

SHAME IN MEDICINE: THE LOST FOREST

EPISODE GUIDE

EPISODE 4.
PASS/FAIL

the
NOCTURNISTS



How to Use This Guide

Though shame is everywhere in medicine, the topic is taboo, which can make it difficult to discuss. To help, we've prepared discussion guides for each episode of our audio documentary series, *Shame in Medicine: The Lost Forest*, to facilitate conversations between friends, colleagues, and leaders.

This discussion guide is for **Episode 4. Pass/Fail**

You'll find:

- Episode summary
- Notes from behind the scenes
- Discussion questions
- A medical trainee's reflection on the episode
- Additional resources

Lastly, talking about shame can be challenging, emotionally and interpersonally. Please feel free to use our **facilitator toolkit** for leading and organizing conversations around shame. You can find additional resources at thenocturnists-shame.org/engage.



Illustration by **Beppe Conti**



Episode 4. "Pass/Fail" Summary

On the path to medicine, we're constantly taking tests: MCAT, shelf exams, step exams, boards, and more. What are these numbers good for? What are they not good for? What is the emotional impact of these tests, and their scores, on medical learners?

Behind the Scenes

We didn't expect to create an entire episode about shame and testing, but so many of the stories we received were about this topic that it called out for its own spotlight. Here, we hoped to explore not just the pros/cons of using test scores to predict clinician performance, but also the outsized emotional experiences that test scores incite in medical learners, due to the way those scores are used to assign worth and open/close doors to different medical specialties. This episode felt especially relevant to our team, as one of our medical student producers was in the process of studying for Step 2 as we created this episode, and could speak directly to the extreme emotional toll it was exacting on them and so many of their peers.

Discussion Questions

1. How do these stories resonate with your own experience in medicine? How did you respond when you were in similar situations?
2. What parts of yourself cannot be captured in numbers and external assessments?
3. Describe a time where you studied for an exam that would strongly impact your professional career.
4. What was your emotional experience of the studying process? Did your score impact your sense of belonging in the workplace?



A Trainee Reflects on Episode 4. "Pass/Fail"

"This episode dug up some old anxieties for me. I vividly remember my dedicated study period leading up to Step 1. I can recall sitting in my apartment trying to spend a scheduled evening to relax and feeling my heart beating out of my chest. I could not bring myself to relax even when I scheduled it in. My anxiety got so bad I actually ended up moving my test date sooner because I would rather not achieve my desired score or fail than continue to live in the anxiety riddled purgatory that is preparing for a high stakes exam where my entire potential as a physician would be boiled down to an arbitrary 3 digit score. I did pass but I also started my first SSRI by the end of my 3rd year as my anxiety continued to snowball from that moment on. I would say it was "generalized", but honestly it was related to my medical education which just generally consumed most every part of my life at the time.

Reduction of learners to scores, publications, and institutional pedigrees is common in medical education but the seeds of these fruits are sown much earlier. Growing up in a single-parent working class home in rural Tennessee, most people hoped a lot for me; however, they did not expect much from me. A seminal moment of my life occurred my junior year of high school. A tumultuous year that included my mother's second divorce and a devastating house fire gave me the impetus to change something in my life.

I elected to leave my Title I county school in order to attend the #1 ranked public school in the state (at the time) down the road in the next county over. It wasn't easy to get in the door. When my mom first called, they said they were absolutely full and could in no way accept students that did not live in the district. My mother was able to work into the conversation that I had taken the ACT the previous spring as part of the Duke TIP program and had received a passing score. Something unlocked when they realized this kid from the sticks could get into college as a high school sophomore. My name was passed along and luckily a family friend just happened to know the principal through the local Rotary Club and was able to advocate on my behalf. After 2 weeks of hopeful waiting, I got the call that I would have a chance to attend Oak Ridge High School. It was a ray of hope in an extremely dark time in my life, but it was also fraught with even more anxieties. I knew no one and was going from the proverbial small pond to big pond. I didn't know if I could even hack it given these students came from the families of engineers, PhD scientists, doctors, dentists, and lawyers all the while being afforded every possible educational privilege of a large well-funded school system.

My first day I remember getting to my 5th period class (AP US history) early. It was the first class after lunch and I felt safer sitting in an empty classroom than I did in the milieu of hundreds of kids I didn't know. The teacher was there, and they looked perplexed when they saw me. He asked if I was the new student from Oliver Springs. I responded in the affirmative. *(Continued on next page.)*



A Trainee Reflects on Episode 4. "Pass/Fail" (cont.)

They asked that I speak to him after class. I waited for the other students to filter out, thinking that this was going to be my "O captain my captain" moment where a faculty member saw my previously untapped potential and took me under their wing to help me unlock it. What actually happened was the teacher wanted to express their immense concern to me that I was not academically prepared for their course as it was the most difficult offering in the entire school. They said my coursework at my previous school paled in comparison to what their students had been doing since the time they were in 8th grade. They emphasized that I would be best suited to transfer to the non-advanced placement course. I remember holding back the tears as I simply said that I would still like to try my hand at it. I proceeded to ace the course and got a perfect score on the AP Exam. I made a point to pull the teacher aside at the end of the year and asked them to recount the first time we had met and what they had said. They apologized for thinking so little of me. I thanked them for the sense of spite which fueled my pursuits that year, but I also forgave them and thanked them for such a rigorous course which was the reason I came to the school in the first place.

Learners should never be reduced to one output or to an aggregate of standardized assessments that fail to capture the intricacies of their lived educational experience. They are nuanced and complex. Learners that have matriculated to UME and GME institutions represent the most talented and hardworking among us, however, their test scores and GPAs don't tell their stories."



Resources

Listen:

Academic Medicine Podcast, [Shame Experiences in Premedical and Medical Students](#).

Read:

Bynum WE IV, Teunissen PW, Varpio L. In the “shadow of shame”: A phenomenological exploration of the nature of shame experiences in medical students. *Academic Medicine*. 2021.

Bynum WE 4th, Uijtdehaage S, Artino AR Jr, Fox JW. [The Psychology of Shame: A Resilience Seminar for Medical Students](#). MedEdPORTAL. 2020.

Cuneo C. N. [Make the Step 1 test for medical students pass/fail](#). STAT. 2019.

