

MEDICAL SCHOOL HOTLINE

Student Well-Being and the United States Medical Licensing Step 1 Examination

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In 1993, the Medical School Hotline was founded by Satoru Izutsu PhD (former vice-dean UH JABSOM), it is a monthly column from the University of Hawai'i John A. Burns School of Medicine and is edited by Kathleen Kihmm Connolly PhD; HJH&SW Contributing Editor.

After completing their first two years of medical school, students across the nation challenge the United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE) Step 1, which tests the application of the biological sciences to the practice of medicine. At the John A. Burns School of Medicine (JABSOM) at the University of Hawaii, students are provided with eight additional weeks of “dedicated study time” for this exam in between the second and third years. Passing the Step exam is required for them to progress in the curriculum. More significantly, their numeric score has a tremendous impact on their competitiveness for elite residency programs, making it the most “high-stakes” exam of their lifetime to date. It is not surprising then that students report overwhelming anxiety and depression associated with this rite of passage.^{1,2} These reflections by JABSOM students capture a depth to their emotions that may surprise faculty and administrators. Revealed is the unprecedented level of anxiety, the sense that their self-worth is determined by their exam score, and the trials and tribulations they undergo that may affect their years after the exam is over. But in these reflections are also words of encouragement and tips for success that would benefit not only our students, but the entire medical school community who collectively share in the responsibility to promote their personal health and well-being.

An Unprecedented Level of Anxiety

Many students felt the anxiety they experienced studying for this exam was higher than any they'd experienced before.

Anxiety and inadequacy. These were the feelings that defined my Step 1 experience. Knowing that a single exam could determine my future filled me with dread.

Studying for something with so much weight on my future is probably the most anxiety-inducing thing I've done. I cried, laughed, and cry-laughed.

During my Step 1 study period I would wake up, and within 15 minutes my palms would start to sweat. They would sweat so much that the keys on my computer keyboard would fill with little puddles of water. It would usually subside by lunch, at which point my stomach would knot up and I'd develop heartburn.

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Around 3 days before my test I took a practice exam at the testing site. My score was in the “okay” range. That was reassuring. Then that same day I began feeling very overwhelmed. It's like it all hit me in that moment, and I started to cry. I'm usually a pretty positive person, and it's pretty uncharacteristic of me to burst into tears over an exam. But it happened. I took a break and listened to some music that I liked. I reached out to some of my friends for prayer and support. I worked out for a little bit. After a while I felt better and ready to focus again.

The Trials and Tribulations

Students found themselves isolated from friends and family, disheartened by feelings of fear and depression as they tried to learn a seemingly infinite amount of information in too short a time span.

Studying for Step 1 felt like I was in a bunker in a post-apocalyptic world. I stayed alone at home for 2 months straight, only ever venturing into the unfamiliar outside world when I needed to collect more food from the Chinese restaurant nearby. I stayed up later and later each day to study, and by the midpoint of my dedicated study period, I had become completely nocturnal, eating breakfast at 10 pm and going to bed at noon. The days blurred together easily since each day was the same: wake up, study, sleep. There was hardly a night that went by where I wasn't dreaming of Step 1 while I slept.

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My mom is cooking for me upstairs. My friends see me on my study breaks. My sister sends me care packages. I owe a debt to all who have supported me along the way, including my ex-boyfriend, who supported me for five and a half years, but who I ultimately lost because I was too busy to be a good partner...

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I was most surprised by the toll on my emotion well-being. I found that when I didn't do well on a practice test it would dictate how I felt for the rest of the day. I struggled with feelings of anxiety and isolation from “the rest of the world”.

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Mother's Day happened to fall on the day before my Step 1 exam. My family planned to fly to O'ahu to have Mother's Day dinner with my sick grandma. Exhausted, I chose instead to get some extra sleep before my test and missed the dinner with my mom and grandma. The anxiety I had about my exam and the guilt I

felt not attending the dinner, ended up keeping me up all night long. I love my family, and this is all for them. Even knowing that, I don't know if I made the right decision.

Equating Exam Performance with Self-Worth

During their preparation, students sometimes questioned whether they were worthy of becoming a doctor.

Studying for Step 1 was the first time I truly doubted myself. I doubted my abilities as a student. I doubted my career choice to be a physician. I doubted my worth as a person.

There were days I didn't feel capable and questioned my ability to pursue a career in medicine.

Let's wait till we get your Step 1 score. If it's lower than 230, you cannot consider this program. – *JABSOM Faculty Advisor*

The Step 1 exam is a challenge because of the weight the medical community places on it. It determines your career, residency program, and your worth as a medical student.

Student Recommendations on Improving Their Well-Being

Students found family and friends were important in building their confidence and helping them overcome fears.

My parents were the source of confidence and faith I needed to continue to believe that I was a good student, that I made the right choice to become a physician, and that I was worth much more than my Step 1 score. They reminded me that for most people, it takes time to develop mastery, and as long as I stayed the course, I would eventually learn the knowledge I needed to be successful.

I felt very isolated and "stir-crazy" at home. So, I decided to study at school where I knew some of my classmates were also studying, which ended up being the best decision for me. Many of the students at school would eat lunch together and it was a great time to relieve stress and feel united in our misery.

It took me a while but I figured out what things I needed to do to manage my wellbeing like exercising, getting dinner with friends, even going home to Maui for a weekend. I realized that sometimes sacrificing study time to do something to make myself feel better would help me in the long run. Board study is a marathon not a sprint.

When I felt demoralized I turned to classmates who could commiserate with me and my family who would provide a sympathetic ear. From the outset the JABSOM faculty said that the people in our lives will carry us through our darkest days and this could not have been truer, especially during the 8 weeks of 12-hour study days.

Don't drop your loved ones for this test because having them by your side makes this huge pill easier to swallow.

I am so grateful to my friends, classmates, and family who surrounded me with love and support. They helped me regain my confidence and kept me laughing through the most demanding period of medical school to date.

While studying for Step 1, I spent most of my time indoors, not leaving the house for days at a time. One day, I decided to study at a cafe. As I walked down the street, I felt a sudden, euphoric sensation. The sun was warm on my face. The scent of freshly cut grass was in the air and a breeze ruffled my hair. I remembered for the first time in a long time that I was lucky to be in Hawaii. Being outside felt like visiting an old friend. I vowed to get out more during my exam preparation. I heard there are beaches nearby.

Every morning we'd roll into the library, set up our study areas and plow through content, notes, and test questions for weeks and weeks on end. During that toughest of times we'd find ways to lift each other up, by bringing in treats or coffee, taking breaks to do puzzles or play with Play-Doh. Rumor has it a kitten was smuggled into the building in a shoebox for a morale boost, but I'll never tell. I am just so happy this group of caring, supportive, fun, talented, passionate group of young doctors will be out in the world soon sharing what they learned and spreading joy.

Lessons Learned from the Experience

Learning medicine is a journey. There is no finish line. The real treasure is the lessons and the wisdom that you gain along the way.

Here's a mnemonic about the Step 1 exam: Sobs and Tears... Even so, Persevere!

My biggest lesson learned is that my test score doesn't determine who I am as a person. This has helped me grow as a person, a medical student, and future doctor.

Although it is important to strive to learn all we can, we must remember we will build that knowledge over a lifetime. Therefore, we shouldn't place too much pressure on ourselves for just one two-month period, for one exam. We have to forgive ourselves, reality check ourselves, and continue to celebrate the small victories.

What we do for our communities is far more important than the three-digit score that follows our names.

Conclusion

In addition to its impact on well-being, students feel pressured to study only the content they deem "board relevant". This has frustrated educators who want students to also focus on skills needed for the third-year like how to interview and examine a patient. This licensing exam, designed to serve as a way to "rank" students has become an impediment to thoughtful curriculum innovation and reform. Due in large part to these consequences, the National Board of Medical Examiners announced in February 2020, that beginning in 2022, the USMLE Step 1 Examination will be reported as pass/fail only, eliminating the numerical score completely.⁴

This is a welcomed change. JABSOM will continue to warn students about the risk associated with studying for this exam and proactively reach out to students to check on their personal health during their dedicated study time. Despite their challenges it is worthwhile to note that the students writing these reflections, the JABSOM Class of 2021 collectively scored *above the national average* for the USMLE Step 1 Examination. This is just one more reason to be proud of our JABSOM students.

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