

Reducing Test Anxiety

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Test anxiety symptoms:

- Physical: headaches, nausea, faintness, feeling too hot or cold, sweaty palms, etc.
- Emotional: getting frustrated quickly, feeling irritable, crying easily, etc.
- Cognitive: blanking out or having racing thoughts that are difficult to control

Assess your study skills

- Studying is not a one-time thing. Spend at least some time with the material daily.
- Studies have shown that the most important factors in moving information from short to long-term memory are frequency and recall. In other words, you recall the information (bring it to mind yourself) at short intervals at first and then at longer intervals. Our thoughts wear a path in the brain – the more often you recall them the easier it is for our brain to find them.
- When you hear or read the information, it goes into your short-term memory. Techniques for moving it into long-term include the following:
- Pause after each paragraph, section, or 10-15 minutes, cover what you've read and ask yourself "What did I just read? What were the main ideas of the section?"
- Say the answers out loud. Saying something out loud anchors it in another part of your brain
- If it's fuzzy, look back and retrieve the information. Continue until you no longer need to refer to the text.
- Work with a study partner: tell each other what you've read, ask each other review questions

- Recite it in your own words helps you to make it your own.
- At the end of reading a chapter, review it through recall. Use the review questions or make up your own.
- Be active. Do something with the information. IE: pretend you're going to teach a class on the material. Write an outline for your class. Present it to a study partner, or teach your cat.
- Pretend you are the professor. What questions would you ask on the test? Write down the questions you would ask if you were teaching the class.
- If you hit something that's really difficult to recall, write it down repeatedly.
- Instead of marathon study sessions, try shorter, more frequent sessions. Study for an hour, wash the dishes, study another hour, call a friend, etc. Use these breaks as rewards.

Have a back-up plan

Make back-up plans to insure that you will still reach your goal no matter what happens with the test. Ask yourself what will happen if you fail this test? What will happen if you fail the class? Will you simply have to repeat the class? Will this mean that you will no longer be able to reach your career goal? If you create a back-up plan, or a "worse case scenario," you know that you have constructed a mechanism that will insure achieving your goal no matter the outcome of a particular test.

Use positive visualization

On the night before your exam (right before you go to sleep works well), find a quiet place to relax. Close your eyes, then take three slow, deep breaths. Now, visualize yourself in the classroom taking the test. See yourself receiving the test, then calmly, confidently taking the exam. You are organized and alert. You are enjoying taking the test because you want to demonstrate just how much you know about the material. Create this movie in your head. You are in command and in control. Repeat the positive visualization again in the morning, right before you get out of bed. When test time comes you will have already seen yourself confidently taking the test. Refer to this personal movie anytime during the test. This positive visualization will help you realize what you are capable of achieving.

Breathe slowly and deeply

- As you approach the scene of the test, begin taking slow, deep breaths into your belly. Continue this breathing pattern until you start the test. If you feel nervous while taking the test, do it some more. As you breathe out, let the tension go.
- In your daily life, train yourself to breathe into the belly rather than the chest. This sends a message to your nervous system to calm down. People who belly breathe have been found to be calmer, more focused, less reactive and happier than those who don't.

Work with your thoughts

- As the test approaches, notice what thoughts you are having. If you have thoughts such as: I should have studied more.....I'll never get through....I just want to finish and get out of here... I'm getting really tense again....My mind's a blank... I must be really stupid....I know everyone's doing better than I am....If I fail this test, I'll flunk the course....

- Simply notice the thoughts, let them go and replace them with a positive thought that you know is true. Example: I studied well, I know the material and I'm going to do my best. If the thoughts continue, continue to let them go and focus on positive thoughts.

Try progressive relaxation exercises

This technique can be done before or during the test. It consists of tensing each group of muscles for 5-7 seconds, then relaxing. Take a deep breath before moving on to the next muscle group.

When the Test is Handed Out

- When the test is handed out, do a quick breathing exercise if necessary. Quickly assess the test. What are the major point items on the test? What do you see expected of you on the test? Try to very quickly calculate how much time you should spend per question so that you attempt to complete the test. Go for the major point items over smaller points.
- Read the directions and questions carefully. Remember that you don't have to answer the questions in order. Answer the ones you know first. Mark the ones you'll go back to if you have time. If you're stuck on a question, write what you do know. Sometimes the act of starting will get your brain to remember the next part.

Trust What You Know

Always rely on your knowledge and intuition. More than likely, it will be correct.

Visit the Counseling and Advising Center

If these steps don't help your anxiety, visit the Counseling and Advising Center and work with a counselor individually with additional methods. We've had good success with the use of energy psychology to reprogram the brain to eliminate test anxiety.