

Test-Taking Strategies & Tips for Managing Testing Anxiety

*Student Counseling and Academic Support Center
Midwestern University*

Study/Prepare to Mitigate Testing Anxiety

- Testing anxiety often stem from a lack of preparation and/or not knowing how effective your study sessions were. Some anxiety around exams is normal and even more so when you aren't prepared.
- Test yourself early and often throughout the study process – don't wait for the exam to tell you what you know/don't know.
 - Reading something and it making sense is very different from you being able to recall information from scratch. Self-assess early and often by looking at a topic, cover the notes and see what you can verbally recall/explain about the topic.
 - *If you can't explain/teach it without looking at your notes, you don't know it!*
 - Build on active recall by asking "what if" questions (ex: what happens if this value changes...if this pathway is blocked... if this structure is damaged...).
 - Track material you can explain/discuss (without the context of the notes) vs. material you are struggling with to better focus future study sessions.
- Spaced Repetition – the more often you actively engage with material, the better you will know it.
 - Most content you study in professional school requires multiple (3-5x) active reviews for long term-retention. Reviewing something 1-2 times is generally not enough to retain the level of detail needed to do well on exams.
 - Chip away at material – it is not realistic to retain everything you need to in one sitting/study session.

Test Taking Strategies

- Try to answer the question in your mind before you look at the answer choices.
- For long/wordy questions, read the last sentence first (this is usually where the question is posed). Then, read the whole question from the beginning. Reading the question stem first can help provide context and focus when reading the additional information provided in the question.
- Use information and context you have gained throughout the exam to help you with difficult questions.
- If you must guess, do so methodically:
 - Eliminate answers you know are wrong
 - Identify how your remaining choices differ
 - Can't decide between two answers? Try writing out everything you know about each on a scrap piece of paper.
- Your first instinct is usually correct. Avoid changing your answer and second guessing yourself unless you are 100% certain that a new answer is correct.
- Concentrate on one question at a time.

Managing Testing Anxiety (in the moment/during testing)

- Try to avoid skipping three questions in a row. If you skip the first three due to high levels of test anxiety, what seems like a way to decrease anxiety (skipping questions until you find a “gimme” question) most often intensifies test anxiety. If you are unsure of the answer on the first three questions, try to at least answer one of the first three, mark it, and return to the question or questions later.
- Slow down - make a conscious, intentional effort to slow down to the point of feeling as though you are reading the question too slow. Try touching each word in the question with your finger/pencil as you read it.
- Take 2 or 3 minutes to write on scratch paper everything you remember about the subject you are being tested on. What you write doesn't have to pertain to the question you are trying to answer. Research shows that the act of writing (anything really, as long as it pertains to the subject under exam) mitigates test anxiety enough so the student can “think” again and start to answer questions.
- Close your eyes and take 2-3 long, deep breaths.
- Practicing positive self-talk (“You can do this”) to counter any negative thoughts that you have.

Additional Tips

- Create a “tool box” and/or plan to address testing anxiety prior to the test date.
- Deep breathing or meditation exercises can help.
- Know your triggers – does talking to classmate before or after the exam heighten anxiety? Or help to keep you calm?
- Close your eyes for a moment and take a few deep breaths (both before the exam and during it as needed).
- Leading up to the exam, try to maintain a sleep schedule that gives you adequate rest.
- Before the exam, give yourself a pep talk – e.g. “I’m going to do my best and that will be good enough. No matter how I do on this test, I’m going to be okay and find a way to keep going forward.”

Student Counseling and Academic Support Center

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