Stress, Test Anxiety, and Success on Exams

Academic Resource Center, tel: 684-5917

It is true that test anxiety undermines clear thinking and your ability to recall relevant information. Chronic test anxiety (anxiety that occurs in a variety of test taking situations) is serious and can get worse if not confronted. In this handout you will find strategies to prevent and cope with test anxiety.

FOR STARTERS:

- Make an appointment with the Academic Skills Instructional Program (684-5917) or at Counseling and Psychological Services (660-1000)
- Avoid the anxious chatter of your fellow test-takers
  a. Don’t ride the bus to the classroom where the test will be given.
  b. Walk to class, breathe deeply, enjoy the scenery.
  c. Wear headphones and listen to your favorite music…right up until the test is put in front of you.
  d. Practice positive self-talk.
  e. Compete with yourself…NOT OTHERS! Understand your own goals and what it’s going to take for YOU to do well.
  f. Understand that ONE exam is not going to determine the rest of your life…neither will ONE course.

Situational Test Anxiety is by far the most common form of test anxiety. This is when something specific occurs during a testing situation that triggers anxiety symptoms. It’s that feeling of panic that happens when the exam content is familiar—you “know” all of the concepts but don’t know where to begin.

The number one cause of situational test anxiety is UNDER-PREPARATION!

Causes of under-preparation include:

- Your understanding of what it means to “know” the material covered on an exam is faulty.
- You understand the material but you have not mastered it.
- You crammed for the exam.
- The exam is the first time you have considered the connections among concepts across chapters/material covered on the exam.
- You did not practice doing the kinds of things you were asked to do on the exam BEFORE TAKING THE EXAM.
- The practice problems or questions you used to study were not at the level of difficulty of actual problems on the exam.
- You did not give yourself enough time to learn the facts cold.
- You did not “test” your understanding of concepts, ideas, theories, processes etc. before going into the exam.
**STUDY BREAKS** are important, not only because they help you combat mental fatigue and improve concentration, but because they help you remember what you have learned.

- Take **5-10 minute study breaks** after about 20 minutes of studying. During that break time, your mind will process information that you have just learned with **NO EFFORT ON YOUR PART**.
- Now, take advantage of a high point of memory consolidation by taking 2 minutes to review what you just learned in that 20 minute session. This is a micro-version of recursive review.

**RECURSIVE REVIEW:**

Recursive Review is frequent review of course material. Most of us know we need to do this to remember but we never seem to get to it. We often find ourselves behind on new material so that we’re learning it for the first time just days before the exam. On top of that, we have to “re-learn” older material that we’ve forgotten. It’s a recipe for stress and underachievement.

**frequent exposure to course material over an extended period of time is the most efficient and effective way to remember!**

- Planning session:
  a) Pull together all of the course material relevant to the exam
  b) Divide it into chunks
  c) Decide on the number and times of study sessions you will need to learn the material and do your final review.
- Study session one:
  a) Learn a specific body of material
- Study session two:
  a. Take 5-10 minutes to review material covered in study session one
  b. Learn a new chunk of material
- Study session three:
  a. Use 10 minutes each to review material covered in study sessions one and two
  b. Learn new chunk of material

Until…

- **FINAL STUDY SESSIONS:**
  a) The last study session or two should be a final review of all material
  b) Test yourself at the level you will be tested on the exam
  c) Practice doing problems or writing essays under timed conditions

**Don’t Forget:**

- ♠ Drink plenty of fluids
- ♠ Don’t drink/eat too much caffeine
- ♠ Eat healthy “brain” foods
- ♠ Get sleep
- ♠ Take fun or relaxing study breaks to relieve stress
- ♠ Plan ahead for studying; you can control time /don’t let time control you