

TEST ANXIETY

WHAT IS TEST ANXIETY?

It is a feeling of agitation and distress. Anxiety can be labeled as "anticipatory anxiety" if you feel distress while studying and when thinking about what might happen when you take a test. Anxiety can be labeled as "situational anxiety" if it occurs while taking a test. Some anxiety is natural and helps to keep you mentally and physically alert, but too much may cause physical distress, emotional upset, and concentration difficulties. Anxiety occurs in a wave, so it will increase from the time you first recognize it, come to a peak, and then naturally subside.

HOW DOES TEST ANXIETY AFFECT YOU?

Anxiety has physiological, behavioral, and psychological effects. Physiological reactions may include rapid heartbeat, muscle tension, queasiness, dry mouth, or perspiration. Behavioral reactions may include an inability to act, make decisions, to express yourself, or to deal with everyday situations. As a result, you might have difficulty (a) reading and understanding questions, (b) organizing thoughts, or (c) retrieving key words and concepts. You might also experience mental blocking, which means going blank on questions or possibly remembering the correct answers as soon as the exam is over. Psychological reactions may include feelings of apprehension, uneasiness, upset, and self-doubt.

WHAT ARE THE CAUSES OF TEST ANXIETY?

Usually there is some real or perceived activating agent. It may be past experiences of blanking out on tests, or being unable to retrieve answers to questions. It could also be a lack of preparation for an exam, which is a real reason to be worried about your performance. In this case errors in time management, poor study habits, failure to properly organize material and cramming the night before the exam might increase anxiety. If you have adequately prepared for a test, your anxiety may result from negative thinking and worries. You might be focusing on past performances on exams, how friends and other classmates are doing, or the negative consequences you expect if you do poorly.

HOW CAN YOU REDUCE TEST ANXIETY?

While studying: Allow yourself plenty of time to accomplish all the things you have to do before the test. Build up confidence by reviewing the material frequently. Set up your study goals and take one step at a time to not overwhelm yourself. If you are feeling anxiety building, there are several types of exercises which can help you get through this period.

- 1. Engage in deep breathing for 2-5 minutes.** Close your eyes and concentrate on the air going in and out of your lungs. Take long, deep breaths, fill your lungs and abdomen, hold your breath, and then exhale.
- 2. Tense and relax different muscle groups.** For example, if your shoulders are tense pull them back and hold them for a few seconds, then relax. This will help you to be aware of the relaxation of muscles and help you to relax more.
- 3. Engage in guided imagery for a few minutes.** Pick a scene that you find peaceful, beautiful, and natural. Think about what you see, what you hear, what you feel and what you smell while in this scene.
- 4. Try to describe the anxiety.** Focus your attention on your anxiety and think about the feelings it causes: how large is it? Where is it located in your body? What is its color, its shape, and its texture? If you can completely experience a physical sensation it will often disappear.
- 5. Aerobic exercise** will help you to release anxiety and excess energy and, as a result, reduce body tension.
- 6. Engage in positive self talk.** This involves: (a) thinking about rational responses to counter negative thoughts (e.g., instead of saying "I'm going to fail this test" say "I have the ability to do this, I just need to get some help."); (b) thoughts that help you to cope with stress (e.g., "a little anxiety is helpful. I will just try my best."); and (c) thoughts that keep you on task (e.g., "I can write this paper if I break it into smaller steps.")

Prior to the test: Arrive early so you can sit where you are most comfortable, and avoid people who are anxious and might cause you to doubt your knowledge. When you receive the test look it over, read the directions twice, and then organize your time efficiently. Don't rush through the test, but work at a comfortable pace and don't worry about how far along classmates are on the test.

During the test: Some of the exercises you can use while studying for a test will also be helpful during the test, such as deep breathing and muscle relaxation. You may want to take a break for a few minutes during the test and try them. Other suggestions to combat test anxiety during a test include: (a) get a drink of water and try to clear your mind, (b) move onto easier questions, (c) eat something or chew gum as an anxiety distraction, (d) ask the instructor a question, (e) think about post-exam rewards for a minute, (f) utilize positive self talk. Come up with positive statements which help to keep you calm, such as "this is only one test," "I am familiar with this material," "this test doesn't reflect on my intelligence," etc.

WHAT ARE RESOURCES ON CAMPUS TO HELP WITH YOUR TEST ANXIETY?

Anxiety Skills Classes or Individual Counseling at UNR Counseling Services. Get a referral from your doctor for counseling or skills classes or call Counseling Services directly at 784-4648 for more information or to set up an appointment.