Do you suffer from test anxiety?

Does just the thought of taking a test make you feel queasy and lightheaded?

Do you have a hard time getting started studying for a test?

Is it often difficult for you to understand test directions and questions?

Do you expect to do poorly on a test no matter how much you study?

Most people probably are familiar with some degree of test anxiety – uneasiness or feeling unprepared prior to a test, especially an important one. Test anxiety in students is fairly common and never fatal. In fact, a small amount of anxiety may be helpful because it sharpens the senses and the mind. However, some students find that they suffer from a lack of confidence, dread, fear and inability to concentrate while taking a test or exam. Some people even draw a blank when it comes to facts and figures they’ve studied and otherwise know. Test anxiety can affect not only academic performance, but self-esteem and overall health as well, and it is observed in all age groups. The good news is that there are many strategies that students may use to combat test anxiety. The aim of this resource is to present some approaches for responding to and managing test anxiety.

Short-term solutions for an upcoming test

If you have a test or exam coming up soon then there are several things that you can do to improve your anxiety level.

- Assess the remaining time before the test and create a simple and realistic study plan. This may mean that you set aside 15 to 20 minutes every day for the next week to prepare for the test. Studying can reduce test anxiety significantly and that 15 minutes per day may really help you feel less anxious. Make sure that you do not cram for the test but space out your study time over days or weeks as you will need time to absorb the material.
- Organise your notes and give priority to what is essential in the unit or course. Identify the most important issues in each theme from the course outline and lecture or workshop notes and talk to your lecturer or trainer if you have any questions about the material.
- Decide how to handle anxiety if or when it happens during the test. Practice relaxation techniques you can use during the test such as tensing and relaxing the muscles in several parts of your body, then taking several deep breaths with your eyes closed. Also plan to go for a quick walk around the building before taking the test. Calm yourself during the test by visualising having successfully completed the test and imagining how good you will feel.
Do you suffer from test anxiety?

Long-term solutions to address anxiety

Getting through the next test is one thing, but for test anxiety to be less of a problem overall, you will need to make some changes.

Study changes that you could try include:

- When you begin to prepare for the test or exam you should ask your instructor what types of questions will be on the test or exam; (multiple-choice, true-false, essay, etc.) and how many questions there might be. If a review sheet or sample test is provided by the instructor, rely on that more than anything else in preparing for a test. If previous semesters tests or exams are available to you then they can be excellent tools for exam preparation. They can tell you how questions may be formatted and the depth of details you need to learn.
- Create a realistic study schedule and follow it as best you can. If you get distracted easily while studying then you should study a little at a time, over a longer period of time, rather than cramming for the test on the last day. Delaying your study until the last day will make you very anxious, and an effective long term plan to assist in reducing anxiety must include learning ways to plan ahead.
- Test yourself on the study material well before the test or exams so that you can work out what you still need to learn. If you have access to previous tests or exams then these can be used as practice tests, otherwise you can formulate questions from the main ideas from your subject’s lecture, text notes and reading material. Include problems that the instructor worked in class and concepts the instructor covered. In textbooks, use bold print, the chapter outline, objectives, or end-of-chapter questions for making possible test questions.

Lifestyle changes that you could try include:

- Reducing the amount of caffeine in your diet.
- Eating well-balanced meals.
- Getting a reasonable amount of night-time sleep, as too little sleep negatively affects learning and recall.
- Follow an exercise program that includes several sessions of aerobic activity a week like brisk walking or jogging.
- Spend some time each day on an enjoyable activity. Tell yourself clearly that this short time away from your studies aids your capacity to concentrate effectively by giving you time out to relax.
- Monitor your thinking patterns and when your thoughts are negative or out of control remember all of the times when you have succeeded when you didn’t think you would. Practice positive self-talk so that you can start to see yourself as someone who can handle any challenge that comes your way.

If you are worrying in ways that lead to illness, giving up, or despair then seek expert help from a medical doctor or counsellor.