Test-Taking Strategies

When you decide to take the CEN certification examination, it is important that you begin to prepare both your mind and your emotions for success. Maintaining strong study habits and positive attitudes will help strengthen your efforts.

Test Anxiety

Most people have experienced anxiety associated with taking a test. Anxiety is a response to an event perceived as a threat. Anxiety is an involuntary response based on fear. Feeling mild anxiety before taking a test can actually be helpful by providing the adrenaline needed to remain alert and perform well. What should be avoided is a level of anxiety so high that it interferes with the ability to recall the information that is needed to make decisions in determining the answers to the test questions.

One way to minimize test-related anxiety is to identify the reasons you are feeling anxious and then to analyze them, confront them, and modify them. In addition, the better prepared you are for the testing situation, the more confident you will be with the process.

Preparing for the CEN Test

Since 2000, the CEN exam has been offered in a computer-based testing (CBT) format. Occasionally, the traditional paper format is also offered. Usually the CBT version of the CEN is administered in a testing center in which the candidate sits in a private cubicle. The exam is also offered each year in association with ENA’s Annual Conference.

No prior computer experience is necessary for taking a CBT examination. Before the CEN examination begins, each candidate reviews a tutorial program that explains how to take the test online. Once the candidate feels comfortable with the computer, they can begin to take the exam.

The CBT version of the CEN examination must be completed within three hours. (Completing the tutorial program before the test begins is not included in this time period.) The CEN examination contains 175 multiple-choice questions, of which 150 items are scored and 25 items are pretest questions of varying content that are analyzed to determine whether they should be used on future examinations. Because pretest questions reflect areas of need in the overall test bank, the content of the exam may not appear to reflect the exact blueprint provided by BCEN. Upon completing the examination, the examinee receives a report that identifies the total score as passing
or failing. In addition, candidates who do not successfully pass the exam receive a subscore in each major subject area.

**Test Blueprint**

Preparation for a test such as the CEN exam begins with determining the material you will be required to know. The BCEN provides a blueprint for the test items on the CEN examination. Review the blueprint in Chapter 2 of this manual to become aware of the broad content areas of the CEN. A more detailed blueprint including associated tasks and primary disease states is available on the BCEN Web pages at www.ena.org.

**Organizing and Using Resources**

Once you know the broad content areas to be covered on the CEN examination, gather emergency nursing resources that will be useful as you prepare. Examples include textbooks on emergency nursing, like the *Emergency Nursing Core Curriculum*, and journal articles on content related to the topics in the CEN test blueprint. Additional resources that may help in preparing for the examination include the following:


Take notes on central ideas. The act of writing may help you organize your thoughts and remember the material. Describe key concepts and explain how information ties together. Jot down important names, relationships, formulas, and examples that will jog your memory as you review them. Flash cards can be helpful memory joggers.

Then rewrite your notes and organize them into major categories that make sense to you. Organizing your notes based on the CEN test blueprint may also be helpful.

**Pacing Yourself**

Cramming as the examination date nears usually increases anxiety. Developing a study plan in advance and using it over time are far more effective and less stressful strategies. Determine how much material you need to cover before your CEN examination is scheduled. Plot a timeline on a calendar. By doing this, you will gain a realistic perspective for reviewing your materials and re-
sources. Be sure to allow extra time in your plan for the more difficult content areas and for areas
with which you are less familiar.

Over study! When you believe you have retained 100% of the material, study another 25% of it.
Scrupulously following your study and review schedule will prevent procrastination and let you
relax on occasion without guilt.

Part of your strategy for review may include joining a CEN study group or taking a formal CEN re-
view course. All members of the study group should have an equal grasp of the material. Coming
into the study group with baseline knowledge will guard against inadvertently learning incorrect
information. Study groups can provide a forum in which to think out loud, clear up misunderstand-
ings, and put together relationships between facts. Group discussion will reinforce your
long-term memory, too.

**Strategies for Taking Multiple-Choice Examinations**

Read the stem of each question first. Then answer each item on the exam in your head, searching
for the closest answer among the choices given. Some general test-taking tips include:

- Read each question carefully.
- Eliminate the answers that are obviously wrong. This tactic is especially helpful when you
  are unsure of the correct answer.
- Do not eliminate an answer unless you know what every word means.
- Implausible answers may be partly right.
- Some responses may be correct in themselves but are not related to the stem of the
  question.
- Don’t read between the lines. Well-written certification questions are intended to be straight-
  forward and to the point.
- Try to reason out the answers to tough questions.
- Look for clues in an answer. Analyze the wording in a question’s stem. The correct answer
  may be one that uses words similar to those in the question.
- Choose the closest answer—the one that is definitely better than the rest.
- Often questions that ask about a hypothetical psychosocial situation are related to how the
  nurse should deal with a patient’s emotional response. The correct answer is often the one
  related to accepting the patient’s feelings.
- It is usually best to follow your first impulse in determining your response to a question.
  Changing answers often leads to incorrect responses.
- Make an educated guess. Doing this increases your odds of answering correctly from 0% to
  25% when you aren’t sure of the answer.
- Don’t look for any pattern to correct items on the exam. Letters (A, B, C, or D) that precede
  the correct answers on the certification exam are chosen at random.

**The Night before the Day of the Exam**

The night before your exam, get a good night’s rest. On the day of your scheduled CEN examina-
tion, take essential materials with you (e.g., photo identification, admission ticket). Psych your-
self into a mood to succeed. Imagine yourself doing well on the CEN exam. You will have spent
plenty of time preparing for the event. Believe that you will remain calm and perform well.
**Using Practice Examinations for Testing Assessment**

Another major strategy for success on the CEN certification examination is taking practice examinations that simulate the experience. Besides helping you identify areas of emergency nursing content that you will want to review before taking the examination, taking practice examinations can motivate you and enhance your confidence. Additionally, the rationale offered after each response may provide new knowledge that will prove useful when taking the actual exam.

In certification examinations such as the CEN, all test items are of the multiple-choice variety. They contain a stem followed by four options. The stem presents a problem or asks a question. Options are potential answers to the questions. Options include both the correct answer and the distracters (incorrect answers). Even though all the options often seem plausible, the correct answer represents the best response to the question.

By taking practice examinations, you will identify strengths and weaknesses in your emergency nursing knowledge while gleaning insight into your own test response patterns. After you have completed a practice CEN examination, reread the items that you answered incorrectly and ask yourself the questions on the following grid. Consider using some of the strategies identified to enhance future performance when taking an examination or test.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contributing Factors: Why do you think you answered an item incorrectly?</th>
<th>Possible Strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did I really know the right answer but marked it incorrectly on the scoring sheet?</td>
<td>• Take time to review your answers after you have marked your scoring sheet to ensure that you have marked the item you intended.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did I not have the knowledge to answer the question?</td>
<td>• Review the rationale for the correct response, which usually contains succinct information to help you fill gaps in your ED knowledge base. • Read the reference list at the end of the rationale section of each question. You can use these references to update or refresh your knowledge of particular content areas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did I misunderstand the question?</td>
<td>• After reading the rationale, reread the stem of the question and all the distracters. Does the correct answer now make sense to you or do you have a knowledge gap?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did I miss a key word or concept in the stem?</td>
<td>• After reading the rationale, reread the stem of the question and all the distracters. Does the correct answer now make sense to you or do you have a knowledge gap?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Contributing Factors:
**Why do you think you answered an item incorrectly?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Did I change my answer?</th>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Possible Strategies</th>
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<tr>
<td>If you find that you often change your answer on a test or exam, determine whether the changed answer tends to be correct.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you tend to change incorrect answers to correct ones, it may be to your advantage to continue the practice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you tend to change correct answers to incorrect ones, reevaluate the usefulness of this practice.</td>
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### Bibliography