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MANAGING TEST ANXIETY AT RANKEN

Everyone experiences some level of nervousness or tension before tests or other important events. A little anxiety or stress can help motivate us and make us more alert. However, too much of it can interfere with our ability to prepare for and perform on tests.

Test Anxiety Can Arise from Many Sources

- Lack of preparation/lack of good study skills
- Inadequate information (about the format of the test, material to be covered in the test, etc.)
- Difficulty handling time pressure
- Internal and external pressures to succeed
- Fear of being evaluated
- Fear of failure
- Perfectionism
- Competition
- Catastrophic thinking (“I don’t know the answer.” “I’ll fail the test.” “I’ll fail the course.” “I’ll never graduate.” “I’ll never get a job.”)

Coping with Anxiety

One of the most common ways that we cope with anxiety is to avoid the problem. However, avoidance often makes matters worse and creates more anxiety. What may be more helpful is to work on improving your coping strategies. The majority of anxiety for some students comes in the weeks, days, and hours leading up to the test. For other students, the most anxious moments occur during the test. Follow the tips below to reduce anxiety before and during your next test.

Strategies for Coping with Anxiety BEFORE the test

- **Psych yourself down before the test.** Too much excitement before the test can make it hard to concentrate and focus.
- **PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE!** You’ve had years of “learning” to get stressed and anxious during tests, so be patient with yourself as you try to learn a new, relaxed way to respond. Practice “psyching down” on a regular basis (in your room, before studying or before class), and soon, you’ll be able to take tests in a more relaxed state.
- **Avoid cramming.** Figure out how much time you will need to study for the exam, and plan your studying accordingly. Trying to master a semester’s worth of material the day before the test is impossible and can easily produce anxiety.
- **Practice taking the test.** Go to the room where it will be held, and familiarize yourself with the surroundings. Take practice tests if they are offered, and adhere to the same restrictions that will be imposed on the official test (time limits, no notes, etc.).
- **Get a normal night’s sleep the night before the exam.** Pulling an “all-nighter” will intensify your anxiety because a brain lacking sleep cannot retain information recently learned.

- **Eat a healthy meal before the test.** Avoid simple carbohydrates (sugar products), which can lower your blood sugar, causing dizziness, headaches, lightheadedness, lack of concentration, and anxiety. Choose complex carbohydrates (whole grains) and proteins, which help stabilize your blood sugar.
- **Avoid coffee and other caffeinated beverages/foods** if you are prone to “caffeine jitters.”
- **Stop studying an hour before the test.** Seeing something you don’t know at the last minute could make you more anxious. Instead, spend the hour before the test relaxing; you might try the techniques of deep breathing or progressive muscle relaxation.
- **Avoid talking about the exam with peers upon arrival at the test site.** Try sitting alone to avoid hearing other students’ conversations.

Strategies for Coping with Anxiety DURING the test

- **Take a few deep breaths before the exam begins.** Breathing becomes shallow and rapid during stressful situations. Slow deep breathing (extending your belly as you slowly inhale) enriches your supply of oxygen, which can help improve concentration and decrease muscle tension.
- **Review the entire test first—read the directions twice!** Then, go back and prioritize the questions according to your ability to answer them.
- **Construct a short outline for essay questions.** An outline will help you avoid rambling and repetition.
- **Read all multiple choice options first, and eliminate the most obvious incorrect responses.** If you are unsure of the correct response, rely on your first impression and move on.
- **Pace yourself.** If it appears you will be unable to finish the entire test, concentrate on the portions you can answer well.
- **Control anxious thoughts.** Tell yourself, “I can be anxious later. Now is the time to take the test.”
- **Counter negative thoughts.** Judging your performance during the test can be self-defeating. Focus on the present moment (answering the question in front of you), not on worries about your potential grade, your performance, or any other distracting thoughts. Negativity wastes energy and is a useless distraction!
- **Don’t focus on the grade.** Avoid setting unrealistic goals for your performance; instead, start with small goals, like getting five more points than you did on the previous exam. Remember that grades are not a reflection of your self-worth; they do not necessarily predict your future success.
- **Determine the origin of your anxiety.** Anxiety is often caused or made worse due to your own negative internal dialogue. For every frightening or negative thought you have, think of a rational counter-thought.

Remember, Ranken’s counselor and Student Success Center staff members are available to assist you.