

COPING WITH EXAM ANXIETY

If you are usually anxious about exams, learn to confront your fearful thinking about tests, learn to reduce and control exam-related tension and other physical manifestations of your fear, and learn how to deal with tests more effectively. (Grassick, 1983, Making the Grade, p. 105)

DEALING WITH TESTS MORE EFFECTIVELY

1. In the weeks/days before, spend your most intense days of study as early as possible. Feelings of running out of time are a major contribution to the stress of the pre-exam period. Developing a study schedule also helps you to feel more in control. In order to reduce overall stress, maintain your physical and emotional health, eat and sleep well, and ask for emotional support if you need it.
2. The night before, do not plan to study too hard the night before an exam unless absolutely necessary. Try to do some general review (e.g., review summary notes).
3. On the exam day, allow more time for everything and attempt to slow yourself down physically, emotionally and mentally. Do everything earlier and slower, making an effort to keep yourself in a calm, confident state of mind.
4. Travelling to the exam, arrive a bit early but avoid mixing with friends and classmates outside the exam room. Most students find discussing the exam with friends, just before the exam, very anxiety provoking.
5. In the exam room, select a seat that you feel will be most comfortable for you. It is usually best not to sit near close friends if you find yourself made anxious by their exam performance. Similarly, do not rush to finish and leave with your friends.
6. Beginning the exam is generally the most stressful, anxiety provoking period (i.e., prior to starting the exam and while reading the exam over). This is when we are most susceptible to feelings of panic and out of control. Starting with a question you know well helps you to settle down and feel more confident and in control emotionally.
7. During the exam, allocate time for each question based on how much each question is worth. Allow time to review. Push yourself early if you feel you are going to slow. Bring a watch so you can pace yourself.

CONFRONTING FEARFUL THINKING

Negative thoughts and worries related to your exam performance distract your concentration when preparing for or writing exams. Examples include: "I'll fail, I'll forget everything, I won't be able to answer any questions, I must get an 'A', If I don't pass this exam, I'll die, I'll throw up, My mind will go blank". You can learn to control these thoughts.

Thought stopping. Monitor your negative thinking and when it starts say aloud or to yourself, "STOP!" The thoughts can come back, and probably will, but when they do, you can use the same technique to stop them again. It will take time and practice to break the habit of negative thinking. However, don't use the technique to stop reasonable worries and appropriate thinking about what you need to do.

1. Daydream or distract yourself momentarily with pleasant thoughts if you are feeling anxious about an upcoming exam. During the exam, you could take a quick fantasy trip and imagine yourself in a calm, beautiful peaceful setting (e.g., a lake, forest, beach). Imagine as much detail as possible and notice your body relaxing as you visualize this. After a minute, return your attention to your exam.
2. Visualize yourself successfully performing well on your exam. Imagine yourself deliberately calming yourself down and resuming work on the exam. Attempt to be as detailed as possible (e.g., imagine the room, the other students, the exam, answering questions quickly and confidently etc.).
3. Engage in positive self-talk. Encourage yourself with phrases like, "I am well prepared; I am doing a good job on this test; I am calm and relaxed; I answered that question well" etc.
4. If you find yourself engaging in catastrophic thinking (i.e., imagining all of the terrible, frightening or embarrassing things that might happen), try to restrict your worrying to specific times and places. Find a chair in a place at home and at school that you don't particularly like to sit in. Make at least two appointments to go to your worry chair every day and worry for about 20 minutes. Don't do anything else in that chair. This will help get your worrying under control.
5. Counter your fears and catastrophic thinking with rational, reasonable and convincing arguments. For example, Catastrophic thought: "I can't possibly learn how to do this in time for the test". Rational Counter-argument: Are you sure? If you worked calmly and efficiently, would you be able to do it? Even if it's true, wouldn't it be better to try to learn as much as you can in the time remaining? Difficult is one thing, impossible is another.

REDUCING EXAM-RELATED TENSION

1. Deep breathing exercises can be very helpful to release tension and anxiety.

Example 1:

Take a deep breath in through your nose until your chest is full and you can feel tension in your diaphragm. Hold it for a few seconds and slowly let the breath out through your mouth until your chest is completely empty. Repeat this 3 to 4 times. You should practice this exercise regularly, at least twice a day, in the weeks prior to the exam. The key is to take long, deep breaths as opposed to short, shallow breaths.

Example 2:

- a) Sit back comfortably in your chair with your hands resting loosely in your lap. Rest your feet comfortably on the floor and, if you wish, close your eyes.
 - b) Take a couple moderately deep breaths, letting yourself relax a little as you exhale.
 - c) Resume breathing normally, and try to count ten breaths. Empty your mind of distracting thoughts by trying to calmly count your breaths. Don't worry if you lose count.
 - d) After you've counted ten breaths, do it again.
2. Monitor tension by scanning your body from your toes to your head for tension. Tell those parts of your body to "relax". You can also practice tensing and relaxing parts of your body. If a part of your body is particularly tense, tense it even more for a few seconds, then relax (and repeat if you wish). This allows you to become more aware of where you hold tension and to give you some control over relaxing your body and feeling increased calmness. You may need to practice a few times before you feel noticeably more relaxed.

For deeper relaxation, you may try tensing and relaxing all parts of your body using the guide below. Sit in a comfortable chair where you will not be disturbed. If you find yourself falling asleep, try relaxing at a different time of day.

- a) Begin practicing this exercise by following the breathing exercise outlined in Example 2.
- b) Tense each body part for 5-10 seconds then relax. Repeat if desired.
- c) Be aware of the differing effects of the tension and the relaxation.

Guide:

Lower arms and hands - clench your fists.

Upper arms - "make a muscle" or flex your biceps
Shoulders and upper back - raise them to touch your ears, roll them forward, roll them back.

Face, mouth and throat - squint your eyes, purse your lips, push your tongue against the roof of your mouth.

Chest - Take in a moderately deep breath and hold it. Simultaneously try to push your shoulders down as far as you can towards your waist. Resume normal breathing.

Stomach - Imagine that someone is just about to punch you in the stomach. Tighten those muscles to make them as hard as possible.

Feet and lower legs - point your toes up towards the ceiling, then let your feet back onto the floor & push them as hard as you can. Stop if you get a cramp.

Upper legs - Try to lift yourself out of the chair, just using your upper legs.

- d) Resume breath-counting - trying to count ten breaths. Again, don't try to control your breathing and don't worry if you lose track.
 - e) To end the exercise, slowly count backwards from "five" to "one" until you open your eyes feeling quite refreshed and relaxed.
 - f) After a few seconds, get out of your chair and have a stretch. Move around a little bit until you're fully alert.
3. Brief periods of fun prior to your exam can also reduce tension. Finally, regular aerobic exercise also reduces overall tension and anxiety levels.

This information is based on "Getting Started on the Right Foot" by Dr. James H. Pond (1991), Student Counselling Services, U of S; David Ellis's (1985) *Becoming a Master Student* and Grassick's (1983) 'Making the Grade'.

Counselling Services, University of Regina 1998