

Mental Notes

A Monthly Newsletter

Volume 2, Issue 4, April 2008

Eustress, Distress, or Just Plain Old Too-Much-Stress? *what you need to know about stress, anxiety, and taking final exams*

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A Common College Scenario

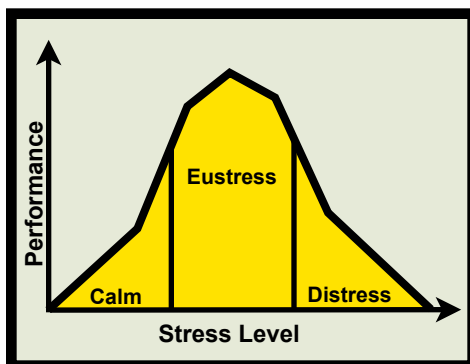
So, you've attended all of your biology class lectures, you've crammed in every last bit of information related to every chapter covered, and you're ready to take the exam. Now, you take your seat with writing instruments in hand, the final exam is distributed, you read the instructions and...OH NO!...you can't remember a single thing about the Krebs cycle, let alone the subtle complexities of photosynthesis. Your palms are sweaty, you're having difficulty breathing, and you just want to get out of the room as soon as you can. You just know you're going to fail the exam and this possible failure will cause you to fail the course, lose your educational funding, and force you to drop out of school. What in the world is happening? Well, you, my friend, are suffering from **TEST ANXIETY!** Technically speaking, your neocortex has been hijacked by your limbic brain which is now driving the proverbial "flight or fight" bus. What? Stay with me on this one. First, a word or two about stress.

Eustress or Distress

Some stress is good for you. Yes, it's true. Human beings need a certain amount of stress in order to achieve a peak performance. This type of stress is sometimes referred to a "eustress." Eustress is the motivation you feel to "hit the books" when it's time to study for an exam or that burst of

energy you notice right before stepping-up to the podium to deliver a speech. Bottom line: Eustress actually enhances performance.

Distress, on the other hand, can be debilitating and decrease performance. When a person is in "distress mode," parts of the body, including the brain, do not function at an optimal level. This type of stress is often experienced as anxiety.



Anxiety

Anxiety is simply the body reacting to stressors or perceived threats. When a person becomes anxious, the body releases adrenaline. Adrenaline prepares the body of the "flight or fight" response which, in turn, causes physical reactions such as increased perspiration, rapid breathing, and an increased heart rate.

Anxiety also causes a change in overall functioning of the brain. Generally speaking, the neocortex filters and processes the information around us, allowing us to make sense of our experiences and respond appropriately. The neocortex enables us to distinguish between actual threats and irrational fears. When in an anxious state, however, it is the limbic brain that is "driving the bus." In other

words, when we are in a state of distress or high anxiety, the limbic brain hijacks the neocortex, effectively shutting-down rational thought, ultimately directing the body to run for it's life...or something like that. Panic attacks, stage fright, and test anxiety are all examples of such hijacking.

Test Anxiety: Good News

There's some good news and some not-so-good news about test anxiety. The good news is that it's treatable. The not-so-good news is that you've probably spent some time "learning" this response, so time will be required to unlearn it. Back to the good news: the treatment.

Perhaps the most important means of addressing test anxiety is **adequate and appropriate preparation** for exams. It's also very important to **rest well, eat well, exercise, and avoid alcohol and stimulants** of all kinds while studying and immediately prior to the exam---of course, continue taking any medications prescribed by your physician. It might also be helpful to **practice relaxation techniques** such a deep breathing exercises. Finally, **adjust your attitude**. Try (realistic) positive thinking. If you're adequately prepared, there's no (rational) reason to expect failure.

For more information about test anxiety and how to avoid/treat it, attend the UNO Counseling Services **Test Anxiety Workshop**. (See below.)

Relaxation Sessions

April 10 April 24 May 8
2:00 - 3:00 PM
Kirschman Hall #401
FREE

For disability related accommodations, please contact Adrian Péré at 280-6683.

Test Anxiety Workshop

April 16, 2008
12:30 - 1:20 PM
Kirschman Hall #401
FREE

For disability related accommodations, please contact Adrian Péré at 280-6683.