

Do you suffer from performance anxiety?

Many people, when required to do something that makes them nervous, suffer from sweaty palms or “butterflies” in the stomach. These are normal reactions to an exam or oral presentation. A little anxiety helps us perform at our best by preventing the carelessness which comes from overconfidence. Sometimes, though, anxiety can increase beyond the level necessary for optimal performance. When this happens, people may feel panic or have their minds go blank. If this happens to you frequently, you might benefit from the following exercise.

Meditation/mindfulness training

Your mind can easily go blank when you are distracted by thoughts about your anxieties. If you pay attention to the distractions instead of the task, panic ensues because your mind is taken up by your fear rather than by the task. You are so worried about what might happen to you if you fail to do well, that you have no energy left to think about answering the questions on the exam. This exercise can help you learn to recognize distractions early, let them go, and return to the task at hand. The technique has been used successfully in stress clinics and hospitals to help people to cope with panic, stress, and chronic pain.

1. Find a place where you won't be interrupted, even by the telephone. Sit quietly in a comfortable position. Close your eyes. Don't lie down; falling asleep defeats the purpose of the exercise.
2. Relax your muscles, beginning at your feet and progressing up to the crown of your head.
3. Breathe through your nose. As you breathe, become aware of the movement of air through your lungs, the expansion and contraction of muscles. Imagine all the stress that you are experiencing leaving your body as you exhale. Imagine energy entering your body as you inhale.
4. With each outward breath, count silently to yourself. After four breaths, begin counting again at one. Repeat this process for about ten to twenty minutes. The simplicity of the exercise means that you will be distracted frequently. Don't try to eliminate the distractions; your mind is very busy and distractions are normal. The point of the exercise is not to allow the distraction to control you. Your task is to breathe and count. When you are distracted (and you may be amazed at how often this happens) try to notice the distraction right away, and then let it go and resume breathing and counting.

With practice, you will be able to do this in an exam situation when your task will be to answer questions or solve problems. For now, practice is important. Try to do the exercise at least once a day. You may find it deeply relaxing. It can also serve to clear your mind before sleep, during study, or between classes.

Variation

It can be helpful to affirm positive qualities that you want to develop in yourself. Many of us repeat negative messages in our heads like cassette tapes. All the preparation in the world will do you no good if you sabotage your efforts with an expectation of failure. If you find yourself thinking such things as “I'll never pass this course” or “I'm no good at math,” try repeating an affirming phrase instead of counting, as you do the exercise above. Try changing your internal

cassette-tape message to “I am well prepared for this exam” or “I take exams easily” or “I know my stuff.” You still need to study, but affirmations can help you prevent setting up a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure.

To find out more about meditation, try these books:

Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D. *Full Catastrophe Living*

David Harp *The New 3-Minute Meditator*

Herbert Benson, M.D. *The Relaxation Response*

Developed by Deborah Moeckel, Ph.D.