Almost everyone experiences some level of anxiety before tests or other important events in our lives. A little anxiety can often help motivate us, but too much and it can become a problem. Some students find that anxiety interferes with their learning and test taking to such an extent that their grades are seriously affected.

**IS IT ANXIETY OR STUDY HABITS?**

Students may blame test anxiety for poor performance on exams. This poor performance may be a lack of preparedness for a test (which causes anxiety), rather than classic test anxiety. Poor time management, poor study habits, and lack of organization can lead to a student feeling overwhelmed. Student’s who are forced to cram at the last minute will feel less confident about the material covered than those who have been able to follow a structured plan for studying. Being able to anticipate what the exam will cover, and knowing all the information has been covered during the study sessions, can help students to enter the testing situation with a more positive attitude.

**WHAT ARE THE COMPONENTS OF TEST ANXIETY?**

The *physical component* involves the typical bodily reactions to acute anxiety: a knot in the stomach, wet and trembling hands, nausea or ”butterflies in the stomach,” ache in the shoulders and back of the neck, dry mouth, pounding heart, etc. These reactions may be present before, during, and even after the test is completed.

The *emotional component* involves worry, fear of failure or panic. When students are not able to control their emotions, they may experience higher levels of stress, thereby making it more difficult for them to concentrate.

The *mental or cognitive components* of test anxiety involve lack of self-confidence and the overemphasis of potential negative results. Students may be preoccupied with negative thoughts, doubting their academic ability and intellectual competence. This could result in problems with attention and memory.

**AT WHAT LEVEL IS THE ANXIETY?**

Any of us who go into a test poorly prepared might find ourselves quite anxious about it. Yet we recover quickly, and resolve to be better prepared next time. Students with persistent test anxiety can be thoroughly prepared, and still be highly anxious. Indeed, many highly anxious students prepare extensively for their exams, and yet perform poorly.

High anxiety reduces not just test performance but also the ability to understand instructions and to benefit from schooling. Most test anxious students feel that high anxiety is simply normal, and do not realize that it can and should be treated. If you are not able to bring your anxiety to a manageable level or if you consistently experience high levels of anxiety prior to and/or during tests and exams, speak with a counselor or physician about support services.
ONE: LOOSEN UP AND RELAX

It is possible for students to learn how to relax on cue, so that anxiety can be controlled during the exam. Learning how to relax is fairly simple, but if you want to be able to do it on your next exam, you will have to practice it beforehand.

Follow these steps:

- Get comfortable in your chair - slouch down if that helps.
- Tighten, then relax different muscle groups of your body, one group at a time. Start with your feet, then move up your body to your neck and face.
- Begin breathing slowly and deeply.
- Focus your attention on your breath going in and out.
- Each time you breathe out, say "relax" to yourself.

Link to other relaxation strategies:

http://www.helpguide.org/mental/stress_relief_meditation_yoga_relaxation.htm

You should also maintain a healthy lifestyle. This can be tough to do when you have to study for exams. Make sure you get enough sleep. Eat a healthy, well-balanced diet and decrease use of caffeine, nicotine, alcohol and other substances. Exercise daily. Also, have some personal "down" time, and a reasonable amount of social interaction.

TWO: CONTROL YOUR ANXIETY

A second approach focuses on reducing the negative and worrisome thoughts that provoke the anxiety. Students who are anxious about tests tend to say things to themselves that are negative or exaggerated.

Research shows that test anxiety can be reduced if these negative thoughts can be replaced by constructive thoughts. In order to do this, you must first become aware of your own thoughts, and then replace them with constructive thoughts.

For example, rather than "If I do badly on the test, I'm a failure", replace it with "Yes this is a difficult test. I am going to do the best I can. If I get a low grade I will do what it takes to perform better next time."

Make sure you have set reasonable expectations and goals. One of the causes of anxiety may be that the goals you have set are not really the ones you want.