Conquering Test Anxiety … “Float Like a Butterfly, Sting Like a Bee”

Everyone has test anxiety. Some have more than others and some have it more often than others but, everyone has it. In tests of his skill and stamina, Muhammad Ali used positive self-talk to see himself as a winner and to psychologically unsettle his opponent. One example is his mantra, “I float like a butterfly, sting like a bee!”

The difference between someone who gets control of their test anxiety and someone whose test anxiety controls them is the use of simple tools and techniques. Below are some ways to stay in control and win the fight against your opponent: Test Anxiety.

**Symptoms of Test Anxiety**

- Cognitive: problems concentrating, recalling information, problems with attention and organizing thoughts
- Emotional: anxiousness, frustration, irritability
- Social: avoiding others; procrastinating by socializing too much instead of preparing for an exam; comparing yourself to other students – especially right before a test
- Physiological: headaches, gastrointestinal distress, sleep disruption, muscle tension, and perspiration

**Tips to Reduce Test Anxiety**

**Before the Test**

1. Ease anxiety through information gathering…ask the professor how many questions will be on the exam, what kind of questions are on the test (fill in the blank, multiple choice, etc.), and how long you will have to complete the test.
2. Focus your preparation on the material you aren’t sure about or that you haven’t yet reviewed.
3. Figure out what your instructor expects (e.g. knowledge of certain details or of general concepts?). Is this your first test with the instructor? If yes, then prepare yourself as much as possible for the first test and it will serve as a learning experience.
4. Start preparing for an exam at least 2 weeks before the test. Life has a funny way of surprising us with things. Don’t wait to study the night before the test because who knows what emergencies might crop up the night before the test. Anyway, preparation reduces test anxiety!
5. FEED BRAIN. REST BRAIN. GET BLOOD (OXYGEN) TO BRAIN. Commit to a routine that enables you to sleep an appropriate amount every night. Commit to eating healthy well-balanced meals and avoiding sugar and saturated fats. Commit to moving your body most days of the week (ideally with a dash of fresh air and sunshine). What? You haven’t done any of that for the past week? Then shoot for a healthy meal and good night’s sleep the night before the test.
6. Lay out your supplies the night before the test (pencils &/or pens, erasers, calculator, wristwatch, sweater or jacket for overly air conditioned rooms).
7. Plan transportation to the test.
   a. Leave enough time to ride the bus, drive, ride your bike, walk…whatever mode you use.
   b. The night before, make sure your car is gassed up and you have air in your car &/or bike tires.
   c. Try not to arrive to the testing site too early if you tend to sit and worry before a test.
The Day of the Test

1) Eat a well-balanced meal or snack before the test. Avoid sugar because you may hit the subsequent “sugar low” in the middle of the test! Go easy on the caffeine. It can make you feel jittery and more anxious.

2) You might want to try taking a brisk 5 to 10 minute walk before going into the exam room. It serves to burn off excess energy and gets blood to the brain.

3) **Claim a spot** for yourself in the exam room. If students nearby are comparing notes and going over content at the last minute then either step out of the room until it is closer to the testing time or change seats. Engaging in last minute conversations about the test might lower your concentration and confidence.

4) When you get your test, take a moment to make sure you have all the pages, the correct number of test items, and that the exam is legible. Also follow any written or spoken instructions from your instructor.

5) If there is a scantron form, fill it out correctly.

6) If you panic, return to the basics (they really work!!). Close your eyes. Uncross your legs. Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose as you count to 4. As you inhale, imagine filling all areas of your lungs – front, back and sides. Hold your breath for the count of 4. Next, exhale through your mouth slowly as you count to 8. Feel as if you are emptying all of the air out of your lungs. Repeat as many times as you need but not too forcefully or quickly as you might hyperventilate.

7) How you talk to yourself, your “Self-Talk” matters. **BE YOUR BEST FRIEND.** Reduce negative self-talk and replace it with **positive self-talk.** INSTEAD OF “I will never get the answer”, SAY “I can get through this”. See below for other examples of positive self-talk.

8) If you need to, boost your confidence by knocking off a few easy questions.

9) Every 10 questions, pause and close your eyes. Take some deep breaths. Then resume your exam.

10) **Don’t change answers** unless you think you really goofed the first time. If you aren’t sure, then hands off!

11) After the test, avoid discussing it other students. Why? Because it either makes you feel as if you did great or that you failed the test when, in reality, you probably did just fine. It is just baseless speculation that doesn’t help anyone. Instead…

12) **Go celebrate!** Reward yourself for test completion. You just checked off another milestone on your way to becoming a nurse!

---

**With these techniques, you’ll win the fight against test anxiety by a knock-out!**
Bonus Stuff

*Everyone has some test anxiety even Mr. or Ms. Perfect Nursing Student, but the trick is to focus on the task at hand. Focus on “what” you are doing rather than “how” you are doing. (By the way, Mr. or Ms. Perfect Nursing Student doesn’t exist, everyone has issues).

*It’s so important, it needs repeating… **GET ENOUGH REST**. Adequate sleep not only restores your brain, it supports your emotional health. (Fostering emotional health = lowered anxiety!)

*Be careful if you skip items. Make sure the item number on the exam and the item number on the answer sheet match.

*Remember, some anxiety boosts your concentration and attention!

*The **Academic Counseling Office** at the School of Nursing has counselors who can meet with you and work with you to reduce your testing anxiety.

**Kathy Alden, EdD, MSN, RN, IBCLC**
507 Carrington Hall
843-8093
alden@email.unc.edu

**Shielda Rodgers, PhD, RN**
406 Carrington Hall
843-2478
srodgers@email.unc.edu

**Jennifer Alderman, MSN, RNC**
549 Carrington Hall
966-9745
jgtaylor@email.unc.edu

*UNC has a wonderful **Counseling and Wellness Services** department within Campus Health Services. Go to [http://campushealth.unc.edu](http://campushealth.unc.edu) and click on the CWS link to find out all about the services they offer. Also, explore their other resources such as Relaxation Audio Sessions you can download to your computer!! There is also a link for “Academic Improvement” under the “Info and Self Help” with topics such as “Exam Anxiety 101”, “Preparing for Exams”, and “Test-Taking Strategies”.

* At the Student Counseling Service website at the University of Chicago, there is a nice collection of links to many different universities organized into topics such as “Anxiety”, “Stress/Wellness”, among others. [http://counseling.uchicago.edu/related/virtualpamphlets/index.shtml](http://counseling.uchicago.edu/related/virtualpamphlets/index.shtml)

*Using positive self-talk is a strategy to decrease anxiety during a test. Some examples of positive self-talk are:
  - “I have plenty of time.”
  - “I can do this.”
  - “OK, I don’t know the answer right away…let me eliminate some choices and go from there.”
  - “I am going to do the best I can.”