



CONTROLLING TEST OR EXAM ANXIETY

Some students experience physical symptoms of anxiety before and during exams (an upset stomach, sweaty palms, racing heart, etc.). Many of these students have trouble recalling information that they actually know. If this is a problem for you, try some of the suggestions below.

Before the Exam:

- ✚ **Study!** Being prepared is one of the best ways to avoid anxiety. If you routinely find yourself cramming for exams it is a good idea to begin to study further in advance. If you know the material to the point of facility, you will be better able to answer test questions *despite* your test anxiety.
- ✚ If you worry about being able to finish an exam in time, **do timed practice exams** or sets of questions.
- ✚ **Put things in perspective.** Remind yourself that your entire future doesn't depend on this exam. There will be other exams and other courses. Many students fail a course or two but go on to graduate from UIC and have successful careers.
- ✚ **Remind yourself of past successes.** Think of a tough course in which you struggled but eventually succeeded. Tell yourself that if you did well on that past exam, you can do well on the upcoming exam.
- ✚ **Don't give a test the power to define you.** An exam won't tell you whether you're brilliant or stupid and it can't predict your future success. Your performance on an exam mostly depends on how well you studied for the test, the quality of your prior education, and the test-taking strategies you use.
- ✚ **Visualize completing the test successfully despite your anxiety.** Play the entire "tape" in your mind -- from the moment you wake up on the day of the exam to the moment you finish the exam.
- ✚ **Practice anxiety control strategies.** As you study, deliberately induce anxiety by saying to yourself the negative thoughts you typically have during an exam (i.e., "I'm going to fail.") Now, practice the Anxiety Control Procedure (described below). Remind yourself that you will probably experience some anxiety during the test, but the anxiety won't hamper your performance because you've practiced controlling the anxiety.
- ✚ **Get a good night's sleep.** With adequate sleep, your ability to think and to deal with anxiety will both improve.
- ✚ The effects of caffeine are increased with high anxiety, so **reduce your intake of caffeine** on the day of the test.

During the Exam:

- ✚ Try to avoid talking with other students right before the exam because their anxieties may rub off on you. Instead, arrive a little early and take a walk as you give yourself a positive self-talk.
- ✚ **Choose a seat in a place with few distractions** (probably near the front). Consider using earplugs to reduce distractions. Do your best to tune out what other students are doing and don't worry if they finish early. Often, some of the worst exams are turned in early.
- ✚ Remind yourself of how hard you studied, how well you did on another exam, and how you've practiced anxiety control.
- ✚ **Skip tough questions and return to them later.** This is especially true for exams that include problem solving.
- ✚ **Expect a few "curve balls" on the exam.** Remind yourself that you're not expecting to get 100% on the exam; you're expecting an A. Also, your sense of what is important is not going to match perfectly with what the professor thinks is important. Therefore, when you encounter a curve ball on the exam, you're not going to get upset and lose your concentration. Instead, you will simply skip that question for now and return to it later to make an attempt.
- ✚ **If you begin to have negative thoughts, say STOP to yourself** and remind yourself of past successes.
- ✚ If you continue to feel overly anxious, do the **ANXIETY CONTROL PROCEDURE**:
 - ✚ Turn the test paper over and close your eyes.
 - ✚ Breathe in slowly to the count of seven and exhale to the count of seven.
 - ✚ Continue this slow breathing until you begin to feel more relaxed.
 - ✚ Open your eyes, turn the test paper right side up, and give yourself a positive self-talk (e.g. "You're sure to do well. You studied hard and remember, you got an **A** on that final in physics.") This whole procedure should take only about a minute to do. It's well worth the time!
- ✚ **Do not try to figure out your grade as you go** (your estimate is not likely to be correct anyway). Instead, just take each question as it comes. An analogy from basketball is to take your shot and move on.
- ✚ **Do not obsess about running out of time on the test.** Check the time periodically (say after you've finished a third of the test), but avoid checking too frequently, as this will only distract you and make you more anxious. Remind yourself that it's better to miss a few points by not quite finishing the test than to lose your concentration and thus miss many points.
- ✚ **Approach your studying seriously, but think of the test as a game.** Your goal is to collect as many points as you can in the time available. Don't worry about a particular question. If you're unsure of the answer, guess and move on. Remind yourself that you can miss a few questions and still get an A.

