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for tomorrow

HOW2 MANAGE TEST AND EXAM ANXIETY

(LSD7)

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TEST AND EXAM ANXIETY

Are you stressed or anxious before tests or exams? It is normal to feel this way, so do not feel you are alone. We all need a degree of anxiety to motivate us to study harder for tests or exams.

During tests/exams students often experience high levels of anxiety and sometimes `draw a blank` even though they know the material well.

Test anxiety refers to the **intense nervousness** which some students feel when they have to write a test or exam. This may negatively affect your performance and therefore needs to be acknowledged and managed.

1 SYMPTOMS OF TEST/EXAM ANXIETY

Tick if these apply to you.

Before a test/exam.

- Insomnia
- Less (or increased) appetite
- Inability to concentrate.
- Boredom. (A surface lack of interest in a subject may cover a deep-seated anxiety about future performance)
- Mock indifference (Don't-care attitude)
- Guilt
- Anger
- Depression.

During a test/exam

- Confusion
- Panic
- Mental blocks
- Fainting.

IF YOU HAVE CHECKED ANY OF THESE BOXES, READ ON.

2 HOW TO CONTROL TEST ANXIETY

Test-taking anxiety can be effectively managed. The following techniques (or shortened versions thereof) can be used during the test or exam if you feel panicky.

- **Be well prepared before a test/exam**

Do your groundwork early on i.e. have summaries and notes up to date. Make certain you understand the work. Cramming and parrot-fashion learning increase the likelihood of those `memory blanks`.

Check and double-check your exam

Ensure that you know where the exam venue is and when you are writing.

- **On the night before the exam**

Try to get a good night's sleep i.e. at least 7-8 hours

- **Arriving at the test/exam venue**

Make sure you arrive on time. Do not stand around talking to other students about what you may or may not have learnt. By hearing them talk, you may become anxious.

- **Employ sound exam techniques**

(For further information refer to pamphlet SS7: *How to write tests and exams.*)

Take your time to read through the paper. If there is a choice, select those questions which you would like to answer. Read all instructions carefully. Allocate time per question. Answer the questions you know best first. This will put you in a confident state of mind and reduce your anxiety. It is a good idea to write out the basic structure of essay-type questions on a piece of scrap paper or in the margin of your exam paper.

Make sure that you know what is required in essay questions. Key words like `Discuss`, `Contrast`, `Compare` etc. will indicate the approach to take.

(Refer to pamphlet SS9: *How to understand the terminology of tests/exams.*)

- **Think about the reasons for your anxiety and write them down.**

Once you have considered these very carefully, try to see an exam as a challenge rather than a threat so that your negative attitude turns into a positive one. This will help you feel motivated rather than anxious.

- **Deal firmly with those negative thoughts**

If you are experiencing exam stress, it is likely that you are thinking negatively. Negative thoughts could occur before the exams, while studying or even during the test/exam.

Ways of dealing with negative thoughts

- **Thought stopping**

This is merely to say to yourself: “*STOP THAT*”. This can be done immediately one becomes aware of a negative thought and before it impairs performance. Any object, for example, an elastic band around your finger, can assist you in preventing negative thoughts. Associate the elastic band with the prevention of negative thoughts. Every time you experience negative thoughts, flick the elastic band and you will be reminded that you cannot afford negative thoughts.

- **Changing negative thoughts to positive ones**

- Unrealistic statements.

You might say, for example, “*I must get 80% for Accounting.*” (but you have never achieved higher than 50 %.) You are making unrealistic demands on yourself. This unrealistic statement could be changed to: “*I’ll do my best to get at least 5% more than last time.*”

Unrealistic demands made by other people can also lead to unrealistic self-statements. You can work at changing these as well.

- Self defeating statements.

Self defeating statements place you in a losing position before you have even started. For example, *“I’ll never get through this work “* This is can be changed to: *“If I plan my studies step by step and follow this plan carefully, I should be able to finish.”*

- Self fulfilling statements.

These have a habit of coming true. For example, *“I made a mess of my last Economics exam. This is sure to happen again.”*

Counter these by means of positive statements. For example: *“I may have made mistakes in my last Economic exam, but I know where I went wrong. I am better prepared this time and I know what mistakes to avoid. I am sure I can pass.”*

- **Visualise success**

We tend to live up to our own expectations, good or bad. If you spend a lot of time mentally rehearsing what you will do if you fail, you increase your chances of failure. Stop the cycle of worry now!

Take time to rehearse what it will be like to succeed. Be very specific. Visualise taking the test/exam successfully. You discover that you know all the answers. Imagine yourself writing quickly and confidently. In your mind, you hand in the paper with confidence. Visualise your celebration when you find out that you have passed. As soon as you realize you are feeling anxious about an upcoming test, begin

using this technique. The more you practise visualization, the better it will work.

- **Praise yourself.**

Consider using positive sentences like: “*I am very relaxed.*” “*I am doing a great job on this test.*” “*I am answering these questions very well.*” “*I am writing very neatly.*” “*I have many tools to help me recall.*”

- **Relaxation techniques**

Here are 3 basic techniques which are useful in relieving test/exam stress.

- **Breathing**

This breathing technique can be used in any stressful situation, as it is not visible. It is a very effective way of lowering your level of tension and your heartbeat.

Stand, sit or lie down comfortably. If at all possible, close your eyes and concentrate on breathing deeply. Shut out all thoughts and concentrate on the rhythmic in-and-out flow of air through your airways. Your breathing should be smooth, but deep.

As soon as you notice yourself relaxing and becoming calmer, breathe in deeply and hold the air in for approximately 10 seconds. When breathing out after 10 seconds, imagine yourself blowing a bowl of soup. There will be a certain amount of resistance when breathing out.

This process lowers your heartbeat and results in a more relaxed state of mind. Repeat three more times, while saying the following as you breathe out: “*I feel calm, refreshed and in control of myself*”.

Compare your present relaxed state with your previous tense feelings.

➤ **Partial relaxation**

Make a note of those muscles which are tense while studying or while you are in the exam situation and attempt to relax these. Couple this with deep breathing.

➤ **The Peaceful Scene Technique**

This method can be used at any time as it is not visible to others. It should be practiced regularly to be effective. Use the following procedure:

By using the breathing technique, create a calm, tranquil and restful state of mind. Free your thoughts totally to move to a place where you have been before and where you were calm and relaxed, for example, a tranquil forest or sea scene.

Concentrate on the scene and try to clearly visualize the picture. Imagine yourself actually standing at the scene.

Experience the associated sensations, e.g. listen to the noise of the sea, listen to the crying of the seagulls, feel the sand running through your fingers, the sun on your skin, look at the blue sky, taste the salt water and smell the saltiness of the wind. Experience the total scene as well as the associated relaxed and warm feeling. Keep this relaxed scene in your mind for a few minutes, while continuing to breathe deeply and smoothly. Say to yourself: *“I feel calm, refreshed and in control”*.

Let your thoughts return to reality.

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