

What Do I Do When I Fail the Social Work Exam?

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Social workers who fail the licensing examination often seek information on how to improve their scores. Prior to retaking any exam, three specific issues must be addressed. These are:

1. understanding how the test was constructed
2. changing one's study strategy
3. changing one's approach to answering the test items

Each issue is discussed below.

Test Construction Standards

Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) examinations are based on a North American analysis of social work practice at various educational and experience levels. ASWB completes a practice analysis every seven to ten years, and the exams are changed after each analysis to reflect current standards of practice.

Social work educators may or may not focus on current practice standards, and indeed many are expected to be futuristic. Do not ignore the value of a social work education, but total dependence on academic learning is not enough. There is more to practice than can be learned from books. Use supervision to apply what has been learned to practice. The key point for exam preparation is: focus on current practice, not distant past or future practice. The licensing examinations are based on what social workers do now on their entry level jobs.

Reliability

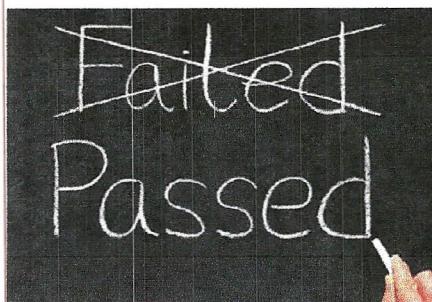
Reliability describes the degree test scores are consistent over time, and the chances that a test taker's score will not change significantly between attempts if the level of knowledge does not change. In practical terms, high test reliability means that if a person fails the exam, there is a high probability that he or she will fail again if there is no change in knowledge. It does not mean that the person will fail—it means there is a higher than 50/50 probability. The ASWB licensing examinations have excellent reliability coefficients.

The practical question is, "What must I do to improve my score?" The answer is that scores can only be improved through an increase in content knowledge coupled with a solid understanding of how multiple-choice tests work.

Study Strategy

In developing a new study strategy, four issues must be addressed. They are:

1. social work terminology
2. critical thinking skills
3. anxiety
4. content areas that a candidate's failing score report indicates need further study



Social Work Terminology

The exams are filled with clinical and generalist social work vocabulary. BSW and MSW graduates should be familiar with basic social work terms and should be able to define them. For example:

- Cognitive dissonance
- Indications
- Contraindications
- Mutuality
- Transference
- Countertransference

If a person fails to define all of these terms, this is a sign that vocabulary remediation is necessary. Consider using the National Association of Social Workers' *The Social Work Dictionary* as a source for developing a comprehensive vocabulary test. In addition, for those taking the clinical exam, terms and categories within the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* are critical to

comprehend immediately, correctly, and unambiguously.

The BSW/MSW curricula are the foundation for the development of a professional vocabulary. When students write term papers or read textbooks, they are building a specialized vocabulary that is employed by current practitioners. Reviewing concepts in textbooks is a helpful strategy. If there is no understanding of the clinical and generalist terminology, there is little chance of passing one of the social work licensing examinations, especially the clinical exam. The vocabulary must become a part of the person's normal speaking repertoire.

Critical Thinking Skills

Knowledge of vocabulary alone is not adequate. On all exams, concepts are commonly employed within test items without directly including the term itself. In order to get the item correct, the test-taker must be able to recognize the concept and respond correctly. For example, a client will never say, "I am having a problem with cognitive dissonance." In a real clinical setting, the practitioner with minimum competence is expected to recognize the concept and must respond to it according to accepted standards of practice. All exams are a reflection of real practice founded on an academic vocabulary.

Critical thinking skills emerge from a vocabulary, a history of problem solving, and practice experience. Critical thinking in social work is an approach to decision-making based on the importance of knowing why we accept beliefs or ideas as accurate. It is a process in which we identify the evidence that supports an idea and then evaluate the strength of that evidence prior to making a decision. Critical thinkers accept and understand that there are many types of evidence in the world, and all types of evidence have value in determining beliefs, but all types of evidence should be open to critical evaluation. Good decisions are based on a strong evidentiary foundation. The strongest foundation is usually based in multiple types of evidence (triangulation) that point toward the same conclusion. Thus, effective critical thinking for the exam requires

the test taker to have a professional social work vocabulary, an academic background foundation, and the capacity to transfer this information into practice scenarios.

Addressing Anxiety

Retaking the exam may be the most anxiety-producing experience a professional can face. Failing an exam has powerful consequences for self-esteem. In practical terms, anxiety can produce significant changes in a person's physical and mental health. A manageable amount of anxiety can be helpful in sharpening acuity and heightening perception. Too much anxiety dulls one's intellectual edge. In addition, it affects the ability to rest and sleep.

Under these circumstances, many test takers might be tempted to ask their physicians for anxiety-reducing prescription medication. There is a risk that these medications may have a negative impact on the cognitive processes. For more information regarding the cognitive impact of anxiety-reducing prescriptions, ask a pharmacist. There are other, non-chemical, ways of reducing anxiety, particularly doing something constructive to prepare for the test. Studying and reading are great sedatives. When a person is facing an exam and can't sleep, studying and reading may help.

Another way to reduce anxiety is to familiarize oneself with the format of the exam questions and practice. ASWB offers a paper *Study Guide* that describes the examination process (at the test center) and provides the exam content outline and a practice test. The sample items can be reviewed for the correct answer to each question, and a rationale is provided explaining why social work subject matter experts determined that answer to be correct.

ASWB also has available an online practice examination that is 170 questions in length—150 scored questions and 20 pretest questions—just like the live exam. A social worker who has registered to take one of the examinations may order the online practice test. An access code to the practice exam online will be given, and access is good for 30 days. The actual administration of the examination lasts four hours, and the examination electronically scores itself and reports the score by complete examination results and by each content area. The remainder of the access time can be spent reviewing the questions, getting familiar with how

they are presented, and understanding the rationales for the correct answers.

Content Areas That Need Further Study

When a candidate is unsuccessful in passing the test, the score report that is generated includes the number of items answered correctly in each content area. For example, if someone taking the master's exam got only 10 of the questions correct in the content area "Assessment and Intervention Planning," which accounts for 24 percent of the questions, or 36 of the total of 150, one place to look to improve knowledge is that content area. There are another 26 questions that could be added to the score.

The candidate needs to look at the subcontent areas in that category—biopsychosocial history and collateral data, use of assessment methods and techniques, and intervention planning. The knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSA) statements in those sections are also available, on the ASWB Web site at <http://www.aswb.org>. The KSAs are the actual practice competencies from which questions can be drawn. In that main category, Assessment and Intervention Planning, there are 20 KSAs under the subheading "dealing with use of assessment methods and techniques, and intervention planning." The list begins with "use of collateral resources," "methods used to evaluate collateral resources," and "the process used in problem identification."

Answering the Test Items

Study preparation is one part of taking the exams, but no matter how prepared a candidate is, a thoughtful approach to the questions is essential. This simple model for answering questions on the exam is based on a basic critical thinking process. The following steps for test taking are adapted from a model for critical thinking:

1. Carefully read the test items (clarify what is asked).

The first step to critical thinking is to be sure you understand what another wants you to believe is accurate. We can apply this idea to test taking as spending a few moments thinking about the question in front of you, looking at the words in the question (especially words like FIRST or MOST) and being sure you are clear on what the question is asking.

2. What is the main knowledge needed to answer?

Critical thinking includes identifying the evidence that supports the information being presented. Reflect on what knowledge you need to answer the question. If the question asks about crisis intervention, you probably need to have some knowledge about crisis theory and crisis intervention models. Our recommendation is that you take a moment to reflect on what knowledge you have in this area.

3. Evaluate your knowledge for application to the question.

Evaluate the strength of your knowledge on the topic in the question. If you have limited knowledge, that will affect your process in selecting an answer. One recommendation is that you do not spend too much time on a question when you do not have a strong knowledge base on the topic. On the other hand, too much knowledge on a topic can cause people to over-think an answer. Be sure to keep the first recommendation in mind to be clear on what is asked.

4. What do you think is the correct answer?

Focus on possible answers. In critical thinking, we ask, "What do I believe?" In test taking, it is now time to ask what looks like the right answer. You will be surprised how often you are quite sure what the right answer is at this point.

5. Evaluate all answers in regard to your correct answer.

There is always value in taking this step, in which you evaluate all other answers against the one you think is best. This is a chance to be sure you have selected the best answer and there is not another answer that has a stronger argument.

6. Select the best answer.

In truth, we may not have needed this step, but this is a reminder that once you are sure what the best answer is, you need to be sure you mark it in the correct spot.

7. Be sure to answer all questions.

There is no penalty for guessing if you do not know or are not sure of the answer. Questions left without a marked response are counted as incorrect.

8. Answer the question based only on the information provided in the question.

Sometimes a question will bring to mind a similar situation that the social worker has encountered in practice. The social worker may then be tempted to add this information to that provided in the question. Doing this can lead the social worker to the wrong answer. The correct answer is determined only from the information provided in the question.

Conclusion

The social work licensing examinations are developed for use in the United States and Canada under the guiding principles of psychometrics, which is the specialized field of testing and measurement, and with input from a diverse group of subject matter expert social workers representing gender, geographic, racial, and ethnic diversity, as well as practice diversity. The test content is developed from what beginning practicing social workers tell ASWB that they need to know to do their jobs effectively. The questions are written by trained item writers and reviewed multiple times for accuracy. The questions are also edited for easy readability. The tests are designed to allow social workers to demonstrate that, by passing, they meet standards for minimum competence in social work practice.

The social work licensing examinations are straightforward tests of knowledge and ability. To improve one's score, additional knowledge must be acquired in the content areas indicated as deficient in the score report. Preparation must be systematic and ongoing. Studying intensely the night before the test is

scheduled is unlikely to help the candidate. Anxiety must be managed to stimulate optimal performance, not become paralyzing. It may be helpful to learn stress reduction techniques and practice them before and during the examination administration. Practice in answering questions and understanding how they are written will also help prepare as well as reduce anxiety.

Passing the social work examination is the last step in acquiring a license. It is a demonstration of minimum competence that assures the licensing board and the public that the person holding the license is competent and fit to practice. It is the last gate to be passed on the path to becoming a professional social worker. Take a deep breath and walk through it with success.

Notes: For technical information regarding reliability, please see: Marson, S. M., DeAngelis, D., & Mittal, N. (2009). The Association of Social Work Boards' licensure examinations: Developing reliability and validity. Research on Social Work Practice, 20(1), 87-99.

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