

Do you worry about exams weeks in advance? Have trouble concentrating when you study? Before, during and after exam week, do you show such signs of stress as rapid heartbeat, nausea or dizziness? If so, you just might have a condition known as "test anxiety."

College psychologists studying this phenomenon over the past few years estimate that 20 percent of all college students have moderate cases of test anxiety—enough to lower their grade point averages by one full point. As many as half of these students may have anxiety serious enough to require treatment in the form of behavior modification.

One psychologist who pioneered in the diagnosis and treatment of test anxiety is Dr. Richard M. Suinn, head of the Department of Psychology at Colorado State University in Fort Collins and psychologist for the U.S. Olympic Ski Team.

Suinn is quick to emphasize that some degree of anxiety is good. "Moderate anxiety can facilitate maximum performance by leading to increased motivation, heightened alertness and greater concentration," he says.

Dr. Carol Schneider of Colorado University's Student Health Center puts it this way, "If you don't have enough anxiety, you don't study. If too much, you perform badly despite good preparation."

What causes test anxiety? As with many stress-related conditions, the causes are varied: your teachers and parents may expect too much, you may be an over-achiever, you may have an excessive need to please people or too much fear of failure.

Lower-than-expected grades and occasional panic are not necessarily indicators of test anxiety. For example, suppose you came from a small high school where the academic demands were relaxed, where you were number one without having to try very hard. Suddenly, you find yourself in a college environment where your classmates are the pick of big-city high schools, where the courses are tough and faculty demands high, where competition is



Fear and Trembling at Exam Time

great and grading is hard. You find yourself struggling to get "C's" instead of the "A's" you were used to. Your lower grades may or may not be attributable to test anxiety.

However, you might be among the test-anxious if you display some of the following symptoms:

- Midway through a test, you find yourself looking around, wondering how other people are doing, worrying about failing the test and wondering what will happen if you do.
- When you read test questions, the words are meaningless. You have to re-read the questions two and three times to comprehend them.
- During tests you are plotting ways to escape—sneaking out, turning in a blank test, fainting.
- You often wish you were out of school and working—especially just before tests.
- You panic as time runs out during a test.
- You postpone studying for exams

until the last possible moment, because studying only reminds you how much you have yet to learn.

If you are having problems studying or taking tests, you should seek help from your campus counseling center. Don't waste valuable time trying to study harder; if test anxiety is your problem, more studying won't help.

Putting Your Anxiety To Rest

The most popular technique for easing test anxiety is called "systematic desensitization." This is a form of behavior modification originally developed by Dr. Joseph Wolpe, a psychiatrist at Temple University, to treat phobias.

Desensitization helps students unlearn a destructive behavior pattern and replace it with a constructive and beneficial one—or in this case to replace their anxiety reactions with relaxation and calm.

The program consists of three steps: the first step is learning to relax deeply and completely; next, through "hierarchy construction" and desensitization itself, students are taught to reproduce deep relaxation in situations that normally arouse anxiety.

The first step, muscle relaxation, is effective for the simple reason that a person cannot have incompatible responses occurring simultaneously. You cannot be tense and relaxed at the same time.

This step involves isometric-like tensing of muscle groups (biceps, shoulders, chest) followed by relaxation of these same groups. Another part of the relaxation training is rhythmic breathing; taking slow, deep breaths helps replace tension with feelings of calm and control. All of these exercises demonstrate the contrast between tension and relaxation, making students more aware of physical tensions and better able to defuse tension before it builds up.

Once the student can successfully relax his muscles at will, he is ready for the next step: learning to deal with conditions which trigger feelings of anxiety.

The student is instructed to use his relaxation skills while a threatening

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