De-Stress: Reducing Test Anxiety

Developed by Sheryl Stevenson, The Writing Centre, UTSC

Many thanks to Shahneen Arif, who first suggested that we offer a workshop on this topic

These materials are available in an alternative format on request.
This module will engage you in practicing techniques that have been shown to reduce test anxiety and, thus, enable students to do their best in high-stakes situations like exams.

The module—as shown on the accompanying handout—is based on the research of Sian Beilock, a University of Chicago psychologist.

If you get hooked on this topic, consult Beilock’s book *Choke: What the Secrets of the Brain Reveal about Getting It Right When You Have To.*
Beilock and her Human Performance Laboratory got lots of attention when many newspapers reported the results of a study she co-authored, published in the eminent journal *Science*.

The article (listed on the handout) presents results from four experiments that suggest that a single 10-minute writing can raise students’ exam scores, especially for students who see themselves as having test anxiety.
The module will show you how to put into practice this research, as well as techniques from other studies.

To start off your practice, we ask you to consider this analogy: your mind is like a sports team, approaching a big game.

Think in terms of coaching yourself and preparing strategies in advance. But also remember that all players aren’t equal. How will you put your star players forward and bench the problem player?
So, let’s start with an exercise. All you need is paper and a pen or pencil.

Imagine you’re in a room and half the students are Team A, while the other half is Team B. Choose which team you’ll be on.

Both teams must think about their next big game: in this case, think about the next exam you will take that you’re worried about. Take 3 minutes to write:

- Team A: write about something that you need to know for the exam.
- Team B: write about your worries about the exam.

When you’re finished, look at the handout that accompanies this module. The first tip suggests what Beilock’s research showed about the type of pre-exam writing that was correlated with better grades.

Is it time to experiment with a new exam-prep strategy?
• Now, try a second exercise. For this one, there are four teams. Again, choose your team and write for 3 minutes. But also think about how each of these types of writing, done before an exam, might help you counteract test anxiety, enabling you to do your best.

• Team A: write about a value that you live by, such as the importance of family or friendship, hard work or social responsibility.

• Team B: write a brief success report that describes achievements and skills you are proud of.

• Team C: write about your personal hero, particularly someone who has succeeded despite obstacles.

• Team D: draw a mind-map that visually represents your many roles, relationships, and interests (a “me-map”). Put your name in the middle, and draw lines out to the many roles or sides of you. Write one of your strengths next to each role. (The next slide shows my own “map of me.”)

After completing this exercise, see tips 2-5 on the handout for research connected to these strategies.
Me

Mother/
Nurturing &
accepting

Instructor/
Love of
learning

Writer/
Sharing
ideas

Wife &
daughter &
sister/
Staying
close
The rest of the slides go along with remaining tips on the handout, suggesting more strategies you can use to *bench your internal worrier*, or even demote that player to a more appropriate role—

maybe your team’s bus driver, someone who gets you to the exam on time.
First (#6), Meditate, Don’t Ruminate

According to *Merriam-Webster* online, “ruminate” has several meanings:

- “to go over in the mind repeatedly and often . . . slowly”;
- “to chew repeatedly for an extended period”;
- “to chew again what has been chewed slightly and swallowed : chew the cud.”
Instead of letting your worrier repeatedly dwell on your fears, **try meditation.**

Numerous studies indicate the benefits of meditation for quieting the mental chatter and enhancing control over attention under stress.

The book (or website) *8 Minute Meditation* offers a simple how-to guide for people who are “too busy to meditate.”
As part of your study methods, consider #7:

**Exploit Both Sides of Your Brain**

- Make good use of the right (spatial) side of your prefrontal cortex: be sure to avoid writing all information you’re studying from left to right. You might try a mind map (see the next slide.)

- And while taking exams, a further tip from Beilock’s book is to try writing math problems **vertically**, which draws on the right (or spatial) side of your prefrontal cortex. Beilock’s research shows improved performance through this strategy.
Mind maps can play to and utilize both sides of your brain through the study notes you create.

Instead of only making notes that you process by reading from left to right, also create patterns that capitalize on the parts of your brain devoted to processing pictures and visual patterns.

For ideas, see the site for Illumine Training (“better minds for better business”):

http://www.mind-mapping.co.uk/

Here are two examples from that site:

Next (#8), **Pre-Create the Exam**

As part of how you study, give yourself a practice test, with a timer.

Practicing under conditions of even mild stress has been shown to improve performance when the crunch is really on.

So make your practice tests as pressured as possible. Set a strict time limit and make sure someone is watching you or will see the results.
For #9, Tap into Your Adrenaline

With a little mind tweak, your body’s response to pressure can remind you of a time you met someone special or were part of a thrilling sports event.

A racing heart is not a bad thing.

Appreciate the feeling of being revved up; tell yourself, “Now I’m really ready to ace this test!”
Now consider tip #10: Give Your Memory a Boost

In an exam, avoid cognitive overload: rather than trying to keep everything in your mind, write a quick outline for an essay, a formula you’ll need, or some steps of the problems you’re doing.

Beilock says this strategy aims to “outsource your cognitive load,” freeing up your working memory by creating “an external memory source” (Choke 176).
Research like Sian Beilock’s on human performance can be both fascinating and personally empowering.

The de-stress strategies suggested in this module can just be a spur to your own investigation and practice.

Let us know in The Writing Centre if you have tips to pass on to others.

And we always value your feedback: https://ctl.utsc.utoronto.ca/booking/students/feedback_wcs.php.

*Best wishes for your exams!*