

## **Coping with College Series**

### **Handling Test Anxiety**

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We all experience anxiety at some time in our lives. Physical signs of anxiety may include such things as a racing heart, "butterflies" in your stomach, sweaty palms, trembling, and breathlessness. Feelings or thoughts associated with anxiety include such things as fear, dread, apprehension, and doom.

Not all anxiety is bad. It is helpful to think about three kinds of anxiety: Useful anxiety, non-useful anxiety, and unhealthy anxiety. Useful anxiety includes preparation for an important event. Anxiety can be useful in that it "gears up" the system for better performance. Or useful anxiety can signal that something is wrong, and be a signal to make changes. Non-useful anxiety is more intense, is irrational and interferes with an important activity. Unhealthy anxiety is chronic and unremitting, and can affect more than a single activity, such as taking a test. It can affect a person's whole life.

In test-taking, a small amount of anxiety (useful) helps a person do better on a test, signaling that this is an important event. More intense, and non-useful anxiety may cause a person to "freeze up" on a test and not be able to remember things that they already know, or to work more slowly.

There are different kinds of test-taking problems that involve anxiety and they have different solutions. One problem involves anxiety due to lack of preparation. This anxiety is based in reality, a signal that one does not know the material. The solution to this problem is preparing. Lack of preparation can result from problems with study skills, so improving study skills will help this type of anxiety.

Another test-taking problem involves anxiety due to lack of test-taking skills. A person may have good study skills but poor test-taking skills. Again, this anxiety is based in reality and the solution is to seek help with test-taking skills.

A trickier kind of test-taking problem involves non-useful test anxiety. This may result from irrational beliefs. There are many irrational beliefs about test-taking, and these are triggered in test-taking situations. For example, there may be the thought "I am no good if my academic performance isn't perfect." Another example is "If I'm facing some kind of a problem, I must worry over it or I will fail." It is possible to dispute these beliefs. For instance, you may ask "Will worrying really help deal with challenges? Does it help with planning or preparation?" After disputing, you can come up with a coping statement, such as "Too much worry is a waste of time. I can plan, prepare, and feel motivated, but need not worry."

Problems with serious anxiety can be successfully dealt with through counseling. Student Counseling Services offers individual and group counseling for students who feel anxious or depressed. Help with study skills and test taking skills is offered through the University Center for Learning Assistance.