

Test Anxiety

YOU CAN P.A.S.S.

Test anxiety is a problem frequently experienced by college students. Almost every student who takes a test feels some anxiety, but for some, the feeling is so intense that it affects their performance - with serious results. Test anxiety can be managed, if you understand what causes it. To help you gain control of your test anxiety, use the P.A.S.S. method described below



PREPARATION FOR TESTS

Test anxiety is caused in large part by inadequate or ineffective exam preparation. If you do not use effective study strategies, you will not have reviewed and understood the course information sufficiently to perform well on the test. Consider taking PSY 1730, Strategies for Academic Success or come to the Academic Resource Center for additional information and assistance to improve your study skills. Additional actions you can take to prepare effectively for tests include:

- Talk to your professor. Ask for suggestions on how to study for his/her tests.
- Ask your professor what material will be covered on the test. Ask about the test format. Will it be essay, objective, fill-in-the-blank?
- Attend Supplemental Instruction (SI) or drop-in tutoring.
- Join a serious study group. Practice by writing and taking your own tests.
- Review your lecture notes daily. Clarify material you don't understand with your professor, study group, SI, or tutor.
- Review previous tests. Ask your professor if he/she makes previous tests available. The more you can know about what to expect on a test, the more prepared you will be and the less anxious you will feel.
- **DO NOT CRAM** for tests. Cramming is only minimally effective for getting good grades, but a GREAT way to increase your anxiety beyond control!

ASSESS SOURCES OF ANXIETY

Part of the problem with test anxiety is a vicious cycle of fear-avoidance-more fear. It is possible that at one time in your prior school experiences you performed poorly on a test. As a result, you became fearful of tests because they meant negative things like failure, ridicule, scolding, etc. To deal with your fear, you avoided tests, resulting in poor preparation, poor performance, and increased fear about tests ("I never do well on tests!"). Because of a few unfortunate experiences, you have built your anxiety to a level that almost ensures you will do poorly on tests.

You must identify the sources of your test anxiety before you can begin to eliminate or reduce their power over you. You have just read about how to improve your study skills so you can prepare more effectively. The other major sources of test anxiety are your negative thoughts and unrealistic expectations.

Identify the thoughts that increase your anxiety. Thoughts can make you frantic by creating images of catastrophic scenarios, such as: "I'll never be able to do this."; "If I don't at least get a 'C' in this class, I won't get into my major."; "I have never done well in math."; "I have to get an 'A' in this class or I won't get into medical school." You must try to challenge those thoughts to make them more rational. For example, say to yourself, "This one test won't decide my chances for medical school."; "With the right type and amount of studying and help from my instructor, I can get through this math class." Corrective reasoning will directly result in reduced anxiety. Other ideas to eliminate irrational thinking:

- Mentally yell "STOP!" when worries or fears cause you to become anxious.
- Accept that you will feel anxious in a test. Accept that you will run into questions you can't answer, so there is no reason to get upset when it happens.
- Daydream before a test. Fill your mind with pleasant thoughts to push out the anxiety.
- Visualize before a test. Mentally rehearse what it will be like to succeed. Visualize taking the test successfully.
- Focus. If you can't answer a question, focus your thoughts on answering the next one, not on catastrophizing that you won't know the remaining questions.

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- Praise yourself. Tell yourself "I can do this." "I'm doing fine." "One question at a time." "This isn't as bad as I thought." Even if you don't totally believe what you're saying, your mind doesn't really know that. If you think more rational thoughts, you will automatically feel and act in more positive ways, despite your level of belief in what you say. The more you practice thinking rationally, the easier it becomes, and you will eventually believe it.

While not performing well on tests can have negative consequences, it is rare that a student's life or career is totally ruined by poor test performance. Spend your energy identifying what is creating the anxiety and poor test performance. Talk with instructors and the Academic Resource Center. Find out alternatives for making the grade you need, such as papers, extra credit, etc. Find out alternatives to your current major if current course material is beyond your capabilities.

STRATEGIES FOR TEST-TAKING

There are test-taking strategies that can help you improve your performance on tests. Participate in Supplemental Instruction sessions, which are offered for many General Education courses. Obtain Idea Sheets on test-taking from the Academic Resource Center. Take PSY 1730, where you learn test-taking skills. Ask your professor for suggestions on taking his/her tests. Work with your study group to find out what techniques they use to perform well on tests - then **practice** them using tests you create in your study group.

Additionally, consider these strategies:

- Come to the test early, with all materials necessary such as paper, "blue book," scantrons, plenty of writing utensils, etc. Take some time to relax, stretch, and breathe deeply.
- Listen to music that has a relaxing effect on you as you walk to class or wait in the classroom.
- Don't do last minute cramming or "obsessing" with classmates before a test. This is guaranteed to increase your anxiety and do little to substantially improve your test score.
- Wear comfortable clothing.

STRESS MANAGEMENT

Practice stress management on a regular basis and before each test. Stress management includes relaxation techniques, good health habits, and positive self-talk.

- Get adequate sleep before a test. Cramming all night may get you through some tests, but in the long run is ineffective for adequate college performance. And, for some subjects, cramming just does not work to learn the material.
- Eat food with nutritional value, especially the day of an exam.
- Limit your intake of substances that tend to negatively affect your concentration.
- Do a ten-minute relaxation exercise before you leave for a test. This can be visualization, meditation, muscle relaxation, or deep breathing.
- If you run into a tough question during the test, close your eyes, breathe, and think to yourself, "I can do this. Relax." and resume work.
- Focus on your work, not on what your classmates are doing. Even if some people are working faster than you, it doesn't mean they are more prepared. It could mean they don't know the answers and are just putting anything down.