Reducing Exam Anxiety

Anxiety is normal and even motivating, in evaluation situations. Too much, anxiety, however, can negatively affect concentration and performance. Everyone experiences anxiety a little bit differently, but test anxiety is often characterized by a combination of feelings such as nervousness, a quickened heartbeat, worry, ‘going blank,’ fidgeting, sweating and more.

Set Yourself Up for Success

- Take care of yourself. Exercise, nutritious foods, limiting caffeine and getting enough sleep can make test anxiety feel less intense. It can also help with your studying!
- Know the exam format and prepare a study schedule. The best way to reduce anxiety is to feel prepared for the test. Visit the CSAS online resources webpage for strategies to create an exam study plan! [https://carleton.ca/csas/learning-support/online-support/](https://carleton.ca/csas/learning-support/online-support/)
- Take breaks. Have short focused study sessions and breaks in-between. Exam time can be hectic, but it is important to connect with others and unwind to prevent burnout.

Test-Taking Strategies:

- Memory dump into the back of your exam sheet if you are worried about forgetting information.
- Read ALL the directions for the exam and start with the questions you know.
- *Implementation Intentions* - Think of a plan for if the stress becomes overwhelming.
  - How do you typically experience test anxiety? Think about thoughts, feelings, physiology, and behaviours. Where are those feelings coming from?
  - What are some things that you can do in the moment if you become anxious?

Strategies for Stress

- **Deep breaths.** Do as many as you need to make the stress feel manageable. This can take a few minutes for some students.
- **Progressive muscle relaxation.** Try clenching your fists as hard as you can for 30-60 seconds and then feel the tension release.
- **Positive self-talk.** Try mantras and affirmations such as “my best is enough”, or “I can do this.” You might like to keep this phrase in mind when doing deep breaths.
- **Visualization.** Close your eyes and imagine a relaxing scene for 1-2 minutes.
- **5-4-3-2-1.** Look around the room and identify 5 things that you can see, 4 things that you can feel, 3 things that you can hear, 2 things that you can smell and 1 personal strength.
- **Take a break.** Ask to go to the washroom for a change in an environment.
- **Accept the anxiety.** Trying to resist feelings of anxiety often makes them stronger. Instead, try to accept that it is there. After, take small steps towards writing the exam.

The Centre for Student Academic Support at Carleton University

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Reflection: After the exam, think about your experience.

- Did you feel anxious? What did it feel like?
- What strategies did you try? Did any of them work? What else could you try?
- If something did not go as well as you had hoped, who can you reach out to for support?

Reward: Brainstorm a reward for after the exam and if possible try to take it easy afterward.

If you feel like anxiety is significantly impacting your academic performance, or other areas of your life, call Carleton Health and Counselling Services at 613-520-6674. For 24/7 support, call Good2Talk at 1-866-925-5454 or text GOOD2TALKON to 686868.

References:

