Test Anxiety

Anxiety and test-taking frequently occur together and achieving a balance between them is important. You need anxiety to keep your edge, to think sharply and comprehensively; however, too much anxiety can cause you to forget what you know or interfere with your organizing skills. But, do not dismay: successful test taking is a skill that can be learned.

First Things First

There are a number of things to do long before opening your blue-book. One is attitudinal: commit to your education as your primary job at the present time. This can be difficult when you are a parent, are taking care of aging parents, or are the primary financial provider for yourself and/or your family. If you regularly consider school to be your second or third “job,” your test preparation will reflect your attitude.

Other approaches are behavioral. Attend class. Actively participate by taking notes, asking questions, and engaging in class discussions. Ask your professor to outline what is important to study for the exam; indeed, many professors will be willing to provide study-guide questions or a list of significant topics, terms, and concepts. Schedule time to study and keep to your schedule. As brilliant as he was, Einstein devoted much time to studying, so do not expect yourself to master material without studying. Consider forming or joining a study group to increase your motivation to prepare and create more opportunities to talk through the course material. Use the Academic Success Center in the HCC for tutoring for difficult topics. You will recall much more information - and your confidence will rise - when you actively engage in the learning process.

Be thoughtful about how you spend your time the night before the test. Get a good night’s sleep so that you think clearly and can easily shift among concepts while taking the test. Avoid alcohol, recreational drugs, or over-the-counter stimulants and sodas (anything containing caffeine) so you do not have any kind of hangover during the test. Review your notes and study questions, but do not plan to “cram” several weeks of studying into one all-nighter before your test. Actually, taking a yoga class or doing whatever exercise best reduces your tension the day before the test will probably help you relax and think more clearly.

One Thing at a Time

The confidence that you develop in taking care of yourself and planning often will carry you through the negative anxiety that can arise when you are sitting with your test. Knowing you have prepared for the test, pace yourself when the test arrives at your desk. Do not panic. Take a few moments to read through all the questions, noting which sections are worth the most points. Plan your test-taking time so that you devote more time to the weighted items or sections.

With essay questions, quickly outline your thoughts on scrap paper. This does not have to look pretty, but it will help you organize the flow of your essay and to include all the related information you need. Complete the essays first to which you know answers most quickly and easily. With multiple-choice questions and true-false items, be careful to read each item and all possible responses completely and carefully.
When responding to True-False items, be sure you consider absolute, all-or-nothing, always/never statements carefully before indicating your response. Finally, remember that your first response is very often the correct answer, so change your answers only when you are quite sure that you missed something in your first response.

**In the Moment “Anxiety-Busters”**

Before you begin the test, stand up straight and extend your arms straight up over your head. Grab your right wrist with your left hand and slowly bend sideways from the waist to the left. Hold the position for a couple seconds. Repeat on the other side. During the test there are some simple exercises that should not be too distracting to others. Shrug your shoulders up to your ears and hold this position for a few seconds. Or drop your chin to your chest and roll your head slowly from side to side. Often these exercises are helpful in relaxing muscles tensed with anxiety, but as with any type of exercise: do not push yourself until/if it hurts and do not do these exercises if you have a neck or spinal injury, etc., unless you first consult with a doctor or physical therapist.

If you do experience concentration, organization, or expression difficulties during the test, consider taking a moment or two to relax. Deep breathing from your diaphragm often will physiologically slow you down and give you a mental break from the thoughts and feelings that are blocking your test performance. Place one hand on your abdomen and breathe into the lower sections of your lungs, slowly counting to five, holding your breath for a few seconds, then just as slowly exhale all the air from your lungs to a count of five. Breathe in deeply through your nose, but exhale through your slightly opened lips. Clear your mind and concentrate only on the act of breathing during this exercise. Complete as many repetitions as you need. You will become proficient with little practice and no one else need know you are deep breathing.

Above all: maintain your positive mindset. Remind yourself that you have prepared for the test and that your plan is to deliver your best possible performance. Then concentrate on one question or item at a time. Circle items that are confusing; you can skip them and come back to them at the end when you have some mental distance because you have completed other items with confidence.

Finally, utilize the Counseling Center to talk through your anxiety. Services are free to you as an enrolled student. All you need do is drop-in for a first meeting, then attend appointments you arrange with your counselor.

Managing test anxiety is a skill like many others you are honing in college. As with learning new concepts and skills, approaching anxiety management from as many directions as possible will solidify your mastery. But the bottom line is that as you believe in your ability to master new skills, tests will gradually lose the power to fluster you.