Counselling Services

MANAGING EXAM STRESS/ANXIETY

The term “exam anxiety” refers to the emotional reactions that some students have to exams. The fear of exams is not an irrational fear – after all, how you perform in university exams can shape the course of an academic career; however, the excessive fear of exams interferes with your ability to be successful at university.

Symptoms:
There are three components of exam anxiety. The physical component involves the typical bodily reactions to acute anxiety: a knot in the stomach, wet and trembling hands, nausea or “butterflies in the stomach”, ache in the shoulders and back of the neck, dry mouth, pounding heart, etc. The emotional component involves fear or panic – as one student put it, “I become completely unglued!” The mental or cognitive components of exam anxiety involve problems with attention and memory – “My mind jumps from one thing to another” and worry “I’m certain to fail”.

What can help:
One approach to reducing exam anxiety is to learn how to relax. It is possible for students to learn how to relax on cue, so that anxiety can be controlled during the exam. Learning how to relax is fairly simple, but if you want to be able to do it on your next exam, you will have to practice it beforehand. Follow these steps:

1. Get comfortable in your chair – slouch down if that helps.
2. Tighten, and then relax different muscle groups of your body, one group at a time. Start with your feet, and then move up your body to your neck and face.
3. Begin breathing slowly and deeply.
4. Focus your attention on your breath going in and out.
5. Each time you breathe out, say “relax” to yourself.

A second approach focuses on reducing the negative and worrisome thoughts that provoke the anxiety. Students who are anxious about tests tend to say things to themselves that are negative or exaggerated. Research shows that test anxiety can be reduced if these negative thoughts can be replaced by constructive thoughts. In order to do this, you must first become aware of your own thoughts, and then replace them with constructive thoughts. For example, rather than “If I do badly on the test, I’m a failure”, replace it with “Yes, this is a difficult test, I am going to do the best I can. If I get a low grade I will do what it takes to perform better next time.”

What can I do to prevent exam anxiety becoming a problem?
Students may blame exam anxiety for poor performance in exams. This poor performance may be a lack of preparedness for an exam (which causes anxiety), rather than classic test anxiety. Be sure to be well prepared.
MANAGING EXAM STRESS/ANXIETY (cont.)

Before the exam
1. Discuss the exam content with lecturer and classmates.
2. Develop effective study and test preparation skills. Spread review over several days rather than cramming.
3. Intensive review should be done a few days before exam.
4. Review text, notes, and homework problems.
5. Use 3X5 cards for learning specific concepts or formulas.
6. Take a practice test under exam-like conditions.
7. Continue regular exercise program.
8. Get sufficient REST.

During the exam
1. Read the directions carefully.
2. Budget your exam time.
3. Change positions to help you relax.
4. If you go blank, skip the question and go on.
5. If you’re taking an essay test and you go blank on the whole test, pick a question and start writing. It may trigger the answer in your mind.
6. Don’t panic when students start handing in their papers. There’s no reward for being the first done.