

Reducing Test Anxiety

Test anxiety symptoms:

- Physical: headaches, nausea, faintness, feeling too hot or cold, sweaty palms, etc.
- Emotional: getting frustrated quickly, feeling irritable, crying easily, etc.
- Cognitive: blanking out or having racing thoughts that are difficult to control

Read the following techniques and choose two or three to try.

Assess your study skills

- Studying is not a one-time thing. Spend at least some time with the material daily.
- Pause after each paragraph, section, or 10-15 minutes, cover what you've read and ask yourself "What did I just read? What were the main ideas of the section?"
- Watch for lists, such as causes, methods, stages or steps and learn them.
- At the end of reading a chapter, review it. Use the review questions or make up your own.
- Be active. Do something with the information. IE: pretend you're going to teach a class on the material. Write an outline for your class. Present it to a study partner, or teach your cat.
- If you hit something that's really difficult to recall, write it down repeatedly.
- Instead of marathon study sessions, try shorter, more frequent sessions. Study for an hour, wash the dishes, study another hour, call a friend, etc.

Use positive visualization and/or affirmations

Use this visualization exercise before you go to sleep at night. Close your eyes and take three slow, deep breaths. Visualize yourself in the classroom taking the test. See yourself calmly, confidently taking the exam. You are organized and alert. You are eager to demonstrate how much you know about the material. You are in command and in control. Say to yourself "I, (your name), am now calm, confident and successful in my test taking." Repeat the visualization and affirmation in the morning.

Breathe slowly and deeply

- At least 10 minutes before the test, begin taking slow, deep breaths into your belly. Continue this breathing pattern until you start the test. If you feel nervous while taking the test, do it some more. As you breathe out, let the tension go.
- In your daily life, train yourself to breathe into the belly rather than the chest. This sends a message to your nervous system to calm down. People who belly breathe have been found to be calmer, more focused, less reactive and happier than those who don't.

Pick up or download the free test anxiety guided imagery CD/mp3 file

The Student Support Center has put together a CD that includes a guided imagery track designed to train your brain to remain relaxed as you prepare for and take tests. Free copies of this CD are available to Grays Harbor College students upon request at the Student Support Center or can be downloaded at http://ghc.edu/support/counseling/media/test_anxiety.mp3.

Work with your thoughts

- As the test approaches, notice what thoughts you are having. If you have thoughts such as: I should have studied more.....I'll never get through....I just want to finish and get out of here... I'm getting really tense again....My mind's a blank... I must be really stupid....I know everyone's doing better than I am....If I fail this test, I'll flunk the course....
- Simply notice the thoughts, let them go and replace them with a positive thought that you know is true. Example: I studied well, I know the material and I'm going to do my best. If the thoughts continue, continue to let them go and focus on positive thoughts.

Write before the exam

Take 10 minutes before the test to write down your feelings. Research has found that this improved the test scores of participants. The researchers believe that laying down your thoughts reduces anxiety and frees your brain to work on the tasks in the exam.

Try progressive relaxation exercises

This technique can be done before or during the test. It consists of tensing each group of muscles for 5-7 seconds, then relaxing. Take a deep breath before moving on to the next muscle group.

When the Test is Handed Out

- When the test is handed out, do a quick breathing exercise if necessary. Quickly assess the test. What are the major point items on the test? What do you see expected of you on the test? Try to very quickly calculate how much time you should spend per question so that you attempt to complete the test. Go for the major point items over smaller points.
- Read the directions and questions carefully. Remember that you don't have to answer the questions in order. Answer the ones you know first. Mark the ones you'll go back to if you have time. If you're stuck on a question, write what you do know. Sometimes the act of starting will get your brain to remember the next part.
- Always rely on your knowledge and intuition. When taking multiple choice tests, stay with your first choice rather than second guessing yourself. Your first guess is more likely to be correct.

Visit the Student Support Center

If these steps don't help your anxiety, visit the Student Support Center and work with a counselor individually with additional methods. We've had good success with the use of methods to reprogram the brain to eliminate test anxiety.