

Test Anxiety: Preparation Methods

Academic Success Center
Iowa State University

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.

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- 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.

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