

About Test Anxiety

Tests have become more important in achieving academic and career goals. Job promotions, professional licenses, final grades are often dependent on an exam grade. Test anxiety can cause you to do poorly on an exam in spite of adequate preparation. During an exam, people with test anxiety usually cannot think clearly, answer inadequately or block completely even though they studied and know the material when not under the pressure of an exam situation.

PHYSICAL AND COGNITIVE EFFECTS

Some physical and cognitive patterns often occur in people with test anxiety. The physical effects of test anxiety include rapid heartbeat, muscle tension, stomach queasiness, dry mouth, nausea and perspiration. The cognitive effects include having trouble reading or understanding questions, blocking on the exam material, being unable to act and having difficulty organizing material.

WHO IS MOST LIKELY TO HAVE TEST ANXIETY

Some people are more vulnerable to test anxiety. People who are self-critical, perfectionistic, pessimistic about their prospects, fear failure, and have a high need for approval are also vulnerable to test anxiety. They also may tend to react to frustration (like the frustration of a challenging exam question) by becoming angry, blocking and withdrawing from the task. People with extremely high standards may have a sense of doubt about themselves which they hope to overcome by getting good grades. This makes getting good grades a very emotional, high-pressure situation that can contribute to the confusion seen in test anxiety. Unfortunately, once someone has had an experience with test anxiety during an exam, a vicious circle may start. The person may become anxious about test anxiety and become confused and inattentive while studying. This would prevent them from learning information in the first place.

HOW YOU CAN REDUCE TEST ANXIETY

- Engage in positive self-talk or “fake it ‘til you make it”. Learn to listen to the self-critical, demanding, defeating and perfectionistic messages you give to yourself. Try to replace them with more realistic, self-confident and supportive statements. For example if you find yourself thinking “I’m such a loser, I’ll never pass this exam”, try to replace the thought with statements such as “I will try to do well” or “I know this information I just need some time to retrieve it”. The supportive self-statements will help lower your level of anxiety; negative thoughts will increase the anxiety.
- Practice deep abdominal breathing for several minutes before the exam and during the exam if you become anxious. Close your eyes and focus on the breath slowly filling your abdomen and lungs. Then follow the breath as you slowly exhale.
- Practice progressive muscle relaxation. Tense and relax any muscle group which becomes tight (e.g., shoulders, neck). See the ***Progressive Muscle Relaxation*** handout.
- Practice guided visualization. Imagine yourself in a peaceful environment such as lying in a meadow or at the beach. In your mind, fill in the details of sound, scent and view in order to make the scene relaxing to you.

If you or someone you care about would like more information, come in and speak with a professional counselor in 0203 James hall. All services are free and confidential.

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