

Systematic Desensitization of Test Panic

Systematic desensitization is based on a couple of simple principles. One principle is that an individual cannot experience anxiety (such as that which causes test panic) while completely relaxed. Thus, if a person can be shown how to reach a state of deep relaxation, she/he can be free from the tension that accompanies anxiety.

A second and equally important principle is that when a person vividly visualizes a scene while completely relaxed, the mental image evokes some of the feelings of the real scene. In other words, the mind cannot distinguish a real experience from one that is vividly imagined. Therefore, if you are suffering from test panic and visualize yourself about to take an exam, you will begin to feel the tensions that you feel when actually taking the exam. It is also the case, however, that if you learn to relax while visualizing yourself taking the exam, you can also learn to be relaxed while actually taking the exam.

Desensitization of test panic involves three basic steps:

1. Determine your hierarchy of anxiety-producing situations related to test-taking, so that you can gradually work up to the more difficult scenes.
2. Learn how to reach a state of deep relaxation by using specific muscle-relaxing exercises and/or imagining a scene of perfect relaxation.
3. While completely relaxed, visualize anxiety-producing situations — beginning with the lowest, least threatening one on your hierarchy. Eventually, you will be able to imagine the scenes at the high end of the hierarchy without feeling anxious.

Determine Your Anxiety Hierarchy

Under TEST ANXIETY EVENTS: STUDENT EXAMPLE is a list of some possible events leading up to and including the taking of an exam. To the right of each item is a number which indicates the RANK ORDER of that item. For example, "When I come to a question I cannot answer" has a rank of "1"; it is the event which produces the most anxiety for this student. "When I can't find the answers to questions on review sheet" has the rank of "2"; it is the second-most anxiety producing event. And so forth.

Once items are given rank order, each is assigned a value of "0" to "100" in the VALUE SCALE column. "0" on the scale indicates a state of complete relaxation — the way we generally operate in everyday life. "100" is the value assigned to the most anxiety producing situation we might experience, such as falling out a window. By using this scale, the test-related events are placed in perspective.

To establish your personal test anxiety hierarchy, follow the directions:

1. Read the list of test-related events in the student example. Cross out any events that are inappropriate for you. In the section "WRITE YOUR OWN TEST ANXIETY HIERARCHY" copy the test related events which apply to you and add other test-related events which trigger anxiety for you. Your hierarchy needs at least five to seven events for effective desensitization, so break down the events as completely as possible.
2. Rank each item on your list in the order of increasing anxiety. Remember that "1" is the most anxiety producing situation, "2" is the next most anxiety producing situation, etc.
3. Assign a value between "0" and "100" to each of the test-related events which you have listed. You will become more aware of slight differences in your anxiety level for different events as you go along. No two events have the same SCALE VALUE. You can adjust as your awareness increases.
4. Rewrite the list into a hierarchy so that the least threatening event is at the bottom. The events need to be listed in successively more anxiety-producing levels as you move toward the top. Place the SCALE VALUE next to each item.

Learn to relax

There are two different approaches you can use here, or the two approaches might be combined, as you like. Whichever approach you use, it is best to prepare to practice a relaxation technique by getting comfortable and closing your eyes. Any relaxation technique must be practiced 5-10 times before you will find it easy to relax. So plan to spend some time practicing with imagery and/or the tape.

1. You can relax by quietly imagining yourself in a place where you could experience complete relaxation and peace. To prepare to use this technique, write a detailed description of this place. Include adjectives related to the sense of sight, smell, sound, feeling, and taste. For example, you might be most at peace lying on the sand, feeling the warmth of the sun on your face with the cool breeze blowing over your body, touching the water, hearing the waves, seeing the bright blue sky with clouds drifting by. Your peaceful place can be any setting which will remind you of total relaxation. Once you have done this, then find a quiet, comfortable spot where you won't be interrupted and imagine yourself in that peaceful place for 10-15 minutes. Think only of the peaceful place.
2. Listen to each of the four relaxation techniques on the audio tape entitled "LETTING GO OF STRESS". This tape is available at the Academic Skills Center, Top Floor, Museum Building. Decide which technique you prefer, then listen to that technique on a regular basis until you become familiar with the technique.

Desensitization

Now you are ready to combine your anxiety hierarchy and the relaxation technique

1. Relax completely.
2. Remaining relaxed, imagine yourself in the least anxiety producing situation in your TEST ANXIETY HIERARCHY (the one with the lowest SCALE VALUE).
3. When you feel yourself getting tense and anxious, return to your relaxation technique until you are comfortable. Then imagine again the anxiety producing situation. Concentrate on remaining relaxed.
4. Practice being relaxed while imagining yourself in this anxiety producing situation until you can imagine yourself in the situation while being completely relaxed. Then move on to the next anxiety producing situation on the scale and repeat the steps above. Keep moving up the scale until you can imagine the most anxiety producing situation while remaining completely relaxed.
5. Now you are ready to apply the relaxation technique to the real situations. Whenever you are anticipating an anxiety producing situation that is on your hierarchy, practice a relaxation technique. It should come quite automatically by now. You will find yourself relaxed and able to successfully handle the situation.
6. Don't be discouraged. Learning to be anxious took a long time. It will take a little time and effort to learn to remain calm and relaxed when faced with those situations which have made you anxious in the past.

Test Anxiety Events

Student Example	Scale Value	Rank Order
When I come to a question I cannot answer.	80	1
The exam paper lying face down before you.	40	9
Awaiting distribution of exam papers.	45	8
On the way to the "U" on day of the exam.	50	7
Discussion of my grades close to the time of the exam.	55	6
When instructor tells what will be covered on the exam.	60	5
When I cannot find the answers to questions on review sheet.	75	2
The night before the exam.	70	3
Two days before the exam.	65	4
A week before the exam.	0	
Two weeks before the exam.	0	
One month before the exam.	0	

(Add here any other events that seem important)

Write Your Own Test Anxiety Hierarchy