COUNSELING CORNER: Conquering Test Anxiety

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The best antidote to test anxiety is confidence that you can meet the challenge of the test, and the best route to confidence is preparation. If you are well prepared for your tests but still have high test anxiety, please read on.

High test anxiety is largely the result of interpreting the test as a dangerous situation. I may simply see an item I don’t know and begin to envision the dangerous experience of failing this exam. I may begin to get anxious and begin to fear that I will panic and blank out. I see others finish the exam early and wonder why it was so easy for them. But what makes ‘failing the exam’ really dangerous stems from my belief that if I don’t do well on this test then I will prove my inadequacy, that others will rightfully think less of and perhaps reject me, and/or that my future is now spelt DOOMED. Perfectionism, a common trait at ‘K’, increases the danger of failure. Many students at K chain their expectations to their perceived high expectations of family and high achieving peers. Ironically, all this high anxiety makes it less likely you’ll fulfill these expectations.

GET REAL
To reduce test anxiety you must reduce the danger of the test by understanding that your self-worth, relationships and future are not on the line in regards to this one test. You are not a failure, worthless or a loser because you fail one or two or more tests. These tests have nothing to do with your value as a human being unless you decide they do. In fact it would be better if you stopped rating yourself in this way and just rated your behavior, e.g. “I did badly on the test, not I failed the test and now I am a failure” If you must rate yourself, rate yourself as a good person “period” who like every other human makes mistakes (often, like daily).

Will family and friends reject you for not doing well? Are you doomed by one test? Will you not use this test as one of many learning experiences and find a way to do better? No matter what, you will still find a way to a happy and productive life. This is just one exam! As I quoted Albert Ellis in my last piece, “nothing is terrible, horrible or terrible, just damned inconvenient”.

POSITIVE SELF-STATEMENTS
You can instantiate a more positive and realistic attitude during a test through positive self statements such as: (see ‘Cognitive strategies below for more examples)
- What it is I have to do? No negative self-statements, think rationally.
- Change I must (have to) do well to I want to do well on this exam.
- This is the anxiety that I thought I might feel. It’s a reminder to cope.

Finally, learn relaxation techniques including deep breathing and progressive muscle relaxation and practice visualizing a good performance on the exam (See the Visualization exercise below). Finally don’t forget the basics: eat well and get a good night’s sleep. Bon Chance?
TEST ANXIETY VISUALIZATION SCENARIO

Picture yourself walking to the room where you will take the exam. Try to imagine yourself feeling confident and relaxed. You arrive at the room. Look around the room in your imagination and picture yourself finding a comfortable seat. See yourself sitting there waiting for the exam to begin. You are feeling a bit tense, perhaps eager to be able to show what you know on this test. You know that if your anxiety becomes too uncomfortable you can reduce it with abdominal breathing. Imagine the instructor handing out the exam questions. Your anxiety increases but is still very tolerable. You are aware that some anxiety enhances performance and you are not worried about it. You remind yourself that you have prepared well for the test so there is every reason to expect that you will do well. Picture yourself looking over the questions. You notice that the first one looks difficult so you pass over that one and see that the next one is easy. You answer that question and feel your confidence increase. Picture yourself working confidently to complete the exam. You are so involved answering questions that you are unaware of any feelings of tension. The time goes by quickly. You are doing well. You know most of the answers right away. There are others you are not sure of, but you have ideas for possible answers and you are not bothered by being unsure. You know that you are doing your best and that is enough to make you feel good about your performance. Imagine yourself turning in your test and saying to yourself that you did a good job. Now you can reward yourself for your hard work by taking time to do something you really like to do.

SOME STRATEGIES FOR OVERCOMING ANXIETY

- Foster positive student-professor relationships
- Develop effective study habits.
- Develop test-taking strategies.
- Increase knowledge of subject.
- Focus attention on the task.
- Use task-relevant strategies.
- Practice and use problem solving.
- Use memory supports.
- Use effective time management.
- Train self in anxiety management.
- Use positive reinforcing self-statements.
- Enjoy success.

EXAMPLES OF COPING & REINFORCING SELF-STATEMENTS

A. CONFRONTING & HANDLING THE STRESSOR OF TAKING AN EXAM

- What is it I have to do? No negative self-statements, just think rationally.
- Don’t worry. Worry won’t help anything.
- Focus on the task. Exactly what does the question really ask? It doesn’t say this… or this… it just asks...
- Just think about what I can do about it. That’s better than getting anxious.
• Don’t look for tricks, just what does it say? What’s the basic question; what’s the main point?
• I don’t want to get lost in detail; stand back and look at the big picture.
• I can’t get the feel of how to work the problem. I’ll come back to it or... Let me just start; maybe that’ll get me into it.
• That’s a stupid question,... o.k., It’s stupid or I don’t get the point, I’ll come back to it.
• Wonder how many I can miss for a ‘B’… I’ll figure that out later; just pay attention and finish this.

B. COPING WITH THE FEELING OF BEING OVERWHELMED
• Don’t get anxious; just take off a moment, take a couple of slow, deep breaths...
• calm... and relax... good.
• Don’t try to eliminate the anxiety totally; just keep it manageable. Keep the focus on the present; what is it I have to do?
• Lots more to do before I finish. Just take one question at a time.
• This is the anxiety that I thought I might feel. It’s a reminder for me to cope.
• Slow down a little; don’t rush and get all in a panic. There’s time for most of it.
• They finished early. I wonder. There’s no way I can know what’s going on with them; forget them.
• I’m not going to be able to do it. I’m going to lose control. No, take a deep breath, part lips, relax, take a candy, relax.
• Label my anxiety from 0 to 10 and watch it change. No, I’m under control. Back to the exam.

C. REINFORCING SELF-STATEMENTS
• It’s working; I can control how I feel.
• Wait until I tell my study group about this.
• I am in control. I made more out of my fear than it was worth.
• My ‘crazy’ ideas. That’s the problem. When I control them I control my fear.