

UPWARD MOBILITY PROGRAM

*A joint venture of the State of Illinois and
AFSCME*

Tips to Control...

TEST ANXIETY

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I knew the material. I had studied for weeks. But as soon as I sat down to take the test, I was sure I would fail. I told myself, "I always mess up on tests." I started to sweat and I just wanted to leave. Sure enough - I failed again.

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INTRODUCTION

If you are like most people, you have probably experienced some degree of test anxiety at one time or another.

Test anxiety is the feeling of fear you have when your performance is about to be evaluated. When you experience this type of anxiety, your abilities to think and to pay attention drop at the time you need them most.

As you might expect, this sense of overwhelming fear and anxiety makes performing the task you're being tested on much more difficult than it would be if your thoughts were clear and your attention were focused.

Often, people who score poorly on an exam will nonetheless insist that they know the material. Many of them are probably telling the truth. Researchers have found a negative connection between test-related anxiety and exam performance. That is, students who display high test anxiety tend to score low on exams. Test anxiety can interfere with test taking in several ways, but one critical consideration appears to be the disruption of attention to the test. Many highly anxious test-taking students waste time worrying about how they're doing and wondering whether others are having similar problems. In other words, their minds wander too much from the task of taking the test.

Emotional responses are a natural and normal part of human life. Even unpleasant emotions serve important purposes. Like physical pain, painful emotions can serve as warnings that one needs to take action. Research has found, however, that a high emotional level can interfere with both attention and memory retrieval, and it can impair judgment and decision-making abilities.

Although emotional arousal may hurt coping efforts, this isn't necessarily the case. One theory predicts that task performance should improve with increased emotional arousal - up to a point. After that, further increases become disruptive and performance deteriorates.

Further, whenever you feel extremely anxious, you will usually entertain a series of negative thoughts. You may think, "What's wrong with me?" or "Why am I so stupid?" or "I'll never be able to pass this test and get promoted." You will usually respond to these types of irrational thoughts by becoming more anxious and fearful.

Then, each time you take a test, you may have the same thoughts. These thoughts, unpleasant emotional reactions and physiological responses (such as sweating palms) take your attention further away from the test. Splitting your attention this way limits the amount of information that you can process and inhibits your ability to figure out exactly what you're being asked to do. Consequently, you answer the questions more slowly and you may answer incorrectly.

Anxiety may also hurt your self-confidence and low self-confidence can further contribute to lower test scores. Counselors have found that people who have high levels of test-taking anxiety tend to give negative descriptions of themselves on personality questionnaires. During tests, these folks often feel helpless and unable to influence outcomes and tend to give up quickly whenever an obstacle to answering a question arises. In turn, each experience of not doing well on a test contributes to a still more negative self-image.

Although many people consistently suffer from test anxiety, they often avoid dealing with this problem until it reaches a point where they feel immobilized. This is unfortunate because test anxiety responds to specific counseling interventions. Over the past decades, numerous studies have determined exactly which methods will best help the person with their particular type of test anxiety.

This booklet will give you an overview of the many ways to better manage your test anxiety. It is set up as a step by step path. You can check off the steps you already follow and concentrate on those you may need.

STEP #1 - BE KIND TO YOURSELF

Eat nutritious foods before the exam.

Get a good night's sleep before your big test. If you will be testing at a time you usually sleep, you may want to take off at least part of the night before you test.

Avoid consuming alcohol or other drugs that will cloud your thinking. This includes antihistamines and other cold remedies that make you drowsy.

Avoid excessive use of foods or drinks containing caffeine: chocolate, cola, coffee, Mountain Dew, Jolt, black or green tea.

Do not take an UMP or other CMS promotional exam if you do not "feel 100%." If you are sick, have had an argument with a family member, got a speeding ticket, had a recent death in the family, or are upset about a work situation - you may not perform as well on the exam.

STEP #2 - LEARN EFFECTIVE STUDY HABITS

Create a study area without distractions. Avoid having the TV, radio, or stereo on so you can concentrate. If necessary, go to a library or arrange for a baby-sitter.

Become efficient in your study habits. Have a study schedule that makes use of "wasted time".

Study when you feel alert and rested. Sit at a well-lighted desk or table. A lounge chair, couch or bed may be too comfortable, and more conducive to a nap.

Create your own learning aides. Use flash cards to learn terms, definitions, vocabulary, etc. Make time lines and charts for history or geography. Use outlines to organize information into smaller increments. Use your own personal creative technique that helps you learn.

Have your study materials gathered together and organized.

Make the most of your notes. Take notes efficiently - learn to distinguish between important information and incidental information. Read and re-write your notes after class so they make sense later. Review them regularly, not just before a test. Use a highlighter to identify key information in your study materials, text and notes.

STEP #3 - MANAGE YOUR TIME BETTER

Mark deadlines and exam dates on your personal calendar.

Keep an ongoing record of your study time. How much time do you plan to devote to studying each time?

Establish your priorities. Is it more important to study or look at the latest issue of your favorite magazine?

Schedule short review sessions. Don't try to cram for hours before a big exam.

If you have trouble studying alone and you know others studying for the same exam, you may find it helpful to form a study group. You can quiz each other and help individuals with their problem areas. Remember to focus on the studying first, and treat yourselves with socializing afterwards.

Schedule time for relaxing. Take a breather - go play! Have fun for awhile. Reward yourself for having a good study session: read that magazine or go see a movie.

STEP #4 - BE PREPARED

Attend all classes. Some instructors take attendance into account for grades.

Be an active listener. Most instructors appreciate class participation. Feel free to ask questions. There are no "stupid questions" in class.

Get help at your college Study Skills Center, usually located near the library. Besides material on test anxiety, the Center will have staff available to review your assignments to help you improve your work - or just to tell you it looks fine the way you prepared it.

Take practice tests to desensitize yourself. The ARCO series has books of sample examinations in several job areas. They are available at most libraries and book stores. A librarian can steer you toward other generic practice exams. Your professor may have an old exam you can take on specific subject matter.

Try a "dry run" before taking a state promotional test. Go to a CMS Testing Center to take an open competitive test for a job title at or near your own skill level. Some CMS test centers offer exams only on computers, so you will want to become familiar with the computer facilities before you take the exam for your target title.

STEP #5 - LEARN GOOD TEST-TAKING SKILLS

Take a deep breath or two to relax before you start to take the test. See the next section, Controlling Test Anxiety, for specific breathing exercises.

Read the instructions thoroughly before starting. Listen attentively to the test-giver's instructions. Don't jump ahead!

Beware of "qualifying words" such as: most, never, always, etc. Responses which contain those words are often incorrect.

Think as you read so you completely understand the question. Read all answers before choosing the most correct one. Make an educated guess by eliminating any you know are incorrect. Then look for clues in the remaining choices. Often, more than one response could be correct under certain circumstances. Find the response that most correctly answers the question.

On a promotional exam, if you know that the "textbook" answer is different from "how we do it where I work," choose the text-book response. The tests are designed to serve many work locations.

Circle or skip difficult questions. Return to them later.

Use the full time allowed for the exam. If finished, review your answers one time, making corrections only to those you marked incorrectly - avoid the trap of changing answers out of fear.

CONTROLLING TEST ANXIETY

1. Don't let your emotions interfere with your logic.

2. First identify and accept that you're experiencing "Test Anxiety".

Up to a certain limit, anxiety increases test scores by speeding up the thinking rate. Above the optimal level, anxiety interferes with test taking ability by blocking an individual's ability to recall information, reducing the test-taking speed due to distraction.

Test anxiety is a learned physical response to negative emotions associated with a history of past failures. The physical response blocks the ability to recall test material because the individual is concentrating more on the way their body feels than on answering the test questions.

Worry and physical response are two components of test anxiety. Both are present in most people, but one or the other is usually predominant.

3. Ask yourself if your negative thoughts are making you anxious and fearful.

Research shows that the self-talk of test-anxious students almost always tends to be negative and self-defeating: *Everyone taking this test is smarter and faster than I am. This test is too hard; I'll never finish it in time.* As the frequency and intensity of negative feedback increases, an individual's ability to concentrate decreases. The individual is spending more time and energy on the effects of failing the test than working on the test.

4. Ask yourself what can you do to change those feelings or negative thoughts.

Become aware of what you say to yourself. Try writing your negative thoughts and then disputing each one with a positive statement. Start to encourage yourself as you would a friend. Repeating your positive statements to yourself will help reprogram your mind for success instead of for failure. Challenge your negative thoughts. Instead of saying, "I'll never pass this test", tell yourself, "I've done everything I can to prepare for this test. I'll do OK."

5. Focus positive attention on the test.

Don't waste time and energy worrying, thinking about the consequences of not doing well, or wondering what others are doing. If you get stuck on a question, skip it and suggest to yourself that you probably studied it and the answer will come to you when you get back to it. If you start to feel anxious, close your eyes, take 3 deep breaths and then back to the task.

6. Try the various relaxation exercises presented on the following pages. Decide which ones you are most comfortable using. Practice the ones that seem to work best for you on a daily basis. Try using them for non-testing stressful situations: when a new recipe flops, when your child upsets you, when you have too much work to do, when you're making your third trip to the hardware store to fix one little thing. Then use them the next time you go to take a test. Give yourself plenty of time to do the exercises before you go in to take the test. Obviously, you don't want to lie down in the test center - but most of these can be done sitting up once you master them.

During stressful situations, we rarely stop to think about what is happening within our bodies. Indeed, the pressures of the moment keep our minds occupied on almost everything but our physiological functions. Consequently, those functions often become irregular, leaving us in an unhealthy state of being. When we are in this state, we have fewer chances to succeed in whatever we try to accomplish.

Among the many physiological functions adversely affected by stress is our breathing. Even when stress is minimal, few people retain a habit of natural, full breathing which is required for maintaining a good mental and physical state. Stressful situations may be handled better and overall mental and physical health will be improved by learning proper breathing techniques.

RELAXATION

Technique # 1 – Proper Breathing

Before beginning any specific breathing techniques, you will want to try this exercise:

1. Lie down on a rug or blanket on the floor with your legs straight and slightly apart, your toes pointed comfortably outwards, arms at your sides not touching your body, your palms up, and your eyes closed. This is called a “relaxed body” position. Take time to relax your body and breathe freely.
2. Breathe through your nose. Keep your mouth closed as you breathe.
3. As you breathe, your chest and abdomen should move together. If only the chest seems to rise and fall, your breathing is shallow and you are not making good use of the lower part of your lungs. As you inhale, you should feel your abdomen rising; it is as if your stomach is filling with air. As you exhale, the abdomen comes back in, like a balloon releasing all of its air. This inhale and exhale process should continue comfortably and smoothly. The chest and abdomen should rise as you inhale and fall as you exhale. The chest should move only slightly.

Technique #2 - Deep, Relaxed Breathing

1. Either sit or lie with your knees bent, your feet about 8 inches apart and your spine straight.
2. Place one hand on your abdomen and one hand on your chest.
3. Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose into your abdomen to push up your hand as much as feels comfortable. Your chest should move only a little and only with your abdomen.
4. Continue step 3 until it becomes rhythmic and comfortable. Now smile slightly, inhale through your nose and exhale through your mouth, making a quiet, breezy sound as you gently blow out. Your mouth, tongue and jaw will be relaxed. Take long, slow, deep breaths, raising and lowering your abdomen. Hear the sound and feel the texture of breathing as you become more and more relaxed.

5. When you first begin this technique, do it for five minutes. When you become more comfortable with it, you may extend it up to 20 minutes.
6. Upon ending a session, stay still for a few minutes and try to keep the entire body relaxed.
7. The purpose of this technique is to develop a good, relaxing breathing method. It may be practiced any time, especially during stressful situations.

Technique #3 - Imaginative Breathing

This exercise combines the relaxing benefits of deep, relaxed breathing with the curative value of positive “self-suggestions.”

1. Lie down on a rug or blanket on the floor in a “relaxed body” pose (see Step 1 of the Deep, Relaxed Breathing technique).
2. Place your hands gently on your solar plexus (the point where your ribs start to separate above your abdomen) and practice deep, relaxed breathing for a few minutes.
3. Imagine that, with each incoming breath of air, energy is rushing into your lungs and being immediately stored in your solar plexus. Image that as you exhale, this energy is flowing out to all parts of your body. Form a mental picture of this energizing process.
4. Continue on a daily basis for at least 5 - 10 minutes a day.

GENERAL RELAXATION METHODS

Technique #1 - Progressive Muscle Relaxation

This is a process for achieving relaxation by tensing and then relaxing each of the major muscle groups of the body. This technique is especially useful for persons who carry excess tension in the body musculature. When practiced regularly, it is effective in alleviating such complaints as tension headache and sore, stiff muscles.

Begin by taking several slow, deep breaths. Practice each of the following exercises with full awareness of your body sensations. As you tense each muscle group, focus your attention on the uncomfortable feeling of tension. Then, as you let go, contrast this with the feeling of warmth and relaxation that you experience.

1. Feet - flex toes back toward head; relax
2. Legs - extend leg and point toe; relax
3. Buttocks and anal sphincter - tighten; relax
4. Hands - stretch fingers apart; relax
5. Abdomen - pull in and tighten; relax
6. Forearms - make fist; relax
7. Shoulders - shrug up to ears; relax
8. Upper back - press shoulder blades together; relax
9. Neck - push chin toward chest; relax
 bend head toward left; relax
 bend head toward right; relax
 bend head back; relax
10. Jaw - yawn; relax
11. Face - grimace; relax
12. Eyes - squeeze tightly shut; relax

End with a few minutes of slow, deep breathing.

Technique #2 - Simple Meditation

1. Sit comfortably and quietly.
2. Tell yourself that you are going to use the next 5, 10 or 20 minutes to re-balance and to relax yourself.
3. Surrender the weight of your body, allowing the chair or floor to support you.

4. Close your eyes, gently cutting out visual stimulation and distraction.
5. As you inhale, repeat to yourself: *I am*
6. As you exhale, say: *re-laxed*.
7. Continue to breath normally as you repeat *I am....re-laxed*.
8. As your mind begins to wander gently bring it back to the awareness of your breath and your statement: *I am re-laxed*.
9. Continue doing this for the length of time you established.
10. To conclude, discontinue the phrase and slowly stretch your hands and feet, your arms and legs, your whole body.
11. Slowly open your eyes.

METHODS TO CONTROL TEST ANXIETY WHEN TAKING THE TEST

Technique# 1 - Tension Differential

This method works by physical relaxation of muscles.

1. Place feet flat on floor in sitting position on a straight-back chair.
2. Hold the under side of the chair with your hands.
3. Push down against the floor with your feet and pull up on the chair with your hands at the same time.
4. Hold to a slow count of 3.
5. Repeat 2 or 3 times.
6. Relax your muscles.

Technique #2 - Palms

This is a form of positive visualization.

1. Cover your eyes with the palms of your hands without touching your eyes.
2. Visualize a relaxing, peaceful scene as if you are actually seeing it.
3. Keep this image for one to two minutes.
4. Uncover your eyes and take the test.

Technique #3 – Positive Feedback

This cognitive method works by increasing your self-confidence.

1. Before the test, repeat these phrases to yourself:

I am prepared for this exam.

Tests measure knowledge, not my worth as a person.

I am going to relax and think positively and do the best that I can do.

2. During the test, remember these phrases and relax.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

This booklet has hopefully helped you learn some new techniques to manage your level of stress.

1. Be kind to yourself
2. Learn effective study habits
3. Manage your time better
4. Be prepared
5. Learn good test-taking skills

This booklet has also given you Tips on Controlling Your Test Anxiety by not letting your emotions interfere with your logic. Relaxation techniques have been explained to help, such as learning deep breathing techniques, progressive muscle relaxation, simple meditation, guided imagery and using positive feedback.

If you believe you are unable to manage your level of anxiety or that your anxiety is more intense than these techniques can calm, it may be helpful for you to seek out professional help. The AFSCME Personal Support Program can help you explore the underlying reasons for your intense anxiety. A referral may be necessary for you to see a doctor for an evaluation for appropriate medication. The referral would be made in accordance with your insurance plan.

Good luck on your next test! Remember that you make your own “luck” with the proper preparation! Enjoy your success!

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