

TEST ANXIETY

During exams, do you...

- feel like you "go blank"?
- become frustrated?
- find yourself thinking "I can't do this" or "I'm stupid"?
- feel like the room is closing in on you?
- feel your heart racing or find it difficult to breathe?
- suddenly "know" the answers after turning in the test?
- score much lower than on homework or papers?

When performing, do you...

- become distracted?
- feel overwhelmed?
- miss important cues from your surroundings?
- "go blank" and forget what you are supposed to do?
- have distracting thoughts of failure or of poor performance?
- perform more poorly than in practice?

YES? Then this information may be just what you need!

How to use this resource:

The intent of this booklet is to help students and parents better understand test anxiety, and to provide methods to help students cope with test anxiety and ultimately be successful in their courses. Students should read this booklet carefully, consider which aspects of test anxiety apply to them, and then identify coping strategies that may help address the anxiety. Ideally, parents would read this booklet with their student and participate in the resulting discussion and identification of coping strategies. Remember that support from family members is always positive, and will ultimately help students deal with their anxiety.

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Several sources have been blended and compiled to create this package:

www.how-to-study.com
www.highschoolblues.com
www.schoolcounselor.org
www.anxietybc.com

Resources also came from:
DR. LYNN MILLER, Ph. D., R. Psych.
Assistant Professor at the University of British Columbia

PART 1: IDENTIFYING TEST ANXIETY

PSYCHED UP, BUT NOT PSYCHED OUT!

In order to perform well in a challenging situation, you must be psychologically and physically alert. You certainly won't perform well on an exam or in an event if you are nearly asleep! This level of "alertness" is also called arousal. Some degree of arousal is essential for optimal performance. Increasing arousal is the idea behind "psyching up"- and it works - in many cases, psyching up enhances performance. The problem is that when the intensity of arousal gets too high, we often begin to feel nervous and tense and experience anxiety. At this level, anxiety becomes distracting and performance declines - we get "psyched out." For optimal performance, you need to keep your arousal at an intermediate level - psyched up, but not psyched out!

TEST ANXIETY ~ "PSYCHED OUT"!

Almost everyone feels nervous or experiences some anxiety when faced with a test or an exam. In fact, it is unusual to find a student who doesn't approach a big test without a degree of anxiety. Many students experience some nervousness or apprehension before, during, or even after an exam. It is perfectly natural to feel some anxiety when preparing for and taking a test.

Too much anxiety about a test is commonly referred to as test anxiety. Test anxiety is very common among students! It can interfere with your studying, and you may have difficulty learning and remembering what you need to know for the test. Further, too much anxiety may block your performance. You may have difficulty demonstrating what you know during the test.

Test anxiety can cause a host of problems in students. Although each person will experience a different collection of symptoms with differing degrees of intensity, the symptoms fall into a few categories.

- **Physical** - headaches, nausea or diarrhea, extreme body temperature changes, excessive sweating, shortness of breath, light-headedness or fainting, rapid heart beat, and/or dry mouth.
- **Emotional** - excessive feelings of fear, disappointment, anger, depression, uncontrollable crying or laughing, feelings of helplessness
- **Behavioral** - fidgeting, pacing, substance abuse, avoidance
- **Cognitive** - racing thoughts, 'going blank', difficulty concentrating, negative self-talk, feelings of dread, comparing yourself to others, difficulty organizing your thoughts.

Stressful emotions can inhibit a student's ability to absorb, retain and recall information. Anxiety creates a kind of "noise" or "mental static" in the brain that blocks our ability to retrieve what's stored in memory and also greatly impairs our ability to comprehend and reason.

Research has shown that providing students with tools and strategies that build both emotional skills and healthy physical habits when preparing for a test can help them overcome test anxiety and the associated symptoms, while improving their ability to prepare for and perform on critical testing.

PART 2: THINK ABOUT THINKING

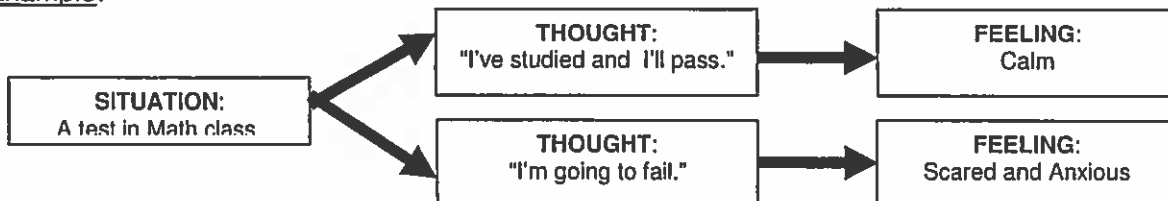
REALISTIC THINKING FOR TEST ANXIETY!

Realistic thinking means looking at all aspects of a situation (the positive, the negative and the neutral) before making conclusions. In other words, realistic thinking means looking at yourself, others, and the world in a *balanced* and *fair* way.

Step 1: Pay attention to your self-talk

Thoughts are the things that we say to ourselves without speaking out loud (self-talk). We all have our own way of thinking about things, and how we think has a big effect on how we feel. When we think that something bad will happen – such as failing a test – we feel anxious. For example, imagine you have a test in Math class. If you think you are going to fail, you will feel scared and anxious. But, if you think you can pass, you will feel calm.

Example:



Often we are unaware of our thoughts, but because they have such a big impact on how we feel, it is important to start paying attention to what we are saying to ourselves.

Step 2: Identify thoughts that lead to feelings of anxiety

It can take some time and practice to identify the specific thoughts that make you anxious, so here are some tips. Pay attention to your shifts in anxiety, no matter how small. When you notice yourself getting more anxious, that is the time to ask yourself:

- 'What am I thinking right now?'
- 'What is making me feel anxious?'
- 'What am I worried will happen?'
- 'What bad thing do I expect to happen?'

Step 3: Challenge your 'anxious' thinking

Thinking something doesn't mean it's true or that it will happen. For example, thinking that you will fail a test doesn't mean you will actually fail. Often, our thoughts are just guesses and not actual facts. Therefore, it is helpful to challenge your anxious thoughts because they can make you feel like something bad will definitely happen, even when it is highly unlikely.

Sometimes, our anxiety is the result of falling into **thinking traps**. Thinking traps are unfair or overly negative ways of seeing things. Use the chart on the following page and consider which thinking traps contribute to your own anxiety.

THINKING TRAPS & TEST ANXIETY

THINKING TRAP	EXAMPLE re: tests & school performance
<p>Fortune-telling: This is when we predict that things will turn out badly. But, in reality, we cannot predict the future because we don't have a magic ball!</p>	<p><i>"I know I'll mess up."</i></p> <p><i>"I'll never be able to pass math."</i></p>
<p>Black-and-white thinking: This is when we only look at situations in terms of extremes: things are either good or bad, a success or a failure. But, in reality, most events call for a more 'moderate' explanation. For example, missing one class assignment does not mean you have failed the entire course ~ you just need to get caught up in class and/or complete the next assignment.</p>	<p><i>"If I don't get a good mark, I'll totally fail."</i></p> <p><i>"I planned to study 6 hours and I know I only studied for 4 and a half. Now there's no way I can pass!"</i></p>
<p>Mind-reading: This trap happens when we believe that we know what others are thinking and we assume that they are thinking the worst of us. The problem is that no one can read minds, so we don't really know what others are thinking!</p>	<p><i>"Everyone will think I'm stupid."</i></p> <p><i>"The teacher doesn't like me."</i></p>
<p>Over-generalization: This is when we use words like 'always' or 'never' to describe situations or events. This type of thinking is not helpful because it does not take all situations into account. For example, sometimes we make mistakes, but we don't always make mistakes.</p>	<p><i>"I always fail school work."</i></p> <p><i>"I never pass tests."</i></p>
<p>Labeling: Sometimes we talk to ourselves in mean ways and use a single negative word to describe ourselves. This kind of thinking is unhelpful and unfair. We are too complex to be summed up in a single word!</p>	<p><i>"I'm dumb."</i></p> <p><i>"I'm a loser."</i></p>
<p>Over-estimating danger: This is when we believe that something that is unlikely to happen is actually right around the corner. It's not hard to see how this type of thinking can maintain your anxiety. For example, how can you not feel scared if you think that you could have a heart attack at any time?</p>	<p><i>"I'm going crazy."</i></p> <p><i>"I'm dying."</i></p> <p><i>"I will throw up."</i></p>
<p>Filtering: This happens when we only pay attention to the bad things that happen, but ignore all the good things. This prevents us from looking at all aspects of a situation and drawing a more balanced conclusion.</p>	<p><i>Believing you got a bad mark on a test because you left 3 questions blank, even though you know you did all of the other 32 questions on the paper.</i></p>
<p>Catastrophizing: This is when we imagine that the worst possible thing is about to happen, and predict that we won't be able to cope with the outcome. But, the imagined worst-case scenario usually never happens and even if it did, we are most likely able to cope with it.</p>	<p><i>"I'll freak out and everyone will sit and watch me. No one will help."</i></p> <p><i>"I'm going to look like such an idiot! The other kids will laugh and I'll die from embarrassment."</i></p>
<p>Should statements: This is when you tell yourself how you "should", "must", or "ought" to feel and behave. However, this is NOT how you actually feel or behave. The result is that you are constantly anxious and disappointed with yourself and/or with others around you.</p>	<p><i>"I should stop worrying about my tests."</i></p> <p><i>"I should never make mistakes in my schoolwork."</i></p>

PART 3: COPING WITH TEST ANXIETY

Use the **THINKING TRAPS & TEST ANXIETY FORM** to help you identify the traps into which you might have fallen.

Here are some questions to ask yourself to help challenge your negative thoughts or self-talk:

- ❑ Am I falling into a thinking trap (for example, catastrophizing or mind-reading)?
- ❑ What is the evidence that this thought is true? What is the evidence that this thought is not true?
- ❑ What would I tell a friend if he or she had that thought?
- ❑ Am I confusing a "possibility" with a "probability"? It may be possible, but is it likely?
- ❑ Am I 100% sure that _____ will happen?
- ❑ How many times has _____ happened before?
- ❑ Is _____ really so important that my future depends upon it?
- ❑ What is the worst that could happen?
- ❑ Is this a hassle or a horror?
- ❑ If it did happen, what can I do to cope or handle it?

Here's an example to help you challenging your negative thinking:

You have an important math test tomorrow and have been feeling quite anxious about it. You may think : *"I'm going to fail the test tomorrow!"*

To challenge this thought, you can ask yourself the following questions:

- ❑ **Am I falling into a thinking trap?**
Yes, I have fallen into the trap of fortune-telling, predicting things will turn out badly before the event even takes place. But I still think I'm going to fail.
- ❑ **Am I basing my judgment on the way I 'feel' instead of the 'facts'?**
I might feel like I'm going to fail, but there is no evidence to support it. I'm prepared for the test, and I have passed other tests at school before.
- ❑ **Am I 100% sure that I will fail?**
No, but what if I do this time?
- ❑ **Well, what's the worst that could happen? If the worst did happen, what could I do to cope with it?**
The worst that could happen is I do fail the test. It'll be disappointing, but it won't be the end of the world. I can go for extra help to find out what went wrong, and ask my teacher if there is anything I can do to improve my mark.

REALISTIC THINKING & TEST ANXIETY FORM

Use copies of this **REALISTIC THINKING & TEST ANXIETY FORM** to regularly write down thoughts that make you anxious. Use the **THINKING TRAPS & TEST ANXIETY FORM** along with this handout to help you replace your anxious thoughts with more realistic ones.

SITUATION or TRIGGER	"ANXIOUS" or "WORRIED" thoughts	REALISTIC THOUGHTS
Math test tomorrow	I'm not good at math and I'm terrible at tests. I'm going to fail. I'll never pass Math!	I will study tonight and try my best tomorrow. I am fortune-telling and I don't know for sure that I will fail. I passed the last test. I have done fine on the homework assignments, so I will probably pass Math even if I don't do that well on this test.

HELPFUL REALISTIC THINKING TIPS

Tip #1: COPING STATEMENTS

Try coming up with statements that remind you how you can cope with a situation.

For example: *"If I get anxious, I will try some calm breathing."
"I just need to do my best."
"People cannot tell when I'm feeling anxious."
"This has happened before and I know how to handle it."
"My anxiety won't last forever ."*

Tip #2: POSITIVE SELF-STATEMENTS

Regularly practice being 'kind' to yourself (say positive things about yourself), rather than being overly self-critical.

For example: Instead of saying *"I will fail."*, say something like ...
*"I know I can do this."
"Everyone experiences anxiety. I can handle this."
"I'm not a loser if I have trouble with a test. Lots of students struggle with tests."
"I'm strong enough to do this test. I will do my best."*

Tip #3: ALTERNATIVE BALANCED STATEMENTS BASED ON CHALLENGING NEGATIVE THOUGHTS

Once you've looked at the evidence or recognized that you've fallen into a thinking trap, come up with a more balanced thought based on facts, not feelings.

For example: When you are facing a math test, a more balanced thought could be:
"There is a chance that I will not pass the math test tomorrow. But, not passing a math test does not mean I will fail the entire class. Even if I don't pass the test, it doesn't mean I will never graduate from high school. I have passed many school assignments and tests before."

DEALING WITH PHYSICAL TENSION TO HELP TEST ANXIETY

Here are a few exercises you can try to help relieve the tension in your body. It can help you relax and boost your energy level.

Focal Breathing

Often, stress is a result of a lack of oxygen. This exercise focuses on breathing and optimizing oxygen intake on every breath. Start by exhaling all the air in your lungs. Exhale slowly for ten seconds. Then, keep exhaling until you feel your lungs are completely empty. Breathe in through the nose to a count of eight. Keep your shoulders down and focus on filling your rib cage. As you feel it expand, start to push down into your abdomen. You should feel your lower body expand and near the end, pressure in your lower back as your diaphragm lowers. Exhale slowly, focusing your breathing by shaping your lips in an ooh position. Pretend there is a candle in front of your mouth that you are trying to blow out. Focusing on this type of breathing will help to focus your mind as well as work to re-oxygenate your blood and reenergize your body.

Body Check

Sit down someplace comfortable and close your eyes. Focus on the muscles in your feet and notice if there is any tension. Tell the muscles in your feet that they can relax. Do the same with your ankles, then move up to your calves, thighs, and buttocks. Tell each group of muscles to relax. Work slowly being sure to scout out any tension that may be hiding in obscure places. Do the same for your lower back, diaphragm, chest, upper back, neck, shoulders, jaw, face, upper arms, lower arms, fingers, and scalp. Pretend you are tracking an electrical current through your body that it starting at your toes and escaping from your fingertips and scalp. You may have to do this twice to be sure not to overlook any tension, but be thorough in your search.

Exercise Aerobically

This is more of a lifestyle than a practical on-site method. Still, it can help to reduce general stress and even improve your health. Do some form of exercise that elevates your heart rate and keeps it beating at that rate for twenty to thirty minutes. It should be something you enjoy, and that you can do at least three times a week. Aerobic exercise includes cycling, basketball, running, swimming, and tennis just to name a few.

REDUCING TEST ANXIETY

- Being well prepared for the test is the best way to reduce test taking anxiety.
- Space out your studying over a few days or weeks, and continually review class material, don't wait until the night before and try to learn everything the night before.
- Try to maintain a positive attitude while preparing for the test and during the test.
- Exercising for a few days before the test will help reduce stress.
- Get a good night's sleep before the test.
- Show up to class early so you won't have to worry about being late.
- Stay relaxed. If you begin to get nervous take a few deep breaths slowly to relax yourself and then get back to work.
- Read the directions slowly and carefully.
- If you don't understand the directions on the test, ask the teacher to explain it to you.
- Skim through the test so that you have a good idea how to pace yourself.
- Write down important formulas, facts, definitions and/or keywords in the margin first so you won't worry about forgetting them.
- Do the simple questions first to help build up your confidence for the harder questions.
- Don't worry about how fast other people finish their test; just concentrate on your own test.
- If you don't know a question skip it for the time being (come back to it later if you have time), and remember that you don't have to always get every question right to do well on the test.
- Focus on the question at hand; don't let your mind wander on other things.

DOS AND DON'TS OF DEALING WITH TEST ANXIETY

- ❑ **Don't** cram for an exam. The amount you learn won't be worth the stress.
 - ❑ **Don't** think of yourself or the test in a negative sense.
 - ❑ **Don't** stay up late studying the night before. You need the sleep. Begin studying a week in advance if possible.
 - ❑ **Don't** spend time with classmates who generate stress for you on test day.
 - ❑ **Don't** take those last few moments before the test for last minute cramming. Try to relax and spend that time reading the newspaper or some other distraction.
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- ❑ **Do** remind yourself that the test is only a test.
 - ❑ **Do** focus on integrating details into main ideas.
 - ❑ **Do** reward yourself after the test with food or a movie or some other treat.
 - ❑ **Do** something relaxing the last hour before the test.
 - ❑ **Do** tell yourself that you will do your best on the test, and that will be enough!

PART 4: TIPS FOR TEST SUCCESS

TEST PREPARATION TIPS

- Budget your time. Make sure you have sufficient time to study so that you are well prepared for the test.
- Go to review. Pay attention to hints that the instructor may give about the test. Take careful notes and ask questions about items you may be confused about.
- Ask the instructor to specify the areas that will be emphasized on the test.
- Make sure you go to the class right before the test; it's another prime time for the instructor to give out more hints or the format of the test.
- Go over any material from old tests, HW's, sample problems, review material, the textbook, class notes... that might be on the test.
- Eat before a test, having food in your stomach will give you energy and help you focus, but avoid heavy foods which can make you groggy.
- Don't try to pull an all nighter, get at least 3 hours of sleep before the test.
- Put the main ideas/information/formulas onto a sheet that can be quickly reviewed many times, this makes it easier to retain the key concepts that will be on the test.
- Try to show up at least 5 minutes before the test will start.
- Set your alarm and have a backup alarm set as well.
- Go to the bathroom before walking into the exam room, you don't want to waste anytime worrying about your bodily needs during the test

TEST TAKING TIPS

BEFORE YOU BEGIN:

- 1. Preview the test before you answer anything.** This gets you thinking about the material. Make sure to note the point value of each question. This will give you some ideas on budgeting your time. As you read the questions, jot down brief notes indicating ideas you can use later in your answers.
- 2. Quickly calculate how much time you should allow for each section** according to the point value. (You don't want to spend 30 min. on an essay question that counts only 5 points.)
- 3. Do a mind dump.** Using what you saw in the preview, make notes of anything you think you might forget. Write down things that you used in learning the material that might help you remember. Outline your answers to discussion questions.

GENERAL TEST TAKING TIPS:

Come prepared; arrive early for tests.

Stay relaxed and confident. Don't let yourself become *anxious*. Don't talk to other students before a test; anxiety is contagious. Instead, remind yourself that you are well-prepared and are going to do well.

Be comfortable but alert. Choose a good spot to take the test. Make sure you have enough room to work. Maintain an upright posture in your seat.

Bring all your supplies! Bring at least two pens/pencils with good erasers, calculator with enough batteries and any other resources that your instructor allows you to.

Bring a watch to the test with you so that you can better pace yourself.

Keep a positive attitude throughout the whole test and try to stay relaxed. If you start to feel nervous take a few deep breaths to relax.

Keep your eyes on your own paper. You don't want to appear to be cheating and cause unnecessary trouble for yourself.

When you first receive your test, do a quick survey of the entire test so that you know how to efficiently budget your time.

Read the directions. (Can more than one answer be correct? Are you penalized for guessing? etc.) Never assume that you know what the directions say.

Answer the easy questions first. This will give you the confidence and momentum to get through the rest of the test. You are sure these answers are correct. Try not to spend too much time on one question.

(GENERAL TEST TAKING TIPS continued.)

Do the problems that have the **greatest point values first**.

Don't rush but **pace yourself**, read the entire question and look for keywords.

Ask the instructor to explain any items that are not clear. Do not ask for the answer, but phrase your question in a way that shows the instructor that you have the information but are not sure what the question is asking for.

Write legibly, if the grader can't read what you wrote they'll most likely mark it wrong.

Always **read the whole question carefully**. Don't make assumptions about what the question might be.

Go back to the difficult questions. While looking over the test and doing the easy questions, your subconscious mind will have been working on the answers to the hardest ones. Also, later items on the test might give you useful or needed information for earlier items. Don't worry if others finish before you; focus on the test in front of you.

Answer all questions (unless you are penalized for wrong answers).

Try to answer the questions from the instructor's point of view. Try to remember what the instructor emphasized and felt was important.

Use the margin to help you figure out if the question does not seem clear or if the answer seems ambiguous.

Circle key words in difficult questions. This will force you to focus on the central point

Express difficult questions in your own words. Rephrasing can make it clear to you, but be sure you don't change the meaning of the question.

Use all of the time allotted for the test. If you have extra time, cover up your answers and actually rework the question.

Reserve 10% of your test time for review. Review the test; resist the urge to leave as soon as you have completed all the items. Make sure you have answered all the questions. Proofread your writing for spelling, grammar, and punctuation.

Don't worry if others finish before you; focus on the test in front of you.

Double check to make sure that you **put your first and last name on the test**.

MULTIPLE CHOICE TEST TAKING TIPS (Good for provincials exams in grade 10)

Read the question before you look at the answer.

Do all the questions you know first. Go back and try the others after.

Come up with the answer in your head before looking at the possible answers. This way the choices given on the test won't throw you off or trick you.

Eliminate answers you know aren't right.

Read all the choices before choosing your answer.

If there is no guessing penalty, **always take an educated guess** and select an answer.

Don't guess if you have no basis for your choice and if you are penalized for guessing.

Since your first choice is usually correct, **don't change your answers unless you are sure** of the correction or unless you miss-read the question.

In "All of the above" and "None of the above" choice questions, **if you are certain one of the statements is true don't choose "None of the above"**. Also, if one of the statements is false, don't choose "All of the above".

In a question with an **"All of the above" choice**, if you see that at least two correct statements, then "All of the above" is probably the answer.

A positive choice is more likely to be true than a negative one.

Usually the correct answer is the choice with the most information. Be careful to read the entire question and the answer selections regardless so you are making a thoughtful choice.

ESSAY TEST TAKING TIPS

When taking essay tests, think before you write. Create a brief outline for your essay by jotting down a few words to indicate ideas you want to discuss.

When taking essay test, get right to the point. State your main point in the first sentence. Use your first paragraph to provide an overview of your essay. Use the rest of your essay to discuss these points in more detail.

Review, Repeat, Review, Repeat, Review ... {You Get the Idea}

- **Plan Your Entire Semester or Course in Advance:** Make sure you understand the 'Big Picture' for the semester or term and plan each course with this in mind. This involves mid-terms, major projects, papers, and final exam schedules. With the big picture in mind, tailor your weekly and daily schedule accordingly.

- **Daily Reviews:** Conduct short reviews of lecture notes before and after class. Begin reviewing after your first day of class. Re-copy your lecture notes each evening as a study exercise. This is especially helpful in courses that require you to memorize. Look over examples done in class for courses like Math and Science. Daily review seems time consuming but really only take a few minutes each night. Small amounts each day will save you from huge study sessions later in the course.

- **Weekly Reviews:** Dedicate at least one afternoon or entire evening during the weekend to review all of your courses. Make certain you have an understanding of where each course is going and that your study schedule is appropriate.

- **Periodic Tactical Reviews:** On your calendar, schedule special reviews. The week before a mid-term or final exam should be blocked out for "special tactical review" ~ a larger study session spread over a few days so you don't have to cram it all into the night before the test. If you have kept a good daily and weekly schedule, studying for a test or exam should only be reaffirming what you already know.

HOW TO STUDY EFFECTIVELY

Studying in an effective manner not only improves grades but can also help test anxiety.

GENERAL STUDY TIPS

- ❑ Minimize distracting noise. Some people need some sound while some prefer silence. Find what works for you.
- ❑ Consider a "do not disturb sign" and turning off your phone. Let voicemail take your calls for a while. You can catch up with people later.
- ❑ Use proper lighting. It's hard to feel motivated sitting in the dark! If you use a desk lamp, place it opposite the dominant writing hand and don't have it too close to you.
- ❑ In terms of temperature, it is better to be cool than warm. Warm rooms tend to make people sleepy.
- ❑ Have plenty of room to work; don't be cramped. Your study time will go better if you take a few minutes at the start to straighten things up and organize your materials.
- ❑ A desk and straight-backed chair is usually best. Don't get too comfortable ~ a bed is a place to sleep, not study.
- ❑ Have everything (book, pencils, paper, coffee, dictionary, laptop, calculator, tape recorder, etc.) close at hand. Don't spend your time jumping up and down to get things.
- ❑ Studying requires the correct attitude. Be calm and patient with yourself as you review the material. Beating yourself up will do no good. Try to open your mind as much as possible by putting other things aside and letting go of frustration.
- ❑ Focus on the areas that need the most attention. Many students feel that any time studying counts as real studying, but studying is less effective if you do not target the areas that need study. For example, if you know how to do all the math or science questions of one type, do not focus your attention on those questions. Instead work on the questions or concepts you find the most difficult. That way you are work on improving your knowledge instead of just reinforcing what you know.
- ❑ Good class notes are important as they make studying and review much easier. Don't expect to learn everything later on your own. Pay attention in class and make your own good notes wherever possible. If you've been absent, ask the teacher or a friend if there are notes you could photocopy. Taking good notes familiarizes you with the material; further review and study solidifies it up.
- ❑ Use your class materials when studying. Good notes can often help you work on the material you find most difficult. If your teacher has given you worksheets, data booklets, quizzes, etc. during class, use those to help you study. Effective studying uses all the resources you have, not just an open text book.