your recall of knowledge. They can help you to identify gaps in your knowledge but need to be carefully balanced with reading and learning.

Past papers and mock exams

Completing mock exams is an excellent way to understand the structure and format of your exam and gives you questions directly aligned to your syllabus. There are huge advantages in identifying your learning gaps as well as being tested in real-time. It is worth noting that many past papers and mock exams are expensive.

Practical application

Where (topic) appropriate, align new knowledge to practical experience and get as much practice as you can. Find opportunities to apply knowledge to practical situations and seek feedback. Or even, where appropriate, complete a workplace-based assessment.

Discussion

Communicate your understanding of topics in study groups, chat lines and forums. (Ensure absolute patient confidentiality is always maintained and be aware how rare complex cases may be recognisable even if anonymised). Find opportunities to air your knowledge in the day job including discussions with peers, supervisors, and members of the multi-professional team.

Game Plan 6: **Maximise your learning**

Test your knowledge and test it again – but ensure variety in your revision

Group quizzes

Write a quiz for other members of a group or team up with another learner. Both writing the questions and finding the answers is helpful, as well as listening to and exploring your fellow learner's answers. All these methods help to develop comprehension. Plus, you too get the chance to complete the quiz written by the other group members. To develop an online quiz, use sites such as www.surveymonkey.com.

Flashcards

Flashcards can be useful - they create a self-sufficient way of knowledge checking, without the need of someone else. Simply write a question on one side and the answer on the reverse side. 'Quizlet' is a potentially useful App for this.

Post-its

Post-it notes are helpful if you wish to structure the content or create flow-charts; different colours can help to create themes. Create a post-it structure on a wall and take a photograph of it. Then remove all the post-its and test yourself to see if you can place them back in their correct position. They can also be placed around your home where there is a natural association with topic information.

Whiteboards

Whiteboards can be useful for writing out notes, drawing diagrams and scribbling ideas. It is easy to move the information around the board by wiping clean and rewriting – easier than when you commit some writing to paper. This is a useful way to assimilate information and build your links and associations with other areas of the topic. Arrows linking ideas and colour to highlight topic areas can be useful additions too. They can be useful for group revision.

Game Plan 6: Maximise your learning

Bite-size chunks

The idea of studying a particular topic can be overwhelming, especially if we perceive it to be dull or difficult. Therefore, break the topic down into manageable bite-size chunks. Stick to one sub-topic and/or one specific issue or problem. Tackle one thing at a time and be satisfied when each small chunk is revised. Use your Study Plan to help you list and break-down topics. At the end of one session, plan for the following session. This will help you start promptly and better use your valuable protected time.

Get started

Learning doesn't need to happen in four-hour slots. If your internal dialogue is persuading you to procrastinate, choose to '*Just do it*'. Everything counts - a short 20-minute revision session can be invaluable for those topics that need a top-up of knowledge or understanding - it's the quality of the revision that counts, not the duration. This is known as the Pomodoro technique, doing 20-minute sessions with short 5-minute breaks in between to keep fresh and alert, with a longer break after 3 or 4 sessions. This is particularly helpful if you find it hard to maintain your concentration for longer periods.

Similarly, at times when you are tired, decide on some simplistic study tasks e.g. create a resource list, test yourself on something fairly easy, complete some e-learning. These small 'quick wins' all add value and contribute to your study progress.

If you do have moments of procrastination, don't beat yourself up and dwell on the fact that you 'should be studying' - instead whole heartedly enjoy the other thing that you do (sometimes you just need a break).

Game Plan 6: Maximise your learning

Aggregation of marginal gains

Small changes can make a significant difference, and small incremental changes can make the biggest difference of all (ask any elite sports coach). However, these take time to bed-in, need practice and active implementation in the workplace in order to shift from the 'consciously competent' to the fluent 'unconsciously competent'.

Focus on the things you can control i.e. the next 40 minutes of revision ahead of you. Focus on making the best use of this time. If you apply this approach to each revision session, you will arrive in the exam with the confidence and knowledge that you have prepared for it to the best of your ability.

Apply this approach to the exam too. Give each question your best focus and consideration. Don't jump to conclusions, or rush and skip over key words. Give each question your best attention and you can then complete the exam to your best ability.

Try not to worry about the outcome, it will look after itself if you attend to the smaller steps you take along the way.

It's all about practise – practise – practise when it comes to oral exams. The more you practise, the easier it will be for you to relax and worry less about your performance and more about what you say. Articulating your knowledge is very different from writing exams or even thinking you know what you 'would' say. There are often courses designed to help with this, but there is a lot of practise you can do yourself, with friends, with colleagues, and in your day-to-day work life. Imagine each case you see at work is an exam question for you to practise presenting your knowledge on the subject, or findings in your examination. Talk to yourself in a mirror, or video yourself in a practise session and reflect on your performance and how you come across. At the end of the day, exams are testing your application of knowledge, but if you come across as well-rehearsed and organised you will make it easier for yourself to succeed. It will also help to practise your 'power pose' beforehand and breathing exercises to keep your body-language confident and the nerves at bay! Be mindful of the different types of examiner you may meet. For example, consider how you might feel if you meet a 'cold' examiner who makes you feel more nervous. How will you manage this feeling and still rise to the challenge of presenting your knowledge? Practise the situation too when you are not sure of your answer – this is OK but consider in advance how you will deal with this situation under pressure.

*Poppy Mackie Wessex PSW Exam Support Lead (Specialty Schools),
Consultant Anaesthetist, Training Program Director.*



Game Plan 7: Feedback

Receiving and giving feedback

Feedback is one of the core principles of any professional's development. You will have had many experiences of good, bad, and destructive feedback in the past, but regardless need to actively seek out the observations of others in order to understand what and why you do something well and to gain insight into what it is that you need to flex, adapt and develop.

You might not be able to influence how someone gives you feedback, but you can determine your own mind set when receiving feedback:

Some 'rules' for receiving feedback:

- Be ready and be clear what specific areas you need feedback on
- Have good non-verbal skills – good eye contact and body language
- Listen! This is important and coming from an expert.
- Remember it is well intentioned – we all need to be stretched
- Actions/events are being criticised not you as a person
- Don't interrupt (they are trying to help you)
- Don't be defensive and don't let it push you over the edge
- Clarify the evidence behind what you are being advised
- Discuss suggestions for change, ask for specific pointers
- Ask for time to reflect afterwards and make notes soon after

Part of your revision will include listening to, observing, questioning, and reading the work of others. You will need to give feedback and the act of doing so will help you understand your own levels of confidence as regards a topic, skill, or attitude. It will also help in your study group for everyone to be mindful of the following:

Some 'rules' for giving feedback:

- Non-judgmental
- Specific
- Directed towards behaviour rather than personality
- Well-intentioned
- In the form of offers rather than directing
- Checked with recipient
- Limited in amount
- Explore mis-matches – *'why does the other person think differently from you'?*

Game Plan 8: Manage exam anxiety

When you have spent months studying for an exam and your training progression depends on the result, it is natural to feel a degree of anxiety about how you will do on the day.

Most people accept exam day nerves as a normal part of the process and learn to manage both physical symptoms (upset stomach, sweating, heart racing etc.) and internal negative thinking (“*I’m going to fail, I know it*”) – all of which are fear responses to the perceived threat of failure. Fear and its physical response can be useful when in danger however it is of little help when faced with a cognitive situation, unless it can be diverted into positive performance anxiety.

Trouble occurs when the perceived threat (not passing the exam and its effect on one’s life) becomes magnified thereby inducing an emotional response. Negative thinking and self-doubt (when unchallenged) can become exaggerated; this then exacerbates the physical symptoms and causes panic. This, in turn, makes focusing and cognition problematic (which adds to further panic).

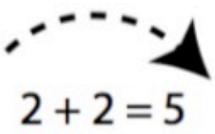
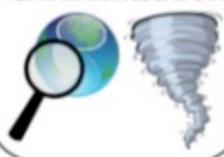
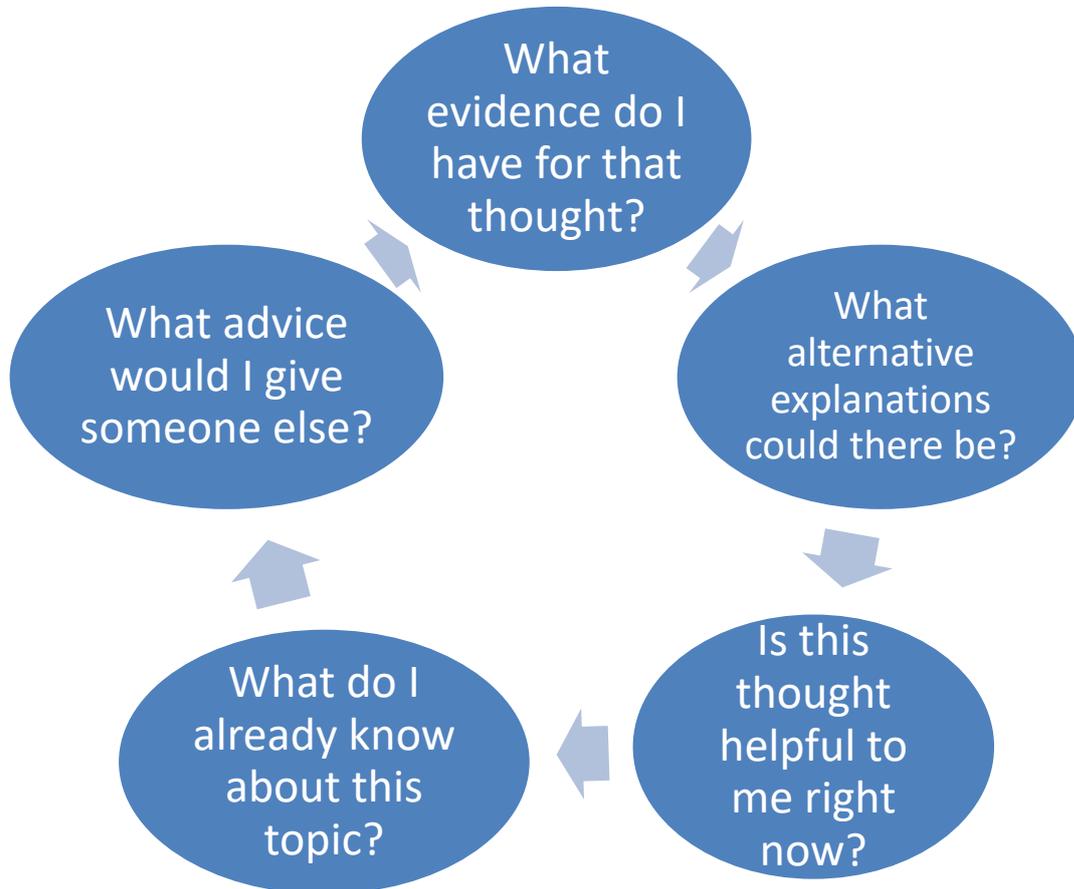
<p>Jumping to conclusions</p>  <p>2 + 2 = 5</p>	<p>There are two key types of jumping to conclusions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mind reading (imagining we know what others are thinking)• Fortune telling (predicting the future)	<p>Magnification (catastrophising) & minimisation</p> 	<p>Blowing things out of proportion (catastrophising), or inappropriately shrinking something to make it seem less important</p>
<p>Emotional reasoning</p> 	<p>Assuming that because we feel a certain way what we think must be true.</p> <p><i>I feel embarrassed so I must be an idiot</i></p>	<p>should must</p>	<p>Using critical words like ‘should’, ‘must’, or ‘ought’ can make us feel guilty, or like we have already failed</p> <p>If we apply ‘shoulds’ to other people the result is often frustration</p>
<p>Labelling</p> 	<p>Assigning labels to ourselves or other people</p> <p><i>I’m a loser</i> <i>I’m completely useless</i> <i>They’re such an idiot</i></p>	<p>Personalisation</p> <p>“this is my fault”</p>	<p>Blaming yourself or taking responsibility for something that wasn’t completely your fault. Conversely, blaming other people for something that was your fault.</p>

Image Source: Psychology Tools

Be realistic; there may be some questions that you find harder than others, that's true for everyone, so stay calm. And ultimately, have faith – the knowledge you have gained over the last few months is in your sub-conscious brain; it simply needs a little time to rise to a conscious level. Start by thinking about what the first reasonable step in the situation described in the question would be. Distracting your brain by using a selection of self-checking questions described below can be very helpful.



Blank moments

The 'rabbit in the headlights' moment is instantly recognisable and blank moments, especially in oral exams, will happen to everyone so don't pretend to yourself that they won't.

Plan for these:

- Be mindful in the moment of your breathing (see page 36) and pace of thoughts.
- Take a moment, be honest and say you are pausing for thought.
- Start to articulate a short summary of your dilemma, outline what you might do balancing pros' can con's,
- Consider what a chosen role model would do in a real-life similar situation

Self-soothing strategies

Before you begin the exam, try some self-soothing strategies (see overleaf) to help to relax and regain composure and calm.

Diaphragmatic breathing

Create calm on the inside and slow a racing heart. Take breaths that fill deep into your diaphragm (rather than shallow breathing from high in your chest). Listen to the air as it travels in and out through your nostrils – block out noise and focus on hearing your breath.

Breathing square

This is a simple activity that involves counting to four, whilst visualising and moving around the four sides of a square. Focus on your breathing as you count:

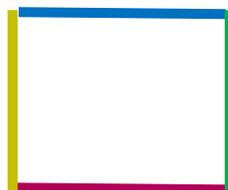
1. Inhale 2 3 4
2. Hold 2 3 4
3. Exhale 2 3 4
4. Hold 2 3 4



Breathing square variation

A variation on the breathing square is to add colour to each side of the square as you count:

1. THINK: blue – Inhale 2 3 4
2. THINK: green – Hold 2 3 4
3. THINK: pink – Exhale 2 3 4
4. THINK: yellow – Hold 2 3 4



Relax your muscles

- Be aware of your body and notice where tension is being held then relax specific muscles.
- Drop your shoulders to a lower and more comfortable position.
- Shake your hands gently or clench and release them; let air flow between your fingers.
- Let your forehead be relaxed and smooth; let your eyelids rest lightly.
- Relax and loosen the muscles around your mouth and jaw.

Think calm thoughts

Manage negative internal dialogue and respond with words that soothe your mind e.g. “be calm”, “be still”, “breathe”, “I’ll get through this”, “relax your muscles” “this feeling will pass”.

Game Plan 8: Manage exam anxiety

Visualisation and positive imagery

Have in mind a calm place, a beautiful place, a person, your career destination, or what success looks like. Drawing on such images can re-focus your mind and reduce stress.

A recent trainee's perspective on exam support...

Whilst preparing to re-sit my membership exam, I needed to develop how I involved patients in joint management decisions. By meeting with an experienced educator who understood the assessment process, I was encouraged to explore my previous non-UK and out-of-medicine experiences and I was helped to lay out management options in that context. Using this approach not only helped me to discuss options better but also helped me to communicate better in day-to-day life. I am really thankful to this person for listening to me, exploring my background and helping me improve my skills using my personal experience.

One very particular skill I learned was that sometimes small changes can make a massive impact. Instead of going through all the management options one by one with our patients, just laying out appropriate broader categories of options might be more helpful than we think. This then helps to focus the conversation on what patients want rather than what we think they want.

When I reflect back, this approach can be successfully used in most situations when communicating with our patients, colleagues and even with our family or friends!

Dr Sarj Qureshi

Newly Qualified GP and Wessex Educational Fellow



Remember your Game Plan = All you need is a 'Pass'

Game Plan 9: Personality attributes and insight

Personality and preferences. How well do you know yourself?

There are countless ways of looking at your personality, not only how you think internally but how you respond to and interact with others, how to behave when under stress and how you prefer to work.

Developing better insight into yourself as a person, let alone a professional doctor, is an essential lifelong requirement and will open endless avenues of self-discovery. This does not mean paying now for expensive personality profiling but, with exam success in mind, it is worth think about yourself as regards the following:

- Assertiveness
- Conflict avoidance
- Delegation
- Insight
- Motivation
- Obsessional
- Organisational
- Perfectionist
- Procrastination
- Response to lack of success
- Saying 'no'
- Self-confidence
- Time-management

What areas represent a bigger challenge to you?

What other areas which don't feature on the above list are you already aware of?

How are you going to address these? With whom? When?

Game Plan 10: Final preparation

Two weeks before

- Check the examiners website – determine the items that are provided and what to take with you e.g. stethoscope. Re-check for recent updates or changes.
- Check the route to the venue and consider the time it might take to get to the actual room; aim to arrive at the room 20 minutes before the exam start time. Consider commuting delays and have a plan B.
- Book travel tickets and check you have the correct ID matching your application details
- If your exam is virtual, check the platform on which it will be hosted works with your computer, check you are in a place with internet stability, check you have a quiet space to perform the exam.

One week before

- Review the syllabus areas, exam format, style of questions and marking criteria.
- Go over study areas or questions that you found difficult during revision or forget easily.
- Attempt a final mock test.
- Create patterns that allow for a good night's sleep e.g. get some physical activity.
- Stay positive and quiet any self-doubt gremlins or catastrophic thinking.
- Set time aside to practice mindfulness techniques e.g. breathing exercises.
- Eat well, eat healthily, prepare food in advance.
- Stay hydrated, drink more water, drink less caffeine and alcohol.

The evening before

- Get a good night's sleep.
- Print details of the venue, room location, timings etc.
- Pack what you need – ID, proof of registration, pens, water, tissues, snacks/packed lunch, money, change for car parking, travel tickets, venue details. Only take in to the exam what you need and is permitted and what you can physically hold (e.g. if you tremor).
- Organise clothes (layers ideally to adjust to changes in temperature). Also, select clothes that you can move in and shoes that are comfortable. Comfort is the goal.
- Set your alarm if an early rise is needed.
- If your exam is virtual, make sure your computer is fully charged and your room is tidy and ready. Ensure your household are not using the same Wi-Fi.

Game Plan 10: Final preparation

Exam day

- Get out of bed when the alarm goes off.
- Start with a good breakfast, but if you are affected by Ramadan please see page 43
- Arrive early.
- Avoid discussing exam components with other students – it can trigger anxiety.
- Use self-soothing techniques to steady nerves (see pages 32-33).
- Take your time to read **all** of the instructions. Exam wording is carefully phrased.
- Take your time to read each question in its entirety.
- In MCQ formats use the 'cover test' – answer the scenario before looking at the options
- If in doubt, ask an invigilator.
- Answer the questions you know the answer to first, flag for review those you are unclear
- Take your time – it's not a race. Pace yourself - monitor 50%, 75% and 90% time points.
- Take short one-minute breaks at regular intervals to pause and re-set yourself
- If you get stuck on a question, stay calm, go back to it later or do your best and move on.
- If you have time at the end, check your answers.
- Ignore those who appear to have finished – stay focused.
- If you remain unsure on a 50:50 question, go with your first or gut instinct.

Post Exam

- Don't re-live every difficult question; consider the parts that seemed to go well.
- Have a treat (or two)

Game Plan 10: Final preparation

What if you are unsuccessful?

- Recognise that this is a significant, emotional time for yourself. Talk about this. It will hurt but can be dealt with. Don't give up.
- You may seek feedback from the College which will help you to understand why you were unsuccessful and to identify your strengths and weaknesses.
- If you were close to passing, then you are doing the right things – decide to do more of the things that got you so close. Consider answers that you could improve or things you would say or do the same, next time around.
- Talk to your friendly ES/CS/TPD and develop a sensible action plan that involves doing something different
- Consider your approach – did you do everything you could? Is it that you can't pass it, or is it something else? What stood in your way – take time to reflect and develop a new strategy. What do you now need to start doing differently?
- Set a realistic date to sit the exam again following advice from your TPD. If you immediately resit within a short time period, the outcome is likely to be the same
- If you strongly believe that there were mitigating circumstances or the mark is incorrect, challenge it by using the appropriate process – see your examiners website.
- If you think you won't attempt it again – remain professional. Allow yourself time to get over any raw emotions before making career-changing decisions.
- Be very careful before changing career paths. Seek advice - but also be careful who you seek advice from.
- Undertake a dyslexia screening assessment soon - <https://wessex.hee.nhs.uk/wellbeing-and-support/psw/ssg/dyslexia/>

Repeated lack of exam success

Some people are unfortunately unsuccessful on multiple occasions. This is obviously very disappointing and a very stressful experience. However, there is lots of support available. We would recommend an early discussion with your supervisor or Training Programme Director to explore potential reasons and ways forward. It may also be worth considering an appointment with your GP if there are any potential physical or emotional health issues.

The Wessex Professional Support and Wellbeing team have a range of resources to support healthcare professionals. Further information is available:

<https://wessex.hee.nhs.uk/wellbeing-and-support/psw/>

Game Plan 11: Summary

Summary

High stakes summative exams are a current fact of professional life and likely to remain so for the foreseeable future. While they can be rewarding, they will be challenging to different people in different ways. If the statement ‘assessment drives learning’ is true, then we can gain by preparing well for exams in ways we might not imagine at the time. Factual recall may disappear in the myths of time, but the process we put in place to be successful and the insights we gain into how we work as human beings, doctors, individuals and team players will all form part of the ‘new’ us we become as we develop throughout life-long learning.

What do you have to do to increase your own chances of success? If you have read through this whole game plan, what do you now need to prioritise? When, where, who and how?!

This Wessex Game Plan is adapted with permission from the amazing HEENE Learner Support and Faculty Development team and we are especially indebted to Alyson Williamson.

We wish you all the best and trust that you gain more than you lose when going through postgraduate assessments.

Any feedback suggestions on the contents of this Wessex Game Plan are welcome at: PSW.WX@hee.nhs.uk



Postgraduate examinations are an accepted part of progressing as a doctor in training. As someone who has failed exams on more than one occasion, I remember that unpleasant feeling, but I also remember later realising it was ok that it had happened, as long as I learned from it. In recent years, as well as the old issues of learning a wide range of factual information to interpret and deliver in a limited time, you now have an increasing range of formats and technology to prepare to use in an examination scenario.

Before becoming Postgraduate Dean, I was a PSW case manager for a number of years, and in this time supported a number of people with varied exam related issues requiring different approaches to optimise chance of future success. The “Wessex Exam Game Plan” contains lots of useful strategies to provide doctors with the help needed to prepare for exams as well as they can. I really hope many readers find its content useful in their future preparations.

Paul Sadler – Postgraduate Dean – HEE Wessex

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