Test Anxiety

Test anxiety is not uncommon among college students. It can be quite distressing and sometimes debilitating both personally and academically. Students suffering from this often feel panicked by exams, and sometimes even “draw a blank” during a test despite knowing the material well. Usually, test anxiety can be fairly quickly and effectively resolved, but sometimes it is part of a larger issue with self-confidence in general.

Test Anxiety Continuum

RELATIONSHIP OF VARIOUS FACTORS TO TEST ANXIETY

- Class
- Nature of Test
- Hx with test taking
- Depth of prep.
- Level of Self-conf.
The Paradox of Anxiety

Everyone needs some level of stress or anxiety in order to motivate and energize them. However, if these levels become too high, they can interfere with academic performance. Moreover, each person has his or her own point at which stress begins to interfere. The information below will help you to determine what your optimum stress level is and provide some tips on how to manage stress when it goes "over the edge."

Stress chart:

You will notice that stress improves performance up to a certain point, and then performance begins to diminish. When the point of diminishing returns is reached is varies from individual to individual. Indicators that you may have reached your "overload point" include:

- Feeling unable to engage with your work
- Feeling unable to divide the work into manageable units
- Feelings of panic
- Feeling unable to absorb/learn any more material
Feeling as if the work is "the enemy"

REDUCING TEST ANXIETY [Modified from material prepared by Marie Kouthoofd]

THE DAYS BEFORE THE TEST: Test preparation is very idiosyncratic for people. My favorite mode was to talk to myself since I’m a very aural learner. The below may or not fit for you. What’s most important is be aware of what works best for you.

- Set aside time to study
- Try to get a sense of what kinds of questions will be asked [e.g., true/false, short answer, multiple choice, etc.]
- Some teachers will provide a study guide—utilize this as much as possible
- Break down the exam preparation into manageable units
- Focus your preparation; you may be setting yourself up for anxiety if you expect to learn “everything”
- Exam preparation should not only include what you don’t know well but acknowledgement of what you do know well
- What degree of specificity will be required to pass the exam; some teachers will ask questions such that detailed learning is required, so be prepared
- Trite as it sounds, think positively; it’s easy to get worried if you run into things you don’t understand well and launch into statements such as, “I don’t know anything!” Again, reinforce what you do know and focus on what you don’t know.
THE DAY OF THE TEST: As with test preparation, test day rituals are very personalized. Again, for me, arriving at the test site early was important, so I could get my favorite seat and get over the initial nervousness that just came from being in the test room.

- Avoid caffeine if it just makes you nervous as opposed to energizing you.
- Give yourself time to feel composed and to be on time for the exam.
- Avoid anxious classmates.
- Take a walk/exercise if this calms you down and time permits
- Listen to some music
- Talk to a friend
- Use positive self-talk [e.g., I’ve prepared for the exam/I can calm myself if I get nervous/Just relax and remember what you’ve learned]
- Get enough sleep [whatever this means for you]
- Common wisdom says you can’t learn new things the day of the test, but review may be helpful; you may even want to learn new things if this works for you

DURING THE TEST: Well here you are, the moment of truth has arrived. Now, what the !@#$ do you do; above all, DON’T PANIC! Consider the following immediate steps:

- Look over the entire test, READ THE DIRECTIONS
- Focus your attention on the test
- Each question is a task; define the requirements of the task and fulfill them
- If you start to feel anxious, practice relaxation techniques. Use anxiety as a cue to engage in positive action, not to worry
- Use positive self-talk

Steps in Coping with Fear or Anxiety

1. Preparing
   - What do I have to do?
2. Confronting and coping

- One step at a time: I can handle the situation
- Try not to focus on fear and anxiety; just think about what I have to do—stay relevant.
- This feeling is a normal feeling.
- It is just a reminder to use my coping skills.
- Relax; I'm in control.
- Take a slow deep breath.
- Ah, good.

3. Dealing with temporary difficulties

- When fear comes, just pause.
- Keep the focus on the present; what do I have to do?

4. Be prepared to relax if

- You start to lose focus
- You begin to forget material you know
- You begin to engage in negative self-talk [e.g., I know I'm failing/I'll never get through this, etc.]
- You can't understand what the question calls for because you are too anxious to break it down

5. Keep in mind:

- Each question is a task.
- I can complete tasks if I break them into small, manageable units.
- What is the task asking of me?
- What is my plan for completing the task?
AGAIN:

- Avoid Stress Engendering Thoughts
  Thoughts such as "I haven't studied enough" and "I don't know the material" only increase your anxiety level.
- If you draw a blank, don't panic
  It happens all the time. Take a few minutes to sit back and wait for it to come back to you or move on until it does.
- Don't look around to see what your classmates are doing
  How is that going to help! Focus on what you are doing.
- EXPECTING PERFECTION IS A SET UP!