**Test Anxiety**

**Introduction**

Most students experience some level of anxiety during an exam. However, when anxiety begins to affect exam performance it has become a problem.

**What Causes Test Anxiety**

* Lack of preparation as indicated by:
* cramming the night before the exam
* poor time management
* failure to organize text information
* poor study habits
* Worrying about the following:
* past performance on exams
* how friends and other students are doing
* the negative consequences of failure

**Physical Signs of Test Anxiety**

During an exam, as in any stressful situations, a student may experience any of the following bodily changes:

* perspiration
* sweaty palms
* headache
* upset stomach
* rapid heart beat
* tense muscles

**Effects of Test Anxiety**

* Nervousness:
* Having difficulty reading and understanding the questions on the exam paper
* Having difficulty organizing your thoughts
* Having difficulty retrieving key words and concepts when answering essay questions
* Doing poorly on an exam even though you know the material
* Mental Blocking:
* Going blank on questions
* Remembering the correct answers as soon as the exam is over

**How to Reduce Test Anxiety**

* Study and know the material well enough so that you can recall it even if you are under stress.
* Learn and practice good time management and avoid:
* laziness
* procrastination
* day dreaming
* Build confidence by studying throughout the semester and avoid cramming the night before the exam.
* Learn to concentrate on the material you are studying by:
* generating questions from your textbooks and lecture notes
* focusing on key words, concepts and examples in your textbooks and lecture notes
* making charts and outlines which organize the information in your notes and textbooks
* Use relaxation techniques, for example, taking long deep breaths to relax the body and reduce stress

**The Immediate Environment**

The environment in which you study can have a big effect on how efficient your study time is. Check your place of study for the following conditions:

* Noise 🡪 Minimize distracting noise. Some people need some sound and some like silence. Find what works for you
* Interruptions 🡪 Culprits are family and friends. Consider a "do not disturb sign" and turning on your answering machine. You can catch up with folks later
* Lighting 🡪 75 watt bulbs are best, but not too close and placed opposite the dominant hand
* Temperature 🡪 Better cool than warm
* Neatness 🡪 Have plenty of room to work; don't be cramped. Your study time will go better if you take a few minutes at the start to straighten things up
* Comfort 🡪 A desk and straight-backed chair is usually best. Don't get too comfortable--a bed is a place to sleep, not study
* Equipment 🡪 Have everything (book, pencils, paper, coffee, dictionary, typewriter, calculator, tape recorder, etc.) close at hand. Don't spend your time jumping up and down to get things

**Preparing for or Anticipating Test Anxiety**

* What is it you have to do? Focus on dealing with it.
* Just take one step at a time.
* Think about what you can do about it. That's better than getting anxious.
* No negative or panicky self-statements; just think rationally.
* Don't worry; worrying won't help anything.

**Confronting and Handling Test Anxiety**

* Don't think about fear; just think about what you have to do.
* Stay relevant.
* Relax; you're in control. Take a slow, deep breath.
* You should expect some anxiety; it's a reminder not to panic and to relax and cope steadily with the situation.
* Tenseness can be an ally, a friend; it's a cue to cope.

**Coping with the Feeling of Being Overwhelmed**

* When the fear comes, just pause.
* Keep the focus on the present; what is it you have to do?
* You should expect your fear to rise some.
* Don't try to eliminate fear totally; just keep it manageable.
* You can convince yourself to do it. You can reason your fear away.
* It's not the worst thing that can happen.
* Do something that will prevent you from thinking about fear.
* Describe what is around you. That way you won't think about worrying.

**Reinforcing Self-Statements**

* It worked! You did it!
* It wasn't as bad as you expected.
* You made more out of the fear than it was worth.
* You're getting better. You're learning to cope more smoothly.
* You can be pleased with your progress.
* You like how you handled it. You can be proud of it.

(Adapted from Asserting Yourself, Bower, Sharon Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1976.)

**List of Self Verbalizations**

The list below contains some common thoughts and worries which many test anxious people have. Check those which you can identify with most. Feel free to add statements which more accurately reflect what usually goes on in your head.

**Top of Form**

**A. Worry About Performance**

I should have studied more...I'll never get through.
I just want to finish and get out of here and hope for the best.
I don't know anything...what's the matter with me.
My minds a blank...I'll never get the answer...I must really be stupid.
I can't remember a thing...this always happens to me...I never do well on anything.
Only 10 minutes left...there are so many questions...I'll never get through everything.
I knew this stuff yesterday...what's wrong with me.
My mind's a blank...I'm just not cut out for this.
This stuff is easy...I should get everything right.
This is terrible, absolutely the worst test I've ever had.
I'm just a no good, terrible, worthless person.

**B. Worry about Bodily Reactions**

I'm sick...I'll never get through.
I'm sweating all over...it's really hot in here.
My hands are shaking again...can't even hold the lousy pen.
My stomach's going crazy...churning and jumping.
Here it comes...I'm getting really tense again...normal people just don't get like this.

C. Worry About How Others Are Doing

I know everyone's doing better than I am.
I must be the dumbest one in the class.
I'm going to be the last one done again...I must really be stupid.
No one else seems to be having trouble...am I the only one?

**D. Worry About Possible Negative Consequences:**

If I fail this test, I'll:
Fail this module
never get a good grade
never graduate on time
never get to be a doctor
my family (or friends, boyfriend/girlfriend, teacher, etc.) will really be disappointed in me...I'll never be able to face them again
everyone will think I'm stupid...I'll really be embarrassed



**Bottom of Form**

**Goal Setting**

* Be sure your goals are your own. It's your life. Do what means most to you. Self-set goals are better motivators than those imposed by others.
* Put goals in writing. This will lessen the odds of losing sight of your goals in the shuffle of daily activity. Writing goals also increases your commitment.
* Make your goals challenging but attainable. Good goals are neither too easy nor impossible. They should cause you to stretch and grow. A challenging, attainable goal will hold your interest and keep you motivated.
* Goals should be as specific and measurable as possible. Don't say, "I want a better job." Ask yourself: What kind of job? Making how much money? In what industry? Living where? Requiring what kind of skill? By when? Specify clearly what you want and you will save an enormous amount of time and effort.
* Every goal should have a target date. Never think of a goal as a goal until you set a deadline for accomplishment.
* Check your major goals for compatibility. Don't fall into the trap of setting major goals where the achievement of one will prevent the attainment of another.
* Frequently revise and update your goals. As a growing person your needs will change over time, and this means goals will have to be modified, discarded and added from time to time. Plan flexibly. Don't think of your goals as carved in stone.

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