

# TWU Counseling Center

## Reducing or Controlling Test Anxiety

There are two requirements for success on a test. The first is learning and knowing the content. The second is demonstrating that knowledge during the exam. Systematic use of learning skills will not only insure learning, but it will also eliminate one of the most important causes of exam panic: the uncertainty concerning one's preparation. That is, it is necessary not only to know the material - but to know that you know it. The self-testing provided by recitation and review is a rehearsal of the final performance (the exam). It provides proof of preparation and a shield against panic. According to students, their primary difficulty is "clutching" when the exam is given.

To maximize your performance and reduce anxiety, consider these steps:

1. Prepare adequately for the test. (Or remember, you can't remember what you haven't studied.) That means planning time to study over a period of time rather than cramming. Cramming is not an effective study technique for long-term learning and it provides you with no alternatives if you find something you don't understand while you are studying. Studying over time allows you to rehearse the material (rehearsal increases performance) and to deal with any questions you might have by asking classmates or professors. It also usually means you have stayed up half or most of the night and will be really tired when you go to take the test.
2. Rehearse the material the way you will be tested. After you have studied the material, ask yourself the kinds of questions you expect to see on the test – objective test questions (multiple choice, short answer, matching, etc.), essay, or story problem. If you can't think of any questions, you probably haven't studied the material well enough yet or you haven't been going to class to see what the instructor has been emphasizing. Nevertheless, the more you practice like you will be tested, the more the exam will feel like just one more time through the material.
3. Monitor the thoughts you are having about your performance. We tend to act the way we rehearse we will act. So, if we spend lots of time imagining that we are nervous, sweaty, and panicking and that we will not be able to remember anything and not be able to answer even one question, chances are good this rehearsal will pay off and we will "blank out" when the exam begins. On the other hand, if we prepare and rehearse adequately and imagine being eager to get to the test so that we can show what we know, it is more likely our performance will increase.
4. Be as physically ready to take the test as you can. This means – getting adequate sleep the night before the exam so you are rested; avoiding caffeine and other stimulants to keep you up the night before to study (and then finding you can't fall asleep). By the way, stimulants cause your body to experience symptoms that precisely mimic panic – rapid heart rate, dilated pupils, shallow fast breathing, shaking, etc. If you drink a gallon of coffee and an hour later think you must be panicking because your body is doing strange things, it may just be the caffeine. Preparing adequately in advance allows you the time you need to sleep and re-charge before the test.
5. Panic is contagious. Stay away from the source of the contagion - other students who haven't prepared well.

6. Reduce potential distractions in the testing room as much as you can. Eat enough to feel comfortable, go to the bathroom before the test, and sit where you are less likely to be distracted. At TWU it is always wise to wear layers of clothing because you never know what the temperature may be. Being able to put on or take off layers during the exam will keep you more comfortable.
7. Admit to yourself that you will not know all the answers. Instead of saying, over and over, "I'm afraid I won't know it", say "some of it I won't know - and some of it I will." Thus, when you read the first question and don't know the answer, you will respond, not with the conclusion that you know nothing, not by clutching, but by saying, "that's the one that I don't know." Also, remember that some anxiety is useful. People perform best when there is neither too much nor too little anxiety. Don't try to eliminate anxiety, just to keep it at a level that allows you to perform best.
8. Use good test taking skills. Most tests do not require you to answer the questions in the order in which they appear. Start by answering the question that is easiest for you – the one about which you are most certain. Then answer the next one in which you have the most confidence. Use this process through the whole test, leaving the most difficult or unsure items for last. Also, use good time management skills – be aware of the weight of each question. Don't spend 30 minutes on a 5-point answer only to find you have 30 minutes to complete the remaining questions worth 95 points.
9. Take breaks. No, you don't need to get up and run a few laps around the track to calm down. But, you might find that putting your pen down, closing your eyes, taking a few slow deep breaths and moving some of the muscles you've kept stationary in your chair for several minutes can help you feel more energized, calm, and able to perform better. This kind of break only takes 30-60 seconds.
10. Plan to reward yourself after the exam is over. Give yourself something to look forward to. Reward yourself for using the best possible study process, not for how well you did or did not do on the exam. Also, review what you did that worked well for you and what didn't work so well. Then, keep what worked and find other better things to replace the things that didn't work so well.