

TEST ANXIETY

Doing poorly on a quiz or an exam is frequently blamed on test anxiety, a phenomenon that one student summed up in the following way: *"I get so uptight when the test sheet is handed out that I totally blank out and can't come up with answers that I **know** that I know."* A frightening situation, to be sure. But why are test-anxious students so convinced that they actually knew the right answers?

The Cause

Immediately after an exam, many students take a look at their textbooks and lecture notes and find the right answers highlighted or underlined. These were the ideas that they studied, the facts and principles that they read and reread. Yet when the time came to write them on the test sheet . . . nothing! What was the problem?

For many students the root cause of test anxiety lies in confusing **recall** with **recognition**. There is an important distinction between them. **Recall** occurs when you retrieve a piece of information from your memory without any hints or cues. **Recognition** is aided by cues. Recognition occurs when you identify a piece of information because of the context in which it is presented.

If someone were to ask you to name the capital of Massachusetts and you came up with the answer -- Boston -- you'd be demonstrating pure recall. If someone were to ask you to name the man who discovered Florida in 1513, you might be stumped. *"I know the answer,"* you might say, *"but I just can't come up with it."* But if you were given a list of explorers to choose from

Sir Francis Drake

Jacques Cartier

Ponce de Leon

Vasco da Gama

You probably would have no trouble identifying Ponce de Leon as the discoverer

of Florida. You **recognized** his name. You did not recall it even though it may have been buried in your memory. You needed a hint to trigger the answer.

The method of study used by many students brings learning to the recognition stage but not to the point of recall: They read and reread, underline and circle, highlight and symbol-mark. This sort of studying can be costly, if you were asked in an exam to name the man who discovered Florida you would have gotten a zero on that question. Undoubtedly, when you went back to your notes, you would have found "*Ponce de Leon*" clearly circled, and you would have concluded that test anxiety had prevented you from coming up with the answer. The real cause of your problem, though, was failure to study your notes to the point of recall.

If the question had been a multiple-choice question, you would have been in luck. As you progress through college, however, multiple-choice questions will become less and less common. **Most questions on tests require recall, not mere recognition.** Thus, counseling, a more relaxed attitude, or greater will power will not wipe out test anxiety. The only thing that will both reduce anxiety and increase success is studying to the point of recall.

Does that mean that test anxiety doesn't exist? Anyone who has had the symptoms knows that test anxiety definitely exists. But test anxiety is not the cause of test failure; test failure is the cause of test anxiety. The only way to break out of this vicious circle is to succeed on tests. The way to succeed is to apply a systematic study method that enables you to recall all or almost all that you study.

Your efforts should begin even before the semester does and intensify at the semester's end as you apply the system before, during, and even after the final exam. The earlier you begin, the better you'll do but you can put the system into practice even in mid-semester.

Probably the best medicine for this disease is to be prepared. If you go into an exam prepared as well as you can ever expect to be, you don't need to get upset. You'll do your best, and that's that! This point has an important psychological

sidelight. Many students do not realize that going to pieces during an exam is frequently an alibi they have given themselves. They blow up not only because they aren't prepared and know they aren't prepared, but also because they then don't need to feel guilty about not being prepared. Test anxiety is often a childish defense the student puts up against taking the blame for his own lack of preparation.

The cure for test anxiety is a simple one: **preparation!** Advance preparation is like a fire drill: It teaches you what to do and how to proceed, even in a high-stress situation; because you've been through the procedure so many times that you know it by heart. In order to be prepared, it is important to be well-acquainted with your textbooks, to faithfully take notes on both lectures and readings, to use a note-taking format that promotes real learning, and to spend as much time as possible reciting your notes. Then, when the time comes to begin studying specifically for a quiz or an exam, you will have a strong foundation of learning on which to build.

Buy textbooks early: Buy your textbooks early; then before classes start, read carefully the preface of each book to get acquainted with the author, how the book is designed, how it is different from other books on the same subject, and so forth.

Use the questions-in-the-margin system for textbook notes: When the first assignment is given, read a page or two to get into the subject matter and then go back to the first paragraph and ask, "*What's the main idea here?*" Once you have decided on the main idea, write a brief question in the margin of the page. Then, opposite each question, underline very sparingly and selectively the key words and phrases that make up the answer. Go through the entire chapter in this way.

Use the Cornell Note-taking System for classroom lectures: Take complete notes of every classroom lecture. Your objective is to capture on paper the instructor's facts and ideas so that you can study them thoroughly, In class, write swiftly, but neatly. Use the Cornell Note-taking System. The system and the format for the note sheets are discussed in the Learning Assistance Center

Learning Package: How to Take Notes. Remember that the wide (6") column on the right is where you write the notes of the lecture. Don't crowd them. Leave plenty of white space. When you get back to them, read your notes from beginning to end, recreating in you mind the original lecture. As you think about each fact and idea, make sure you have understood it clearly; then, in the narrow (2½") column on the left write a brief, meaningful cue or question.

Recite your lecture notes and textbook chapters: Recitation is the most powerful method known to psychologists for embedding facts and ideas in your memory. Before putting your lecture notes away, cover the notes in the wide column, leaving exposed the questions in the narrow column. Read the first question aloud, and recite the answer. Recite aloud, using your own words. After reciting, look at your notes in the wide column to see whether your recitation was on target. Proceed in this way until you have answered all the questions in the narrow column.

Use the same recitation technique for your textbook chapters. Cover the textbook page, exposing only the questions written in the margin of each page. Recite the answers in your own words. Recite over and over again until you get the answer right.

Remember: If you can't answer the questions now, you haven't learned the material, and you won't be able to recall it later during the exam. During the exam, you won't have forgotten anything because you failed to learn anything in the first place.

Keep up-to-date in your course work: Your preparation for exams must begin on the very first day of classes and continue throughout the entire semester. To study effectively for an exam your course work must be up-to-date! Your mind and your time should focus steadily on the upcoming test. If you must spend any time getting caught up -- completing assignments that you should have done earlier in the semester -- you seriously endanger your performance on the exam. If you stay on top of your assignments throughout the semester, they won't come

back to haunt you when it's time to study for finals.

BEFORE THE EXAM

If you are taking four courses, each consisting of about forty classroom lectures and twenty textbook chapters, you are responsible for one hundred sixty lectures and eighty textbook chapters. How do you organize your notes and your time to study all this material?

Organizing Your Time

Schedule the time available to you in the week before each exam and finals. Use the sample Weekly Schedule Form on page 6. Fill in the time blocks that will be taken up by meals, meetings, job (if you have one), and recreation. Next fill in your classes. Under no circumstances should you miss any of these. You'll be responsible for the lectures themselves, and you will want to hear the instructor's answers to students' questions about the exam. Fill in the time you will need to complete term papers and other assignments. Make sure you get them done before exam week. You don't want unfinished business to interfere with your study or to distract your thinking during exams.

You should find that some extra time is available toward the end of the week. Use it to study for your exams. Fill in the exact study times and subjects. Instead of simply writing "*Study*" in the time blocks, write exactly what you will study: *Study economics, chaps 1 to 10*" or *Summarize sociology notes.*" Make a schedule that you'll be able to follow, and then follow it. Don't make this just a lesson in filling out a schedule and then end up putting it aside and not following it.

Toward the end of the week before finals, make up another schedule -- this one for exam week. Fill in the times for your exams and for your meals and recreation. Remember that you must be in tip-top shape mentally, emotionally, and physically if you are to do your best on the exams. Don't skip meals, recreation, or sleep to get in more study.

By finals week, the bulk of your preparation should be completed, and most of your summaries should be in order. Leave a block of time immediately before each exam to review the summary sheets for that exam. The less time you allow between this last review and the exam, the less forgetting will take place. Review calmly and thoughtfully, and carry this thoughtful behavior right into the exam room.

Questions To Think About As You Complete This Anxiety Module

- Do you view anxiety as an emotion caused by an event? Or do you view it as an emotion caused by how you think about or perceive an event?
- Do you believe that because anxiety is bad it increases how high-strung or nervous you feel?
- What do you believe about yourself and about events in your life that might affect your level of anxiety?
- Do you have some self-sabotaging beliefs that lead to high anxiety?
- What do you think are some of the symptoms of being anxious?
- What are some strategies that you use to decrease your level of anxiety?