DEVELOP A POSITIVE MENTAL ATTITUDE

A positive mental attitude can help you control test anxiety. This positive attitude limits anxious responses and makes you a more successful test taker. A positive mental attitude requires you to function from a position of strength. This does not imply that you have to be powerful, manipulative, or dominant. What it does require is that you develop techniques that put you in control of your own thoughts and behavior. To be in control of yourself, you should operate from a position of positive self-worth with a feeling of empowerment. This begins with self-assessment.

You have both strengths and weaknesses. Both should be identified to maximize your potential. Strengths are easy to focus on because they are safe and nonthreatening. Weaknesses are more difficult to focus on because they may make you feel inadequate and uncomfortable. When performing a self-assessment, be honest with yourself. You must separate your ego from your assessment. Only you will know the result. Remember, few people are perfect! Have the courage to be honest with yourself and to identify your imperfections. You can have weaknesses and imperfections and still have a positive self-concept.

To develop a positive self-concept, you must be willing to look within yourself and appreciate that you are valuable. Acting from a position of strength requires you to start saying and believing that you are worthwhile. A positive self-concept increases when you believe, down to your very core, that you are important.

A feeling of empowerment increases when you are able to use all your available resources and learned strategies to achieve your goals. To achieve empowerment, you must develop techniques and skills that not only make you feel in control but also actually put you in control. When you are in control, you function from a position of strength.

To achieve a sense of self-worth and a feeling of empowerment that will help you succeed in test taking, you must learn various techniques and practice them before taking the test. These techniques will help you control stressful situations, reduce anxious responses, and enhance concentration. This improves your analytical and problem-solving abilities and strengthens your test performance. By learning and practicing the following techniques, you will have a foundation of strength.

Establish a Positive Internal Locus of Control

Henry Ford once said, "Whether you think you can, or you think you can't... you're right." In other words, what you think can be a self-fulfilling prophecy. The way you talk to yourself influences the way you think about yourself. What you say indicates how you feel about your control of your behavior and your life. "I was lucky to pass that test." "I could not help failing because the teacher is hard." "I got anxious, and I just became paralyzed during the test." Each of these internal monologues indicates that you see yourself as powerless. When you say these things, you fail to take control.

Identify your pattern of talking to yourself. Do you blame others, attribute failure to external causes, and use the phrases "I couldn't," "I should," "I need to," or "I have to"? If you do, you are using language that places you in a position of impotence, dependence, vulnerability, and hopelessness. YOU MUST ESTABLISH A POSITIVE INTERNAL LOCUS OF CONTROL. You do this by replacing this language with language that reflects...
control and strength. You must say “I want,” “I can,” and “I will.” When you use these words, you imply that you are committed to a task until you succeed. Place index cards stating “I WANT,” “I CAN,” and “I WILL” around your environment to cue you into a positive pattern of talking to yourself.

**Challenge Negative Thoughts**

Your value as an individual should not be linked to how well you do on an examination. Your self-worth and your test score are distinctly isolated entities. If you believe that you are good when you do well on a test and bad when you do poorly, you must alter your thinking. You need to work on recognizing that this is illogical thinking. Illogical or negative thinking is self-destructive. Negative thoughts must be changed into positive thoughts to build confidence and self-worth. As confidence and self-worth increase, anxiety can be controlled and minimized.

Positive thinking focuses your attention on your desired outcomes. If you think you can do well on a test, you are more likely to fulfill this prophecy. It is critical that you control negative thoughts by developing a positive mental attitude. When you say to yourself, “This is going to be a hard test. I'll never pass,” CHALLENGE THIS STATEMENT. Say to yourself, “This is a ridiculous statement. Of course I can pass this test. All I have to do is study hard!” It is crucial that you challenge negative thoughts with optimistic thoughts. Optimistic thoughts are valuable because they can be converted into positive actions and feelings, thus placing you in a position of control.

For this technique to work, you must first stop negative thoughts. Use the technique called ARREST NEGATIVE THOUGHTS to identify the pattern of negative thinking that you use to defend yourself. After you identify a negative thought, envision a police car with flashing lights that signifies ARREST NEGATIVE THOUGHTS. You can even place pictures of police cars around your environment to cue you to ARREST NEGATIVE THOUGHTS. After you identify negative thoughts, handcuff them and lock them away so they are no longer a threat. Actually envision negative thoughts locked up in a cell with bars and yourself throwing away the key.

After you stop a negative thought, replace it with a POSITIVE THOUGHT. If you have difficulty identifying a positive thought, praise yourself or give yourself a compliment. Tell yourself, “Wow! I am really working hard to pass this test.” “Congratulations! I was able to arrest that negative thought and be in control.” To increase control, take an inventory of the things you can do, the things you want to achieve, and the feelings you want to feel that contribute to a positive mental attitude. Throughout the day, take an “attitude inventory.” Identify the status of your mental attitude. If it is not consistent with your list of the feelings you want to feel or the positive image you have of yourself, CHALLENGE YOUR ATTITUDE. Compose statements that support the feelings you want to feel, and read them over and over. Such statements may include “I can pass this test!” or “I am in control of my attitudes, and my attitudes are positive!” “I am becoming a nurse!” Make sure that you end the day with a positive thought, and even identify something that you want to accomplish the next day. Forecasting positive events establishes a positive direction in which you can focus your attention.

**Use Diaphragmatic Breathing**

An excellent way to reduce anxiety is to use the technique of diaphragmatic breathing. On inspiration, diaphragmatic breathing causes the diaphragm to flatten and the abdomen to expand outward. On exhalation, the abdominal muscles contract. As you slowly let out this deep breath, the other muscles of the body tend to “let go,” promoting relaxation. You probably do this now unconsciously. Most people take a deep breath and exhale, or sigh, several times an hour. When you “sigh,” you are using a form of diaphragmatic breathing. You can break the pattern of shallow short breaths associated with anxious feelings when you perform this type of breathing. Anxious responses tend to occur at the beginning of a test, when you are stumped by a tough question, or when you are nearing the end of a test. Using diaphragmatic breathing during these critical times can induce the relaxation response.
When practicing diaphragmatic breathing, place your hands lightly over the front of the lower ribs and upper abdomen so that you can monitor the movement you are trying to achieve. As you become accomplished in this technique, you will not need to position your hands on your body. Practice the following steps:

1. Gently position your hands over the front of your lower ribs and upper abdomen.
2. Exhale gently and fully. Feel your ribs and abdomen sink inward toward the middle of your body.
3. Slowly inhale, taking a deep breath through your nose and expanding your abdomen first and then your chest. Do this as you slowly count to four.
4. Hold your breath at the height of inhalation as you count to four.
5. Exhale fully by contracting your abdominal muscles and then your chest. Let out all the air slowly and smoothly through your mouth as you count to eight.

Monitor the pace of your breathing. Notice how your muscles relax each time you exhale. You may feel warm, tingly, and relaxed. Enjoy the feeling as you breathe deeply and evenly. You should practice this technique so that controlled breathing automatically induces the relaxation response after several breaths. After you are able to induce the relaxation response with controlled breathing, you can effectively draw on this strategy when you need to be in control.

It is important not to do this exercise too forcefully or too rapidly because it can cause you to hyperventilate. Hyperventilation may cause dizziness and light-headedness. These symptoms should subside if you continue this exercise less vigorously. Always monitor your responses throughout the exercise.

Desensitize Yourself to the Fear Response

Individuals generally connect a certain feeling with a specific situation. To learn to control your feelings, you must first recognize how you consider and visualize events. It is not uncommon to connect a feeling of fear with an examination. In a testing situation, the examination is the event, and fear may be the response/feeling. If you experience a fear response during an examination you must interrupt this response. You have the ability to control how you respond to fear. When you are able to separate the event from the feeling, you establish control and become empowered. However, establishing control does not happen automatically. You have to desensitize yourself to the event to control the fear response.

Desensitization involves repeatedly exposing yourself to the identified emotionally distressing event in a limited and/or controlled setting until the event no longer precipitates the feeling of fear. Desensitization depends on associating relaxation with the fear response. To achieve this response, you should practice the following routine.

First, you must practice the relaxation response. Controlled breathing, an excellent relaxation technique, has already been described. After you are comfortable with the technique of controlled breathing, you can use it in the desensitization routine.

Second, you should make a list of five events associated with a testing situation that cause fear and rank them, starting with the one that causes the most anxiety and progressing to the one that causes the least anxiety. A sample list follows.

1. Taking an important examination on difficult material
2. Taking an important examination on material you know well
3. Taking a small quiz on difficult material
4. Taking a small quiz on material you know well
5. Taking a practice test that does not count

Event number 5 should evoke the least amount of fear.

Third, you should practice the following routine:

1. Practice controlled breathing and become relaxed.
2. Now imagine event number 5. If you feel fearful, turn off the scene and go back to controlled breathing for about 30 seconds.
3. After you are relaxed, again imagine scene number 5. Try to visualize the event for 30 seconds without becoming uncomfortable.

4. After you have accomplished the previous step, move up the list of events until you are able to imagine event number 1 without feeling uncomfortable.

When you are successful in controlling the fear response in an imagined situation, you can attempt the same success in simulated tests at home. After you are successful in controlling the fear response in simulated tests at home, you can take some simulated tests in a classroom setting. Continue practicing desensitization until you have a feeling of control in an actual testing situation. This may take practice. It will not be accomplished in one practice session.

Another way you can use the concept of desensitization is to practice positive dialogue within yourself. For example, imagine the following internal dialogue within yourself:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“How am I feeling about the examination today?”</td>
<td>“A little uncomfortable and fearful.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Do I want to feel this way?”</td>
<td>“Absolutely not!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“How do I want to feel?”</td>
<td>“I want to feel calm, in control, and effective.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“What am I going to do to achieve that feeling?”</td>
<td>“I am going to practice relaxation and controlled breathing.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

You might say to yourself, “I don’t see myself doing this. This is silly.” However, the resilient and tenacious individual who is willing to try new techniques is in a position of control. If your goal is to be empowered, then you have only to be open and willing to learn. In this same way that laboring women practice breathing techniques for labor pain, the astute student can practice these techniques to control test anxiety.

**Perform Muscle Relaxation**

The muscle relaxation technique involves learning how to tense and relax each muscle group of your body until all of your muscle groups are relaxed. This technique requires practice. Initially, you must first assume a comfortable position and then sequentially contract and relax each muscle group in your body from your head to your toes. When a muscle group is tensed and then released, the muscles relax. This technique cannot be quickly described in a short paragraph. However, the following brief exercise is included as an example.

Find a comfortable chair in a quiet place. Close your eyes and use diaphragmatic breathing, taking several deep breaths to relax. You are now ready to begin progressive muscle relaxation. Sequentially, move from one muscle group in the body to another, contracting and relaxing each for 10 seconds. After each muscle group is tensed and then relaxed, take a slow, deep breath using diaphragmatic breathing. As you are relaxing, observe how you feel. Experience the sensation. You may want to reinforce the feeling of relaxation by saying, “My muscles are relaxing. I can feel the tension flowing out of my muscles.” Visualize the tension like a mist leaving your body through the ends of your fingers and toes. Remember not to breathe too forcefully to avoid hyperventilation.

The following is a sample of muscle groups that should be included in a progressive muscle relaxation routine:

1. Bend your head and try to rest your right ear as close as you can to your right shoulder. Count to 10. Assume normal alignment, relax, and take a slow, deep breath. Release.
2. Bend your head and try to rest your left ear as close as you can to your left shoulder. Count to 10. Assume normal alignment, relax, and take a slow, deep breath. Release.
3. Flex your head and try to touch your chin to your chest. Count to 10. Assume normal alignment, relax, and take a slow, deep breath. Release.
5. Make a fist and tense your left forearm. Count to 10. Relax and take a slow, deep breath. Release.
6. Tense your right biceps by tightly bending (flexing) the right arm at the elbow. Count to 10. Relax and take a slow, deep breath. Release.

Continue moving from the head and arms to the trunk and legs by contracting and relaxing each of the muscle groups within these areas of your body. You can understand and master this technique by obtaining an audiotape or video that is designed to direct and instruct you through the entire routine of tensing and relaxing each muscle group. The muscle relaxation technique should be practiced every day until it becomes natural. After you have mastered this technique, you can use a shortened version of progressive relaxation along with controlled breathing at critical times during a test.

**Use Imagery**

Using imagery can help you to establish a state of relaxation. When you remember a fearful event, your heart and respiratory rates increase just as they did when the event occurred. Similarly, when you recall a happy, relaxing event, you can recreate the atmosphere and feeling that you had during that pleasant period. Using imagery is not a difficult technique to master. Just let go and enjoy the experience.

Position yourself in a comfortable chair, close your eyes, and construct an image in your mind of a place that makes you feel calm, happy, and relaxed. It may be at the seashore or in a field of wildflowers. Let your mind picture what is happening. Observe the colors of the landscape. Notice the soothing sounds of the environment. Notice the smells in the air, the shapes of objects, and movement about you. Recall the positive feelings that flowed over you when you were in that scene, and relax. You can now open your eyes relaxed, refreshed, and calm.

At critical times during a test, you can take a few minutes to use imagery to induce the relaxation response. To reduce stress successfully, you must position yourself in control. Some students use the mantra, “I’ve got this!” from the moment they begin a test. When you are in control, your test performance generally improves.

**Overprepare for a Test**

One of the best ways to reduce test anxiety is to be overprepared. The more prepared you are to take the test, the more confident you will be. The more confident you are, the more able you are to challenge the fear of being unprepared. Study the textbook, read your notes, take practice tests, and prepare with other students in a study group. Even when you think you know the information, study the same information again to reinforce your learning. For this technique to be successful, you should schedule a significant amount of time for studying. Although this is time-consuming, it does build confidence and reduce anxiety. No one has said that learning is easy. Any worthwhile goal deserves the effort necessary to achieve success. Being overprepared is the BEST way to place yourself in a position of strength.

Consider the following scenario. A student is not doing well in school and asks what she can do to improve her performance. The concept of being overprepared is discussed, and she works out a study schedule of 2 hours a day for 2 weeks before the next test. After the test, the student says she thinks she did well because the test was easy. It is pointed out that she perceived the test as easy because she attained the knowledge that enabled her to answer the questions correctly. Her eyes light up as if someone has turned on a light bulb over her head!

When you recognize that you have the opportunity to be in control and take responsibility for your own learning, you become all that you can be. Recognize that the purpose of your learning is to be the best nurse you can be.
Exercise Regularly

Exercising regularly helps you to expend nervous energy. Walking, doing aerobic exercise, swimming, bike riding, or running at least three times a week for 20 minutes is an effective way to maintain or improve your physical and mental status. The most important thing to remember about regular exercise is to slowly increase the degree and duration of the exercise. Your exercise program should not be so rigorous that it leaves you exhausted. It should serve to clear your mind and make you mentally alert and better able to cope with the challenge of a test. Also, exercise should not be performed just before going to bed because it can interfere with sleep.

Regular exercise should become a routine activity in your weekly schedule, not just a response to the tension of an upcoming test. After you establish a regular exercise program, you should experience physical and psychological benefits.

ESTABLISH CONTROL BEFORE AND DURING THE TEST

It is important to maximize your opportunities to feel in control in a testing situation. Additional techniques you can use to establish a tranquil and composed atmosphere require taking control of your testing equipment, your activities before and during a test, and your immediate physical space. Techniques to create this atmosphere are reinforced in Chapter 7, “Test-Taking Techniques.” However, they also are discussed here because they can be used to reduce anxiety and promote empowerment.

Manage Your Daily Routine Before the Test

It is important to maintain your usual daily routine the day of the test. Eat what you usually eat, but avoid food and beverages with caffeine. Caffeine can lessen your attention span and reduce your concentration by overstimulating your metabolism. Avoid the urge to stay up late the night before a test. If you are tired when taking a test, your ability to concentrate and solve problems may be limited. Go to bed at your regular time. Following your usual routines can be relaxing and can contribute to a feeling of control.

Manage Your Study Habits Before the Test

Do not stay up late studying the night before a big test. Squeezing in last-minute studying may increase anxiety and contribute to feelings of powerlessness and helplessness. DO NOT CRAM. If you have implemented a study routine in preparation for the test, then you should have confidence in what you have learned. Establish control by saying to yourself, “I have studied hard for this test, and I am well prepared. I can relax tonight because I know the material for the test tomorrow, and I will do well.” Avoid giving in to the desire to cram. Instead, use the various techniques discussed earlier in this chapter to maintain a positive mental attitude.

Manage Your Travel the Day of the Test

Plan to arrive early the day of the test. It is important to plan for potential events that could delay you, such as traffic jams or a flat tire. The more important the test is, the more time you should schedule for travel. If you live a substantial distance from the testing site, you might ask another student who lives closer to allow you to sleep over the night before the test. The midterm or final examination for a course may be held in a different location than the regularly scheduled classroom used for the lectures. If you are unfamiliar with the examination room, make a practice run to locate where it is, and note how long it takes to get
there. Nothing produces more anxiety than rushing to a test or arriving after the start of a test. A feeling of control reduces tension and the fear response. You can be in control if you manage your travel time with time to spare.

**Manage the Supplies You Need for the Test**

The more variables you have control over, the more calm and relaxed you will feel. Compose a list of items to bring with you to the test. Sometimes the supplies that can be used are stipulated by the institution giving the test. They may include pencils, pens, scrap paper, erasers, a ruler, a watch, and even a lucky charm. It is suggested that you collect the items the day before the test. This eliminates last-minute rushing to gather needed supplies on the day of the test and contributes to your sense of control. Some testing sites do not permit the presence of any personal items. These sites include venues for nurse licensure examinations.

**Manage Your Personal Comfort**

Maslow’s hierarchy of needs specifies that basic physiological needs must be met before you attempt to meet higher-level needs. Be aware of your basic needs relating to factors such as nutrition, elimination, and physical comfort. Meet these basic needs before the test because unfulfilled needs will compete for your attention. For example, arrive early so that you can visit the restroom; wear layers of clothing so you can adjust to various environmental temperatures; and eat a light, balanced meal to maintain your blood glucose level. Once these basic needs are met, then you can progress up the ladder of needs to self-actualization.

**Manage the Test Environment**

When you arrive early, you generally have a choice of where to sit in the room. This contributes to a feeling of control because you are able to sit where you are most comfortable. You may prefer to sit by a window, near a heat source, or in the back of the room. Generally, it helps to sit near the administrator of the test. Directions may be heard more clearly, and the administrator’s attention may be gained more easily if you have a question. It is wise to avoid sitting by a door. The commotion made by people entering or exiting the room can be a distraction and can interfere with your ability to concentrate. Take every opportunity to control your environment. Measures that help you feel in control contribute to a positive mental attitude.

**Maintain a Positive Mental Attitude**

Remind yourself of how hard you have worked and how well prepared you are to take this test. ESTABLISH CONTROL by arresting negative thoughts and focusing on the positive. Say to yourself, “I am ready for this test! I will do well on this test! I can get an ‘A’ on this test!” These statements support a positive mental attitude and enhance a feeling of control.

**Manage Your Physical and Emotional Responses**

At critical times during the test, you may feel nervous, your breathing may become rapid and shallow, or you may draw a blank on a question. Stop and take a mini-break. Use controlled breathing to induce the relaxation response. You may also use a shortened version of progressive relaxation exercises to induce the relaxation response. Daily practice of breathing and relaxation exercises will enable you to induce the relaxation response quickly during times of stress. After these techniques are implemented, you should feel in control and empowered.
The techniques described in this chapter are designed to increase your mastery over the stress of the testing situation. When you feel positive about yourself and have a strong self-image and a feeling of self-worth, you will develop a sense of control. When you are able to draw on various techniques that empower you to respond to the testing situation with a sense of calm, you will improve your effectiveness. Use these techniques along with the other skills suggested in this book, practice the questions, and take the comprehensive final book exam as instructed in the section “How to Use This Book to Maximize Success” at the beginning of this text. These activities will support a positive mental attitude, provide you with a feeling of control, and increase your effectiveness in the testing situation.