

= CHAPTER 9 =

Will I Do Well Enough?

Nicole looked over her first pathology exam as it was discussed in class. This was the first exam of the physical therapist assistant program. She winced as she saw the grade “68” in bold letters at the top of the exam. “How could this have happened?” she questioned in-

wardly. "I have never had a 'D' before. I have always made straight A's."

Performance Anxiety

Performance anxiety is a manifestation of stress and occurs when worry and fear interferes with performance, causing distress for the performer. This can occur for musicians playing at a performance, for speakers giving a presentation, or for students taking tests or practical examinations.¹ For health professions students, practical examinations involving simulated clinical performance and presentations have been found to be more anxiety producing than paper and pencil examinations.² High stress levels affect performance on important tasks as well, especially those that require accessing information from memory and while decision making.³

The symptoms of performance anxiety are varied and can range from simple “butterflies” and mild excitement to totally debilitating panic attacks. Physical symptoms might include heart palpitations, extreme perspiration, dry mouth, shaky knees and hands, trembling voice, shortness of breath, dizziness, nausea, urinary frequency, diarrhea, and/or a sense of dread. Emotional symptoms include feeling frightened, sad, frustrated, angry, or a combination of these. Intellectually, there may be difficulty in paying attention, concentrating, and remembering. Take a look at [Table 9-1](#) and see whether you have experienced any of these symptoms.

The person experiencing performance anxiety may withdraw, feeling more isolated, and have a low sense of personal effectiveness or feel guilty or ashamed regarding the current situation. Coping strategies are often ineffective, resulting in reaction and

worry, rather than more effective preventative action.

Research on Worry and Decreasing Performance

Research shows that anxiety resulting in worry and self-doubt interferes with information processing and memory.^{[1-6](#)} Performance tests show that worry tends to divert attention and valuable cognitive processing time, just when you need it most.

So, in addition, to not knowing what is on the test, if a student worries about it while trying to succeed on the examination, performance is likely to be even worse!

Just as the physiological, emotional, and intellectual manifestations of anxiety are varied in the moment that we feel stressed, our longer term responses to stress can also vary.

Illness

Research shows that student susceptibility to illness increases during examination periods, resulting in a far greater incidence of viral and upper respiratory infections during these periods of stress.⁷⁻¹⁰ Similarly, persons under extreme physical stresses, such as marathon runners, show increased vulnerability to illness post-marathon.¹¹ There is evidence that physical exhaustion, anxiety, stress, and worry are related to compromised immune function and higher incidence of illness.

Fatigue

Overwhelming fatigue and excessive sleepiness is a common response when chronically faced with situations in which there is little sense of control over the outcome. Fatigue is a common

symptom of depression as well. Fatigue interferes with attention and focus; its effects on performance are dramatic and far-reaching.

TABLE 9-1

RESPONSES TO ANXIETY¹

ACUTE MANIFESTATIONS OF ANXIETY

Physical Symptoms

- Racing pulse
- Perspiration (can be extreme)
- Dry mouth
- Shaky knees and hands
- Trembling voice
- Shortness of breath
- Dizziness
- Nausea
- Bladder and rectal pressure

Emotional symptoms

- Fear
- Sadness

- Frustration
- Anger
- Dread

Intellectual symptoms

- Difficulty paying attention
- Problems with concentration
- Poor memory

Adapted from Anxiety and Depression Association of America. *Test Anxiety*. <http://www.adaa.org/living-with-anxiety/children/test-anxiety>. Accessed August 26, 2014.

Burnout

Burnout often involves feeling overwhelmed and disconnected from your studies or the clients and patients with whom you are working. It is characterized by feelings of physical and emotional fatigue and changes in relationships and attitudes. Researchers who find symptoms of burnout in students typically find higher frequency of feelings of emotional exhaustion and cynicism and diminished frequency of

feelings of personal accomplishment. In the clinical setting, strong levels of social support from both supervisors and peers is one of the few factors that seems to be associated with low levels of burnout.¹²

Substance Abuse

Substance abuse involves the use of external chemicals or drugs, such as alcohol, legal and illegal drugs, caffeine, or tobacco. Substances are often used to numb the pain of anxiety or depression.¹³⁻¹⁴ The performance impairment and serious health risks that accompany the abuse of these substances are undesirable for anyone.

TABLE 9-2

SYMPTOMS OF DEPRESSION*¹⁵

- Persistent sad or “empty” mood

- Feeling hopeless, helpless, worthless, pessimistic, and or guilty
- Substance abuse
- Fatigue or loss of interest in ordinary activities, including sex
- Disturbances in eating and sleeping patterns
- Irritability, increased crying, anxiety, and panic attacks
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions
- Thoughts of suicide; suicide plans, or attempts
- Persistent physical symptoms or pains that do not respond to treatment

*Not all people with depression will have all these symptoms or have them to the same degree. If a person has 4 or more of these symptoms, if nothing can make them go away, and if they last more than 2 weeks, a doctor or psychiatrist should be consulted.

Adapted from Symptoms of Major Depression. SAVE - Suicide Awareness Voices of Education. http://www.save.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=home.viewPage&page_id=A806E240-95E6-44BB-C2D6C47399E9EFDB. Accessed July 20, 2013.

Depression and Suicide

Clinical depression can be a serious problem for students. Be aware of the symptoms and problems listed in [Tables 9-2](#) and [9-3](#). Suggest that any student or colleague experiencing these symptoms seek professional help.

Identifying the Source of the Problem

Olivia had always succeeded in the past with minimal effort. What was the problem now? As she read over the test questions, she felt like she had studied for a different test. She had a sinking feeling and felt her palms begin to sweat.

Olivia's story is common among high-ability students who have been successful in the past but now face difficulties with the intensive demands of the physical therapist assistant program. There are a number of common problems that lead to performance difficulties on examinations.

Effort

Many students have a history of past success with less than maximal effort. In both physical therapist and physical therapist assistant education, the complexity of the material presented and the sheer volume of information one faces require different strategies to improve performance.

TABLE 9-3

SUICIDAL SYMPTOMS*16

WARNING SIGNS OF SUICIDE

- Thinking, talking about, or planning suicide
- Substance use or abuse
- No sense of purpose or belonging
- Anger
- Feeling trapped, like there is no way out
- Feeling hopeless, like there is nothing to live for
- Withdrawing from family, friends, work, school, activities, hobbies
- Anxiety, restlessness, irritability, agitation
- Reckless or high-risk behavior
- Dramatic changes in mood
- Preoccupation with death
- Suddenly happier, calmer
- Loss of interest in things one cares about
- Visiting or calling people one cares about
- Making arrangements; setting one's affairs in order

- Giving things away

*A suicidal person urgently needs help—see a doctor or psychiatrist. Call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255). This is a confidential source of help available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and staffed by trained phone counselors.

Adapted from Warning Signs of Suicide. *SAVE - Suicide*

Awareness Voices of Education.

<http://www.save.org/index.cfm?>

[fuseaction=home.viewPage&page_ID=705E1907-](http://www.save.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=home.viewPage&page_ID=705E1907-)

[C4DD-5D32-2C7087CE5924CCA4](http://www.save.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=home.viewPage&page_ID=705E1907-C4DD-5D32-2C7087CE5924CCA4). Accessed July 20, 2013.

Study Time

Take a look at your study time. It is reasonable to expect that you will be spending 2 to 3 hours studying for each in-class hour. If you are spending this amount of time and not seeing positive results, you may be choosing the wrong information to study or using ineffective learning strategies. See [Chapter 8](#) to review some more effective learning strategies.

Reading Priorities

The volume of reading required may at times exceed your capability to read it. You must become good at skimming; reading abstracts and conclusions; and looking for key words, definitions, and other critical information. You may not be able to read all assigned reading for full comprehension and retention, yet you will be responsible for these facts.

Talk with your professor about what information is most important to study. Use your class notes as a guideline. Watch for key phrases and repetitive information in your notes and books.

Use Learning Strategies

[Chapter 8](#) presents many strategies for enhancing information processing, comprehension, and mastery of mater-

ial. Put these techniques into place to assist you.

Find and Use a Support System

Identify what academic support services are available on campus. These may include tutoring, mentoring, advising, and extra help or study sessions. Meet with a study group to help maximize your efforts.

Reduce Distractions and Diversions

Explore ways to reduce the distractions in the environment in which you study. Find a place in a quiet corner of the library or designated place in your home where you will not be disturbed. Change seats if you are distracted by a person sitting next to you. Commit to and keep a regular study schedule in an environment that will support, not interfere, with your efforts.

Time Management

Do you have conflicting obligations, such as work, child care, or family responsibilities? Are you using your time efficiently? Are you procrastinating? Recent evidence indicates that poor time management significantly contributes to student performance anxiety.¹⁷ Review [Chapter 10](#) for time management techniques.

Limited Clinical Background

Sometimes students who have had minimal contact with patients and clinical exposure lack a context in which to apply the information they are learning. This may interfere with being able to identify the most important information. Pay attention to the specific examples given in class. These examples

will help you to understand and use this material.

Unable to See “The Big Picture”

Are you excessively concerned with details? Many courses emphasize details and few courses pull together “the big picture.” Many students find themselves studying compartments of facts and information for tests but lack opportunities to think about how this information applies to a patient’s problems or physical therapy practice.

Actively ask yourself, “How am I going to use this information?” “Why is this important for me to learn?” If you or your classmates are unable to answer these questions, seek assistance from the faculty. Learning information in context will assist with retention and future application. (Review [Chapter 8](#) for the details.)

tion involved in reaching this decision is a valuable growth process.

Take Action!

Let's first consider the basics of a healthy lifestyle. Are you getting sufficient rest, eating a healthy diet, and participating in regular exercise? Many students would answer no, no, and no! Examine these areas and make needed changes. Despite multiple demands and responsibilities, you must make caring for yourself a priority.

Lifestyle Habits

Rest

Be sure that you are getting enough sleep. Fatigue interferes with both information processing and memory. Reduce caffeine intake. Don't sleep during the day, especially if you are waking

up at night. If anxiety is keeping you awake, take action to address it.

Nutrition

Be sure that you consume a healthy diet that is going to give you sufficient energy for the work you are doing and to prevent long-term health problems. Don't let the time pressures of your educational program reduce the quality of the diet you consume. There are many alternatives to eating campus "fast-foods."

Many college students gain weight. In addition to high-calorie, high-fat convenience eating, insufficient exercise may also be a consideration. Don't let this add to your worries.

Exercise

Regular aerobic exercise, such as walking, swimming, or biking, and resistive exercise, such as lifting weights, is critical to prevent (and im-

prove) many health problems associated with a sedentary lifestyle. Further, regular exercise habits now may protect you from common work-related injuries later. As an added bonus, there is a growing body of work that supports the connection of exercise and movement to enhanced information processing, mood elevation, and stress reduction.

Study Habits

Study Groups

Working in a group works! Organize a group if you are not already in one. Group work allows you to organize your study time, focus on specific class requirements and questions, and process essential information with others.

Work Harder/Increase Study Time

Are conflicting interests reducing your study time? Consider the following

Career Doubts

Sometimes problems with performance lead students to question whether they are well-suited for a career as a physical therapist assistant. Consider what attracted you to the physical therapy field. If those reasons are still valid, you may want to explore what strategies you can utilize to facilitate your future success.

Your future success is dependent on your satisfaction and happiness doing this work. If you are having doubts, talk with an advisor, trusted faculty member, or clinical mentor. Do not brood alone with your doubts.

You are not alone, nor are you abnormal to question your choices. Questioning allows you to consider and reaffirm your choice. Even if you choose not to continue your studies to become a physical therapist assistant, the reflec-

strategies to increase your effectiveness in studying:

- Can you study at home or would studying in the library increase your efficiency and concentration?
- Do you need to reduce work or personal commitments?
- Can you maximize commuting time with listening to tapes of lectures or reviewing your notes?

Seek Alternative Means of Enhancing Your Knowledge Base

Are you just not getting it? Seek alternative sources. There may be computer-based resources, Internet sites, videos, and other self-directed resources that are available to augment and supplement the course material. Check with faculty, library staff, professional networks, and student resource guides.

Studying More Effectively

Review the tips in [Chapter 8](#) on learning and information processing research. Specifically look for the following problems in your studying strategies:

Are you having difficulty:

- Prioritizing and selecting what to study?
- Identifying relationships between bits of information?
- Reading everything and not remembering anything?
- Not finding the information you need?
- Having difficulty applying information?

Remember that cognitive processing research shows us that comprehension and memory of newly acquired information is greatest if YOU make sense of the information, talk about it, summarize it, write it in your own words,

establish a context for the new information, and apply it to real-life situations.

Reading a textbook with a highlighter in hand is a waste of your valuable time. You must do something active with what you are reading, which will enable you to relate it to something else, apply it, categorize it, or put it into context.

Monitor Your Thoughts

Petra lay awake in her bed worrying about the exam she took earlier that day. She discussed her answers later with her classmates and realized she had made many mistakes. She could not stop thinking about the questions she read incorrectly and worried, "What if I flunk out of school? What would I tell my parents? I've worked so hard for this."

interfere with performance and some suggested ways of coping with these bad habits.

Use Your Resources

Faculty Involvement

Use faculty resources early and often! Ask for help as soon as you note a problem. Use faculty office hours, teaching assistants, and extra review times that are available. Be specific about your questions. Some good questions to start are as follows:

- What information is most important to study?
- What relationships between facts are most critical?
- Can you explain discrepancies between the reading and lecture notes? (Have specifics in mind.)
- What additional resources may help my understanding?

Tutoring

Are tutoring services available? If you need help, investigate college or program resources that might provide a tutor. Is there another student that could spend several hours a week with you?

Focus on Clinical Applications

It may help to see a clinical application of the information. There are several strategies that may be effective:

- Study with classmates who have more diverse clinical experience. Ask them to relate their experiences and apply this information.
- Seek opportunities to spend a few hours per week with a faculty member in practice.
- Use your vacations and down time to gain some clinical experience.

The thoughts that we have, especially after an unexpected failure, are related to underlying beliefs about ourselves and may increase anxiety and reduce our future expectations of success.¹⁵ These thoughts may ruin our enjoyment of the challenges and learning experiences ahead. They may dampen feelings of success and take the fun out of sharing achievements and accomplishments with colleagues.

[Chapter 8](#) introduces the concepts of *metacognition* and *reflection*. Take a few minutes to think about the thoughts that you frequently have. Are you guilty of “making mountains out of molehills?” Everyone has probably had 1 or 2 nights lying awake and thinking about the “worst things that could happen.” You can change the negative thought patterns that interfere with your performance. The first step is to be aware of them.

Check [Table 9-4](#) for common habitual negative thought patterns that

Counseling Services

Investigate free counseling services through your student health center. Student concerns are their specialty. Don't let a problem get out of hand. Take action to address issues, such as performance anxiety, stress, personal conflicts, and depression, early and effectively.

Support Groups

Evidence shows that social support is key to effective management of stress.¹⁹ There may be organized support groups for students, such as those run by a women's resource center, a reentry center, a students with disabilities center, or a group related to specific health or mental health concerns. Support is a key factor in your success. Don't overlook the value of emotional support in improving your performance. Sometimes just knowing that

others share your feelings and anxieties allows you to then focus on the tasks at hand.

Help Lines and Hotlines

Ask for help when you need it. Anonymous help lines and hotlines are available in every city across the country. They often also serve as referral centers to other resources in your university and community.

Train Your Relaxation Response

Some of the most effective ways to reduce anxiety involve altering your physical responses, such as breathing and muscle tension.¹⁶ Try some of the following strategies to train your relaxation response.

Deep Breathing

You are more likely to take shallow breaths when anxious. If you change

your focus to breathing deeply, you can slowly begin to relax. Place your hand on your abdomen and inhale in a way that makes your abdomen expand. As you exhale, your abdomen should move inward. Practice by taking 9 to 15 slow deep breaths, 2 or 3 times per day. Then, during a stressful situation, focus on taking 2 to 3 deep breaths, and you will feel more relaxed.

Selective Muscle Relaxation

Muscle tension also increases with anxiety. You can consciously relax your muscles to reduce muscle tension. Focus on a particular muscle group during deep breathing, such as your neck or shoulders, and tense and then relax the muscle. Focus on releasing the tension in the muscle, repeating the word *relax* to yourself. You can add selective muscle relaxation to deep breathing in a stressful situation.

TABLE 9-4

COMMON NEGATIVE THOUGHT PATTERNS¹⁸

<i>PATTERN OF THINKING</i>	<i>CHARACTERISTICS OF THIS THOUGHT PATTERN</i>	<i>A BETTER WAY TO THINK</i>	<i>WHAT TO SAY TO YOURSELF AND OTHERS</i>
Filtering	Magnifying the negative details while filtering out the positive aspects of a situation	Shift your focus. Think of strategies to cope with the problem rather than the problem itself. Focus on the positive aspects of the situation, your personal qualities, past successes, and positive events. Be realistic about the situation. If it is a one-time occurrence or a temporary problem, think of it that way.	"I am usually a very capable student; I misunderstood the instructions on this part of the exam."
Polarized thinking	All things are good or bad, perfect or a failure. There is no middle ground.	Realize that every situation is more complex than simply good or bad. There is a continuum that reflects reality. Think in terms of percentages.	"I am able to do this well 95% of the time."
Overgeneralization	Coming to a general conclusion, based on a single incident or piece of evidence. Expecting bad things to happen over and over.	Quantify, rather than using words that are qualitative (terrible, horrendous, awful). How many times has this happened? Examine how much evidence you really have for your conclusion and evidence that would be against your conclusion. Throw out the conclusion until you have consistent evidence to support it. Avoid statements using words such as "every, all, always, none, never, everybody, and nobody." Use words, instead like "sometimes" and "often."	"Some of my classmates did very well on the first exam. I am succeeding in this course, even though my performance on the first exam didn't really reflect how much I know."
Mind reading	Thinking that you know how other people feel about you and why they act the way they do, without their telling you.	Check out your perceptions—ask people what they think or feel. Be direct. Look at the evidence you have to support your conclusion and the evidence that would be against your conclusion. What are some other logical explanations?	"I'm worried because it seems like you are angry with me. Is there any truth to what I'm saying?"

Catastrophizing	Expecting disaster. What if...I fail this exam? What if...I don't have enough money to pay my tuition next semester?	Make an honest assessment in terms of the odds or percentage of probability of the event happening. Realistically look at the chances of this happening. Take constructive steps with tasks within your control to prevent future problems, instead of worrying about them.	"I have had only two 'C's' all the time I've been in college. There is a very low likelihood that I will fail now, because I'm more interested and involved in my studies than I have ever been." "I can apply for a loan. Even though I don't want to be in debt, it will allow me to finish my education without the added stress of compromising my studies by working too much."
Shoulds	Working from a list of strict rules about how you and other people should act. People who break the rules make you angry and you feel guilty if you break the rules.	Question any rules or expectations that include the words "should, ought, or must." Realize that ALL action comes from personal choice. Also, there is no prescribed way to feel about a particular situation. Think of exceptions to these rules that seem to run your life. Realize what YOUR values and opinions are and what CHOICES you are making in your life and don't impose them on others.	"I'm choosing to spend this Sunday afternoon with my friends, rather than studying."
Being right	You must be right and prove that your actions are correct. Being wrong is not acceptable to you and you will go to any length to demonstrate your correctness.	Actively listen to what others have to say. Participate in communication by repeating what you think you've heard to verify your understanding. Defuse the immediate situation. Agree to disagree with another person. Focus on what you can learn from the other person's perspective.	"I understand your point of view. I look at the situation differently."
Doubting yourself	Having constant self-doubts and fears of failure. You assume that you are the only one with these feelings.	Realize that success in every situation may not be possible. However, the choices you make are under your control. Think about how you define success and what steps you can take to ensure that you'll be successful the next time.	"I can make choices that will help me to be successful."
Blaming	Holding others responsible for your problems. Or turning blame inwards as an indicator of failure.	No one can be at fault for the actions and choices you have made, as a responsible adult. Identify the choices you have made that have created the situation you are now in. Look at the options you now have for coping with it.	"I chose to focus on other work during the first few weeks of the semester, which has allowed me to fall behind in my reading. I will focus the next few days on catching up."
Adapted from McKay M, Davis M, Fanning P. <i>Thoughts and Feelings—The Art of Cognitive Stress Intervention</i> . Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications; 1981:17-45.			

Self-Suggestion and Imagery

Another helpful relaxation technique pairs a phrase, image, or affirmation with a feeling of calmness. For example, you might use an image of a peaceful scene or a meaningful symbol to help you to enter a state of relax-

ation. Repeating words to yourself, such as *Peace* or *Now*, can help to keep your mind from racing away from the present. Affirmations, such as, “I am most effective when I focus on the present” or “I am relaxed and confident in all situations,” may help to thwart excessive anxiety and panic in a stressful performance situation.

Develop a Ritual

Rituals are behaviors we use to give us a sense of familiarity, achieve a focus, and reduce anxiety.²⁰ Think about the basketball player who bounces the ball 3 times before shooting a free throw. Develop a simple ritual that will help you to relax. This might involve arriving early to choose a preferred seat, bringing a bottle of water with you, or using a particular pen that makes you feel comfortable. It could involve privately saying a phrase that affirms your ability or a spiritual belief.

Rituals work when they lower anxiety. Avoid choosing rituals that are likely to increase anxiety, such as when you forget that “lucky rabbit’s foot!”

Summary

Performance anxiety and related stress is a frequent concern for students. Changes in lifestyle and study habits may direct and focus your efforts more effectively. Examining and monitoring negative thought patterns can be helpful to reduce anxiety. Taking control of the choices you make will help to focus your efforts on strategies to lower anxiety and facilitate success. Outside resources, such as academic and emotional support services, are often helpful to students experiencing worry and anxiety. Although this is an intense and demanding time, it will pass quickly, and you will soon be working in your desired career.

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PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

1. Automatic thoughts. Think of your experiences in the past week. Make a notation of several times that you can recall that you have experienced an unpleasant emotion, self-doubt, or negative thought. Record the thoughts that you had at the time in the second column. Refer to [Table 9-4](#). In the third column change your focus and enter a more positive thought.

<i>SITUATION</i>	<i>THOUGHTS AT THE TIME</i>	<i>A BETTER WAY TO THINK</i>

2. Evaluate your habits, which may alleviate performance anxiety:

Are you planning study time
into your daily schedule?

Do you have adequate social and
emotional support?



Do you have enough sleep each night? If not, how can you arrange your schedule to decrease fatigue?

What improvements can you make to your nutrition and diet?

What is your regular exercise schedule? If less than 3 times weekly, make a plan to incorporate more exercise.

Are you working in a study group with others?