

## OVERCOMING SPECIFIC ACADEMIC ANXIETIES

When people think of extreme fear, they often think of airplanes, crowded elevators, high places, and snakes. In an academic setting, however, anxiety is typically associated with:

- public speaking,
- studying for and taking tests,
- mathematics,
- writing.

Overcoming intense anxiety is serious business. What follows is a brief overview of the cognitive strategies used to subdue such a response. If you are mildly or moderately anxious in an academic situation, you can utilize these strategies; if you are intensely anxious in one or more of these situations, we recommend that you work with a counselor at your campus counseling center. Remember that you can learn how to *manage* rather than suffer anxiety.

### **Four primary sources of academic anxiety:**

1. your academic reputation (what opinions others will have if you perform poorly),
2. your own opinion of your abilities and competence,
3. your concerns about actualizing your goals, and
4. your uneasiness about being unprepared (Divine & Kylen, 1982).

What frequently happens to many students is their memory of poor prior performance increases their anxiety level, which results in an increasing spiral of intensity about their responses. In this state, emotions interfere with the ability to think clearly and rationally. The ability to attend and concentrate suffer, causing them to feel intimidated and defensive. Thus, the cycle continues, and they just want to escape such negative emotions. Some students are even willing to fantasize about leaving college, just to achieve a sense of relief.

The purpose of anxiety reduction is to modify a fear response so you can perform competently. Performance anxiety, sometimes called stage fright, is a learned response. The fact that we learn to be anxious is actually good news because that means we can learn how to be calm. There are some common themes in the strategies to overcome these specific academic anxieties: appropriate content preparation, rehearsal, rational self-talk, physical self-care, and effective use of time.

### **Speech Anxiety**

Students often experience some form of speech anxiety. It is the *public* in public speaking that intimidates so many people. Most of us have had little experience in public speaking through our high school years, yet it is a crucial professional skill. Increasingly, college faculty members are assigning public presentation of projects as required components of advanced courses. If you become nervous about making a formal presentation in class, the following strategies can help:

#### **Before the event:**

- Finish appropriate, timely, comprehensive content preparation.
- Use rational and helpful self-talk such as *I'll be fine – I'm the only person who knows how nervous I am* or *I'll just laugh if I mess up*.
- Practice or rehearse your performance.
- Get enough sleep, exercise, and good nutrition.

**During the event:**

- Make careful and deliberate use of your time.
- If you feel yourself becoming tense, breathe deeply and refocus on the task using appropriate self-talk such as *I know more about this topic than anyone else in the room* or *Just a few more minutes and I'll be finished*.
- Use rational and helpful self-talk throughout your presentation.

**Other suggestions:**

- Adapt your vocabulary and examples to your audience.
- Grab the audience's attention by using audiovisual aids (pass out any handouts at the end).
- Make eye contact with individuals.
- Speak loudly enough for people in the back row to hear.
- Use accurate information.
- Place a watch on the lectern to monitor your use of time.
- Deliver an effective, structured, and upbeat conclusion (a short summary of your main points will help the listener). (Rowh, 1989)

**Test Anxiety**

The most common academic anxiety is test anxiety. How many times have you lost points on a test when you knew the material? How many times have you raced through a test and turned it in without checking your answers just because you wanted to get it over with and escape? How many times have you worried more about a test than studied for it? A little anxiety can help motivate us and focus us on the task, but too much anxiety simply destroys performance.

**Test Anxiety Survey**

Test anxiety is a frequent experience for college students. Look at the following checklist. How many of these characteristics describe you?

- \_\_\_\_\_ You feel that tests are more of a threat than a challenge.
- \_\_\_\_\_ You have a lot of worrisome or negative thoughts about what might happen if you do poorly.
- \_\_\_\_\_ You have physical reactions (such as butterflies in the stomach, sweaty palms, altered heart or breathing rate) when you are about to take a test.
- \_\_\_\_\_ You have trouble keeping your mind on the test items or remembering ideas you learned recently.
- \_\_\_\_\_ You worry about other people scoring higher than you on the test.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Your worries about tests have not decreased as you have matured (Divine & Kylen, 1982, pp. 60–61).

If you suffer from test anxiety, is your response generalized to all tests or is it specific to one course or subject? Your answer to that question is important. If you have been severely anxious in all testing situations for more than two years, we strongly recommend that you work with a counselor on more powerful techniques such as progressive relaxation, cognitive desensitization, and thought stopping. If you have specific anxiety about one course, then these strategies can help you manage stress and increase performance.

**Before the test:**

- Finish appropriate, timely, comprehensive content preparation, including all homework. In simple terms, read, study, and work with a study group. Go to any

review sessions and be sure to go to class the week before the test.

- Use rational and helpful self-talk such as *I am well-prepared to take this test* or *I will read and answer each question carefully*.
- Practice or rehearse your performance by creating and/or answering potential test questions.
- Get enough sleep, exercise, and good nutrition. Even if you study late the night before, get at least two to three hours of sleep.

### **The day of the test:**

- Grab the psychological edge by going to class on time with *all* the required materials.
- Be sure to take a watch to set specific time goals so you will have enough time at the end of the test to check your answers.
- Do not participate in the fearful pretest conversations that the other students are having.
- If you have a choice of where you sit during the test, sit away from friends and toward the sides or back of the room to minimize distractions when people finish early.

### **During the test:**

- Make careful and deliberate use of your time. Look over the test and allocate how much time you intend to spend on each section.
- If you feel yourself becoming tense or distracted, close your eyes, take a few deep breaths, and refocus on the question by saying, *What is this question asking?*
- Use rational and helpful self-talk throughout. It is tempting to use *catastrophizing* statements such as *I am no good at this and will never succeed* or *I have failed before and I will fail again*. Instead, deliberately use rational and calming statements like *I need to stay focused on one question at a time* or *Just because I failed before does not mean I will fail this time*.

## **Math and Writing Anxiety**

Our abilities to solve math problems and to write college papers are procedural knowledge skills. Usually students who have math or writing anxiety have developed these responses over many years. An important initial step is to determine your level of competence in procedural knowledge skills. In other words, what is your competence when you are *not* anxious? Most campus learning centers have diagnostic tests to help you discern your skill level. If you are deficient in these skills, pursuing the appropriate remediation is imperative. You may need to learn these skills at the high school level before attempting a college-level class. Remedial courses or labs, computer tutorials, and individual tutoring are available through most colleges or local libraries. As you master each level, you will discover that your anxiety is lessening. Many college students, however, have good procedural knowledge skills but freeze on the math test or in-class writing assignment. If that is your circumstance, review the following strategies:

### **Before the class:**

- Complete appropriate, timely, and comprehensive content preparation, including all homework. Work with a tutor to clarify areas you find confusing and then attend study group sessions and test reviews.
- Use rational and helpful self-talk such as *I've practiced and gone to the test review* or *My tutor gave me some shortcuts that should really help*.
- Practice or rehearse your performance. For math, rework your homework problems and any additional problems available. Practice explaining to yourself how to do the problems. To prepare for in-class writing assignments, write possible questions and outline your answers. Write thesis statements for each possible question.

- Get enough sleep, exercise, and good nutrition.

**During the event:**

- Make careful and deliberate use of your time. For math, immediately write the formulas down. Then plan how you will allocate your time on the various parts of the test. For in-class essays, quickly write down any key names, dates, etc. to organize into an outline later.
- If you feel yourself becoming tense, refocus on the task using appropriate self-talk and breathe deeply. Refocus by saying, *Okay, what is this question asking, and what do I know about it?*
- Skip to an easier question when you get stuck. Many times the answer to a problem will come to you in the process of taking the test. The important thing is to remain calm and keep your thoughts flowing.
- Use rational and helpful self-talk throughout such as *These first few questions look just like the ones covered during the test review last night. I'm going to be fine.*

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