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Handling Test Anxiety

From the University of Illinois

Generally, we all experience some level of nervousness or tension before tests or other important events in our lives. A little nervousness can actually help motivate us; however, too much of it can become a problem — especially if it interferes with our ability to prepare for and perform on tests.

Dealing with Anxiety

The first step is to distinguish between two types of anxiety. If your anxiety is a direct result of lack of preparation, consider it a normal, rational reaction. However, if you are adequately prepared but still panic, "blank out," and/or overreact, your reaction is *not* rational. While both of these anxieties may be considered normal (anyone can have them) it is certainly helpful to know how to overcome their effects.

Preparation Can Help

- Preparation is the best way to minimize rationale anxiety. Consider the following:
- Avoid "cramming" for a test. Trying to master a semester's worth of material the day before the test is a poor way to learn and can easily produce anxiety. This is *not* the time to try to learn a great deal of material.
- Combine all the information you have been presented throughout the semester and work on mastering the main concepts of the course.
- When studying for the test, ask yourself what questions may be asked and try to answer them by *integrating* ideas from lectures, notes, texts, and supplementary readings.



The Bottom Line:

Taking tests can be very stressful. You can deal with the anxiety with these tips and make test taking easier.

- If you are unable to cover all the material given throughout the semester, select important portions that you can cover well. Set a goal of presenting your knowledge of this information on the test.

Changing Your Attitude

Improving your perspective of the test-taking experience can actually help you enjoy studying and may improve your performance. Don't overplay the importance of the grade — it is not a reflection of your self-worth nor does it predict your future success. Try the following:

- Remember that the most reasonable expectation is to try to show as much of what you know as you can.
- Remind yourself that a test is only a test — there will be others.
- Avoid thinking of yourself in irrational, all-or-nothing terms.
- Reward yourself after the test — take in a movie, go out to eat, or visit with friends.

Don't Forget the Basics

Students preparing for tests often neglect basic biological, emotional, and social needs. To do your best, you must attend to these needs. Think of yourself as a total person — not just a test taker. Remember to:

- Continue the habits of good nutrition and exercise. Continue your recreational pursuits and social activities — all contribute to your emotional and physical well-being.
- Follow a moderate pace when studying; vary your work when possible and take breaks when needed.
- Get plenty of sleep the night before the test — when you are overly tired you will not function at your absolute best.
- Once you feel you are adequately prepared for the test, do something relaxing.

The Day of the Test

To be able to do your best on the day of the test we suggest the following:

- Begin your day with a moderate breakfast and avoid coffee if you are prone to "caffeine jitters." Even people who usually manage caffeine well may feel light-headed and jittery when indulging on the day of a test.
- Try to do something relaxing the hour before the test — last minute cramming will cloud your mastering of the overall concepts of the course.
- Plan to arrive at the test location early — this will allow you to relax and to select a seat located away from doors, windows, and other distractions.
- Avoid classmates who generate anxiety and tend to upset your stability.
- If waiting for the test to begin causes anxiety, distract yourself by reading a magazine or newspaper.

During the Test: Basic Strategies

Before you begin answering the questions on the test, take a few minutes and do the following:

- First review the entire test; then read the directions *twice*. Try to think of the test as an opportunity to show the professor what you know; then begin to organize your time efficiently. Work on the easiest portions of the test first.
- For essay questions, construct a short outline for yourself — then begin your answer with a summary sentence. This will help you avoid the rambling and repetition which can irritate the person grading the test. For short-answer questions, answer only what is asked — short and to the point. If you have difficulty with an item involving a written response, show what knowledge you can. If proper terminology evades you, show what you know with your own words.
- For multiple choice questions, read *all* the options first, then eliminate the most obvious. Unsure of the correct response? Rely on your first impression, then move on quickly. Beware of tricky qualifying words such as "only," "always," or "most."
- Do not rush through the test. Wear a watch and check it frequently as you pace yourself. If it appears you will be unable to finish the entire test, concentrate on those portions which you can answer well. Recheck your answers only if you have extra time — and only if you are not anxious.

During the Test: Anxiety Control

Curb excess anxiety in any of the following ways:

- Tell yourself "I can be anxious later, now is the time to take the exam."
- Focus on answering the question, not on your grade or others' performances.
- Counter negative thoughts with other, more valid thoughts like, "I don't have to be perfect."
- Tense and relax muscles throughout your body; take a couple of slow deep breaths and try to maintain a positive attitude.
- If allowed, get a drink or go to the bathroom.
- Ask the instructor a question.
- Eat something.
- Break your pencil lead — then go sharpen it.
- Think for a moment about the post-exam reward you promised yourself.

After the Test

Whether you did well or not, be sure to follow through on the reward you promised yourself — and enjoy it! Try not to dwell on all the mistakes you might have made. Do not immediately begin studying for the next test. . . indulge in something relaxing for a little while.