

TEST ANXIETY

Test anxiety is an issue that many students face at one time or another. It is important to learn to recognize test anxiety and learn how to deal with the anxiety more effectively. Anxiety is a normal human feeling that is part of life, and can often serve as a form of adrenaline (e.g., butterflies before making a speech or performing on stage). The anxiety can help by providing alertness and readiness; however, excessive anxiety can result in stress and hinder an individual's performance. When "situational anxiety" (e.g. Test Anxiety) occurs, it may cause physical distress, emotional upset, and concentration difficulties. If test taking anxiety persists & becomes problematic, seek assistance from the school counselor or other professional resources available on campus.

SYMPTOMS OF TEST ANXIETY

- Fear of failing before arriving to take the exam.
- Feeling tension as exam is being passed out.
- Physical symptoms: increased heart rate, shortness of breath, perspiring, dry mouth, muscle tension, and etc.
- Negative thinking such as: *I'm going to fail, I am dumb, and I shouldn't even bother taking the exam.*
- "Blanking out" on information that you studied.
- Recalling information upon leaving the class room or a short period later, that you "blanked out on" during the exam.
- Frustrated with your grade on the exam because you know you were well prepared.

TIPS FOR REDUCING TEST ANXIETY

- Prepare for the exam ahead of time. "Cramming" is a big culprit of test anxiety.
- Get plenty of rest and sleep the night before the exam.
- Don't forget to eat the day of the exam, preferably something nutritious.
- Avoid arriving too early or late to the exam.
- Avoid listening to others or discussing the exam with others, while you're waiting for the exam. The anxiety of others can "rub off" and suddenly you begin to doubt yourself.
- During the test, don't forget to breathe! Take deep breaths to help you relax.
- While you are taking deep breaths, replace negative thoughts with positive thoughts. Use statements such as "this is only one test," "I am familiar with this material," "I have the ability to do this," "this test does not reflect on my intelligence," etc.
- Tense and relax different muscle groups to help reduce body tension. Change body position.
- Work on the easiest portions of the test first. Don't get bogged down and worry about questions you don't know; move on to the next question. The answer may come to you or you may get clues from other exam questions.
- Don't rush through the test, but work at a comfortable pace and don't worry about how far along classmates are on the test.
- Reward yourself when you are finished with the exam. Do not dwell on your mistakes.

THE FIVE CAUSES OF TEST ANXIETY:

- Test anxiety is a learned behavior.
- The association of grades and personal worth causes test anxiety.
- Test anxiety can come from a feeling of a lack of control.
- Test anxiety can be caused by a teacher embarrassing a student.
- Being placed into course above your ability can cause test anxiety.
- Test anxiety develops from fear of alienation from parents, family, and friends due to poor grades.
- Test anxiety can be caused by timed tests and the fear of not finishing the test, even if one can do all the problems

THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF TEST ANXIETY:

1. One type of test anxiety is somatic, which is what you are feeling.
2. The second type of test anxiety is cognitive, which is what you are thinking.

TWO REASONS STUDENTS LEAVE THE TEST ROOM EARLY INSTEAD OF CHECKING THEIR ANSWERS:

1. Their anxiety level gets so high that they have to leave.
2. They don't want to be the last one in the classroom.

THE TWELVE MYTHS OF TEST ANXIETY:

- Students are born with test anxiety.
- Test anxiety is a mental illness.
- Test anxiety cannot be reduced.
- Any level of test anxiety is bad.
- All students who are not prepared have test anxiety.
- Students with test anxiety cannot learn math.
- Students who are well prepared will not have test anxiety.
- Very intelligent students and students taking high-level courses, such as calculus, do not have test anxiety.
- Attending class and doing my homework should reduce all my test anxiety.
- Being told to relax during a test will make you relaxed.
- Doing nothing about test anxiety will make it go away.
- Reducing test anxiety will guarantee better grades.

HOW TO REDUCE TEST ANXIETY

RELAXATION TECHNIQUES

There are both short-term and long-term relaxation response techniques that help control emotional (somatic) and worry (cognitive) test anxiety. Once these procedures are learned, the relaxation response will take the place of an anxiety response.

THE TENSING AND DIFFERENTIAL RELAXATION METHOD

1. Put your feet flat on the floor.
2. With your hands, grab underneath the chair.
3. Push down with your feet and pull up on your chair at the same time for about five seconds.
4. Relax for five to ten seconds.
5. Repeat the procedure two or three times.
6. Relax all your muscles except the ones that are actually used to take the test.

THE PALMING METHOD

1. Close and cover your eyes using the center of the palms of your hands.
2. Prevent your hands from touching your eyes by resting the lower parts of your on your cheekbones and placing your fingers on your forehead. Your eyeballs must not be touched, rubbed or handled in any way.
3. Think of some real or imaginary relaxing scene. Mentally visualize this scene. Picture the scene as if you were actually there, looking through your own eyes.
4. Visualize this relaxing scene for one to two minutes.

DEEP BREATHING

1. Sit straight up in your chair in a good posture position.
2. Slowly inhale through your nose.
3. As you inhale, first fill the lower section of your lungs and work your way up to the upper part of your lungs.
4. Hold your breath for a few seconds.
5. Exhale slowly through your mouth.
6. Wait a few seconds and repeat the cycle.

LONG-TERM RELAXTION TECHNIQUES

The cue-controlled relaxation response technique is the best long-term relaxation technique. It is presented on side two of the audiocassette *How To Reduce Test Anxiety* (Nolting, 1986). Cue-controlled relaxation means you can induce your own relaxation based on repeating

certain cue words to yourself. In essence, you are taught to relax and then silently repeat cue words, such as "I am relaxed." After enough practice you can relax during tests.

NEGATIVE SELF-TALK

Negative self-talk (cognitive anxiety) is defined as the negative statements you tell yourself before and during tests. Negative self-talk causes students to lose confidence and to give up on tests. Students need to change their negative self-talk to positive self-talk without making unrealistic statements.

During tests, positive self-talk can build confidence and decrease your test anxiety. Using positive self-talk before a test can help reduce your test anxiety and improve your grades.

EXAMPLES OF NEGATIVE SELF-TALK:

- "No matter what I do, I will not pass the course."
- "I am no good at math, so why should I try?"
- "I cannot remember the answers or I have forgotten how to do the problems. I am going to fail this test."
- "I failed this course last semester, and I am going to flunk out again this semester."

EXAMPLES OF POSITIVE SELF-TALK

- "I failed the course last semester, but I can now use my study/ math skills to pass this course."
- "I went blank on the last test, but I now know how to reduce test anxiety."
- "I know that with hard work, I will pass math."
- "I prepared for this test and will do the best I can."
- "I feel good about myself and my abilities. I am not going to worry about that difficult problem. I'm going to use all my test time and check for careless errors. Even if I don't get the grade I want on this test, it is not the end of the world."

THOUGHT-STOPPING TECHNIQUES

Some students have difficulty stopping their negative self-talk. These students cannot just tell themselves to eliminate those thoughts. These students need to use a thought-stopping technique to overcome their worry and become relaxed.

To stop your thoughts in the classroom or during a test, silently shout to yourself "Stop" or "Stop thinking about that." After your *silent shout*, either relax yourself or repeat one of your positive self-talk statements. You may have to *shout* to yourself several times during a test or while doing homework to control negative self-talk. After every shout, use a different relaxation technique/scene or positive self-talk statement.

Thought stopping works because it interrupts the worry response before it can cause high anxiety or negative emotions. During the interruption, you can replace negative self-talk with positive self-talk statements or relaxation. Students with high worry anxiety should practice this technique three days to one week before taking a test. Contact the campus counselor if you have additional questions about how to reduce test anxiety/negative self-talk statements.

REFERENCE:

Paul D. Nolting, Ph.D., *Math Study Skills Workbook, Your Guide to Reducing Test Anxiety and Improving Study Strategies*, 2000 by Houghton Mifflin Company.