Skills for Success:
TEST ANXIETY

Objectives:
1. Connect with peers
2. Learn about UCS services
3. Identify if you struggle with test anxiety
4. Learn the signs of test anxiety
5. Learn how to cope with test anxiety
6. Understand the causes and cures for test anxiety
7. Learn techniques to help you deal with test anxiety

Take home messages:

1. 

2. 

3.
Skills for Success: Test Anxiety

How do you know whether you have test anxiety?

Signs of test anxiety in your head
- Mentally blanking out
- You have racing thoughts
- You have difficulty concentrating
- You have negative thoughts about...
  ◦ Past performance
  ◦ Consequences of failure
  ◦ How everyone else is doing
- Knowing the answers after the test, but not while taking it

What causes test anxiety?

1. **Cause** - You are unfamiliar with the test.
   **Cure** - Learn about the test.
   - How many questions are on the test?
   - What format are the questions in (for example, multiple choice, short answer, etc.)?
   - How much time do you have to take the test?
   - How are your answers scored (should you write in essay format)?
   - What material is covered in the test?
   - What do the questions look like?

2. **Cause** - You feel you have not mastered the material being tested.
   **Cure** - Make a study schedule and stick to it.
   - Create a study plan that outlines...
     i. What you are going to study.
     ii. Where you are going to find helpful resources.
     iii. When you are going to take each step.
   - For the test you should...
     i. Have a good understanding of important terms and concepts.
     ii. Be able to define them in your own words.
     iii. Be able to explain why they are important.

Signs of test anxiety in your body
- Nausea
- Cramps
- Faintness
- Sweating
- Headache
- Dry mouth
- Increased breathing rate
- Fast heartbeat
- Tense muscles
3. **Cause** - You have negative thoughts.
   **Cure** - Counter negative thoughts with positive thoughts and actions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negative thought</th>
<th>Positive thought</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I always do poorly on tests.</td>
<td>I have got a better study plan for this test that I ever had before.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If I don’t pass this test, I am a failure.</td>
<td>I am going to pass, but if I don’t, I can bounce back.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The test is going to have trick questions.</td>
<td>The test is designed to let me show what I know, and I know all the formats of the questions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perfectionist thought</th>
<th>Realistic thought</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There is an impossible amount of things to learn for this test.</td>
<td>I do not need to know the answer to every question, I just need to pass.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My knowledge of one of the topics is really shaky.</td>
<td>I do not need to know everything about every topic. Also, if I start now, I can learn more about the topics in which I know I am weak.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. **Cause** - You believe certain myths about the test.
   **Cure** - Learn the truth about tests: Myth vs. Truth

**Myth** - The exam could out you as a phony, exposing that you are not smart.
~**Truth** - Most professors understand the pressures of taking an exam and usually make an effort to give you credit for whatever you may have correct in an answer. So even if you do not know the answer try your best to put together all the principles you have learned and come up with an educated guess.

**Myth** - You should have studied everything.
~**Truth** - As the exam comes closer there is no use trying to study everything; however with the remaining time you have chose the material you study wisely. First, don’t bother reading material not discussed in class. Second, brush up on things that are more likely to come up on the exam. Some tips - Try to recall material that your professor mentioned more than once. Read about topics he/she assigned as homework. Take note of items he/she has written on the board or included in power point, such as terms, names, formulas, or dates. Study anything the professor told you would be on the exam.

**Myth** - If you have not understood what you read, there is no use taking the exam.
~**Truth** - Oftentimes there is a lot of information covered in your course work and it is highly unlikely you will comprehend every topic fully. If there is time ask your professor or classmates for clarification on topics you do not understand but even if you do not have time for this, take the exam anyway.
Myth - The exam questions are not easy to understand
~Truth - Generally professors want you to do well on exams and phrase the questions in ways that you can understand but if you are having trouble understanding a question ask the professor for clarification.

Myth - Exams are for people with good memories
~Truth - While some exams still test for your memorization skills, there are also exams that test for your understanding of the material and your comprehension skills, your ability to analyze a topic, how you compare and contrast, and how you relate a concept to a real world setting.

Myth - Exams are just for people who work extremely fast.
~Truth - There are time limited exams but all of the information on the exam should be something you have seen before. If there is anything new on the exam, it is only a manner of presentation: same principles, different data.

Myth - Calculations are either right or wrong.
~Truth - Credit is almost always given for effort. Even if you do know how to get the final answer, attempt as best you can, you may get a few extra points.

5. Cause - Your body shows signs of anxiety.
Cure - Take care of your body, and your mind will benefit
- Eat well and exercise.
- Studies have shown that lack of sleep can contribute to memory loss and lack of concentration. So get plenty of sleep, especially the night before the exam.
- Continue to socialize with friends and family and take regular study breaks. You emotional health is as important as your physical health for minimizing anxiety.
- Surround yourself with positive people who support your studying and desire to do well. Try to avoid friends or acquaintances with negative attitudes, especially negative attitudes about studying.

6. Cause - Tension reinforces itself and builds up.
Cure - Practice tension-release exercises.
- When you start feeling anxious, take a couple of long, deep breaths and exhale slowly. While you do this, it may help to close your eyes and imagine a peaceful setting, such as a quiet tree-lined pond, or a beautiful ocean beach.
- When you feel your body tensing up, focus on a particular group of muscles (e.g. the shoulders or back), and first contract them for about 10 seconds and then allow them to relax. Concentrate on the difference in the feelings and repeat the exercise trying to get the muscles to relax more each time.
7. **Cause** - You allow the test environment to get on your nerves.

**Cure** - Tune out distractions.
- Try to avoid arriving too early or too late.
- After you arrive in the classroom, choose a seat away from doors, aisles, and other high-traffic areas.
- Sit by yourself and do not chat with others. Your classmates may be anxious to and nervousness and anxiety can be contagious.
- Have a strategy for dealing with distraction. One strategy may be to mentally repeat a word or phrase, such as “remain calm”.

8. **Cause** - Your mind goes blank or it wanders.

**Cure** - Stay focused.
- Arrive with a plan of how you will start the test.
- Upon beginning do not rush to answer the first question but instead browse the entire test, page by page, first. Don’t try to read each question just eliminate surprises.
- Remember you are not expected to answer every question correctly so prepare mentally for there to be questions you do not know.
- If you “go blank” remember action fights anxiety. Start writing down anything on scratch paper and it is very possible ideas will come.
- For multiple-choice questions, answer the easy ones first and leave the harder ones for later. Do not spend too much time on any one question and if possible answer every question even if you have to guess.

---

**Test Anxiety Tips**

Everyone has some level of test anxiety. In fact, low to moderate levels are good because you’ll do better on tests than students who don’t have any anxiety at all. However, high levels of test anxiety need to be lowered to manageable levels.

**What can you do?**

1. Prepare carefully for the test! Be ready two days ahead of the test. You need to store the information in long term memory. You do this by repetition of the information. Best way to store information is to study well and then take a nap or sleep for the night. Do not go to a movie or do something emotionally intense! It erases what you just learned.
2. Bring the levels of anxiety in all areas of your life down.
3. Avoid certain substances. For example, sugar and caffeine naturally increase the levels of anxiety. Alcohol stops the neurotransmitters in your brain from working which reduces your memory. Smoking marijuana prevents you from storing information into your long term memory.
4. Sleep and eat well a week ahead of time. Eat something with protein before the test – it will help your brain work better.
5. Do physical activity at least 10-15 minutes before the beginning of the test. Don’t get to class too early but give yourself enough time to get there. When you get there early don’t go in the classroom – walk around for 10-15 minutes. Walk up and down the stairs. Do something active. This burns out the adrenaline in your system and works to calm you down.

6. Avoid highly stressful people/situations before test.

7. Practice deep breathing – the kind when your stomach rises when you breathe and not your chest. This type of breathing evens out adrenaline by giving you positive endorphins.

Techniques during a test:

1. When you get anxious the adrenaline levels in your body increase. High levels of adrenaline cause you to “lose” information during tests. Answer the questions you know first. This evens out the adrenaline levels in your brain. Then go back and work on the ones you skipped initially.

2. When you get the test write down what you know in the margins or on the back page right away. Write key phrases, points, formulas, etc. before you even look at the test questions. If you freak out and forget areas during the test, reading your notes in the margins will help you to regain focus on the material and remind you of what you knew before you walked into take the test. This gets you back in the frame of mind you need to be in for the test.

Adapted from: UNC Counseling Center
Sunlight Meditation

Picture yourself in a safe, beautiful place outdoors. Now imagine that you feel a warm, gentle breeze blowing over your body. Overhead you can see a beautiful blue sky and some white clouds. Shining directly overhead is the sun.

Now imagine that you can feel the warmth and light from the sun directly above you. You can feel it shining down—in and through your entire body. You feel it beginning to relax and soothe every part of your body. In a moment, you might concentrate on this sunlight and move it over to your right arm. Focus it there. Just experience the warmth and light from the sun penetrating the fingertips of your right hand. You can feel it soothing and relaxing your right hand. And in a moment it begins to move from your right hand to your forearm...and then to your upper arm...and then to your shoulder. Just feel the sunlight warming and soothing your entire right arm. You can feel it filling and soothing every muscle, tendon, and nerve in your right arm. And you feel your right arm—from the tips of your fingers to your shoulders—becoming completely relaxed. And you find yourself just letting go more and more...becoming more and more at peace.

Now move the light from the sun to your left arm. Imagine it entering and soothing your left hand. And in a moment you can begin to feel it moving from your left hand up your left arm...soothing your forearm...and then your upper arm...moving all the way up to your shoulder. You’re relaxing all the muscles, nerves, and tendons in your left arm...feeling the light penetrating and soothing your entire left arm.

Just continue to let yourself drift deeper and deeper into quietness and peace...feeling very safe, secure, and relaxed. And, gently now, take the light from the sun and move it over to your right leg. Allow it to move from the tips of your toes all the way up your right leg to the big hip joint. Feel the warmth as the sunlight moves up through your right leg, from your right foot to your right calf...and then to your right knee...and then to your right thigh...and finally to your right hip bone. Just feel the sunlight penetrating and soothing every muscle, tendon, and nerve in your right leg and hip. Your entire right leg is feeling completely relaxed.

And in a moment, feel the sunlight move to your left leg. Again, allow it to move from your left foot up through your entire left leg to your hip bone. Feel it soothing and relaxing your left ankle...then your calf...and then your knee...and then soothing all the muscles in your thigh...and finally moving up into your hip. You can feel the sunlight penetrating every muscle, tendon, and nerve in your entire left leg. And in a moment you find your left leg feeling completely relaxed.

And now move the light from the sun into your stomach area. Just feel it warming and soothing every organ in the lower part of your body. Just feel the pressures and tensions of the day draining away from you...as your stomach and lower abdomen relax completely. Feel your stomach and lower abdomen becoming very relaxed.

Now take the light from the sun and move it into your chest area. Let it soothe and comfort that area. Just feel it streaming into your chest. You’re feeling relaxation...peace...and comfort through your entire chest...feeling your chest becoming very relaxed and your breathing becoming easy.
Now, in a moment, you might bring the light from the sun down through the top of your head. Imagine it soothing and comforting the top of your head...and then the area around your eyes...and then your jaws. And in a moment, feel the warm, soothing sensations of the sunlight moving down into your neck, relaxing and releasing every tight muscle in your neck. And in a while you can feel your neck completely relaxing. Your head and neck are becoming completely relaxed.

And now let the sunlight move down your spine, down through your spine all the way to your tailbone...feel it moving down through your spine all the way to your tailbone. And then imagine the light moving out from your spine into every nerve of your body. Feel the sunlight moving into every nerve of your body, healing and relaxing all of those nerves. And as all of your nerves relax, you can enter into a very deep state of peace. Just allow yourself to drift deeper and deeper into quietness and peace...becoming more and more relaxed. In a moment you can feel the sunlight relaxing and soothing every single cell in your body. Every single cell in your body is becoming very relaxed. And you feel yourself becoming very deeply relaxed...very much at peace.

Final Words...

1. Practice, practice, practice
   - Practice in any way possible. Take practice tests or do practice problems. Visualize yourself remaining calm while you take the exam. Visualize yourself completing the exam and doing well on it.

2. Find a coach
   - This can be a classmate, friend or relative
     With your coach make a list of all the fears you have about the test and about test taking in general. Next to each fear, write down the specific steps you will take to help you conquer that fear.

For example...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fear:</th>
<th>Steps:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| I'm going to freeze up during the exam. | 1. I will take the practice test, timed, once a week until the test.  
                                          | 2. I will practice relaxation techniques prior to taking the test.  
                                          | 3. I will use relaxation techniques to help relieve tension during the test. |

3. University Counseling Services (UCS) is a resource, call 410-455-2472 for an appointment.

4. Remember...Test anxiety feeds on the unknown; the more you know about the test, about yourself, about your anxieties and how to conquer them, the less the test anxiety will control you. Good luck!!

Adapted from: The Anxiety & Phobia Workbook by Edmund J. Bourne, Ph.D., 4th Ed, 2005

Adapted from:
The Praxis Series: Reducing test anxiety
http://www.lazysmartstudents.com/exams/