Managing Stress

Most students experience stress before or while they are taking exams. Use this guide to help identify your problem areas and discover strategies to reduce stress and get better test results.

Do you experience test stress or anxiety?

Some anxiety just before or during a test is quite normal. In fact, when your body is more alert and your senses are heightened, that small amount of anxiety can actually help you stay focused during the exam. However, when this stress or anxiety is so overwhelming that it causes you to be distracted, flooded with emotion, or unable to concentrate, this emotion is counterproductive.

What does test stress or anxiety feel like?

Physiologically, test anxiety involves adrenaline and other stress hormones that your body releases. If you have severe anxiety, your body "thinks" that you are in danger. It produces arousal responses such as sweating, increased heart rate, increased breathing, and tightening of chest, shoulder, or back muscles. No wonder you can't think!

Cognitive and emotional factors also play a role. What you tell yourself about a test or about your abilities has a great impact on how well you will perform. Pay attention to your "self-talk." Is your self-talk positive and calming or is it making you more anxious?

In addition, the importance you place on a particular exam or course may negatively impact your performance. This added pressure can easily overtake your focus and attention. If you feel you "have to" ace a particular test in order to get the grade to be admitted into a major, avoid feeling like a failure, or meet perfectionist expectations,—that's too much pressure for a single exam! Instead, try to remind yourself that the outcome of this one exam doesn't determine who you are as a person or whether you will succeed in life.

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How can I reduce test stress and anxiety?

There are several ways you can start to reduce test anxiety.

- <u>Give yourself plenty of time to study</u>. Anxiety can come from poor planning. Start studying 5 -7 days before an exam so that you can have repeated spaced review and are really comfortable with the material. Cramming only increases anxiety. Check out the CFL's handout *"5-Day Study Plan"* for ideas about how to space your review.

- <u>Commit yourself to a healthy lifestyle</u>. Regular exercise and a good diet can help control anxiety. Avoid over-caffeinating or energy drinks which impact your stress level. Faced with a choice of doing an all-nighter or going to bed, go to bed. Getting enough sleep will dramatically increase concentration and memory during an exam.

- <u>Make room for positive self-talk</u>. Try writing down all your fears and concerns about the test before you leave your room the day of an exam. Studies have shown that if we write out our fears and "talk them out" on paper, we clear our minds for focus. As you walk to class and settle into your chair, remind yourself of how well you studied, how you attended and participated in class, and how you will be able to accomplish what the test is going to ask of you. Pray for calm.

- <u>Be aware of what distracts you</u> and respond accordingly. If you're easily distracted by visual or auditory stimulation, sit somewhere in the classroom that minimizes such distractions. If earplugs help you cut out distracting noise, bring a pair with you (or stop in the CFL for a pair). If you get nervous when others finish an exam and start leaving, sit with your back toward the door.

- <u>Use simple relaxation techniques before the test</u>. For example, close your eyes and take 5 deep, cleansing breaths. You could breathe in for 4, hold for 4, and exhale for 6 or try another pattern that works for you. Or starting with your feet and moving up your body, tighten and relax your muscles.

- <u>If your anxiety persists</u>, process your feelings and fears with a trusted friend or counselor. A counselor may be able to help you understand how to help you reduce anxiety and learn how to manage it. Also come in to the Center for Learning, and let's talk about how you are studying before a test and what are some best practices to use while taking a test.