

Study Skills Program

Improving Exam Performance Managing Test Anxiety

- ***What is Test Anxiety?***

Test anxiety occurs when people get nervous before and during exams and their bodies speed up. As such, test anxiety is not inherently harmful; when positively directed, this increase in energy actually enhances exam performance. Only when this energy is directed away from positive performance does it become a problem.

- ***How do I know if Test Anxiety is causing problems?***

Test anxiety is causing problems if your anxious state is resulting in poor performance. "Blanking" on answers, physical symptoms, inability to focus your eyes on the page, and self-doubt can indicate a test anxiety problem.

A common example of test anxiety: you see a question, know the answer but cannot remember it, struggle with the question, give up, turn in the exam, leave the room, and remember the correct answer once you leave the exam setting. People often believe if they had just stayed a little bit longer, they would have been able to correctly answer the question. However, since the problem is being solved by the very act of leaving the stressful situation, staying longer would not fix the problem. Only by managing test anxiety during the exam can the student correctly answer the question.

- ***How do I manage my test anxiety?***

Successfully managing test anxiety is a matter of giving yourself two messages: (1) I can do this; and (2) I'm relaxed. When combined, the message "I'm relaxed because I can do this" focuses your test anxiety toward productive test taking rather than on interference with memory.

- ***What techniques will help me?***

There are three techniques that will help you to believe "I'm relaxed because I can do this" and focus test anxiety toward positive performance. These three techniques work best in combination.

1. ***Positive Self-Talk***

We process information and evaluate it via a process that can be described as "self-talk." This "self-talk" will tell us whether or not we believe we will succeed or fail. If you tell yourself you are a poor student and will fail your exam, you are likely to be right. Instead, remind yourself of the time you spent listening in class, doing homework, and learning the information for the exam. In this way, you will focus yourself on the knowledge you have, rather than on the additional information that you could have learned. This attitude will help you believe "I can do it."

2. ***Relaxing Imagery***

We can process images at the same time that we process words. When we do so, we put the words and images together. Thus, picturing yourself in a low-stress environment where you feel relaxed and rejuvenated (such as tanning on a beach) can help you believe "I'm relaxed." In conjunction with positive self-talk, the combined message is formed.

3. ***Physiological Techniques to Slow the Body***

These two techniques help reinforce the relaxing imagery by physiologically forcing your body into a

more relaxed state. First, use deep breathing (inhale for three seconds, hold it for three seconds, exhale for three seconds). Second, pick a muscle or muscle group and flex it as hard as you can for 30 seconds. This flexing will cause adrenaline (epinephrine) to flow through your body. When you relax the muscle, the chemical that counters adrenaline (norepinephrine) will flow through your body, biochemically relaxing you.

Reducing Test Anxiety

Anxiety is something that everyone experiences to some extent in any stressful situation. For students, one of the most frequent stressful or anxiety-provoking experiences is taking tests. All students may feel some effects of the anxiety associated with exams. Anxious feelings can range from a nervous feeling to forgetting and blanking out or actually becoming physically ill. Slight amounts of anxiety frequently result in improved test performance, but anxiety becomes a problem when it begins to adversely affect a person's performance on the exam.

There are three main areas students can work on to reduce test anxiety when it begins to interfere with test performance.

Mental Preparation

Mental Preparation is of primary concern in dealing with test anxiety.

Before the exam, the student can do several things:

1. Be thoroughly prepared. A confident knowledge of course material is the first step in reducing test anxiety.
2. Review material. Review should be spaced throughout the week. This aids memory development and retention.
3. Don't cram. A final review is fine, but trying to cover two months of material in two hours is not an effective way to prepare for an exam. Begin your review process early to help reduce last minute anxiety.
4. Arrive at the exam location early. Relax, and don't talk about the test with friends--frantic reviews are often more confusing than helpful.

During the exam, be test-wise and have a plan for taking the exam.

1. Some initial tension is normal. Generally, when you receive the test, stop for a moment, take a few deep breaths and exhale slowly, relax, and then start reviewing directions and test items.
2. In a timed test, make a schedule for answering questions. Allow more time for higher point questions. Pace yourself to answer as many questions as possible.

3. Don't spend too much time on any one question. If you can't come up with the answer, quickly move on. You can always come back if you have time. Higher scores will usually result from trying all items.
4. If you get stumped on a question, move on to questions you can answer. This will get your mental process and concentration ready for more difficult questions.

Physical Preparation

Physical Preparation is a second important area to consider in reducing test anxiety.

1. **Before the exam**, develop good study habits and techniques. Adequate food and rest are an important part of any study program, especially before an exam. When people are tired, they become frustrated easier and experience more anxiety.
2. **During the exam**, find a place where you will have some privacy, that is well-lighted and comfortable. Bring everything you will need (scratch paper, pencils, calculator, etc.). Avoid locating yourself near doors or other high distraction areas.

Relaxation Techniques

Relaxation Techniques are a third way you can reduce anxiety. When used with mental and physical preparation, relaxation before and during an exam can aid retention and improve test performance.

1. Let your body relax, put your arms at your side, close your eyes, and let your mind go blank.
2. Beginning with your head, first tense the muscles in the forehead and scalp for about 10 seconds. Then let them relax completely. Think about the difference and concentrate on making those muscles relax more and more.
3. After about thirty seconds, repeat the process with the muscles of your face and jaw, neck, shoulders, arms, chest, etc., until you reach your toes.
4. While continuing to relax, imagine those situations where you feel most tense and anxious. If you become anxious, stop imagining and relax again. Repeat the process of relaxation and imagining until you feel no anxiety while imagining.

5. Practice relaxing at times when you feel anxious--while studying, reviewing, or actually taking the exam (if time permits). This will reduce tension and help clear your mind for study and review.