



# TEST ANXIETY

**It's the morning of the "Big Test".** In an hour, you'll be taking an exam whose results will count 50 percent of your final grade. You feel like:

- (a) throwing up
- (b) hollering for your mother
- (c) yelling at your sleeping roommate, who's oblivious to your pain
- (d) all of the above

If you feel like any of the above, you're not alone. You've got test anxiety, a fear of impending academic doom that you probably share with half the students on the campus. How can you keep your stomach from doing flips? How can you get calm enough to recall all those names, dates, and graphs that are playing hide-and-seek in your brain?

The problem is more than simply being worried about a test. It is quite natural for a student to be nervous before a big exam. In fact, research shows that **some anxiety can be helpful**. The increased arousal that comes with a little anxiety can actually increase energy and sharpen thinking. However, the same studies have found that, in this case, more is definitely not better. Too much anxiety leads to a rapid decrease in thinking and an inability to focus and concentrate on the task at hand.

## Four Tips for Short-Term Relief

1. **Say No to No Doz:** Sure, you're going to do some last-minute cramming the night before a test. Just don't do it with the aid of quarts of coffee or tea. The reason: Caffeine adds to stress. Gulp some No Doz and, come test-time, you may be too wired to focus on the job in front of you.
2. **Eat Light:** For a couple of hours before a test, stay away from heavy food – or, if you must, just sample something light. Eat a lot and you might get drowsy. Your digestive system will be competing with your brain for oxygen-rich blood. Better than eating, take a walk to get that blood moving rapidly through your body.
3. **Avoid Distractions:** Don't give a second's thought to that idiot sitting next to you who's writing twice as fast as you can think. (She or he is probably writing an angry letter to the professor, blaming her/him for failing to inspire her/him.) The test's the thing. Concentrate only on it.
4. **Take a Break:** Pause whenever you need to break the tension. Close your eyes and practice head rolls or another relaxing exercise.

## Four Keys to Test Taking Success

**Key Number One.** The first key is the ability to reduce tension to manageable levels. There are numerous methods for achieving a relaxed state of mind and body, such as progressive muscle relaxation, deep breathing, and biofeedback. Descriptions of these techniques are available from books and handouts in the UI Student Counseling Center Self-Help/Resource Room.

**Key Number Two.** The second key is to study while relaxed and to study well. Numerous research studies have found that students score higher when they study while relaxed and take a test in the same emotional state of mind. In addition, studying while one is relaxed helps one learn the material more thoroughly and remember it more easily.

**Key Number Three:** The third key is previewing the test situation. This means doing a mental run-through of the test-taking day. It is a way of mentally de-energizing the anxiety that comes with any big test.

Put yourself in a relaxed state of mind. "See" yourself in action from the time you get up in the morning until the test is completed. Any time anxious feelings become too strong, reduce excess tension by using whatever relaxation method works for you. Imagine yourself entering the testing room and taking a seat. See yourself breathing deeply to initiate further relaxation. As you go through the exam you can reuse the relaxation responses to minimize or dispel any excess stress or anxious feelings.

**Key Number Four:** The fourth key is to have confidence in your knowledge. If you have studied effectively, everything you need to know to pass the exam has been stored in memory and is available to be recalled. Try to feel confident and comfortable. You can develop the tools to relax yourself before and during the test.

**A simple test-taking strategy:** First answer all the questions you absolutely know. Then go back and answer the questions that take a bit more effort. Lastly, guess at the questions that you have no idea about, the ones that "seemed to be from outer space because they sure didn't relate to anything you remembered reading or hearing."

## **Self-Talk During a Test**

A number of self-statements are especially useful for coping with feelings (physiological and mental) of anxiety and panic during a test.

1. I'm starting to get too anxious so I'd better slow down a little...there's plenty of time.
2. I'm starting to lose control...better take a deep breath...relax...let it out slowly...that's better.
3. I keep making myself anxious...I'll switch my focus to the test.
4. What is it I have to do? Focus. No negative self-talk.
5. Focus on the task...exactly what does this question ask for?
6. What's the basic question...the main point?
7. Why should I worry about how everyone else is doing?...just think about myself and read the next question.

## **BOOKS: Available for browsing in the UI Counseling & Testing Center Self-Help Room**

**Taking the Anxiety Out of Taking Tests: A Step-By-Step Guide.** By Susan Johnson, Oakland, CA: New Harbinger, 1997.

After beginning with an overview of fear and what you need to do to move through your fear, this book explains basic physical and mental relaxation techniques. Specific cognitive techniques designed to help alleviate the stress that test taking causes are detailed. Information on time management, decreasing procrastination, and study skills is included.

## **Need Additional Help?**

The University of Idaho Counseling & Testing Center offers free counseling/psychotherapy for these and related issues for UI students. For more information or to schedule an appointment, call the Counseling & Testing Center (Mary E. Forney Hall, Room 306, 1210 Blake Ave.) at 208-885-6716.

Website: [www.uidaho.edu/ctc](http://www.uidaho.edu/ctc)

All appointments are strictly confidential.