



Milwaukee School of Engineering Counseling Services Newsletter

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Test Anxiety: How to Stay Calm for Finals

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With finals looming on the horizon, many students may find themselves becoming anxious. This is not always a bad thing. Moderate anxiety causes our minds and bodies to become alert to their surroundings, preparing them to deal with whatever task is required (such as taking a final exam). Unfortunately, when it comes to test-taking, many students have so much anxiety that it becomes difficult to focus on anything *but* the anxiety.

What Test Anxiety Looks Like:

- Having a mental block or freezing up
- Finding words or problems meaningless when reading
- Feelings of impending panic before or during an exam
- Worry about performance compared to other test takers
- Forgetting information that you previously learned
- Difficulty concentrating
- Physical discomfort (nausea, rapid pulse, excessive perspiration, muscle tension)

One important note: Test anxiety generally refers to students who would do better on an exam if they were able to remain calm. If a student has not studied at all for an exam, the above symptoms may be legitimate, not excessive, anxiety!

How to Counteract Test Anxiety:

Prepare Regularly

Start studying for exams early, preferably with a plan. Short review sessions at scheduled times are better for knowledge retention than marathon cramming. Similarly, dividing material to be covered into small tasks makes it easier to prioritize and is less overwhelming. If you have access to them, use study aids.

Students should also prepare their bodies before an exam. Often a good night's sleep, a proper diet, and light to moderate exercise (to reduce tension in the body) will make a great difference

in how students feel the day of a test. Avoid all drugs before an exam, especially stimulants. *This includes caffeine!* Stimulants mimic anxiety symptoms and will make anxiety more intense.

Use a Positive Attitude

Understand that how a person thinks about an exam is a choice. We all can choose to think negatively (“I’m not smart enough.”) or we can choose to think positively (“I’ll focus on one thing at a time.”) Remember to put the exam in perspective. The test and the grade are a measure of understanding the class material, not a measure of self-worth. All students who have been accepted to a competitive school like MSOE must have had some academic success in the past- and students should remind themselves of those past successes.

Practice Relaxation

There are numerous relaxation techniques, but nearly all feature some abdominal breathing. Abdominal breathing means breathing deeply and slowly from the abdomen, using your diaphragm control breath. It increases the amount of oxygen your body receives while simultaneously slowing your heart rate. This induces a calm emotional state. This can be done in as short as thirty seconds. Spending a minute or so to relax during a test is better than wasting time nervously re-reading questions or trying to remember answers when panicked. *The more a person practices relaxation the more effective it will be in a test-taking situation.*

Focus on the Present

Students should try to keep their focus on the present moment. Worries about the consequences of doing poorly will only make anxiety worse and will further impede performance. For this reason it is a good idea to do something other than studying for the hour or so before the exam- anxious students are unlikely to retain much from cramming. Also, avoid discussion about material right before the exam, especially if the people talking are also anxious. Stay focused on what can be done in the present rather than worrying about the future.

How Professors Can Help:

Students may wish that their professors would write easier exams to decrease test anxiety, but professors do need to measure the students’ ability to demonstrate comprehension. However, professors also have some control over another, less obvious variable: the testing environment. Although it may seem obvious, professors can do their part to decrease test anxiety with a warm smile and a simple “Good Luck,” before the exam. Similarly, calmly going over the test instructions, including highlighting any points that may give students trouble, can foster a less anxious environment. Even if a test may seem difficult students will be less anxious if they know their professors would genuinely like them to succeed.

Resources:

Here are sites from other universities that have suggestions on how to beat test anxiety:

<http://campus.umn.edu/counsel/selfhelp/vpl/testanxiety.htm>

<http://www.counsel.ufl.edu/selfHelp/testAnxiety.asp>

<http://www.twu.edu/o-sl/counseling/-sld001.htm>

http://www.hsc.edu/counseling/selfhelp/test_anxiety.html

<http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~counsel/test.htm>

<http://www.sdc.uwo.ca/learning/mcanx.html>

http://www.scs.tamu.edu/selfhelp/elibrary/keeping_calm.asp

These sites give more information on relaxation. Although most require 20-30 minutes per day, once the techniques are learned they can be applied very quickly in a testing situation.

<http://www.counsel.ufl.edu/selfHelp/relaxation.asp>

<http://www.uwec.edu/counsel/pubs/relaxationresponse.htm>

<http://www.twu.edu/o-sl/counseling/SH018.html>

http://www.nmu.edu/www-sam/cnsl_ctr/relax.htm

For even more articles geared toward college students on test taking and stress management see "Virtual Pamphlets" at the Counseling Services web page:

http://www.msoe.edu/st_life/couns/vpc.html

If you are concerned that your anxiety might be affecting more than just your test-taking, you can go to MSOE's counseling website (http://www.msoe.edu/st_life/couns/) and follow the links to the "Screening for Mental Health - Online Screening Program." Once there you can take the screening for Generalized Anxiety Disorder.

As always, you can drop by Counseling Services (K-230) in the Kern Center, or schedule an appointment to see a counselor (414-277-7590).

Good Luck on Finals!

MSOE Counseling Services is located on the Second Floor of the Kern Center (K-230). To Schedule an appointment with a Counselor, call (414) 277-7590. For more information, visit Counseling Services at: www.msoe.edu/st_life/couns