What is test anxiety?
A stress response from your body.

What causes this stress response?
Stress is our body’s way of creating energy when faced with a perceived danger. In some situations, stress can help our bodies react to emergencies with more strength and efficiency. Unfortunately, our bodies can't always tell when we are in an emergency or not. Therefore, we may feel stress for things that are not a danger to our survival, such as taking tests.

Too much stress can lead to unclear thinking, mood fluctuations, and poor eating habits. It is helpful to identify your personal stressors and react when you feel your body increasing in stress.

What does stress feel and look like for you? (ex: racing heart, clammy hands, stomachache)

What do you currently do when you feel stress?

Ideas to combat stress (in the week leading up to an exam):
Choose all that you wish to implement

___Eat well and exercise
___Sleep at least 7 hours/night
___Take 5 deep breaths (in through the nose, out through the mouth)
___Continue to socialize with family and friends/take regular breaks
___Surround yourself with positive people
___Expect and accept some anxiety
___Following the test, reflect on what you did well and what you could improve upon
___Make a study guide
___Explain what you are learning to people around you (explaining it to others helps you learn!)
___Create flashcards
___Other (list here: _____________________________)

Next time we meet, we will discuss the strategies that worked.
Common Causes of Test Anxiety

Cause: You are unfamiliar with the test.
Cure: Learn about the test.
- How many questions are on the test?
- What is the format of the test (multiple-choice, short essay)
- How much time will you have to take the test?
- How are your answers scored?
- What topics will be covered?
- What is an example of a question to be asked?

Cause: You feel unprepared for the subject being tested.
Cure: Make an organized study schedule and stick to it.
- Block off time each day during the week before a test
- Be able to define terms and concepts in your own words
- Look for similarities and differences between ideas you are learning about

Cause: You have negative or perfectionist thoughts.
Cure: Counter them with positive thoughts and actions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negative Thought</th>
<th>Positive Thought</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I always do poor on tests.</td>
<td>I've got a better study plan for this test than I've ever had before.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This test is going to have trick questions.</td>
<td>The test is designed to let me show what I know, and I know all of the formats of the questions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perfectionist Thought</th>
<th>Realistic Thought</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There's an impossible amount of things to learn for this test.</td>
<td>I don't need to know the answer to every question; I just need to pass.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My knowledge of one of the topics is shaky.</td>
<td>I don't need to know everything about every topic. If I start now, I learn more about the areas I should focus the most on.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Barriers to Performance**

Stress and test performance are related to each other. For most people, test performance falls off because they are over-stimulated by stress in their lives. These life stressed can be divided into physical barriers (body), cognitive barriers (thoughts), and preparation.

**Physical Barriers to Test Performance**

Just before you take a test or during the test itself, so you experience: jitters, sweaty palms, stomach or bowel pains, racing pulse, heart pounding, or the inability to focus and concentrate? These are physiological symptoms of stress. Here are some ways to reduce their effects.

1. **Get plenty of sleep** the night before the test. If you are sleepy, your ability to think clearly and to remember will be affected. Cramming is an ineffective study strategy that inhibits recall.

2. **Avoid stimulants like coffee or sugar** prior to test. Skip your morning coffee and don’t eat the sweet roll. These substances add chemical stress. Don’t take stimulants or drink coffee to stay awake the night before the test.

3. **Eat a balanced diet.** It is important for optimal functioning that your body has all the nutrients it requires. Eat foods from all four food groups and don’t skip meals.

4. **Learn to relax.** Take time to learn about relaxation processes and what works for you. The techniques you choose should feel comfortable, be brief and be the type you could do in the testing room in front of other people (e.g., hot baths work but are impractical).

Here are some ideas:

- ♦ Breathe deeply but slowly for 30 seconds. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth.

- ♦ Imagine heavy weights on each shoulder and push down and stretch the muscles of your neck and shoulders.

- ♦ Visualize your anxiety as a color concentrated in different parts of your body. Visualize the colors slowly draining out through your hands and feet.

- ♦ Say to yourself, “I am relaxed in my body, I am relaxed in my mind, now I am ready.”
Cognitive Barriers to Test Performance
Just before you take a test or during the test itself, do you spend a lot of time worrying about your performance? Do you expect to do poorly on the test no matter how much time you spend in preparation? Do you talk to yourself and tell yourself how badly you are doing? These self-statements or “self-talk” are barrier to your test performance. Here are some examples of cognitive errors:

1. **Overgeneralizations**: “I can never get math,” or “I always do poorly on essay tests.”
2. **Catastrophizing**: “Taking a test in a horrible experience,” or “If I do poorly on this test, I’ll ruin my whole life.”
3. **Using an Inappropriate Example**: “My uncle Larry flunked this course when he was in college,” or “This guy in my Spanish class told me that Professor Johnson gives horrible tests.”
4. **Improper Inference**: “I just have to accept that I will never do well on tests.”
5. **Conflicting Goals**: “I want to do well on this test, but I just have to make the party on the night before.”
6. **Personalization**: “If I flunk this test, I’ll consider myself a total failure.”
7. **Using a Single Standard**: “I have to get at least a ‘B’ on this test or it won’t mean a thing.”

Many other examples are possible. “Self-talk” is as individual as the people who take tests. Listen to what you say to others and then listen to what you say to yourself. Learn to ask yourself the questions.

“What am I telling myself that is making it harder for me to perform well on this test?”

Begin constructing positive self-statements to replace counter-productive, negative self-talk. Use affirming statements while you study and when taking tests. Remind yourself of past successes, how well you’ve prepared, and your knowledge of the material. Visualize yourself doing well on the exam; most importantly, visualize yourself doing YOUR BEST! Remember, an exam grade represents only your performance on the particular test, not your overall knowledge.

Preparation Barriers to Test Performance
Maybe you aren’t experiencing the kind of symptoms mentioned in the first two sections. No matter how physiologically calm you are, no matter how cognitively clear and confident you are, you aren’t very likely to do well on a test for which you didn’t spend the time to prepare. Remember this old saying:

“Aim at nothing and you will hit the target every time.”

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Managing Test Anxiety

Many students feel that they suffer from nervousness before and/or during an exam. Some students have not prepared properly and are rightfully nervous about their performance! If you suspect that you have test anxiety, make sure that lack of proper preparation is not the reason. If you have consulted with someone about your study techniques, have made changes or adjustments and are still so anxious that it interferes with your performance, try some of the following suggestions:

Imagery in Stress Reduction

Imagery is a potent method of stress reduction, especially when combined with physical relaxation methods such as deep breathing. We are all aware of how particular environments can be very relaxing, while others can be intensely stressful. The principle behind the use of imagery in stress reduction is that you can use your imagination to recreate a place or scene that is very relaxing. The more intensely you use your imagination to recreate the place or situation, the stronger and more realistic the experience will be.

- One common use of imagery in relaxation is to imagine a scene, place or event that you remember as peaceful, restful, beautiful and happy. You can bring all your senses into the image, with sounds of running water and birds, the smell of cut grass, the taste of cool white wine, the warmth of sun, etc.
- Use the imagined place as a retreat from stress and pressure. Scenes can involve complex images such as lying on a beach in a deserted cove. You may 'see' cliffs, sea and sand around you, 'hear' the waves crashing against rocks, 'smell' the salt in the air, and feeling the warmth of the sun and a gently breeze on your body. Other images might include looking at a mountain view, swimming in a tropical pool, or whatever - you will be able to come up with the most effective images for yourself.
- Other uses of imagery in relaxation involve mental pictures of stress flowing out of the body; or of stress, distractions and everyday concerns being folded away and locked into a padlocked chest.

Imagery in preparation and rehearsal

You can also use imagery in rehearsal before a big event, allowing you to run through it in your mind. It allows you to practice in advance for anything unusual that might occur, so that you are prepared and already practiced in handling it. Imagery also allows you to pre-experience achievement of your goals. This helps to give you the self-confidence you need to do something well.

Thought Awareness

Thought awareness is the process by which you observe your thoughts for a time, perhaps when under stress, and become aware of what is going through your head. It is best not to suppress any thoughts - just let them run their course while you observe them. Watch for negative thoughts while you observe your 'stream of consciousness'. Normally these appear and disappear being barely noticed. Normally you will not know that they exist. Examples of common negative thoughts are:

- worries about how you appear to other people
- a preoccupation with the symptoms of stress
- dwelling on consequences of poor performance
- self criticism
- feelings of inadequacy

Make a note of the thought, and then let the stream of consciousness run on. Thought awareness is the first step in the process of eliminating negative thoughts - you cannot counter thoughts you do not know you think.
Rational Thinking - the next step of awareness
Once you are aware of your negative thoughts, write them down and review them rationally. See whether the thoughts have any basis in reality. Often you find that when you properly challenge negative thoughts they are obviously wrong. Often they persist only because they escape notice.

Positive Thinking and Affirmation - use with rational thinking
You may find it useful to counter negative thoughts with positive affirmations. You can use affirmations to build confidence and change negative behavior patterns into positive ones. You can base affirmations on clear, rational assessments of fact, and use them to undo the damage that negative thinking may have done to your self-confidence. Examples of affirmations are:
- I can do this.
- I can achieve my goals.
- I am completely in control of my life.
- I learn from my mistakes. They increase the basis of experience on which I can draw.
- I am a good valued person in my own right.

Progressive Muscular Relaxation
Progressive Muscular Relaxation (PMR) is a purely physical technique for relaxing your body when muscles are tense. The idea is behind PMR is that you tense up a group of muscles so that they are as tightly contracted as possible. Hold them in a state of extreme tension for a few seconds. Then relax the muscles to their previous state. Finally you consciously relax them again as much as you can. You can apply PMR to any or all of the muscle groups in your body depending on whether you want to relax just a single area or your whole body.
- Experiment with PMR by forming a fist, and clenching your hand as tight as you can for a few seconds. Then relax your hand to its previous tension, and then consciously relax it again so that it is as loose as possible. You should feel deep relaxation in the muscles. Although you might well be able to relax muscles as far without the initial tension, tensing the muscle helps to provide a starting point for the exercise. It helps in gauging the initial level of tension in the muscle.
- For maximum relaxation you can use PMR in conjunction with breathing techniques and imagery (e.g. of stress flowing out of the body).
- It can also be effective to link the exercise of PMR to a keyword that you can say to yourself. Associating the feeling of relaxation with the keyword means that in a moment of tension you can bring the feeling of relaxation purely by repeating that word.
How to Relax During Tests

Testing in itself can cause stress or anxiety, but we often carry these into the test. The following steps are prospective ways to calm yourself during an exam.

**Before leaving for the test:** Minimizing your tension during a test begins with your behaviors before the test. Consider the following:

- Follow your regular sleep pattern the night before. Set two alarms for morning tests.
- Pack the items you need the night before.
- Avoid caffeinated beverages and energy drinks.
- Wear loose fitting clothing that will not restrict your circulation while seated.
- Stretch to loosen your body and encourage circulation; practice deep/slow breathing.
- Change negative thoughts into positives. Some examples:
  - Instead of, “I won’t do well” think to yourself, “I will do my best.”
  - Instead of, “I failed before and I will fail again” think to yourself, “I learned from my mistakes on the previous test.”

**Arrive early,** and do the following steps to ease yourself into the testing situation.

- Select a seat that is comfortable for you with good lighting and space.
- Arrange the items you need that are allowed during a test (pen/pencil, calculator, etc).
- Sit quietly with good posture, and breathe deeply and slowly.
- Run through your mind concepts that may be on the test. Continue to breathe deeply and slowly.

**While testing,** address the following, each which is a potential sign of creating tension for yourself.

- **If you are breathing quickly**...adjust your posture and consciously focus on deep, slow breathing for 10-15 seconds. Return to the test.
- **If you are holding your pen/pencil too tight**...set down the pen/pencil. Then, clench and loosen your grip 4-5 times, and shake it briefly. Grasp your pen/pencil again but loosely. Return to the test.
- **If you are hunching over or slouching**...you could be limiting circulation. Sit up straight and take deep, slow breaths. You will notice that breathing changes, which allows more oxygen into your body. Keep this posture, and return to the test.
- **If your back feels stiff**...you could be limiting circulation. Raise and lower your shoulders a few times, while also pulling your shoulders forward and backwards.
- **If your legs feel stiff**...stretch them out straight (try to not kick the desk in front of you). Massage your calves with a free hand. Alternatively point and clench your toes a few times.

When finished with your test, take a few moments to relax stretching your tense body parts and returning to deep breathing. Then, use the remaining time to review your work and make improvements.
Prepare to Lessen Anxiety

Anxiety is something that everyone experiences to some extent in any stressful situation. For students, one of the most frequent stressful or anxiety provoking experiences is taking a test. All students may feel some effects of anxiety associated with exams. The anxious feeling can occur before the test, while reviewing for the test, during the test or after the test and can range from a nervous feeling and sweating, forgetting and blanking out, to actually becoming physically ill. While all of these are symptoms of anxiety, most people don’t experience anything worse than a nervous feeling. Slight amount of anxiety frequently results in improved test performance. However, anxiety becomes a problem when it begins to adversely affect a person’s performance on the exam.

There are three main areas students can work on to reduce test anxiety when it begins to interfere with test performance.

#1 Mental Preparation

- Before the exam the student can do several things.
  - Be thoroughly prepared. A confident knowledge of course materials is the first step in reducing test anxiety.
  - Review the material. Review is fine but trying to cover two months of material in two hours is not an effective way to prepare for an exam.
  - Begin your review process early. This also reduces last minute anxiety.
  - Arrive at the exam location early. Tardiness only causes more stress! Relax and don’t talk about the test with friends or other students- frantic review is often more confusing than helpful. Also, do not sit near anyone who seems anxious, as it will only serve to make you more anxious.

- In the exam a student should be test-wise and have a plan for taking a test.
  - Some initial tension is normal. Generally when you receive a test, stop for a moment, take several deep breaths, relax, and then start reviewing direction and test items.
  - In a times test, make a schedule for answering questions. Allow more time for a higher point question. Pace yourself to get as many questions as possible answered. Knowing how well you are progressing will eliminate anxiety over whether or not you will finish the exam.
  - Don’t speed too much time on any question. If you can’t come up with the answer, move on. You can always come back if you have time. Higher scores will usually result from trying all items.
  - If you get stumped on a question or series of questions, move onto questions you can answer. This will get your mental process and concentration ready for more difficult questions.

#2 Physical Preparation

- Before the exam students should develop good study habit and techniques. Adequate food and rest are important to any part of the study program, especially before an exam. When people are tired they become frustrated more easily and experience more anxiety.

- During the exam find a place where you will have some privacy, one that is well lit and comfortable. Bring those supplies necessary for the exam such as a calculator, pens, etc. avoid sitting near the door or other high distraction places.
#3 Relaxation
In connection with mental and physical preparation, relaxation before and during the exam can aid in retention and improve test performance. When a person is anxious, his/her body becomes physically tense. Relaxation removes tension and thus reduces anxiety— the deeper the relaxation the greater the reduction in anxiety. There are several things you can do to achieve a state of relaxation prior to an exam.

- Go for a walk. Allow adequate time prior to the exam to go for walk. Clear your mind as you walk and enjoy the sense of relaxation.
- Avoid discussing the test with anyone—especially fellow classmates as that only serves to fuel anxiety.
- Take a series of 10 deep breaths, holding each breath for 10 seconds. Slowly release your breath.
- While sitting or lying down, tense all the muscles in your body. Hold the tension for seconds. Release, let your muscles relax completely. Repeat, as needed until you feeling feel less anxious and deeper sense of relaxation.
- Stretch. Stretching your muscles invigorates the body and is a great pick me up, especially if you are groggy.