De-Stress: Reducing Test Anxiety  

Ten Tips Based on Current Research*

1 **Express-Release Your Worries**  For 10 minutes just before an exam, write about your worries concerning the test. Research suggests that such writing can get fears out of the way, so that students concentrate better during the exam and achieve higher scores.

2 **Reflect on Your Personal Values**  During the lead up to a big test, take 10-15 minutes (on the TTC, in line at Tim’s, while having breakfast) to write about a particular value that you live by, such as the importance of family or friendship, hard work or social responsibility. Find inspiration at the website *This I Believe*. And for research on how “values affirmation” boosts student performance, see below**.

3 **Outsmart Your Inner Worrier**  Research shows that people perform better during high-stakes tests of their ability if they think about themselves in a positive light before entering the situation. Positive self-talk—such as a success report that reminds you of your past achievements—can override doubts about your ability to perform in each new test you face. Use your Jedi mind tricks to calm your inner critic.

4 **Visualize Your Personal Hero**  Pay attention to people who succeed despite obstacles. If you’re a member of a group who is negatively stereotyped, before a big exam, hold in mind your own personal role model. Sian Beilock says such results may now be described as “the Obama effect” (*Choke* 175).

5 **Do a Multi-You Diagram**  A quick way to put a high-stakes exam in perspective is to draw a mind-map that visually represents your many roles, relationships, and interests or hobbies. Next to each role/relationship/interest, write a strength you display in that role. One test is not who you are.

6 **Meditate, Don’t Ruminate**  Many people with test anxiety frequently chew (or “ruminate”) on negative feelings or memories. Numerous studies indicate the benefits of meditation for quieting the mental chatter and enhancing control over attention under stress. You can often find free meditation classes on campus. And the book (or website) *8 Minute Meditation* offers a beginner’s guide that may get you hooked.

7 **Exploit Both Sides of Your Brain**  Organize key points or information in a visually memorable way on a single sheet of paper. Use diagrams or vertical lists, rather than just writing in long lines from left to right.

8 **Pre-Creat the Exam**  As part of how you study, give yourself a practice test, with a timer. Practicing under conditions of even mild stress (with a time limit or with someone watching or seeing the results) has been shown to improve performance when the crunch is really on.

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!”

10 **Give Your Memory a Boost**  In an exam, avoid cognitive overload: rather than keeping everything in your mind, write a quick outline for an essay or some steps of the problems you’re doing.

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*This handout is based on the research of Sian Beilock, a University of Chicago psychologist. See her book *Choke: What the Secrets of the Brain Reveal about Getting It Right When You Have To*, as well as the article she co-wrote, “Writing About Testing Worries Boosts Exam Performance in the Classroom” in *Science* (2011).

**Also note the 2010 article in *Science* by Miyake et al.: “Reducing the Gender Achievement Gap in College Science: A Classroom Study of Values Affirmation.”  --Sheryl Stevenson, UTSC Writing Centre, 2013