Avoiding Stress and Tension

One way to reduce test anxiety is to avoid stress and tension in the first place. The following guidelines (Pauk, 1989) may help students avoid the behaviors and situations that trigger stress and tension.

- Avoid situations that one knows will cause stress and tension. For example, postpone asking someone on a date unless you know he/she will accept. Avoid confrontations with a parent or roommate.
- Always be amply prepared or over prepared for tests, labs, speeches, and class discussions. For more information, refer to the Preparation section.
- Resist the temptation to procrastinate. Putting off tasks is a major source of tension. To avoid the pitfalls of procrastination, master the skills of self-discipline, motivation, organization, and time management.
- Realize that some free time in one's schedule is a good thing. The key to avoiding feelings of guilt when not studying is to use free time in moderation and to work hard during study hours so one feels one has earned the free time.

Releasing Stress and Tension

No matter how hard we try, it seems that sooner or later we are unable to avoid excessive stress or tension. When stress and tension accumulate to levels that cause disruptions in one's ability to perform tasks, like taking tests, try the strategies described below for releasing stress and tension (based on Pauk, 1984).

- Talk to someone. Though you may feel embarrassed or apprehensive about discussing your worries with others, try to realize just how serious it is to keep those feelings bottled up within yourself. Remind yourself that you are not the only person in the world who gets anxious; everyone does at one time or another. It is a common experience. Talk with an objective person like a roommate, resident assistant or resident director, faculty advisor, tutor, family member, clergy, coach, or specially trained counselor in the guidance office or student life office.
- Escape temporarily. When things go wrong and you feel tensions building, take some time to escape from them for a little while. One may do this by physically moving away from the source of tension; go for a short walk, visit the mall for an hour, or shoot some baskets. If physical separation from the stressors is not possible, try to imagine yourself sitting next to a quiet lake or on a mountain trail.
- Rechannel anger and anxiety. Instead of keeping it inside or losing control, try to find another outlet for your worries, one that make more positive use of your emotional energy. Let problems wait a day or two before tackling them. Hum a song or count to ten when you feel tensions rising.
- Worry about someone else. Listen to the concerns of another person, letting him/her know you are interested in his/her welfare and you are there to help with his/her anxiety. This will keep your mind off your own stress for awhile and may help you to put your problems in perspective. It will also help you to realize that you are not the only person experiencing tension.
- Take one task at a time. If one is under tension, even normal tasks or small amounts of work can be too much to handle, let alone being overwhelmed with work in all classes. Try not to think about all the things you need to do and/or how far you are behind in one class or another. Focus on one task at a time. And remind yourself that the seemingly helpless situation is only temporary.
- Accept normality. Sometimes anxiety develops when a student expects too much of him/herself. An attitude of perfection often sets one up for failure and disappointment. Strive to do your best instead of trying to be perfect. Step back and examine your goals with respect to your capabilities. Are your goals feasible, or are they beyond your means? Are they your goals, or someone else's?
- Take time out for recreation. Recreation is essential for mental, emotional, and physical health as it provides an opportunity to "blow off steam" and it takes one's mind off other things. Make recreation part of your daily schedule, even if it only involves taking a daily walk, sewing for half an hour, or playing catch with a friend.

Adapted from: http://muskingum.edu/home/cal/index.html
How to Cope With a Crisis

“No matter how healthy your normal state of mind and body, you probably will have an occasional crisis brought on by stress throughout your life. At such times, the best way to remain on an even keel is to adopt the following attitudes and behavior:

- Concentrate on things as they are now. Do not increase your mental burdens by brooding about the past. Think about future events only to the extent that you can help to shape them. Do not worry about a future that you cannot control.

- Consider your problems one at a time. Sometimes lumping them together can make them seem overwhelming, but if you look at them individually you may be able to see that each one is not as serious as you thought. Then you can begin to look for solutions.

- Talk things over with your family and friends. Do not always complain or burden them with your troubles, but seek, and listen to, their opinions and advice.

- Once you have decided what you want to do about a problem that you can do something about, act promptly and firmly. Positive action is usually healthier than passive brooding.

- Occupy yourself and your mind as much as possible. Social activities such as sports, volunteer work or discussion groups are often preferable to solitude during a time of strain.

- Do not hold grudges or blame other people for your current problems. Even if you have been wronged in some way, a constant sense of frustrated hostility will accomplish nothing except further damage to your mental health.

- Make a point of devoting some time every day to physical relaxation that temporarily frees your mind from its preoccupations. If you go for a walk, for instance, concentrate on what you see around you instead of thinking about your problems.

- Apart from being more sociable and more physically active than usual, it is especially important to stick as closely as you can to your daily routine. At times of crisis a familiar pattern of regular meals and activities at specified hours can encourage a sense of security by providing an orderly outer environment.

- To avoid taking your worries to bed with you, try not to think about them after 8 pm. You will probably sleep better if you can wind down a few hours before going to bed. Also, if you wake up during the night, you are more likely to be relaxed enough to go back to sleep if you were not occupied with problem-solving when you first fell asleep.

- Learn to recognize a crisis, and do not be too proud to admit that you are overwhelmed by anxiety and can no longer manage on your own. Consult a physician sooner than later. Alternatively (or in addition), ask for help from a community mental health agency or a religious organization. [Seek out the counseling center on your campus.] You may find that when you talk about your problems and fears with an objective but sympathetic professional, your worries no longer seem insurmountable.”

Adapted from:  http://muskingum.edu/home/cal/index.html
Health, Exercise, Diet, and Rest

One reason for anxiety is poor mental or physical health. These, in turn, often result from poor eating, sleeping and exercising habits. The following guidelines help to reduce test anxiety resulting from poor health.

Get a good night's sleep, or one's normal amount of sleep, each day for several days before the test. All-nighters often don't catch up with a person until two days later, so lack of sleep even several days before the test can affect performance.

Exercise or do something fun to burn off extra energy. Non-studying activities help to take one's mind off worries and concerns about the test. They also serve as outlets for anger and other negative emotions that feed anxiety.

Eat a balanced meal before every test, especially if you are accustomed to eating that meal. For example, don't skip breakfast if you normally eat it just because you have butterflies about the test. A high carbohydrate dinner the night before helps to raise energy levels. Get a drink of water before the test, or take a lidded cup in with you if permitted.

Avoid excessive amounts of caffeine as it may cause jitters. Use only small amounts of caffeine occasionally to maintain attention. Use only coffee, tea or soda pop as sources of caffeine. Do not use over-the-counter or prescription stimulants.

If you experience strong physical reactions to anxiety, like butterflies or headache, visualize where they are in your body and describe them to yourself. This may help to alleviate them without medication.

Visit a testing room ahead of time to note the temperature of the room. Dress accordingly. Or better yet, dress in layers so that you may adjust to changes in temperature.

Adapted from:  http://muskingum.edu/home/cal/index.html