Text Anxiety Workshop

Wellness & Psychological Services
The National Council Licensure Examination, or NCLEX, is a national examination for the licensing of nurses in the United States and Canada. The implementation of this exam in a Canadian context has been a challenging transition for many recent graduates, and this presentation is part of a MacEwan University initiative to set students up for success.

In 2002, Eddy and Epenter published a qualitative interview study of 19 graduates who took the NCLEX-RN. Their sample included 10 graduates who passed the NCLEX and 9 who did not. Eddy and Epenter interviewed their participants about the testing experience and the relationship between nursing education and the NCLEX-RN. They found that graduates who passed the exam tended to take responsibility for their learning, paced their exam preparation, took the exam when they felt prepared, and used stress management strategies to cope with emotional responses to the exam. In contrast, graduates who did not pass the exam did not identify a reasonable plan for review, felt confident prior to the test but became anxious during the test, perceived pressure by others to take the exam before they were ready, believed that they had not known how to take the exam, and felt unprepared to manage the anxiety that came up during the exam.

In the context of these findings, the good news is that by listening to this presentation you are taking responsibility for your learning and preparing to manage exam anxiety – with practice, you will be able to master your experiences of anxiety and succeed.
during stressful test-taking situations.
There are a variety of symptoms that are associated with test anxiety. Physical symptoms include symptoms of the fight or flight response, such as a pounding heart, quick or shallow breathing, a headache, upset stomach, dry mouth, and sweating, trembling hands. Emotional symptoms of test anxiety include feelings such as panic, fear, anger, and helplessness. Cognitively, people who experience test anxiety may “go blank” and have difficulty retrieving information, struggle to understand and read exam questions, be easily distracted during the exam, and ultimately receive a lower exam mark that does not accurately reflect their understanding of the material.
An important distinction to make about test anxiety is that test anxiety refers to when a person studies and prepares for a test, but experiences a high level of anxiety that interferes with taking the test. A person who does not study or prepare for a test likely will experience anxiety symptoms, but this isn’t really test anxiety – this is an appropriate response to underpreparation!

Image of library: https://www.flickr.com/photos/118118485@N05/15817405853/
Image of hammock: https://www.flickr.com/photos/leaflanguages/8345400433/
Anxiety occurs on a continuum, and a certain amount of anxiety will contribute to positive performance. Here is a diagram of the Yerkes-Dodson law, which was developed by Yerkes and Dodson in 1908. According to this law, performance increases with physiological or mental arousal up to a certain point, which is within the optimal performance range. After this point, too much mental or physiological arousal is correlated with lower performance. Having an optimal amount of anxiety will motivate you to focus and accomplish your goals without being debilitated or overwhelmed.
Where does test anxiety come from? Earlier on, I briefly mentioned the physical symptoms of anxiety and their connection to the fight or flight response. When we interpret an exam as a threatening situation, the sympathetic nervous system is activated, and hormones such as norepinephrine and adrenaline are released and activate the physical symptoms of anxiety. We go into survival mode – rational thinking becomes difficult, because we are prepped to run, fight, or hide. This survival mechanism was great earlier on in our evolution, when we were facing life-threatening predators. Unfortunately our stress system is outdated, and isn’t well-suited to stressful but non-life-threatening situations.

The good news is that we can gain greater control over our anxiety response – there are two main ways to do this. First, decreasing physical arousal and the physical symptoms of anxiety is possible through relaxation exercises. Second, we can change our cognitive response to tests by changing the way that we think about them – by recognizing and challenging unhelpful thoughts and beliefs about exams, we can train our brain that these scenarios aren’t life-threatening or dangerous enough to merit the fight or flight response. Calming the body will help calm the mind, and vice versa.
Let’s look at how to address the physical symptoms of anxiety. If physical symptoms are troublesome, there are a variety of simple techniques that you can use. Practice is essential – if you build these into your study routine, you will be better focused during your studying and the relaxation techniques will be easier to use during the exam.

**Breathing**

Breathing is one of the quickest and easiest ways to manage physical symptoms of anxiety. Deep breathing, also known as diaphragmatic breathing, abdominal breathing, or belly breathing, is helpful because it facilitates full oxygen exchange – oxygen is traded for carbon dioxide. Many people breathe shallowly without realizing it, and their shoulders tend to rise up and down when they are breathing. Shallow breathing is connected to a faster heart rate, shortness of breath, dizziness, and uncomfortably tense chest muscles. In contrast, deep breathing involves expanding your diaphragm, slowing your heart rate, and relaxing your chest muscles.

Let’s take a moment to practice deep breathing. Place one hand on your chest and one hand on your stomach, just above your belt line. Inhale through your nose and try to make the hand on your stomach expand outwards. Fill your diaphragm with air, to the point that feels comfortable for you. Pause for a moment or two, and then slowly exhale through your mouth. As you practice deep breathing, the hand on your chest should remain in place and the hand on your stomach should move outwards as your diaphragm fills with air.
It might feel awkward to breathe deeply at first, because it is likely different from what you are used to. Believe it or not, deep, belly breathing is natural – if you’ve ever seen a baby at rest, you may have noticed that when they breathe their tiny bellies expand outwards with each breath. At some point, we learn to breathe shallowly instead of deeply, and this can exacerbate anxiety symptoms.

Another aspect of deep breathing that is helpful is that you can choose to focus on your breath and disengage from distracting, potentially negative thoughts. Many people find it helpful to count as they are breathing, as this engages the mind and facilitates slow, deep breathing. There are a variety of counts available, and I’d encourage you to experiment to see which one is most comfortable for you. I’ll go over a couple of common techniques here.

The 4-7-8 is a highly recommended breathing technique, and it is often used as a sleep aid due to its quick and relaxing effects. To do the 4-7-8, you inhale through your nose over four counts, hold your breath for seven counts, and then slowly exhale over eight counts before starting the cycle again. Let’s try it here. Take a deep breath, and inhale through your nose... 2... 3... 4... and now pause... 2... 3... 4... 5... 6... 7... and now slowly exhale through your mouth... 2... 3... 4... 5... 6... 7... 8... and start again with an inhale... 2... 3... 4... and now hold... 2... 3... 4... 5... 6... 7... and now exhale... 2... 3... 4... 5... 6... 7... 8... You can repeat this cycle as many times as is helpful.

Another helpful technique is to take ten slow, deep breaths, and with each breath count backwards from ten. This technique is less about counting the rhythm of your breath, and more about counting the number of breaths that you take. Breathe at a pace that is comfortable for you, but slower than your typical breathing. When you count down and reach that last breath, you will likely notice a significant difference between how you felt at “10” versus how you feel at “1.”

You might also experiment with breathing with intention – this involves thinking a phrase as you breathe. For example, as you breathe in, you might think “I am,” and as you breathe out, you might think “at peace.” Alternatively, you might think “breathe in relaxation” as you inhale and “breathe out stress” as you exhale. There are many options here, and I’d encourage you to create one that fits for you.

Another trick to quickly tackle the physical symptoms of anxiety is called the 10-second anxiety trick. This involves a combination of deep breathing, muscle tensing, and then muscle relaxation. To do this, take a deep breath in through your nose and simultaneously tense as many muscles as you can. Scrunch your face, make fists with your hands, raise your shoulders, and tense up the muscles in your arms and legs. Hold the breath and the muscle tension for 10 to 15 seconds, and then release your breath and relax your muscles at the same time. Take a moment and give this one a try, now... take a deep breath in through your nose, and tense up your muscles.... And now just
hold that breath and that tension for 10 seconds.... And release. You can easily repeat this as many times as needed.

Image: http://www.iamyogahealth.com/just-breathe/
There are a few more fairly simple ways that you can address anxiety’s physical symptoms. One is to take a quick mental vacation and imagine a place that is soothing, relaxing, and peaceful. For some people, this might look like a classic beach scene with sunshine, hot sand, and a view of the water. For others, a relaxing image might involve a specific memory with a close friend or family member. Imagining yourself in this soothing space can make a significant impact on the symptoms that you notice.

You can also use your imagination to picture other soothing, transformative images that shift from tense or stressful images to more relaxed images. With practice, your body will also mirror this shift. A few examples here would be imagining tightly twisted ropes and seeing them slowly untwist into individual strands… or imagining a cold, harsh wind blowing against your skin and then feeling it become warmer and softer… or picturing an ice cube as it melts into cool water… or imagining storm clouds moving across a sky and leaving clear, blue, skies in their wake.

If you would like more structured relaxation exercises, then I would recommend that you check out the resources that have been included with this presentation. There are a wide variety of free guided relaxation scripts available on YouTube and through other websites as well.

Image: http://wallpapersafari.com/relax-wallpaper/
Cognitive Symptoms
We are now going to move into how you can address the cognitive symptoms of anxiety. Just to recap, these include symptoms such as going blank, having difficulty understanding and reading questions, being easily distracted during the exam, and receiving low exam grades that don’t reflect your knowledge.

One way to address these cognitive experiences is to use mindfulness techniques. Mindfulness is about redirecting your attention with purpose, and observing thoughts and feelings without judgment as they arise. Thoughts are just thoughts, and you can choose to engage with them or let them pass by. In this presentation, I’ll go over a couple of informal mindfulness practices that you can use to redirect your attention when anxious thoughts come to visit.

The breathing exercises that we previously touched on are good examples of mindfulness techniques, as they involve focusing your attention on your breathing in the present moment.

Another exercise that I recommend is called the 5-5-5 – in this exercise, you practice nonjudgmentally describing your physical experience in the present moment, thereby redirecting your attention from anxious thoughts. With the 5-5-5, you name 5 things you can see, 5 things you can hear, and 5 things that you can physically feel in your environment. This might include things like “I feel my back against the chair” or “I feel my feet touching the ground.” This exercise is easy to do at any point, as you can...
silently name these aspects of your environment. If you still feel overwhelmed after completing the 5-5-5, you can repeat it with 4-4-4, 3-3-3, and so on. Give that exercise a try right now – take a moment, and identify 5 things that you can see.... And now 5 things that you can hear (this can be a bit tricky)... and now 5 things that you can physically feel.

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, or CBT, is a therapeutic approach that has a considerable amount of research evidence in favour of its use with anxiety and test anxiety. The major tenet of CBT is that your thoughts, emotions, and behaviours are intricately connected – if you can change the way that you think about a situation, then you can in turn change the way that you feel and the way that you act. From a test anxiety perspective, if you challenge anxious thoughts, then you can reduce the emotional and cognitive symptoms of test anxiety that you experience and achieve better results on your exams.

Here are a few common negative thoughts that you may have experienced with respect to past exams. “I’m going to fail the exam.” “Other people will know the material better than I do.” “The exam questions won’t reflect what I know.” “I never do well on multiple choice tests.” “I can’t do this.” Unsurprisingly, these types of thoughts are often connected with emotions such as despair, discouragement, hopelessness, fear, and frustration. How amazing would it be, then, to change these thoughts and then experience more positive, adaptive emotions when faced with a stressful testing situation?

Image: http://in8.uk.com/2013/05/how-is-this-different-to-cognitive-behavioural-therapy/
One of the first steps to changing negative thoughts is to recognize them when they occur. By bringing these thoughts into your conscious awareness, you are better able to challenge them and replace them with more adaptive thoughts.

**Negative Thinking**

- Do any of the following phrases sound familiar?
  - I’m going to fail the exam.
  - Other people will know the material better than I do.
  - The exam questions won’t reflect what I know.
  - I never do well on multiple choice tests.
  - I can’t do this.

- What feelings are connected to these thoughts?
There are a variety of common cognitive distortions, or types of negative thoughts, that plague individuals who experience test anxiety. All of us experience irrational thoughts from time to time, but in the case of test anxiety these thoughts can be frequent and debilitating. Here are a few of the most common cognitive distortions that pertain to test anxiety (which I have adapted from Leahy and Holland’s Categories of Distorted Automatic Thoughts, Treatment Plans and Interventions for Depression and Anxiety Disorders, 2000):

- **Mind reading** – you assume that you know what people think without having sufficient evidence of their thoughts. For example, “They don’t think that I could succeed on the test.”

- **Fortunetelling** – you predict the future negatively: Things will get worse, or there is danger ahead. For example, “I will definitely bomb the exam.”

- **Catastrophizing** – you believe that what has happened or will happen will be so awful and unbearable that you won’t be able to stand it. For example, “I wouldn’t be able to handle it if I failed.”

- **Labelling** – you assign global negative traits to yourself and others. For example, “I’m not a good student,” or “I am incapable of success.”

- **Overgeneralizing** – you perceive a global pattern of negatives on the basis of a single incident. For example, “I didn’t do well on that assignment. That means that I’m
going to fail the course, and I definitely won’t have a hope on the final.”

- **Dichotomous thinking** – you view events or people in all-or-nothing terms. For example, “I will either ace the test or I will fail it. There is no in between.”

- **Shoulds** – you interpret events in terms of how things should be, rather than simply focusing on what is, thereby putting extra pressure on yourself. For example, “I should get a high grade on the test. I should do well, or else I’m a failure as a person.”

- **Unfair comparisons** – you interpret events in terms of standards that are unrealistic – for example, you focus primarily on others who do better than you and find yourself inferior in the comparison. For example, “Others did better than I did on the test” or “I don’t measure up.”

You can refer to the handout to see more examples of cognitive distortions. The more that you are able to recognize these patterns in your thinking, the better situated you will be to change and replace them. Practice is key.

Challenge
After you recognize negative thoughts, and identify the cognitive distortions that are at play, you can then work on challenging these thoughts. At this step, there are several questions that you can ask yourself.

• What evidence is there for this thought, or against this thought?
• Is this the only way to view this situation?
• What are the advantages to changing this thought?
• How does this thought help or harm me?
• What would I tell someone else in a similar situation?

Breaking down anxious thoughts in a chart format is a great way to challenge them, as you can track anxious thoughts as they arise, ask the questions that we just went over, and remind yourself of the progress that you are making with tackling anxious thoughts. This isn’t an overnight process – it’s likely that you have been experiencing these anxious thoughts for a long time, and so it will take time and practice to shift your outlook. The good news is that your work will pay off over time. Invest the patience and energy into your development – it will be worth it!
So, after breaking down anxious thoughts and challenging them, the next step is to replace them with more balanced, adaptive thoughts. Ideally, you want to create a new thought that is believable and oriented towards success. Use your answers from the thought-challenging questions, especially the evidence against the negative thought and the advantages to changing the negative thought.

Here is an example of an adaptive thought that I crafted in response to the negative thought, “I’m going to fail the exam”: I have struggled on tests before, but I am investing a lot of time and effort into studying for this exam. I’m following the topic guidelines, using flash cards, and doing practice tests. I’ve gone to a couple of study workshops and I’ve talked to my instructors as well. I don’t have to get 100% to be successful. I am capable and I will do my best.”

Notice that this new thought reflects the work that was invested into preparing for the exam and a realistic outlook – I, or you, don’t have to get 100% to be successful.
Coping Statements

Practicing thought challenging in the chart format that we described is one option for challenging anxious thoughts. Another more basic way is to create coping statements so that as soon as a negative thought comes up, you can replace it with a more adaptive thought. Some people find it helpful to write out longer phrases, such as the one that we just went over, whereas others like having short phrases that can be repeated as needed. With practice, any of these phrases could be added to your study routine and used during the exam. You could pair a quick coping statement with a few deep breaths to really maximize its impact, and thereby calm both your body and your mind.

Here are a few quick coping statements that you might find helpful: I know the material, I can do this, this anxious feeling will pass, just breathe, it will be worth it when it’s over, a little anxiety is natural, and I’ve written many tests before.

Adjust Your Mindset

As you are studying and working on managing anxious thoughts, there are a few key points to keep in mind. You could also write these points down and use them as coping statements. Some people find it helpful to pick coping statements and write them down on flashcards or post-it notes so that they are readily available during times of stress. Do what works best for you! Here are some boosters that I would like you to remember:

• An exam does not reflect my value as a person
• I don’t have to be perfect – no one is
• I am taking steps to prepare for the exam
• Worrying harms more than it helps
• I’ll take it one question at a time
• I have the resources that I need

The more that you reinforce these ideas for yourself, the easier that they will be to access during stressful study periods or as you prepare to write an exam.

On Exam Day

Here are a few tips to help you put your best foot forward on exam day.

• Eat breakfast
• Use relaxation strategies to manage physical symptoms of anxiety
• Get to the exam location a few minutes early so that you don’t feel hurried or rushed
• Don’t talk about possible exam questions with other students – at this point, focus on clearing your mind and preparing to show off the knowledge that you’ve worked hard to gain
• Take mini-breaks at your station if you find that anxious thoughts or sensations are becoming troublesome. Refocus your attention, and help yourself feel grounded.
  • Practice deep breathing, use the 5-5-5, stretch, or any combination of the above that feels helpful to you
• Use adaptive self-talk whenever you need a boost. Remind yourself of your coping statements.
  • I can do this!
  • I’m doing the best I can.
  • There are no prizes for finishing first!
After the Exam

After the exam, reward your effort. Focus on what you did right rather than rehashing things that might not have worked out the way that you wanted them to. Take time to relax, recharge, and self-soothe in a way that feels comfortable for you. When you feel ready, take the testing experience as an opportunity to learn from your challenges and successes – it might be helpful to reflect on study strategies or anxiety management techniques that were helpful, so that you can access these the next time that you have to write an exam.

If You Need to Re-take the Exam

In the event that you need to re-take the exam, here are a few tips. Be kind to yourself, and recognize that it was a difficult exam. Reach out for support from people who you can trust. Use the feedback that you receive about your exam performance to adjust your study plan for the next exam. Ultimately, you can frame this challenge as a learning opportunity – a negative exam experience can teach you about yourself, aspects of studying or anxiety management that you would like to improve, and it can also make you more understanding and empathic towards others. This may be especially helpful in your future career when you are helping to mentor nursing students.
Additional Resources
This brings my presentation to an end. Feel free to drop by Wellness and Psychological Services (7-103A) to discuss your concerns with a counsellor or to learn more strategies to address Test Anxiety. We have Initial Consultation times scheduled Monday to Friday, where students can drop in between 9 and 10:30 AM and 1 to 2:30 PM, to briefly meet with a counsellor and connect with appropriate resources.

I’ve also included several additional resources that may be helpful as you practice anxiety management and prepare for successful test-taking. Thanks for your attention, and I wish you all the best as you move forward with your learning.