

A 10-MINUTE GUIDE

The Calm NCLEX Study Plan

How to Study for Nursing Exams
Without Burning Out

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WELCOME

Why This Guide Exists

If you're a nursing student, you already know the content is hard. But here's what nobody tells you: **for most students, the content isn't actually the problem.**

The problem is studying while exhausted, anxious, and overwhelmed — which means the hours you put in don't stick.

I'm not a nurse. I'm an educational psychologist and certified DBT coach, and I've spent my career studying how people actually learn — and what anxiety does to memory and focus. This guide gives you two things:

- A study system based on learning science (not just “study harder”)
- Simple tools to calm your nervous system so the studying actually works

You can read this whole guide in about 10 minutes. Let's go.



THE SCIENCE, BRIEFLY

The One Thing Anxiety Does to Your Studying

When you're anxious, your brain shifts resources away from the areas responsible for working memory and recall — the exact systems you need for exams.

This is why you can study for 6 hours, feel like you know nothing, panic, study more, and retain even less. **It's not a discipline problem. It's a nervous system problem.**

A calm 45 minutes beats an anxious 4 hours.

Everything in this guide is built on that rule.

PART ONE

The Study Method: Short Sessions, Active Recall

1. Study in 25–45 minute blocks.

Set a timer. When it goes off, take a real break — stand up, leave the room, no phone scrolling (that's not rest, it's just different stimulation).

2. Use active recall, not re-reading.

Re-reading your notes feels productive but creates an “illusion of knowing.” Instead:

- Close the book and write down everything you remember
- Answer practice questions *before* you feel ready
- Explain a concept out loud like you're teaching a patient

3. Space it out.

Reviewing a topic 3 times over a week beats reviewing it 5 times in one day. Your brain consolidates memory between sessions — especially during sleep.

4. Practice the way you'll be tested.

The NCLEX tests clinical judgment, not memorized facts. Practice questions should be the **core** of your studying, not the thing you do at the end “once you know the material.”



PART TWO

Your Weekly Template

Here's a sample low-burnout week. Adjust the times, keep the structure:

Day	Session 1 (25–45 min)	Session 2 (25–45 min)
Mon	New topic — active recall	Practice questions
Tue	Review Monday's topic	New topic
Wed	Practice questions (mixed)	Rest or light review
Thu	New topic	Review Tuesday's topic
Fri	Practice questions (mixed)	Rest
Sat	Weekly review — self-quiz everything	Off
Sun	OFF. Fully off.	This is part of the plan, not a reward.

Total: roughly 8–10 focused hours. That's enough — *if* the hours are calm and active.



PART THREE

The 90-Second Reset

Use this before **every** study session. It's a simple grounding practice adapted from DBT skills. It takes 90 seconds and lowers your stress response enough to actually absorb what you study.

Step 1 — Exhale longer than you inhale.

Breathe in for a count of 4, out for a count of 6. Do this 5 times. The long exhale signals your nervous system that you're safe.

Step 2 — Name 3 things.

Look around and silently name 3 things you can see, 2 you can hear, and 1 you can feel. This pulls your mind out of “what if I fail” and into the present.

Step 3 — Set one tiny intention.

Not “master pharmacology.” Just: *“For the next 30 minutes, I'm working on cardiac meds.”* Small and specific keeps the panic out.

It feels almost too simple — that's why people skip it, and why the people who don't skip it study better.



PART FOUR

When Test Anxiety Hits Mid-Exam

Three tools from DBT you can use silently, in your seat, mid-question:

1. The pause-and-anchor.

Feel your feet flat on the floor. Press down slightly. One slow exhale. This takes 5 seconds and interrupts the spiral.

2. Thought labeling.

When “I’m going to fail” shows up, silently label it: *“That’s an anxious thought, not a fact.”* You don’t have to argue with it — just name it and return to the question.

3. One question at a time.

Anxiety wants you to think about all 85 questions at once. Your only job, ever, is the question in front of you. When you catch yourself forecasting, come back to this one.



YOUR NEXT STEP

Where to Go From Here

You now have the **how** of studying — short sessions, active recall, a calm nervous system.

What you also need is good **content** to study from: clear explanations, lots of NCLEX-style practice questions, and structured review. That part I'll leave to the nursing educators.

In my emails over the next few days, I'll share:

- A deeper dive on beating test anxiety (the stuff that didn't fit in this guide)
- My honest recommendation for the NCLEX prep platform I'd point students to
- A simple way to build your personal study calendar

Keep an eye on your inbox — the first one arrives tomorrow.

CAN'T WAIT?

The NCLEX prep platform I point students to is [NURSING.com](#) — clear, calm explanations and thousands of NCLEX-style practice questions, which is exactly how this guide recommends you study.

Disclosure: that's an affiliate link — if you subscribe, I may earn a commission at no extra cost to you. I only recommend tools I genuinely believe help students.

You've got this. Calm and steady wins.

— Laura Bill, MA

This guide is for educational purposes and is not medical or psychological treatment. If anxiety is significantly interfering with your daily life, please reach out to a mental health professional.