

Managing Test Anxiety

What does test anxiety feel like?

- Some students experience mainly physical symptoms, such as headaches, nausea, faintness, feeling too hot or too cold, rapid heartbeat, hyperventilating, etc.
- Others experience more emotional symptoms, such as crying easily, feeling irritable, or getting frustrated quickly.
- Test anxiety may affect thinking ability; it can cause you to blank out or have racing thoughts that are difficult to control or tune out, thus disrupting concentration.
- Many students feel some level of anxiety when writing exams and most can cope with some anxiety and bring it down to a manageable level. **If you are not able to manage your anxiety, or if you consistently experience high levels of anxiety prior to and/or during tests and exams, we strongly encourage you to speak with a counselor or physician about support services; contact the Counseling & Testing Center (201 Frazee Hall, 257-8701) .**

What can you do to manage test anxiety?

- Be **well prepared** for the test.
- Include as much **self-testing** in your review as possible—*over learn* material.
- Maintain a **healthy lifestyle**: get enough sleep regularly, good nutrition, exercise, some personal "down" time, and a *reasonable* amount of social interaction.
- Set the alarm clock and then get a **good night's sleep** before the exam.
- As you anticipate the exam, **think positively**, e.g., "I can do OK on this exam. I've attended class, reviewed regularly, studied thoroughly, and I know my stuff."
- On the night before the exam, make sure to **collect anything that you will need**: pen, pencil, ruler, eraser, calculator... *double check the exam time and location*.
- Get to the exam **on time – a little early, but not too early**.
- **Don't talk to other students** about the exam just before going into the exam.
- Sit in a **location** in the exam room where you will not be distracted.
- As the exam is distributed, **calm yourself down** by taking slow deep breaths.
- Make sure to listen to instructions and **carefully read instructions** on the exam.
- As you work on the exam, **focus only on the exam**, not on other students.
- If you feel very anxious, take a few minutes to **calm yourself down**. Stretch your arms and legs and then relax them again. Take a few slow deep breaths. Do some positive internal self-talk; say to yourself, "I can do this." Then direct your focus to the questions; link questions to their corresponding lecture and/or chapter, visualize your review materials.
- Engage in "**thought stopping**" if you find that you are worrying a lot, mentally comparing yourself to your peers, or thinking about what others may say about your performance on this exam, re-direct your thoughts to positive scripts.
- If the exam is more difficult than you anticipated, try to **focus and do your best**. Making thoughtful, educated choices may result in a reasonable grade! Learn from the experience.
- When the exam is over, **treat yourself**. If you don't have any other commitments, maybe you can go to a movie with a friend. If you have to study for other exams, you may have to postpone a larger break, but a brief break can be refreshing.

Manage test anxiety so that your performance on a test reflects your real progress in that course.

If interfering levels of test anxiety persist, however, talk to a counselor for some specialized help.

Preparation Can Help

- Preparation is the best way to minimize anxiety. Consider the following:
 - Avoid "cramming" for a test. Trying to master a several weeks or a semester's worth of material the day before the test is a poor way to learn and can easily produce anxiety. Just think...if you could learn it in a few days, they'd teach it in a few days.
 - Combine all the information you have been presented throughout the semester and work on mastering the main concepts of the course, adding more detail with each review.
 - When studying for the test, predict what questions may be asked and try to answer them by *integrating* ideas from lectures, notes, texts, and supplementary readings.
 - If you are unable to cover all the material given throughout the semester, select important portions then set a goal of presenting your in-depth knowledge of this information on the test.

Don't Forget the Basics

Students preparing for tests often neglect basic biological, emotional, and social needs. To do your best, you must attend to these needs. Think of yourself as a total person — not just a test taker. Remember:

- Continue the habits of good nutrition and regular exercise. Continue a *balance* of academics, your recreational pursuits, and social activities — all contribute to your emotional and physical well-being.
- Follow a moderate pace when studying; vary your work when possible and take breaks when needed.
- Get plenty of sleep the night before the test — lack of adequate sleep slows thought processing and interferes with memory; when you are overly tired you will not function at your absolute best.
- Once you feel you are adequately prepared for the test, do something relaxing.

During the Test: Basic Strategies

Before you begin answering the questions on the test:

- First review the entire test; then read the directions *twice*. Try to think of the test as an opportunity to show the professor what you know; then begin to organize your time efficiently. Work on the easiest portions of the test first, sections that are worth the most points next, and then work through the rest.
- For essay questions, construct a short outline for yourself — then begin your answer with a summary sentence. This will help you avoid the rambling and repetition which can irritate the person grading the test. For short-answer questions, answer only what is asked — short and to the point. Re-read the question to be sure you answered it completely. If you have difficulty with an item involving a written response, show what knowledge you can. If proper terminology evades you, show what you know with your own words, examples from class, and illustrative points.
- For multiple choice questions, read the question carefully and answer it in your mind, then read *all* the options first, then eliminate the most obvious. Unsure of the correct response? Rely on your first impression. Beware of qualifying words such as "best," "except," "not," "only," "always," or "most."
- With instructor permission, have a blank piece of paper to do a "brain dump" of formulas, key terms, lists, outlines, or cues for yourself so as to clear your mind and have for reference during the test.
- No need to rush through the test. Wear a watch and check it periodically as you pace yourself. If it appears you will be unable to finish the entire test, concentrate on those portions which you can answer well. If you have time left, go back and work on the more difficult questions you skipped earlier. Recheck your answers only if you have extra time — do not talk yourself out of answers.

For more test-taking strategies, come to The Study on the 3rd Floor Commons.