

Test Anxiety: Managing Test Anxiety

Academic Success Center

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:

1. 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.

2. 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.

3. 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.