Test-induced Anxiety

Anxiety and stress produced by an impending exam, or induced at the time of an exam, is often referred to as test-induced anxiety. It is common to be nervous before or during an exam, but test-induced anxiety can be serious enough to interfere with our potential to do our best. This handout outlines various strategies that can help you better manage test-induced anxiety to maximize your exam performance.

I. Reflection activity

Before reading through various strategies offered on this handout, consider reflecting on your test-induced anxiety. Reflecting in this way can help direct you to strategies with the greatest impact given your needs.

What are potential sources of your test-induced anxiety? Check the boxes for what might be true for you.

- Under preparation – “I didn’t study enough”
- Fear of failure – “I’m going to fail this exam”
- Exam time management – “I’m running out of time”
- Recall challenges – “I don’t remember this concept, I am drawing a blank”
- Past exam performance – “I just don’t test well”
- Environmental distractions – “I just can’t focus”

Describe a time when test-induced anxiety got in the way of your exam performance. What happened?

Describe a time when you successfully managed test-induced anxiety. What happened?

II. Strategies

a) Introduce stress in your studying. Plan to self-test often in the weeks leading up to an exam. Practice remembering and applying concepts with no notes. Take practice exams in one sitting, and time yourself. In these ways, you can start to desensitize yourself to exam stress and develop coping skills for the exam itself. You are also gathering evidence of your ability to test well, and evidence of what you do know.

b) Simulate exam conditions. Make sure to simulate exam conditions when studying or doing a practice test. Always studying alone in complete silence, or always listening to music is very different than the exam environment. Instead, make sure to expose yourself to similar levels of distraction and noise, such as studying at the library around other people with distractions like squeaky chairs, pencil tapping, and people coughing.

c) Memorize necessary processes, paradigms, and formulae. Are there productive concepts you could memorize that would help you answer a number of different test items? When you begin the exam write out these
Concepts on a scratch piece of paper. Sometimes our minds can “go blank” as we go deeper into the exam and anxiety levels rise. This way, you have them already down on a sheet of paper for reference.

d) Do less, not more, as the exam approaches. Cramming up to the start of the exam can leave you stressed and fatigued, and you want to be the best version of yourself come exam time. Get a good night’s rest. Decide when you will put away your review materials, and how you will use your time leading up to the exam to manage your stress levels, such as exercising or practicing meditation.

e) Limit sugar and caffeine. Stimulants can exacerbate the effects of test-induced anxiety. Try to eat healthy foods the day of the exam, especially foods that are high in fiber and protein (versus sugary, highly processed carbs). Avoid over eating, as that can causes drowsiness.

f) Don’t rush. Lay out everything you will need ahead of time so you don’t forget anything as you leave for the exam (extra pencils, scantron, blue book, watch, etc.). Plan to arrive early so you are not in hurry.

g) Avoid discussing the exam with classmates who generate anxiety. Try and avoid discussing the exam with classmates as you wait for the exam to start. Consider wearing headphones to block out nervous chatter. Listening to how others are nervous can raise your anxiety levels.

h) Be kind to yourself. You have the power to disrupt negative self-talk by replacing it with positive thoughts. Thinking I’m going to do my best versus I’m going to get an F can have a real impact on how you manage your test-induced anxiety.

i) Manage time and build your confidence. Flip through the whole exam and decide how to budget your time. Answer the easier questions first to build confidence and momentum. Skip the ones that get you stuck, and return to them later.

j) Pause and collect yourself. If your anxiety level is peaking during the exam, pause and close your eyes and focus on your breathing. Inhale and exhale slowly for a number of seconds before going back into the exam. Focus on yourself and your exam, rather than thinking about others in the room.

k) Trust yourself. Avoid panicky answer changing by committing to the answers you chose with confidence. Trust your gut! Avoid overthinking and potentially changing your answers later by only flagging certain trickier questions for review.

l) After the exam. After all the nerves of the exam, find ways to distract yourself instead of comparing answers with others or stressing about how you did. It’s time to de-stress by seeing a friend, going for a walk, or practicing other types of self-care. This is especially important when you have multiple exams in a short time period, like finals week.

Acting upon your reflection and your review of the recommended strategies, what are three next steps you would take to better manage your test-induced anxiety?

1. ____________________________________________________

2. ____________________________________________________

3. ____________________________________________________

UC Davis Resources

- Read our Learning Strategies 101 handout for evidence-based study tips.
- Attend our Strategies for Test Taking workshop.
- Schedule an appointment with Student Health and Counseling Services for stress and anxiety management.
- Connect with the Student Disability Center to explore potential accommodations for documented non-normative anxiety.

References

- Cal Poly, Academic Skills Center. Text Anxiety. https://asc.calpoly.edu/ssl/testanxiety