

Exam Preparation for Students

One of the best, if not the best, strategies for coping with test anxiety is preparation.

Students who are amply prepared or over prepared for tests almost always perform better than unprepared students. Preparation helps to avoid or dispel anxiety that arises for several reasons:

- the student realises he/she is inadequately prepared for the exam,
- the student has inappropriate expectations about his/her preparation for the exam,
- the student is overwhelmed by the amount of information to be learned,
- the student is unable to locate supplies needed for the exam, or the student is late to the test.

There are four facets of preparation. Learning Preparation involves learning the material to be covered by the test. Material preparation means gathering and organising the supplies needed for the test. Physical preparation entails attention to nutritional and sleep requirements before a test. Mental preparation encompasses attitudes and motivation.

Learning Preparation

The most important point to be made here is that the process of learning the material to be covered by the test must occur well in advance in order to avoid anxiety. The best students begin exam preparation the first week of class or immediately following a prior exam. This ensures that information is stored in long-term memory, where it is better protected from sudden memory loss triggered by anxiety or anticipation – the risk of which can be minimised by regularly listening to the Exam Buster CD!!

Vow not to cram the night before the test. Cramming everything into one or two nights of study accomplishes little more than storing limited information in short-term memory and heightening anxiety. Blanking out during a test, when everything one has studied is suddenly and irreversibly lost from memory, usually occurs because anxiety and anticipation knock information out of short-term memory. Only the best students can make cramming work to pass a test. Even so, they usually forget the information soon after the test and have to relearn information for comprehensive final exams such as The Leaving Certificate.

To prepare effectively, you must complete all projects and homework, prepare all study materials well in advance so the night prior to test can be reserved for a light study session. In other words, be sure to complete all homework, labs, and readings in a timely manner. Schedule time to recopy, reorganise, and/or review your notes. Prepare study aids, such as flash cards, sample questions, study guides, and graphic organisers, and review them often in the weeks before the exam.

If haven't read material by few nights before your exam, it's probably too late to start!! It will just create more anxiety as you rush to read and you think about the other things you need to be studying. Of course, the best solution is preventative; schedule time to read weeks before the test and stick to the schedule. But if time runs out and you haven't intensively read the text (and the test covers text material), then just **skim and survey** the chapters to get the main ideas. Read the introductions and summaries for the chapters. Consider how the information relates to class material.

Remember the bottom line. If you know you have effectively prepared for an exam, you are less likely to experience the severe and debilitating effects of exam anxiety.

Material Preparation

Be sure that all ancillary materials needed for the test have been gathered and organised the night before the exam. Having things in order gives you one less thing to worry about.

Be sure to have working pens or sharpened pencils. There is nothing more frustrating before an exam than trying to find a pencil sharpener! Check to make sure your calculator is working. If you borrow a calculator, be sure you know how to operate it.

Set extra alarms or have a friend call you to make sure you arrive at the exam in plenty of time. This is especially important for early morning tests. Arrive in enough time to find a seat away from **distractions**, to relax, and to review the main ideas. But don't arrive so early that it gives you time to panic.

Physical Preparation

One reason for test 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 exam anxiety resulting from poor health.

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

Exercise or do something fun to burn off extra energy. Non-studying activities help to take your mind off worries and concerns about the exam. They also serve as outlets for anger and other negative emotions that feed anxiety. Remember, they should not interfere with study schedules!

Eat a balanced meals regularly, especially before the exam, if you are used to eating that meal all the better. 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 exam, or take a lidded cup in with you if permitted.

Avoid alcohol during the year, or at least limit your intake to no more than 3 units in an evening, not more than once a week. It will impact on your study and exam performance otherwise!! It goes without saying, do not drink alcohol the night before an exam.

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

If you experience strong physical reactions to anxiety, like butterflies or headache, visualise where they are in your body and describe them to yourself. This may help to alleviate them without medication. Remember a certain amount of nerves is normal prior to exams, keep those butterflies under control, remember your trigger touch!!

Visit the 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.

Self-Image, Motivation, and Attitudes Preparation

Several causes of test anxiety are related to internal aspects, including self-image, motivation, and attitudes. Specifically, you may experience exam anxiety if you have negative self-images and lack confidence in your abilities, if you dislike the subject, course, and/or teacher, or if you have histories of poor performance on exams in general or in the subject. Remember the past

Your mental states can greatly affect your performance in exams and your vulnerability to exam anxiety. The **Exam Buster CD** is designed to bolster self image and improve attitudes and beliefs towards exam capability – listen to it regularly and over time you will notice differences in your attitudes and confidence levels.

Self-Image Preparation

Students often develop negative self-images when they experience failures on exams, especially if they feel they didn't receive the grade they deserved. This may translate into heightened anxiety in future exams. Again **Exam Buster CD** is a great aid in this area!!

Here are some general tips:

First, try to **focus on past exam successes**. Learn from past failures, but don't dwell on them. Consider what you did differently to prepare for tests on which you were successful versus tests that went poorly. Can you see the cause and effect relationships? Repeat those actions that made you successful and alter those that resulted in failure. Model the positive behaviours of those you know who have excelled in exams. Find out what they did and how they did it – incorporate it into your own study plan.

Second, **engage in positive self-talk**. Generate a list of your positive qualities and remind yourself of them by posting them in your room or repeating them to yourself periodically. Then make a more specific list of the positive aspects of your exam preparation. Repeat them to yourself when you feel anxious. Ignore negative comments from classmates, especially while waiting for the exam to be distributed. Realise that these students are negative because they, unlike you, are unprepared. Avoid students who create negative hype, even they are your friends, take a friend holiday – you can always reconnect after the exams!

Motivation and Preparation

To get motivated to prepare for and sit an exam, try the following tips.

Get motivated to begin test preparation early by reflecting on past exam failures that resulted from procrastination. Learn from past mistakes. Remind yourself that every half-hour or hour spent studying well before the test is one or two more correct answers. And remind yourself that the more preparation completed ahead of time, the less to worry about the night before the test and the less to do to prepare for comprehensive finals. Reflect on your short-term and long-term goals that may be fulfilled by passing the test and the course.

Before leaving for the exam or while walking to the room, listen to your favourite song on the stereo or Walkman in order to get your blood flowing. Your favourite song will get you motivated and will prevent you from hearing negative comments from poorly prepared classmates.

Confidence Preparation

You should do everything you can to bolster confidence in your exam preparation and exam taking abilities. Confidence can greatly reduce feelings of anxiety because if you believe you will do well, you probably will. Again regular listening to **Exam Buster** CD will really help boost your confidence, especially if you listen regularly over the academic year!

Over preparation for the exam is a good way to improve confidence. Know the information "backwards and forwards" and be sure of your understanding. Take self-tests or have another student quiz you to prove to yourself that you've mastered the material.

In addition, try not to think about what 'the best student' in your year is doing to prepare for the exam; concentrate on yourself!!!