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# ****IMPROVING TEST-TAKING ABILITIES****

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| Approximately 20% of US college students experience symptoms of test anxiety and most athletes and artists experience performance anxiety at some point in their careers. Many students experience some nervousness or apprehension before, during, or after an exam. While a little nervousness can be a powerful motivator, test anxiety hinders performance and learning.  |
| **During exams, do you...** * feel like you “go blank”?
* become frustrated?
* find yourself thinking “I can’t do this” or “I’m stupid”?
* feel like the room is closing in on you?
* feel your heart racing or find it difficult to breathe?
* suddenly “know” the answers after turning in the test?
* score much lower than on homework or papers?

**When performing, do you…** * become distracted?
* feel overwhelmed?
* miss important cues from your surroundings?
* “go blank” and forget what you are supposed to do?
* have distracting thoughts of failure or a poor performance?
* perform more poorly than in practice?

If you answer "yes" to several of these questions, you may be experiencing test or performance anxiety. **SYMPTOMS OF TEST ANXIETY** * **Physical** – excessive sweating, chills or hot flashes, rapid heartbeat, dry mouth, nausea, shortness of breath, light-headedness, headaches, diarrhea, and/or fainting – all symptoms of the sympathetic nervous system kicking into high gear.
* **Cognitive** – difficulty concentrating, difficulty organizing your thoughts, comparing yourself to others, racing thoughts, negative self-talk, ‘going blank’, feelings of dread or doom.
* **Emotional** – excessive worry, disappointment, frustration, depressed mood, uncontrollable crying or laughing, or feelings of helplessness, hopelessness or worthlessness.
* **Behavioral** – fidgeting, pacing, procrastination and other forms of avoidance, frantic activity, substance abuse, cutting or other self-harm

**REASONS FOR TEST ANXIETY*** **Lack of preparation** – Poor organization, time management, and study habits can lead to feeling unprepared and overwhelmed. Cramming at the last minute is less effective, more stressful, and definitely unpleasant.
* **Expectations** – Whether your own, your parents, coaches, scholarship committee or extended family, expectations play a major role in how stressful you experience something. Perfectionism is particularly cruel and punishing as a mindset as it involves all-or-nothing thinking and is not only exclusively focused on outcomes instead of learning and growing but includes the mandate “I can’t fail” which is a pressurized double negative.
* **Negative associations** - Students who have experienced problems related to prior testing (e.g., failure, parent punishment, teacher humiliation, loss of status among peers) can have those past experiences flaring up like fire alarms.

**GENERAL SKILLS TO IMPROVE TEST-TAKING ABILITIES*** **Get a good night’s sleep -** Cramming is never the answer and pulling an all-nighter can exacerbate your nerves. Having 7-8 hours per night is usually more beneficial than rereading a text until dawn.
* **Fuel up -** Eat a nutritious breakfast before the test and pack smart snacks for ongoing energy. Look for foods that offer a steady stream of nutrients, rather than a sugar high followed by a crash.
* **Exercise - regular exercise relieves stress, helps with sleep, increases energy, improves focus and concentration and even creates new brain cells. It’s hard to get a better deal than exercise, but the benefits are short-lived. Walking a ways to the test site can help burn off adrenaline.**
* **Limit substances -** Not abusing your body also helps; using alcohol or other drugs (including caffeine) that alter your natural state detracts your ability to function at an optimum level.
* **Keep a balanced and realistic mindset -** develop reasonable expectations and manage negative and irrational thoughts about catastrophic results; do not allow your grades to become dependent on the outcome of one exam.
* **Relaxation techniques -** deep breathing exercises, visualization, and stretching can help to increase focus an concentration. Professional athletes and Navy Seals use these techniques to manage their sympathetic nervous system. Deep breathing: learn to breathe deeply, place your hand on your stomach and inhale through your nose so that your abdomen expands. Hold for a count of 3, exhale through your nose for a count of 7. Practice when calm first so that you find your “sweet spot.” Then, during a stressful situation, focus on taking 2-3 deep breaths, and your body will relax.
* **Routines** - Routines help us focus and can reduce anxiety. Whether the ritual is related to your task (e.g., basketball player who bounces the ball three times before shooting a free-throw) or not (e.g., doing a math puzzle prior to a big tennis match) is up to you to decide. Organize materials the night before and check to make sure you have everything you will need (e.g., test materials, water, snack, a sweater so you aren’t cold) is a great standard routine to start with.
* **Slow Down** -We live in a frantic go-go society that stress super-productivity and it’s important toteach yourself to slow down and move consciously at a level where you can prepare and perform better.

**SPECIFIC SKILLS TO IMPROVE TEST-TAKING ABILITIES****Focus on your process instead of the outcome -** Mindset sets the tone for performance. When you focus on each problem in the moment, you will get a better outcome; think of a test as a hurdle race, one hurdle at a time. This is also important when it comes to preparation. **Rely on times you have been successful in the past -** Remind yourself of past successes and what you did well in those times. Bring those strategies and practices into the present and use them again; you don’t have to reinvent the wheel each time you take a test.**Develop good study habits** - Attend class regularly Complete all assignments in a timely manner Find a quiet place to study on a regular basisSpreading studying over several days Ask for additional help when needed Exercise to build energy Encourage yourself; set up a system of rewards for dedicated studying and good test performance * **Practice the performance** - The time limits of an exam, the tied score of a game, or the audience at your performance – are all stimuli that increase your level of arousal and add to your experience of anxiety. If you practice under similar conditions, you’ll become less sensitive to these stimuli. For a major exam, work through a practice exam under the same time constraints that will exist when you take the exam. For an important athletic or artistic performance, practice with distractions or with an audience. Or visual either one.
* **Get to the testing site a little early.** Feeling rushed will only amp up the anxiety, but don’t arrive too early or you might have too much time on your hands.
* **Learn good test-taking skills -** do not panic if you can’t remember something right away:
* Read questions and directions carefully before you begin
* Answer questions you know well first, and then go back to other ones
* Outline essays before you begin to write; keep short answers short
* Don’t spend a lot of time reviewing answers
* After you’ve read the directions, dive right in by finding some questions you can ace to build up your confidence and momentum, don’t let the blank page amp up your anxiety, or make an outline for an essay answer.

**GIVE YOURSELF A GOOD TALKING TO** * **Self-talk comes in all varieties:**
* *“I have to take a physics test."*  This is factual.
* *"I think I will pass my physics test.”*  This is hopeful.
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* *"I’m going to fail my physics test.”*  This is negative.
* *"I can't fail my physics test.”*  This is a double-negative.
* *"I know I can get an A on my physics test.”*  This is either positive, super-positive or overly optimistic.
* *"It’s possible to get an A on my physics test because I attended all the classes, asked the professor for help when I needed it, got good grades on all my homework, and studied five hours over the past three days for it.”*  This is realistic with factual justification.
* **Instructional vs Motivational Self-Talk**:
* Instructional Self-Talk work best with tasks that involved focus, strategy and technique (e.g., cooking, packing, counting, writing, editing, looking for an object).  “First I need to put the widget into the post, and then connect the backing to the post.”
* Motivational Self-Talk work best on tasks based on speed, strength and power (e.g., sports). However, don’t try to overcompensate with overzealous, motivational monologues (‘I’m the best!’) A realistic example is self-talk Naomi Osaka used in her mid-match wobble in the 2018 US Open - “I just told myself that it is a final and I am playing against Petra and she is a great champion. I can’t let myself act immature in a way. I should be grateful to be here and that is what I tried to be.”

**THE 3 KINDS OF TESTS**

* **Objective** (e.g., multiple choice, true-false, short answer, and matching)
* Objective tests ask you to know how discrete bits of information are connected.

(e.g., a. 1492 connects with b. Columbus crossed the Atlantic)

* Practice for these by some method approximating flash cards is usually best.
* **Essay**
* Essay tests ask you to compare/contrast (e.g., how things are related or note related to each other), or describe/discuss (e.g., asks you to show you know content)
* Outlining and understanding main points and how they are connected works best.
* **Concept learning** (story problems)
* Concept learning asks you to show you know the concept by being able to use it (e.g., math story problems, using a concept in a different way than it was discussed)
* Studying the concepts from different angles and views to see how they connect to each other works best.
* **Oral exams or practice exams** require practicing one’s actual routine, in necessary, in front of others.

**GOAL SETTING -** As I tell my patients, this isn’t rocket science but there are a lot of moving parts.

**Level I** – Are you getting good sleep, regular exercise, eating well, limiting substances, consistently attending class, turning in assignments on time, doing fair-good on quizzes, and studying enough?

**Level II** – Probably requires a reevaluation of study habits, putting in extra time, asking questions to make sure you understand material properly, getting a study-buddy, seeking help from a tutor or the professor after during office hours, joining a study group, sitting in the front of the class, practicing deep breathing and visualizing.

**Level III** – Probably requires talking to peers to see if they are struggling too, a deeper dive into trying new study habits, consider therapy to address anxiety and/or problematic history and negative associations with test taking, etc.

So how does one integrate all these concepts and habits?

* Evaluate how well you are doing with each
* Highlight the ones you need to work on
* Start with 2-3 goals, you can add more once the first ones have been addressed
* Pick either an easy task to integrate to gain momentum or pick a more involved one that will make a big difference for you or a combination thereof

**STRESS VS ANXIETY**

While there are similarities between stress and anxiety, the main differences are:

* The source of stress is mainly external, and anxiety is mainly internal
* Stress is usually in relation to specific pressure, but anxiety spread can like a wildfire to any part of life
* Stress is relieved once the external source is dealt with, while anxiety will persist even after a positive outcome

**STRESS VS PRESSURE**

From the article “Your Failure To Differentiate Stress From Pressure Could Be Your Downfall” by Amy Morin, who cited Henrie Weisinger, senior author of ‘Performing Under Pressure: The Science of Doing Your Best When It Matters Most,’”:

* “Stress refers to the situation of too many demands and not enough resources – time, money, energy – to meet them.”
* “Pressure is a situation in which you perceive that something at stake is dependent on the outcome of your performance.”
* “Asking oneself, ‘Am I feeling overwhelmed by the demands upon me, or do I feel I have to produce a specific result?’ can differentiate the two, although, both can occur simultaneously.”

If you are still struggling to improve your test-taking abilities despite diligent efforts to improve, you may want to schedule an appointment with Counseling Services. Counseling Services address a wide range of issues including Depression, Anxiety, Stress Management, Anger Management, Self-Esteem, Relationships, Substance Use and Abuse, Study Skills, Adjustment to University Life, Grief and Loss, Conflict Mediation and others. We also provide referrals to other agencies and specialists in the community.

**All counseling sessions are confidential and FREE to RSU students.**

Trevor Huskey, LCSW is the Coordinator for Counseling Services and is currently seeing students M-F between 8 am – 5 pm.

Caitlin Hendrex, LMSW is the part-time RSU Counselor and currently sees students on Tuesday between noon – 9 pm and Thursdays 8 am – 2 pm.

**Please call 918 343 7845 to arrange an appointment.** If no one answers, please leave a message with your name and phone number (please speak slowly), and Trevor or Caitlin will call you back as soon as either is able to.

**We are here to help fellow Hillcats get psyched up *instead of* psyched out!**