

Minimizing Test Anxiety

Every student experiences some anxiety in the face of preparing for and taking exams – it’s a normal response to any performance related activity. If you find that anxiety is hindering your performance on exams, there are a number of steps you can take to help alleviate your difficulties. It is helpful to first understand the nature of destructive reactions to the stress of exams.

Remember: Preparation Beats Anxiety. The most common cause of test anxiety is under preparation. The more effectively you prepare for an exam, the less anxiety you will feel. If anxiety is making it difficult for you to prepare effectively for an exam or if you are experiencing destructive anxiety despite your preparation, there are a number of strategies you can use to overcome the anxiety.

How to Reduce test anxiety²

Analyze instead of personalize - The key to overcoming anxiety is to train yourself to focus on tasks by analyzing what needs to be done in the here-and-now instead of personalizing negative feelings and worries.

Correcting this can take a bit of practice, because you have to police yourself and counter negative thoughts with positive thoughts focused on what you can accomplish.

When you feel negative thoughts creeping up, you have to alert yourself to make a change and then follow through on changing your thought process.

Use positive, supportive self-talk to counter negative feelings and negative internal talk. Instead of saying to yourself, “There is no way I can learn all of this material” say “I need to organize the material into chunks to make it easier to learn.” Instead of expressing doubt in your ability, “I always do poorly on essay exams” say “I can use new strategies for achieving success on this exam.” If you are confronted with an exam item that you cannot immediately answer say to yourself “That’s just one item, I can go on to others and come back to it” instead of “I knew this test was going to be impossible!”

Remind yourself that you have the ability to succeed. Thinking “I’m just not smart enough to pass this exam” or “I don’t think I belong here” can lead to giving up the effort of trying to learn the material. Instead, remind yourself about why you came to UW and tell yourself that you have the skills to learn the material and focus on the next task. If you are just getting started with studying for an exam, that task might be a study schedule. Establish concrete goals for each study session so that you can mark your successes.

Excessive worries can be destructive. Thinking “If I don’t do well on this exam, I’ll never get into med school” over emphasizes the importance of the exam and places your focus on something far in the future, which hinders your ability to focus on the immediate task. Turn your thoughts around to the positive by reminding yourself why your goals are important and how the task of preparing for the exam is part of how you are progressing toward your goal.

Do not judge yourself. When confronted with difficult material or looking at the results of previous exams, do not react by judging yourself, as in “I’m just not smart enough to understand this!”

Analyze the task or results for clues as to how you can improve or how you will prepare for what comes next. Look at previous exams to see what you did correctly. Were there any particular kinds of problems or questions that you did well on? Did you make similar mistakes throughout the exam? Can you make a plan for improvement simply by analyzing the exam? When looking at the material to study for the next exam, use your analysis of previous exams and experiences to develop a plan for studying.

² Adapted from University of Michigan, <http://www.umich.edu/~lsastudy/tests.html>

Techniques for Minimizing Test Anxiety

Deep muscle relaxation: Tense individual muscles for 10 seconds and then release them. As you release each muscle, concentrate on relaxing it as far as possible. Successfully move from one muscle group to the next until you have relaxed your entire body.

Deep Breathing: concentrate on your breath as you take deep breaths, filling your lungs and then exhaling slowly.

Guided imagery: Choose a scene that you find relaxing and imagine yourself there. Focus on the sights, sounds, and feelings you experience there.

Counteract anxiety once you are relaxed.

Use the strategies listed above to shift your focus on the tasks you need to accomplish.

After you are relaxed, **imagine yourself going calmly into the exam.** Talk yourself through the strategies for succeeding on the exam. See yourself effectively reacting to an item you had not anticipated.

Use **exercise to help reduce tensions and help you relax.** Although you obviously cannot not get up and jog around the classroom during the exam, exercise can help you relax during study sessions and exercising immediately before an exam will relax you and give you time to clear your mind of worries.

Additional Resources on Campus

The UW Counseling Center will meet with students experiencing test anxiety:

University Counseling Center

Hours of Operation:

Monday - Friday

8:00 am - 5:00 pm

341 Knight Hall

Phone: 307-766-2187

TTY: 307-766-2187

Email: uccstaff@uwyo.edu