

Reducing Test Anxiety

Before the Test

- Be well prepared for the test: use self-testing and scheduled study time to avoid cramming
- Get a full night's sleep the night before the test and eat a light meal before the exam
- Get to the exam on time: not too late but not too early
- Be cautious about talking to other students about the exam, their nerves can become your nerves

During the Test

- Sit in a seat where you feel comfortable, avoid sitting near other nervous students
- As the test is distributed, take 5 slow, deep breathes and engage in positive self-talk
- Slowly and carefully read the instructions
- As you take the exam, focus only on the exam, not on what other people are doing, how long they are taking or on past/future exams
- If you feel anxious during the test, take a moment to breathe deeply, stretch your arms and legs, get comfortable again and remind yourself that you are prepared and are doing a good job

General Tips:

- **Use a behavioral relaxation technique to relax your body**
Behavioral techniques such as deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation and visualization can help you achieve a physiological state of relaxation, when you do, your mind will follow suit. Like any skill, relaxation techniques have to be regularly practiced for you to become adept at using them to relax.
- **Use a cognitive approach to relax your mind**
It is essential to talk to yourself in ways that lower rather than raise anxiety, to develop some "counter-propaganda" to challenge the negative predictions with which you are indoctrinating yourself. You need to talk to yourself in ways that change your self-talk from negative to positive, from despairing to realistically hopeful. Remember, test anxiety is when your worries get in the way of showing your professor what you know -- so, by definition, YOU DO KNOW THE MATERIAL, at least sufficiently to pass the test if not necessarily to ace it, and you need to remind yourself of this.
 - **Ask yourself how real is the threat?**
Anxiety is a normal, natural biological and psychological reaction to a real or perceived threat. This means that the test anxious student perceives the test as a threat of some sort. If you are prone to test anxiety, an important step in overcoming it is to try and discover in what way you perceive the test as a threat to you. For example, a test might be perceived as a threat to your self-esteem,

parental approval, financial aid, or career plans. Next, try and rationally evaluate if the threat is as real or as serious as you think. Most test-anxious students exaggerate the "threat" posed by a test. Ask yourself: Am I really a worthless person if I don't get a good grade on this test? Will my parents really disown me? Will this one test, in one course, in one semester really derail my whole future?

- **Identify and challenge core negative beliefs and self-defeating thoughts.**

The test anxious student essentially believes "I can't do this" I'm stupid and so I'm going to do horribly on this test and when I do, that will be absolutely terrible and I won't be able to handle it." It is this core belief and the self-defeating thoughts that flow from it (and not the test itself) that raises anxiety, which in turns lowers performance -- which only strengthens the core belief for the next time round, thereby setting up a self-fulfilling prophecy. Thus, this core belief and its associated thoughts must be aggressively challenged for anxiety to go down.

In that core belief you can detect both negativity (I can't do this, I won't be able to handle it) and catastrophizing or blowing things out of proportion (doing poorly on the test is terrible). You can challenge negativity by reminding yourself that you do understand the material, are not stupid, can do it, have done well on similar tests in the past, have coped with disappointments in the past just fine, etc. You can challenge catastrophizing by reminding yourself that it would not be the end of the world to fail a test, that one test doesn't determine one's whole life, that there's a difference between being a someone-who-failed-a-something-at-a-sometime vs. being a "failure," and that there is difference between disappointment and despair. No one is happy if they don't do as well on a test as they'd like and it's okay to be disappointed -- but don't escalate discontent into despondent desperation.

Another core belief some test anxious students have is "I must achieve competence or perfection in all that I do". Perfectionism is, of course, impossible to obtain, and so to demand it of yourself or to equate "success" with "perfect performance" is to guarantee "failure". Challenge perfectionism by saying "I don't need to be perfect to be okay" I just need to do the best that I can and give this test my best shot under current circumstances.

- Get some exercise or physical activity. Exercise is a great stress reliever and can help re-charge your mental batteries.