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Addysg a Gwella Iechyd  
Cymru (AaGIC)  
Health Education and  
Improvement Wales (HEIW)

# Exam Preparation

## PSU Wales

### Trainee Pack

**Exam Title** \_\_\_\_\_

**Exam Date** \_\_\_\_\_ **Location** \_\_\_\_\_

**Exam Time From** \_\_\_\_\_ **Until** \_\_\_\_\_

This pack has been produced by the Professional Support Unit and is based on resources created by the HEENE Learner Support & Faculty Development team and is designed to be shared widely across the region but should not be reproduced or used without permission.

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## Introduction

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Exams, during Doctors' training, seem to be never-ending. With the pressures of family life, working life, and the e-portfolio (to name but a few) it can be difficult to see how it's possible to fit any revision in at all.

Or perhaps despite your best efforts, you haven't quite yet reached the pass mark. Well, medical competency does not always reflect itself in exam pass marks. Many of Wales' most successful doctors, consultants and medical leaders failed an exam at some point during their training. Passing exams is an essential aspect of your training and failed attempts can affect your confidence, your stress level and your wallet.

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. It's sometimes common sense and sometimes just a nudge to think differently. We want you to be the best doctor you can be, and in the specialty you want to work in. Sometimes though, things do not work out, and the most important thing to remember is that's ok too. Life is full of opportunities, some that we plan and some that are thrust on us!

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 from your College website for specific advice on specialty exams.

### **Your Passport to a Pass**

In following the 8 Steps 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.

**Objective = Achieve a 'Pass'**

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## Step 1: Reflect upon your approach

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**"INSANITY:  
DOING THE SAME  
THING OVER AND  
OVER AGAIN AND  
EXPECTING  
DIFFERENT  
RESULTS."**

**ALBERT EINSTEIN**

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 develop a more suitable approach this time around.

Some common reported factors for failing exams include...

- entering an exam when you are relatively new to the NHS and UK exam structure
- lack of research on the college's exam guidance
- lack of familiarity with the exam structure, type of questions, marking criteria etc.
- lack of a study plan and revising in an ad-hoc way
- 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)
- relying on the same old notes, from the same old books
- revising solo without seeking support of study friends or groups, peers and colleagues
- cramming revision in to too short a timeframe
- using memory as the only means of learning
- using revision techniques that don't suit your learning style
- insufficient revision on topics where there was known knowledge gaps or the topic was perceived as dull or difficult
- investing too long on topic details that were not required
- insufficient testing of knowledge and comprehension
- insufficient practice of skills and/or behaviours
- revising in an unsuitable environment

“

*We do not learn from experience ... we learn from reflecting on experience*

”

**John Dewey**

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## Step 1: Reflect upon your approach

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### Activity 1: Which issues resonate with you?

### 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.

*Exam Preparation – HEIW, Professional Support Unit (HEENE, Learner Support and Faculty Development version 1)*

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## Step 1: Reflect upon your approach

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### Activity 2: Self reflection

1. When you have previously struggled with exams, what sort of areas posed the most difficulties?
2. Are your revision strategies realistic and what you would expect for the exam?
3. Are you using past papers and focussing on specific areas of development?
4. Are you linked in with other trainees sitting the exam or have you joined study groups?
5. Have you got advice from other trainees in similar circumstances who have successfully passed the exam?
6. Is your knowledge level in the work place at the expected level or do you have knowledge or skills gaps? If so, do you have a targeted action plan?
7. Do you feel you get over stressed during the exam to an extent that impacts on your memory?
8. Are you reviewing results from previous exams with an experienced supervisor to draw out areas of success versus areas that require focus?
9. Have you started revising for your next exam sitting from afresh or are you repeatedly using the same notes and past papers?
10. What do you feel the main issue is?

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## Step 2: Organise yourself

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### Book a realistic exam date

A study period of 6-9 months is usually advisable then break it down into 3-month chunks.

At the beginning of your new training year, check the dates of your exams. Your college's website will provide information on dates, eligibility, the application period, venues, fees, how to apply and publication of results. The application period is sometimes short, and your revision may start before you are able to book. Therefore, place a reminder task in your calendar to ensure you don't miss the booking window.

Consider the date of your ARCP and decide on the best exam date option. Also consider your work commitments, e-portfolio and home commitments and try to coincide this with the most realistic timeframe for committing to revision.

Find your Study Policy - check what study leave you have available and how your study budget can be used. For example, check if study leave can be used to attend the exam as well as any exam preparation courses. Also check to see if the budget can be used to pay for the exam and additional exam resources. Check the rota and book your study leave. Ideally avoid a week of late shifts the week running up to your exam date, book study-leave for that week if you can.

### Apply for adjustments

Each College has their own policy on Disability and Reasonable Adjustments. Review the policy - you may be entitled to apply for extra time for dyslexia for example. Allow plenty of time for your request to be considered - make that application when you book the exam date. The policy will explain how to apply and what to do if a need arises after you have booked.

### 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.

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## Step 2: Organise yourself

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### 1) Study location

Choose a study location that is 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

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

### 2) Distracting habits

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 e.g. household cleaning 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 (see page 42).

#### Top Tip

If there is a caller that you cannot ignore, e.g. school / nursery, then you will want your mobile with you, but on “**do not disturb**”.

Ensure their number is a “**Favourite**” and you will be alerted.



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## Step 2: Organise yourself

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### 3) Organise resources

Decide upon your study resources; look on your College's website and see if they provide reading lists, videos, podcasts, links to other sites for resources. Use social media e.g. follow relevant colleges or specialty societies on Twitter to get quick and simple information updates.

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

Manage the expectations of family and secure their support. This pack will go into more detail in Step 4. It's important that those around you are aware of the demands of exam study and are willing to help you. This includes trainers, senior colleagues, senior clinical colleagues and peers (*also see pages 25 – 26*). And, if you need help and it's not offered, ask for it.

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

- Syllabus and college exam guidance
- Pens, notebooks, device and charger, library card
- Books, articles, papers, website links, pre-papers, mock exams
- Water and food
- Money, layers of clothing

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## Step 3: Review College guidance

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### Understand the exam structure

Remember, you're aiming for a **pass** – you can increase your chances significantly by determining what the examiners want and how to demonstrate or evidence it.

Start by visiting your College's website; find the curriculum and any candidate guidelines for the exam

You can expect to find information such as:

- Subjects covered – don't assume that you know what's covered - you don't know what you don't know – some trainees find it useful to transfer the curriculum to a mind map. Continue to return to the map throughout your revision period to ensure that you're not focusing on your favourite topics - areas that you find easy or interesting. It's important to be sure that you have no blind spots
- Examiner's guidance
- 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), and how long you have
- Marking criteria and awarding of marks
- Additional specialty specific advice or guidance – there might be guidance for simulated exams or information on courses available



*Make sure you understand the marking scheme. Spend time with your trainer watching/listening to cases with the marking sheet to hand. The more you get a feel for the marking scheme the better your consulting skills will become.*

*Dr Stephen Hailey – CSA Examiner / GP /  
Clinical Trainer*

#### 1) Examiner's guidance

Some specialties 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.

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## Step 3: Review College guidance

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### 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	Provides a problem (known as a stem); lists possible options (known as alternatives); the correct or best alternative is placed amongst other distracting alternatives. Assesses basic recall to application, analysis and evaluation.
Best of Five	Provides a clinical scenario; the correct option is amongst a list of 5 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.

### 3) Complete past papers and mock exams

Exam practice is vital. Look on your College website 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. When possible recreate exam conditions – time yourself, ensure there are no interruptions and treat it as the “real thing”.

Work through as many papers that you can find and identify any knowledge gaps as you go. When completing them, keep an eye on time and check you are working at the designated exam speed, some online tests do this for you. Additionally, it is important to note that for some specialties mock papers are expensive and you may need to decide upon the best point in your revision timeline to complete them.

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## Step 3: Review College guidance

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*Find out as much about the exam as you can:  
What will happen on the day? What methods of assessment are used?  
What are the common reasons for candidates to fail?*

*Dr Andrew Cooper – CSA Examiner / GP /  
Clinical Trainer*

### 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. Your exam 'patients' may be real patients, fellow medical students or professional actors. Regardless of which you encounter, respond to them as real people and fully demonstrate your range of knowledge, application of procedures, clinical skills and professional behaviours.

#### Top Tip

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.

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### Step 3: Review College guidance

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#### **Activity 3: check the guidance for your exam**

Look at your College website, refer to the curriculum and see what guidance 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 available – what can you learn from this?
7. What other study resources are available?
8. Are past papers or mock exams available?

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## Step 4: Create a realistic study plan

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### Estimate your revision needs

Now that you have reviewed the curriculum 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 and indicate the breadth and depth required for each topic. All topics are not equal - is an overview sufficient or does the curriculum suggest in-depth comprehension?
3. Rate your existing knowledge on the topic (1 = 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).

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.

## Step 4: Create a realistic study plan

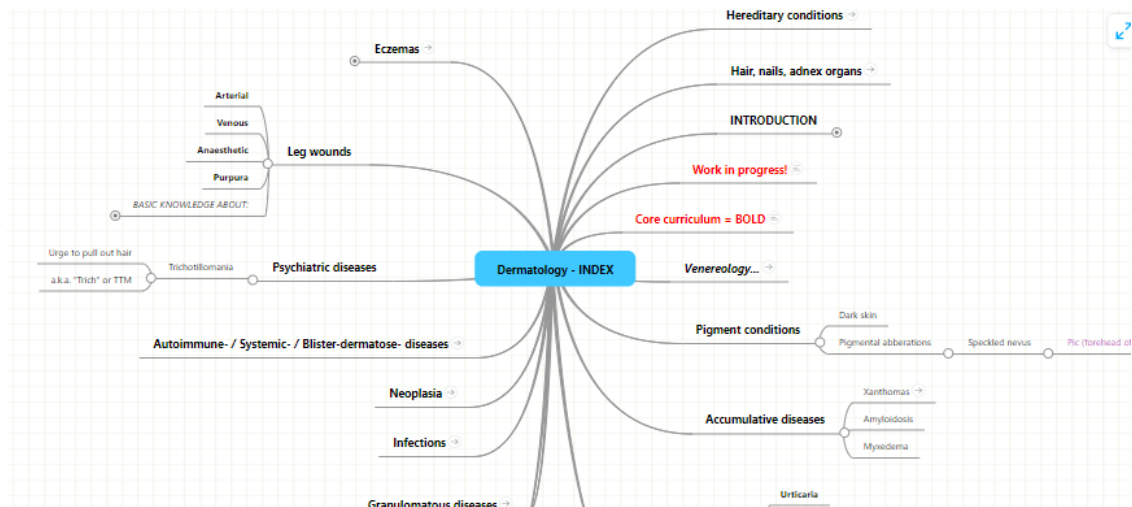
### Activity 4: Estimate your revision needs log and prepare a mind map

	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 <b>(Tick)</b>
1.					
2.					
3.					
4.					
5.					

**Extend the table to include all topics / sub-topics.**

Transfer the topics and the sub-topics to your mind map – you might want to underline the topics that need in-depth comprehension, and/or highlight areas where your existing knowledge is low. Keep your mind map somewhere visible so that you can check that you are not avoiding tricky topics; and so that you can see that your knowledge is improving. Tools like Mind Meister can be useful e.g.

<https://www.mindmeister.com/5755934/dermatology-index>, but a large piece of paper and sticky notes can be just as effective. Some specialties have mindmaps available – just search the internet.



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## Step 4: Create a realistic study plan

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### Evaluate work and homelife commitments

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

Studying full-time whilst at university 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. Therefore, in an *ideal* world plan, plan to complete exams *before* taking on domestic responsibilities....but we all know that this is easier said than done. Trainees pass exams while frequently swapping roles, and you can pass too. In Section 5 we look at the various sources of support available to you – take full advantage of that support, and remember: you only need to achieve a **PASS**.

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

- 1) your work commitments
- 2) your homelife commitments
- 3) time stealers/savers
- 4) a calculation of how much time you have available for revision

As you work through this section, use the 'Study Plan Template' (page 20) or produce your own; alternatively, the internet provides many styles available to download for free, find one that suits you.



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## Step 4: Create a realistic study plan

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### 1) Plot work commitments

On the 'Study Plan Template' (page 21) plot your work commitments including:

- exam date
- rota
- training courses
- audit / quality improvement projects
- conferences and meetings
- teaching commitments
- e-portfolio work
- ARCP

Check your rota and make swaps, where necessary, to free up time before the exam – ideally take a week of leave, but if that's not possible at least ensure that you have no nights and no on-calls in the days running up to the exam.

### 2) Plot homelife 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
- special occasions/celebrations/annual events
- hobbies and associated events
- social events with friends
- children's school events
- family commitments
- appointments (dentist, hospital etc.)
- chill-time

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.

**If possible, keep work and home commitments to a minimum the week before the exam.**

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## Step 4: Create a realistic study plan

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### 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. Perhaps you could:

- pay someone to do cleaning, ironing, car washing, window cleaning, gardening
- choose *not* to do any cleaning, ironing, car washing etc. during this time
- create a family schedule
- arrange or pay for someone to prepare meals
- batch cook and freeze
- arrange for babysitters to gain extended study time
- pay for a dog-walker
- shop online for groceries, birthday presents etc.
- say “No” to requests and demands that encroach upon your time
- ask friends and family to support you with ad-hoc situations
- explain to friends ‘how’ they can best support you
- accept that things won’t be perfect during this time

### Find the little moments for study

Everything counts and even twenty minutes of study 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

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## Step 4: Create a realistic study plan

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### Calculate available revision time

Now decide how much time you can realistically dedicate to revising each 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 flexibility.

Finally, look at your 'Study Plan Template' (page 21) and assign topics according to the remaining time slots available. For example, if you only have short twenty-minute slots on a Saturday – allocate a topic where you require only 'top-up' revision. Subjects that you find challenging will be best suited to more lengthy slots.

**Remember Your Objective = Achieve a Pass**

## Step 4: Create a realistic study plan

**Activity 5: Study Plan Preparation** Below shows an example of a **Study Plan Template**; the number of weeks would need to be extended for the full study timeline. Consider your work and home commitments, **seek support from your family, manage their expectations of your availability** to e.g. go food shopping, iron etc and estimate the realistic hours available for study – transfer the topics onto an A3 wall-planner.

Rota Examples	Work rota = Long Shift Working Hours: Homelife: Hours to study:	Work rota = Day Shift Homelife: Hours to study: Topic:	Work rota = Night Shift Working Hours: Homelife: Hours to study:	Work rota = Twilight Working Hours: Homelife: Hours to study:	Work rota = On Call Working Hours: Homelife: Hours to study:	Work rota: Working Hours: Homelife: Hours to study:	Work rota: Working Hours: Homelife: Hours to study:	
	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday	Total Study Hours
Week 1	Work rota: Homelife: Hours to study: Topic:	Work rota: Homelife: Hours to study: Topic:	Work rota: Homelife: Hours to study: Topic:	Work rota: Homelife: Hours to study: Topic:	Work rota: Homelife: Hours to study: Topic:	Work rota: Homelife: Hours to study: Topic:	Work rota: Homelife: Hours to study: Topic:	
Week 2	Work rota: Homelife: Hours to study: Topic:	Work rota: Homelife: Hours to study: Topic:	Work rota: Homelife: Hours to study: Topic:	Work rota: Homelife: Hours to study: Topic:	Work rota: Homelife: Hours to study: Topic:	Work rota: Homelife: Hours to study: Topic:	Work rota: Homelife: Hours to study: Topic:	
Week 3	Work rota: Homelife: Hours to study: Topic:	Work rota: Homelife: Hours to study: Topic:	Work rota: Homelife: Hours to study: Topic:	Work rota: Homelife: Hours to study: Topic:	Work rota: Homelife: Hours to study: Topic:	Work rota: Homelife: Hours to study: Topic:	Work rota: Homelife: Hours to study: Topic:	
Week 4	Work rota: Homelife: Hours to study: Topic:	Work rota: Homelife: Hours to study: Topic:	Work rota: Homelife: Hours to study: Topic:	Work rota: Homelife: Hours to study: Topic:	Work rota: Homelife: Hours to study: Topic:	Work rota: Homelife: Hours to study: Topic:	Work rota: Homelife: Hours to study: Topic:	
Week 5	Work rota: Homelife: Hours to study: Topic:	Work rota: Homelife: Hours to study: Topic:	Work rota: Homelife: Hours to study: Topic:	Work rota: Homelife: Hours to study: Topic:	Work rota: Homelife: Hours to study: Topic:	Work rota: Homelife: Hours to study: Topic:	Work rota: Homelife: Hours to study: Topic:	
								<b>TOTAL STUDY HOURS</b>



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## Step 4: Create a realistic study plan

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

Date	Duration	Topic	Learning resources	Content covered	% Understanding of the topic	Next session...

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## Step 5: Actively generate support

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### Generating support

Preparing for exams can be a challenging time for many, especially when juggling a demanding job and busy homelife. 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:

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

### 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.

*Also see “Identify time savers” page 18.*

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## Step 5: Actively generate support

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### Learning support

- Do you have colleagues who have already passed the exam – what advice would they give on preparation, useful resources, on-the-day tips etc.?
- Which colleagues could help you on topic areas that you find challenging?
- Consider your clinical and professional network (those from the past and present) – who could you contact to ask for suggestions on useful learning resources and materials, general topic advice, learning strategies or study approaches?
- Who, within the multi-professional team, has a useful network of contacts whom you could ask to be sign-posted to?
- Check to see what revision courses are available.
- Whenever there is something you don't understand actively seek clinical clarification; speak to anyone who can help with the issue.
- Speak with your Clinical Supervisor and other colleagues – explain that you wish to apply and embed newly learnt knowledge whilst on shift and tell colleagues that you will actively ask questions, communicate your understanding and seek clarity.
- 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.
- Different learning needs - if you've been unsuccessful with an exam several times, have you considered a learning needs assessment? It's worthwhile getting in touch with the PSU to get it checked out - it's not unusual for trainees to receive a dyslexia diagnosis at this stage in their academic career.



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## Step 5: Actively generate support

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### Study groups

Studying with others can be a more interesting way to study, it can bring an air of competitiveness, stimulating revision engagement. Learning by discussion is highly valuable, allowing the learner to impose 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. Aim to include people with a range of approaches to revision, different clinical experiences and, just as importantly, diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds.



And, make sure that any study group is regularly attended by someone who has passed this exam, like a senior trainee, or a mentor or trainer. This will help you minimise the risk of making the same mistakes again (if you're resitting).

- Could you set up or join a study group of peers preparing for the same exam? Remember, it can be online. Zoom, MS Teams are fantastic tools to enable virtual study groups.
- Ensure that group membership is varied in terms of approaches to revision, backgrounds in experience, culture and seniority.
- Ensure there is input from a senior trainee, mentor or trainer (especially for viva preparation) as they can provide additional insights and prevent repeated mistakes.
- Share information about useful resources including reading materials, website links, videos, podcasts, ways of testing knowledge etc.

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## Step 5: Actively generate support

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- Talking out loud has been found to benefit memory recall. Select topics for each group member. Meet to share and discuss your understanding.
- Share study approaches, talk through areas of challenge, brainstorm ideas and discuss cases.
- Discuss issues that require 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 page 35).



*I think forming a revision group can be helpful, but think carefully about who this is with and whether their revision style complements yours, because equally you shouldn't compare your revision to others (especially in terms of quantity) my personal mantra was quality of revision time over quantity!*

*Dr Kathryn Speedy – ST4 Psychiatry*

### Self-care support

If you are feeling overly stressed during your study and it is affecting you at work, take a look at pages 37-41 (**Step 7**), and consider linking up with:

- Your GP
- [The Professional Support Unit](#)
- [Your Health Board's Employee Wellbeing Service](#)
- [Health for Health Professionals Wales](#)
- [Wellbeing resources available through HEIW](#)

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*Step 5: Actively generate support*

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**Activity 6: Support network - who can help and how?**

Family:	Friends:
Current Colleagues:	Past Colleagues:
Study friends/groups:	

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## *Step 6: Accelerate your learning*

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### **Shallow-learning versus deep-learning**

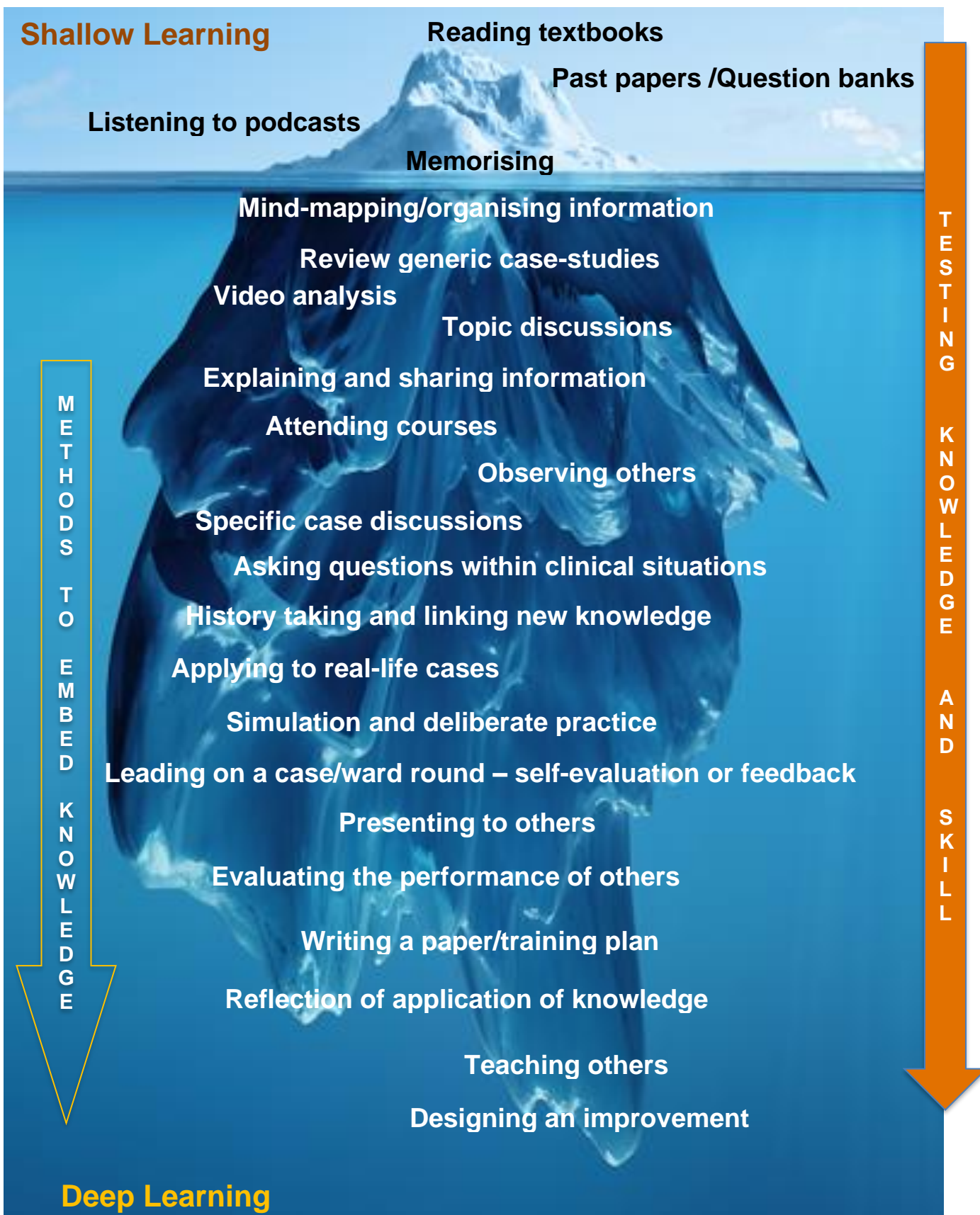
Strategies that create shallow-learning or deep-learning have been debated for many years. Marton and Säljö's 'Six Conceptions of Learning' theory explains that learner intentions play a large part in whether learning is deep or shallow. Intentions, and the subsequent level of learning, differs if the learner's intent is to perhaps pass a test versus engage in and evaluate a topic for practical use.

Shallow learning is associated with tasks such as reading, memorising and recalling information – this type of revision can be helpful in learning facts e.g. details of who, where, when, and what of a topic. Deep learning on the other hand is associated with creating meaning, organising information, building connections and developing critical analysis. The learning strategies go beyond the simple rote 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. Therefore, when reviewing your curriculum and exam guidance, look at your study plan - decide upon the required level of learning – some exams may simply require that you recite the factual 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.

Also, consider how you prefer to learn (audio, visual, kinaesthetic) and tap in to learning strategies that accelerate your learning. If you are an auditory learner using mind-maps and coloured pens may have no impact on developing your comprehension of a topic. Whereas listening to podcasts or working in groups and discussing case studies may prove more valuable and productive. Find a combination of strategies that work for you – return to your reflections on learning and use the ones that have been effective. But be vigilant - it's important that you don't just use the same old revision strategies because that's how you have always revised.

Step 6: Accelerate your learning

Levels of learning and revision strategies



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## Step 6: Accelerate your learning

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### 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 either by writing information by hand or typing. Reorganising your notes into themes, consolidating large amounts of information into bullet format, using mnemonics or writing and then answering quiz type questions can help some people with memory recall.

#### **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.

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## Step 6: Accelerate your learning

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### PSU can help

If you're unsure of your learning style or think that you have different learning needs please contact the PSU. An online QuickScan Assessment will identify your learning style and suggest ways to accelerate your learning, but also indicate whether you need additional support for dyslexia

### Case studies

Using case studies can help you to convert theoretical ideas into 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.

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## *Step 6: Accelerate your learning*

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### **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 history taking, examination and management plan. Then compare these with the admitting doctor's notes.

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 you can 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.

Be curious and actively seek opportunities to embed your knowledge and learning. Ask lots of questions to consultants, 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.

Familiarise yourself with the exam marking framework, especially for OSCEs and vivas. Consider what the examiners are looking for and practice demonstrating the patient management, the behaviours and communication style in each patient interaction whenever possible.



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## *Step 6: Accelerate your learning*

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### **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.

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## Step 6: Accelerate your learning

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### 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 provide options to compare modules and track your progress. You can also choose to answer questions which you've previously answered incorrectly. The services are available by subscription and examples include - Pastest, OnExamination and Passmedicine.

#### 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 curriculum. 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, chatlines and forums. Find opportunities to air your knowledge in the day job including discussions with peers, supervisors and members of the multi-professional team.

#### 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](http://www.surveymonkey.com).

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## Step 6: Accelerate your learning

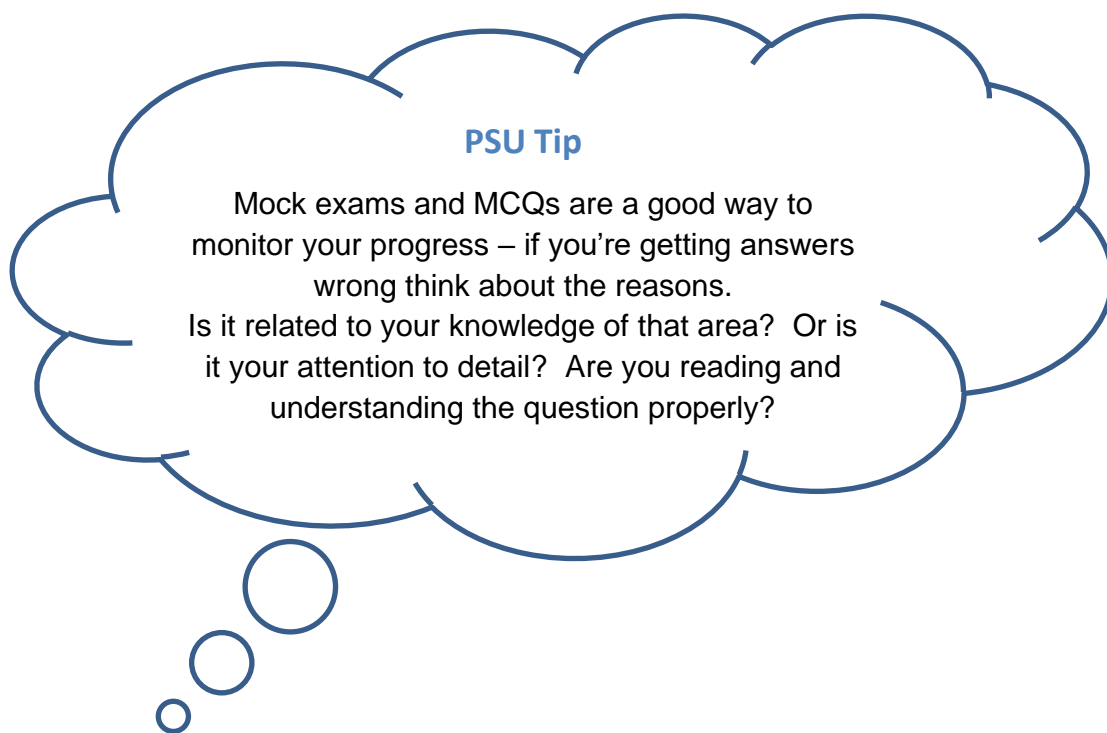
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### Flashcards

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.

### 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.



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## Step 6: Accelerate your learning

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### 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.

### 'Just do it' (as Nike would say)

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. 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).



*Base your learning around patient encounters. Get into the habit of analysing what happened, identifying learning needs and checking the guidelines and evidence.*

*Dr Andrew Cooper – CSA Examiner / GP /  
Clinical Trainer*

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## Step 7: Manage exam anxiety

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### What's going on?

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.

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).

You might recognise some of these responses.....

<b>Magnification / catastrophising</b>	<b>Emotional reasoning</b>	<b>Using critical words</b>	<b>Labelling</b>	<b>Personalisation</b>
Blowing things out of proportion and expecting the worst	Assuming that because we feel a certain way what we think must be true - "I don't feel as though I know enough, I must be stupid"	Should / must / ought make us feel guilty or like we have already failed	I'm stupid, i'm not good at exams	Blaming yourself or taking responsibility for something that wasn't completely your fault / not taking enough responsibility

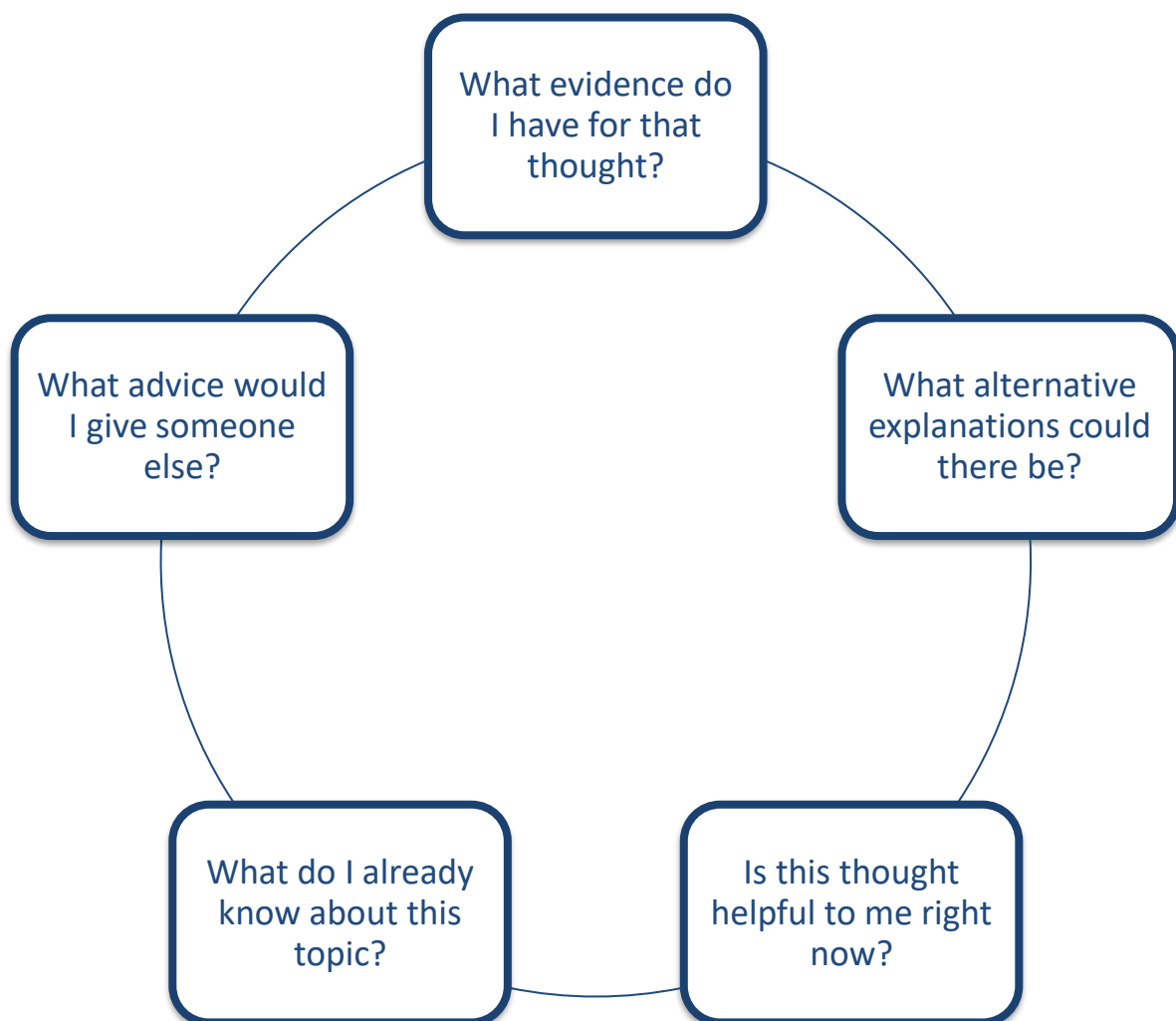
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## Step 7: Manage exam anxiety

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### What can I do about it?

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.



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## Step 7: Manage exam anxiety

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### Self-soothing strategies

Before you begin the exam, try these self-soothing strategies to help to relax and regain composure and calm.

#### The complete breath

Create calm on the inside and slow a racing heart. Take breaths that fill the whole of your lungs, low, mid and upper (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 five, whilst visualising and moving around the four sides of a square. Focus on your breathing as you count:

1. Inhale 2 3 4 5
2. Hold 2 3 4 5
3. Exhale 2 3 4 5
4. Hold 2 3 4 5



#### Breathing square variation

A variation on the breathing square is to visualise colour as you count to five and move around the four sides of a square.

1. THINK: blue – Inhale 2 3 4 5
2. THINK: green – Hold 2 3 4 5
3. THINK: red – Exhale 2 3 4 5
4. THINK: purple – Hold 2 3 4 5



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## Step 7: Manage exam anxiety

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### Use mindfulness apps and resources such as:

- Mindful: [www.mindful.org](http://www.mindful.org)
- Free workplace mindfulness audio tracks  
<https://www.bangor.ac.uk/mindfulness/audio/index.php.en>
- Headspace App 'weathering the storm' free meditation: [www.headspace.com/covid-19](http://www.headspace.com/covid-19)
- BellyBio: <http://bellybio.com/>

### Grounding technique – focus on your environment

- 5 things you can see
- 4 things you can feel
- 3 things you can hear
- 2 things you can smell
- 1 thing you can taste

### 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.
- Tighten and tense all muscles in your body as you take a deep breath in, hold the breath - release with a sigh. Repeat 3 times (particularly good in bed just before sleep).

### Think calm thoughts

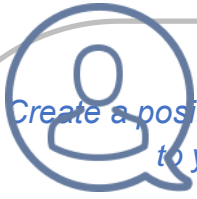
Manage negative internal dialogue and respond with words that soothe your mind e.g. *“be calm”, “be still”, “breathe”, “I’ll get through this”, “relax your muscles” “this feeling will pass”*.



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## Step 7: Manage exam anxiety

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Create a positive mantra “I have worked hard, I am clever, I can pass” and say it to yourself in the mirror in the days running up to the exam.

*Be kind to yourself – remember that postgraduate exams are tough, and you have prepared as best you can. If you don't pass it is not a failing of you as a person. All you can do is your best.*

*Do something positive for yourself in the run up to the exam. Go for a massage, get your nails done, buy a good book to enjoy afterwards. And focus on how enjoyable that thing is. It helped to contextualise the importance of the exam for me – it's not the be-all and end-all.*

*Consider having a folder of key information that you run through quickly in the hours before the exam. Make it short and snappy. Perhaps include things that are recall dependent (for example cancer staging, formulas, definitions).*

*Consider what you have to eat and drink before the exam. caffeine can be unhelpful in large quantities, as can a big “carby” breakfast.*

*During the exam if I felt overwhelmed by a question, I would leave it and come back to it. It takes me time to settle into an exam. I like to read the whole paper and answer only the questions that come to me very quickly the first time around. Then I go back and think about the others once I have had time to calm down a bit.*

*Dr Rachel Lee - ST5 Obstetrics and Gynaecology*

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## Step 8: Final preparation

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### Two weeks before

- Check the college website for the items provided and what to take with you e.g. stethoscope.
- 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.

### One week before

- Review the curriculum areas, exam format, style of questions and marking criteria.
- Go over study areas or questions that you found difficult during revision.
- Attempt a final mock test. Consider practising one each day to finely hone your exam technique.
- Create patterns that allow for a good night's sleep e.g. daily physical activity, establish a bed-time routine (if you don't already have one). It might include having a bath or shower an hour before bed, and reading a novel for half an hour before turning the light off at around 10.30pm. A bed-time routine is a **good tip for shift-working too** – just following the same steps in the same order signals to the body to wind down and prepare for sleep.
- Stay positive and soothe 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

- 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 into the exam what you need and what you can physically hold.
- 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.
- Relax and spend time doing something that is not exam-related – you know all you need to know and there is no need to cram.
- Set your alarm if an early rise is needed and get a good night's sleep.

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## Step 8: Final preparation

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*Arrive at the exam in the best shape that you can. You should travel early, rest well and try to take an upbeat and positive attitude into the day.*

*Dr Andrew Cooper – CSA Examiner / GP /  
Clinical Trainer*

### Exam day

- Get out of bed when the alarm goes off.
- Start with a good breakfast.
- Arrive early.
- Avoid discussing exam components with other candidates – it can trigger anxiety.
- Use self-soothing techniques to steady nerves (see pages 34-35).
- Take your time to read **all** of the instructions.
- If in doubt, ask an invigilator.
- Take your time to read each question in its entirety.
- Answer the questions you know the answer to first.
- 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, but beware of changing your answer – second guessing can be detrimental....only make a change if you identify an obvious error.
- Ignore those who appear to have finished – stay focused.

**REMEMBER = All you need is a ‘Pass’**

### Post Exam

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

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## Step 8: Final preparation

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### What if it didn't go your way?

- Don't give up.
- 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 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.
- 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 the mark is incorrect, challenge it by using the appropriate process – see your College's website.
- If you think you won't attempt it again 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.
- Contact the Professional Support Unit for confidential, 1:1 support and guidance - [HEIW.ProfessionalSupport@wales.nhs.uk](mailto:HEIW.ProfessionalSupport@wales.nhs.uk)

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## Step 8: Final preparation

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### Repeated exam failure

Some people do unfortunately fail exams repeatedly. This is obviously very disappointing, costly and a very stressful experience.

However, there is lots of support available. We would recommend an early discussion with your supervisor, Training Programme Director or College Tutor to explore potential reasons. It may also be worth considering an appointment with your GP to rule out any health issues.

Additionally, you can meet with the Professional Support Unit. The PSU supports individuals with exam preparation, planning, prioritising, organising, techniques. Using appropriate listening, questioning and feedback skills, the PSU helps the individual to gain insight about their situation and explores reasons behind the setbacks. It is a confidential one to one relationship in which an individual is supported by someone experienced and/or qualified in coaching who helps them to learn and unlock their potential. You can self-refer or be referred by your Educational Supervisor, Professional Support Lead, College Tutor or Training Programme Director.

Individuals who feel they may benefit from a dyslexia assessment can find useful information from the British Dyslexia Association <https://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk>. We can send you a link to investigate that further via a quick online assessment. If dyslexia is identified we can then refer you on to the Educational Psychologist for a formal assessment.

If you are not intending to attempt the exam again, the PSU can help you to consider alternative career paths and plan next steps with you.



#### PSU Tip

Do not make career-changing decisions whilst feeling deflated. Give it some time, mull it over and come and speak with the Professional Support Unit to explore options.

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- Vanderbilt University – CFT Teaching Guides eg How People Learn; Learning style; Writing Good Multiple Choice Test Questions; Metacognition <https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages>
- Clinical Case Studies – GP online <https://www.gponline.com/education/general-practice-case-studies>
- Pastest <https://www.pastest.com/>
- PassMedicine <https://passmedicine.com/>
- BMJ On Examination - <http://www.onexamination.com/#QuestionBrowser>
- Dr Alan Watkins TEDx: 'Being brilliant every single day'  
Part 1: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q06YIWCR2Js>  
Part 2: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q\\_fFattg8N0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q_fFattg8N0)

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## Specific Guidance for GP Trainees

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- MRCGP Applied Knowledge Test (AKT)

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

'How to Prepare for the AKT' including:

- A clear overview of what is required

[Preparing to take the MRCGP Applied Knowledge Test: A concise guide for trainees \(578 KB PDF\)](#)

- An outline of how trainers can help trainees prepare by identifying how day-to-day practice influences exam content [What can Trainers do to help AiTs prepare for the AKT? \(578 KB PDF\)](#)

### Statistics:

- Clinical evidence and data interpretation: 'Statistics' in the AKT - A guide for a tutorial and/or peer group learning [Clinical evidence and data interpretation: 'Statistics' in the AKT \(1.6 MB PDF\)](#)
- Dr Chris Cates' EBM Website <https://www.nntonline.net>



*The wording 'statistics' is an issue for me as we are striving to make this increasingly about 'what a GP sees/might see in the coalface' i.e. understanding drug company adverts, referral rates, admission rates, early cancer diagnosis reviews and above all risk communication with patients.*

*Understanding needs to be grounded in interpreting information we see as GPs whether in commissioning reports, locality prescribing reviews, simple practice audit or the types of graphical/tabular display we see in important journals. I want young doctors to critically appraise the information they see and are sent before being able to communicate risk to their patient/population.*

*Dr Chris Elfes - RCGP ECU Steering Group Chair & EKC Clinical Lead*

**We welcome further guidance from other specialties to enrich this Support Pack**

**If you would like to help, please contact: [HEIW.professionalsupport@wales.nhs.uk](mailto:HEIW.professionalsupport@wales.nhs.uk)**