

TEST ANXIETY

Generally, we all experience some level of nervousness or tension before tests or other important events in our lives. A little nervousness can actually help motivate us; however, too much of it can become a problem — especially if it interferes with our ability to prepare for and perform on tests.

Dealing with Anxiety

The first step is to distinguish between two types of anxiety. If your anxiety is a direct result of lack of preparation, consider it a normal, rational reaction. However, if you are adequately prepared but still panic, "blank out", and/or overreact, your reaction is *not* rational. While both of these anxieties may be considered normal (anyone can have them) it is certainly helpful to know how to overcome their effects.

Preparation Can Help

- Preparation is the best way to minimize rationale anxiety. Consider the following:
- Avoid "cramming" for a test. Trying to master a semester's worth of material the day before the test is a poor way to learn and can easily produce anxiety. This is *not* the time to try to learn a great deal of material.
- Combine all the information you have been presented throughout the semester and work on mastering the main concepts of the course.
- When studying for the test, ask yourself what questions may be asked and try to answer them by *integrating* ideas from lectures, notes, texts, and supplementary readings.
- If you are unable to cover all the material given throughout the semester, select important portions that you can cover well. Set a goal of presenting your knowledge of this information on the test.

Changing Your Attitude

Improving your perspective of the test-taking experience can actually help you enjoy studying and may improve your performance. Don't overplay the importance of the grade — it is not a reflection of your self-worth nor does it predict your future success. Try the following:

- Remember that the most reasonable expectation is to try to show as much of what you know as you can.
- Remind yourself that a test is only a test — there will be others.
- Avoid thinking of yourself in irrational, all-or-nothing terms.
- Reward yourself after the test — take in a movie, go out to eat, or visit with friends.

Don't Forget the Basics

Students preparing for tests often neglect basic biological, emotional, and social needs. To do your best, you must attend to these needs. Think of yourself as a total person — not just a test taker. Remember to:

- Continue the habits of good nutrition and exercise. Continue your recreational pursuits and social activities — all contribute to your emotional and physical well-being.
- Follow a moderate pace when studying; vary your work when possible and take breaks when needed.
- Get plenty of sleep the night before the test — when you are overly tired you will not function at your absolute best.
- Once you feel you are adequately prepared for the test, do something relaxing.

The Day of the Test

To be able to do your best on the day of the test we suggest the following:

- Begin your day with a moderate breakfast and avoid coffee if you are prone to "caffeine jitters." Even people who usually manage caffeine well may feel light-headed and jittery when indulging on the day of a test.
- Try to do something relaxing the hour before the test — last minute cramming will cloud your mastering of the overall concepts of the course.
- Plan to arrive at the test location early — this will allow you to relax and to select a seat located away from doors, windows, and other distractions.
- Avoid classmates who generate anxiety and tend to upset your stability.
- If waiting for the test to begin causes anxiety, distract yourself by reading a magazine or newspaper.

During the Test: Basic Strategies

Before you begin answering the questions on the test, take a few minutes and do the following:

- First review the entire test; then read the directions *twice*. Try to think of the test as an opportunity to show the professor what you know; then begin to organize your time efficiently. Work on the easiest portions of the test first.
- For essay questions, construct a short outline for yourself — then begin your answer with a summary sentence. This will help you avoid the rambling and repetition which can irritate the person grading the test. For short-answer questions, answer only what is asked — short and to the point. If you have difficulty with an item involving a written response, show what knowledge you can. If proper terminology evades you, show what you know with your own words.
- For multiple choice questions, read *all* the options first, then eliminate the most obvious. Unsure of the correct response? Rely on your first impression, then move on quickly. Beware of tricky qualifying words such as "only," "always," or "most."
- Do not rush through the test. Wear a watch and check it frequently as you pace yourself. If it appears you will be unable to finish the entire test, concentrate on those portions which you can answer well. Recheck your answers only if you have extra time — and only if you are not anxious.

During the Test: Anxiety Control

Curb excess anxiety in any of the following ways:

- Tell yourself "I can be anxious later, now is the time to take the exam."
- Focus on answering the question, not on your grade or others' performances.
- Counter negative thoughts with other, more valid thoughts like, "I don't have to be perfect."
- Tense and relax muscles throughout your body; take a couple of slow deep breaths and try to maintain a positive attitude.
- If allowed, get a drink or go to the bathroom.
- Ask the instructor a question.
- Eat something.
- Break your pencil lead — then go sharpen it.
- Think for a moment about the post-exam reward you promised yourself.

After the Test

Whether you did well or not, be sure to follow through on the reward you promised yourself — and enjoy it! Try not to dwell on all the mistakes you might have made. Do not immediately begin studying for the next test. . . indulge in something relaxing for a little while.

WHAT IS STRESS?

Stress is the "wear and tear" our bodies experience as we adjust to our continually changing environment; it has physical and emotional effects on us and can create positive or negative feelings. As a positive influence, stress can help compel us to action; it can result in a new awareness and an exciting new perspective. As a negative influence, it can result in feelings of distrust, rejection, anger, and depression, which in turn can lead to health problems such as headaches, upset stomach, rashes, insomnia, ulcers, high blood pressure, heart disease, and stroke. With the death of a loved one, the birth of a child, a job promotion, or a new relationship, we experience stress as we re-adjust our lives. In so adjusting to different circumstances, stress will help or hinder us depending on how we react to it.

How Can I Eliminate Stress from My Life?

As we have seen, positive stress adds anticipation and excitement to life, and we all thrive under a certain amount of stress. Deadlines, competitions, confrontations, and even our frustrations and sorrows add depth and enrichment to our lives. Our goal is not to eliminate stress but to learn how to manage it and how to use it to help us. Insufficient stress acts as a depressant and may leave us feeling bored or dejected; on the other hand, excessive stress may leave us feeling "tied up in knots." What we need to do is find the optimal level of stress which will individually motivate but not overwhelm each of us.

How Can I Tell What is Optimal Stress for Me?

There is no single level of stress that is optimal for all people. We are all individual creatures with unique requirements. As such, what is distressing to one may be a joy to another. And even when we agree that a particular event is distressing, we are likely to differ in our physiological and psychological responses to it.

The person who loves to arbitrate disputes and moves from job site to job site would be stressed in a job which was stable and routine, whereas the person who thrives under stable conditions would very likely be stressed on a job where duties were highly varied. Also, our personal stress requirements and the amount which we can tolerate before we become distressed changes with our ages.

It has been found that most illness is related to unrelieved stress. If you are experiencing stress symptoms, you have gone beyond your optimal stress level; you need to reduce the stress in your life and/or improve your ability to manage it.

How Can I Manage Stress Better?

Identifying unrelieved stress and being aware of its effect on our lives is not sufficient for reducing its harmful effects. Just as there are many sources of stress, there are many possibilities for its management. However, all require effort toward change: changing the source of stress and/or changing your reaction to it. How do you proceed?

1. Become aware of your stressors and your emotional and physical reactions.
 - o Notice your distress. Don't ignore it. Don't gloss over your problems.
 - o Determine what events distress you. What are you telling yourself about meaning of these events?
 - o Determine how your body responds to the stress. Do you become nervous or physically upset? If so, in what specific ways?
2. Recognize what you can change.
 - o Can you change your stressors by avoiding or eliminating them completely?
 - o Can you reduce their intensity (manage them over a period of time instead of on a daily or weekly basis)?
 - o Can you shorten your exposure to stress (take a break, leave the physical premises)?
 - o Can you devote the time and energy necessary to making a change (goal setting, time management techniques, and delayed gratification strategies may be helpful here)?

3. Reduce the intensity of your emotional reactions to stress.
 - o The stress reaction is triggered by your perception of danger...physical danger and/or emotional danger. Are you viewing your stressors in exaggerated terms and/or taking a difficult situation and making it a disaster?
 - o Are you expecting to please everyone?
 - o Are you overreacting and viewing things as absolutely critical and urgent? Do you feel you must always prevail in every situation?
 - o Work at adopting more moderate views; try to see the stress as something you can cope with rather than something that overpowers you.
 - o Try to temper your excess emotions. Put the situation in perspective. Do not labor on the negative aspects and the "what if's."
4. Learn to moderate your physical reactions to stress.
 - o Slow, deep breathing will bring your heart rate and respiration back to normal.
 - o Relaxation techniques can reduce muscle tension. Electronic biofeedback can help you gain voluntary control over such things as muscle tension, heart rate, and blood pressure.
 - o Medications, when prescribed by a physician, can help in the short term in moderating your physical reactions. However, they alone are not the answer. Learning to moderate these reactions on your own is a preferable long-term solution.
5. Build your physical reserves.
 - o Exercise for cardiovascular fitness three to four times a week (moderate, prolonged rhythmic exercise is best, such as walking, swimming, cycling, or jogging).
 - o Eat well-balanced, nutritious meals.
 - o Maintain your ideal weight.
 - o Avoid nicotine, excessive caffeine, and other stimulants.
 - o Mix leisure with work. Take breaks and get away when you can.
 - o Get enough sleep. Be as consistent with your sleep schedule as possible.
6. Maintain your emotional reserves.
 - o Develop some mutually supportive friendships/relationships.
 - o Pursue realistic goals which are meaningful to you, rather than goals others have for you that you do not share.
 - o Expect some frustrations, failures, and sorrows.
 - o Always be kind and gentle with yourself--be a friend to yourself.



APPOINTMENTS & OFFICE HOURS

Our office hours are 8:00am to 12:00pm and 1:00pm to 4:30pm, Monday through Friday. Our offices are closed during University holidays. Our Central office is at **Galbraith Hall 190**. You may call or stop by our central office to make an appointment. Call **(858) 534-3755**. Appointments are generally available within two weeks of your request. However, at times of peak demand the wait can be longer. If you wish to speak with a specific psychologist or staff person, please use the above telephone number; you will then be transferred to the requested individual. You may request a specific staff person for counseling on the basis of gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity or location, but it will possibly mean a longer wait until an appointment becomes available. For locations and maps to our offices, [click here](#).

For life threatening emergencies, please call 911.

Although P&CS generally operates on an appointment basis, there are occasions when a problem or crisis feels too overwhelming to wait for a scheduled appointment. If this is the case, please make this known when you call and you can be seen immediately or within a few hours depending on the nature of the crisis during our hours of operation (8:00am-12:00pm and 1:00pm-4:30pm, Monday-Friday). Call (858) 534-3755 to speak with an on-call counselor who will then assist you in handling the concern or crisis.

After hours, P&CS psychologists can be reached for psychological emergencies through the **UCSD campus police at (858) 534-HELP**.