

# Understanding Test Anxiety & Anxiety Reduction Strategies

There are two types of anxiety students can experience around test taking. One type of test anxiety stems from a student having less than effective time management and study skills. Anxiety can usually be overcome through a student developing better skills that will improve their test taking abilities. The materials presented here are for those whose anxiety stems from the thoughts, feelings, and physical responses from the test taking experience.

## The Chemistry of Test Anxiety

Students with test anxiety will experience rushes of adrenaline before and throughout their test. Adrenaline blocks the brain from thinking and triggers a flight/fight response. You can learn how to control and recover from these adrenaline bursts.

Physical activity can help burn off adrenaline. Build in time to do a physical activity for at least 10 minutes before your exam. This physical activity can help the body process that chemical release of adrenaline you might be experiencing.

Since you will likely have a jolt of adrenaline at the onset of the exam, start by answering only the questions you feel confident about. You will benefit in two ways from this strategy. After been given some time, your brain will recover from the adrenaline shot and you will be able to tackle the more complicated questions. You will also create confidence and a positive momentum for moving through the rest of the exam.

Prepare your body for battle! Get a good night sleep and eat a proper meal. You're asking your body and your brain to be in peak performance, you control the most important elements for making this happen.

Avoid caffeine and sugar if possible since these substances will naturally raise your state of alertness, which will look/feel like anxiety the day of a test.

## Pre-Test Checklist

- Get a sounding board! Seek out someone who can help you recognize if your anxiety is getting the best of you. They can help you assess the situation, brainstorm ways to address the anxiety and your test preparation.
- Be sure to share your test anxiety issues with your instructor (not the hour before an exam!). The instructor may be willing to explore options such as taking the test in the instructor's office or being allowed a break during the test. Just sharing your issue with your instructor may provide some relief.
- No last minute cramming! Create a test study schedule for allotted times and stick to it.
- Avoid excessive socializing and the consumption of alcohol/drugs during the critical few prep days before an exam day.
- Organize all of your materials for the exam the night before (pencils, blue books, note cards, etc.).
- Get to the exam on time, not too early. Arriving too early may create a situation where your anxiety balloons.
- Avoid speaking with any fellow students who are not prepared or who express negativity. Be cautious of talking with other students about the exam material just before going into the exam, especially if this situation has made you nervous or confused in the past.
- If you have a disability, work with the Disability Support Services office. There are likely accommodations that will allow you to take your test in an environment that is free from distractions.
- Acknowledge and prepare for reality:
  - There will be some stress, in fact low amounts of stress induce better performance
  - There will most likely be some questions that catch you off guard
  - You will probably experience difficulty recalling some material you studied
  - Recognize that while the test is very important, it by itself shouldn't cause a failing grade in the class

# Test Anxiety: Recognize Your Triggers

## EXTERNAL TRIGGERS

<b>Visual Triggers</b> <b>The sight of...</b>	<b>Auditory Triggers</b> <b>The sound of ...</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Students getting up and turning in their tests</li><li>• A room becoming more and more empty</li><li>• People turning the pages of their exams</li><li>• The clock ticking away</li></ul> <p><b>My visual triggers:</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Pencils dropping on the table</li><li>• Backpacks being zipped up</li><li>• Desks moving around</li><li>• The sound of clocks ticking</li><li>• The door opening and closing as people leave</li><li>• The sound of people outside of the classroom</li></ul> <p><b>My auditory triggers:</b></p>
<p><b>Possible Solutions:</b></p> <p>Choose your seat wisely:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What seat might be exposed to the least amount of distractions?</li><li>• Perhaps sitting right up front might prevent you from scanning the room for distractions.</li><li>• Sitting away from a window might be wise for those who feel they are easily distracted.</li><li>• Avoid the temptation to look up often. Stay focused on the exam in front of you.</li></ul> <p><b>Strategies that will work for you:</b></p>	<p><b>Possible Solutions:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Use ear Drown out sound by sitting near a noisy fan or vent.</li><li>• Use ear plugs.</li><li>• Ask the instructor if you can listen to music while taking your exam.</li></ul> <p><b>Strategies that will work for you:</b></p>

# Test Anxiety: Recognize Your Triggers

## INTERNAL TRIGGERS

### Feelings are a by-product of what you think...

The meaning of an event lies not within the event itself but rather with the interpretation of the event.

Examine the negative thoughts you are having so you can change what you're feeling. Recognize every time a negative thought creeps into your head. STOP the negative talk and analyze your thought.

<u>I find myself thinking....</u>	<u>I find myself feeling...</u>	<u>I am physically feeling ...</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How much brighter the other students are than me</li> <li>• Of the consequences of failing</li> <li>• I won't ever graduate from college</li> <li>• Why bother</li> <li>• About the time limit for the exam</li> <li>• No matter how much I prepare, I never will do well on tests</li> <li>• The teacher should offer more papers than tests</li> <li>• I can't concentrate because there are so many thoughts racing through my head</li> </ul> <p><b>My negative thoughts:</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Panic</li> <li>• Depressed</li> <li>• Nervous</li> <li>• Disappointed</li> <li>• Worry</li> <li>• Angry</li> <li>• Irritated</li> <li>• Frustrated</li> </ul> <p><b>My negative feelings:</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Racing/pounding heart</li> <li>• Rapid breathing</li> <li>• Perspiration</li> <li>• Knots in the stomach</li> <li>• Change in appetite</li> <li>• Shaking, trembling, muscle aches</li> <li>• Numbness/tingling</li> <li>• Headaches</li> <li>• Nausea</li> <li>• Dizziness</li> <li>• Feeling too hot or too cold</li> <li>• Crying</li> <li>• Clammy hands</li> <li>• Grinding teeth</li> </ul> <p><b>My negative physical feelings:</b></p>

### **Strategies for ending negative thoughts:**

Is your thought a true statement? If not, remind yourself of your positive work you've done to prepare for the exam and the work you're putting into combating your anxiety.

Repeat some normalizing statements to yourself: I'm prepared for this; I can handle the situation; This feeling is normal and can be overcome; I'm in control; I'm going to focus on my strengths.

Focus on things you've done to prepare and the body of knowledge you've developed.

### **My strategies for stopping negative thoughts:**

If you have thoughts that do leave room for reality-based doubts (example - I haven't prepared adequately for the test), these are areas you need to address. Enlist the help of your support network (family, friends, advisors, instructors) when confronting these issues.

# Strategies for Managing Your Test Anxiety

Visualization, Meditation, and Progressive Relaxation are strategies that redirect your focus from the anxiety and allow you to create a new frame of mind. If you practice these techniques over a period of time, you will find it will be easier to achieve a state of relaxation. Each time you implement your strategy, your body and mind will remember these cues and relaxation will come easier and faster.

## VISUALIZATION

Visualization means that you create a place in your mind that is free from stress. Many visualization techniques begin by envisioning a staircase and once you reach the top of the staircase you are transported to your “Go To” place. Try to use all of your senses to aid you in bringing this scene to life. What do you see, hear, smell, taste, feel? The more details, the more real your “Go To” place is, and the more you can move away from the anxiety.

## MEDITATION

One type of meditation is simply stopping all thoughts, which is much harder than it sounds. After meditation, you can resume activities with clarity. You can perform very simple meditative activities before and during exams. When you are experiencing your test anxiety during the exam, turn your exam over and close your eyes. Breathe in slowly for several breaths, focusing ONLY on the sensations as the breath moves in and out of your body. You can do this numerous times until you feel focused enough to carry on with your test.

## PROGRESSIVE RELAXATION

Tighten your hands into fists and simultaneously tense the muscles in your upper arms and shoulders. Hold for 10 seconds and relax for 15-20 seconds. Repeat until you can feel some physical release of your stress. Do this same exercise with tightening the muscles in your face, chest, legs, neck, back. You can do this exercise before the exam, working through all parts of the body. During the exam you can use progressive relaxation in the classroom for shorter periods of time and focusing on your areas of that hold the most stress.

## DESENSITIZATION

Desensitization is a way of practicing your chosen method for stress management (Visualization, Meditation, and/or Progressive Relaxation). You will try and recreate the anxiety producing situation and begin using the techniques you want to implement to combat your test anxiety. Imagine yourself in different scenarios: the night before the test, see yourself walking into the room, the moment the professor hands you the exam. Once you have a peaked stress level, begin using your stress management strategies to lower your stress level.

# Tackling My Test Anxiety

**Think of a time where you felt like you had a successful test taking experience. What may have contributed to your success?**

**How do you de-stress in other parts of your life?**

**Who can you ask to help you with your test anxiety issues? How will they recognize your anxiety is getting the better of you? How can they help you get back on track?**

**What are some techniques and strategies you think you could realistically try this semester?**

**Celebrate your successes even if you feel like you still have progress to make. How will you measure success?**

## **TACKLING YOUR ANXIETY**

Your journey of dealing with anxiety does not have to be a solitary one. UNC counselors want to be your partner in this journey. Take the first step in managing your anxiety, make an appointment today!

<b>UNC Counseling Center</b> Cassidy Hall 970-351-2496 <a href="http://www.unco.edu/counseling">www.unco.edu/counseling</a>	<b>Psychological Services Clinic</b> McKee Hall, Room 247 970-351-1645 <a href="http://www.unco.edu/cebs/psych_clinic">www.unco.edu/cebs/psych_clinic</a>
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