Managing Test Anxiety

What does test anxiety feel like?

- Some students experience mainly physical symptoms, such as headaches, nausea, faintness, feeling too hot or too cold, etc.
- Others experience more emotional symptoms, such as crying easily, feeling irritable, or getting frustrated quickly.
- A major problem of test anxiety can be its effect on thinking ability; it can cause a person to 'blank out' or have racing thoughts that are difficult to control.
- Western students are strongly encouraged to seek assistance if you experience interfering levels of anxiety prior to and/or during tests and exams; if you are not a Western student, speak with a counsellor or physician about support services.

What can you do to control test anxiety?

- Be well prepared for the test.
- Include as much self-testing in your review as possible.
- Maintain a healthy lifestyle: get enough sleep, good nutrition, exercise, some personal "down" time, and a reasonable amount of social interaction.
- As you anticipate the exam, think positively, e.g., "I can do OK on this exam. I've studied and I know my stuff."
- Engage in "thought stopping" if you find that you are worrying a lot, comparing yourself to your peers, or thinking about what others may say about your performance on this exam.
- Before you go to bed on the night before the exam, organize anything that you will need for the exam -- pen, pencil, ruler, eraser, calculator, etc. Double check the time of the exam and the location.
- Set the alarm clock and then get a good night's sleep before the exam.
- Get to the exam on time - not too late but not too early.
- Be cautious about talking to other students about the exam material just before going into the exam, especially if this will make you more anxious.
- Sit in a location in the exam room where you will be distracted as little as possible.
- As the papers are distributed, calm yourself by taking some slow deep breaths.
- Make sure to carefully read any instructions on the exam.
- As you work on the exam, focus only on the exam, not on what other students are doing or on thinking about past exams or future goals.
- If you feel very anxious in the exam, take a few minutes to calm yourself. Stretch your arms and legs and then relax them again. Do this a couple of times. Take a few slow deep breaths. Do some positive internal self-talk; say to yourself, "I will be OK, I can do this."
- If the exam is more difficult than you anticipated, try to focus and just do your best. It might be enough to get you through with a reasonable grade.
- When the exam is over, treat yourself. If you don't have any other commitments, maybe you can take the night off. If you have to study for other exams you may have to postpone a larger break, but a brief break may be the "pick up" that you need.