UWSOM ACADEMIC SUPPORT & COUNSELING
TEST ANXIETY TALK

YVONNE TYLER, MD, ACADEMIC LEARNING SPECIALIST; CLIFTON KELLY, MS, MDIV, LMHC MEDICAL STUDENT COUNSELOR
ANXIETY & STRESS IN MEDICAL SCHOOL

- So much to do, so little time!
PERFECTIONISM AND IMPOSTER SYNDROME

Two common related thought processes and behaviors

**Perfectionism -**
- The desire to be or appear perfect.
- Always working under the toughest scrutiny
- Little room for error
- Self criticism that prevents forward progress

**Imposter Syndrome -**
- The fear of being exposed as a fraud
- The individual doubts their skills, talents, and accomplishments despite evidence of their competence

Article for UW grad students:
https://grad.uw.edu/learning-to-let-go-of-perfectionism-in-grad-school/

Article for UW grad students: https://www.grad.washington.edu/for-students-and-post-docs/core-programs/mentoring/mentor-memos/the-imposter-syndrome/
SHAME AND GUILT

Shame
- I am equal to my mistakes, missteps, inadequacies, etc. (I am…)
- Inward focused
- Disempowering

Guilt
- I am NOT equal to my mistakes, missteps, inadequacies, etc.
- Outward focused
- Empowering
“Perfectionism is not the same thing has striving to be your best. Perfectionism is the belief that if we live perfect, look perfect, and act perfect, we can minimize or avoid the pain of blame, judgement, and shame. It’s a shield. It’s a twenty-ton shield that we lug around thinking it will protect us when, in fact, it’s the thing that’s really preventing us from flight.”

— Brené Brown, The Gifts of Imperfection
The American Psychological Association (APA) defines anxiety as “an emotion characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts and physical changes like increased blood pressure.”

Knowing the difference between normal feelings of anxiety and when it is something more serious can be done with the help of a professional such as a physician or therapist.

Under the broader category of anxiety, students may experience challenges related to perfectionism, performance anxiety, test anxiety and imposter syndrome.

Source: Goodtherapy.com
Performance anxiety is fear about one’s ability to perform a specific task. People experiencing performance anxiety may worry about failing a task before it has even begun. They might believe failure will result in humiliation or rejection.

Performing before others can make people feel vulnerable. They may fear that a mistake will damage their reputation and make them seem less than perfect.
Test anxiety is a combination of physical symptoms and emotional reactions that interfere with your ability to perform well on tests.

Many students experience varying levels of test anxiety for a number of different reasons.
Remarkably, researchers have surmised that other, seemingly related issues including lack of exercise and poor nutrition are the result of test anxiety as opposed being contributing factors.

In a survey of 1st and 2nd year medical students (N=200) from a medical college in Asia, factors contributing to test anxiety include:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>inadequate rest</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>irrational thoughts</td>
<td>67.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>excessive course load</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>inadequate study</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Prevalence of examination related anxiety in a private medical college. J AYUB MED COLL ABBOTTABAD 2013; 25(1-2) – Khan AN; Rasool SA; Sultan A; and Tahira I.
“Test anxiety is modestly inversely correlated with USMLE step-1 scores.”
SYMPATHETIC NERVOUS SYSTEM ACTIVATION IN RESPONSE TO A PERCEIVED THREAT
THREE COMPONENTS:
COMMON PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS OF ANXIETY
 HOW DO WE EMOTIONALLY EXPERIENCE ANXIETY?
SYMPTOMS & REAL IMPLICATIONS

**Physiological**
- Insomnia
- Tense Muscles
- Hypertension/High Blood Pressure
- Fatigue
- Sweating
- Gastrointestinal Problems
- Increased Heart Rate
- Trembling

**Psychological**
- Impaired Processing Speed
- Avoidance
- Increased Doubt
- Rumination/Racing Thoughts
- Mind Fog / Blanking
- Disorganization
- Sadness
- Guilt
- Fear
WHAT DOES THAT LOOK LIKE FOR ME?

Avoiding going to class → Avoiding answering emails or other forms of communication → Not sleeping or sleeping too much → Not eating or eating too much → Tightness of chest/muscles

Crying → Mind Going Blank → Irritability/Anger/Passive Aggressiveness → Guilt/Shame → Fear

Feelings of panic → Constantly second guessing yourself → Sadness
PROACTIVE TECHNIQUES

Physical activities: yoga, tai chi, working out

Thought stopping

Cognitive restructuring
  • Reframe it (challenge vs. threat)
PROACTIVE TECHNIQUES – WORRY TIME

1. **Worry Time**
   - Set aside daily Worry Time for 10 minutes.

2. Record yourself / write through your worries.
   - Do not think about any positive alternatives, only the negative ones...
   - Attempt to become as anxious as possible while worrying.

3. Continue to the end of each worry period, even if you run out of ideas and have to repeat the same worries over again.

4. At the end of ten minutes, let go of those worries with deep breaths, then return to other activities.

5. At the end of the week, go back and notice any patterns or repetitions.
Familiar questions first

Mark challenging/longer questions & come back

When you’re done you’re done!

TTT: TEST TRIAGE TECHNIQUE
TEST-TAKING TECHNIQUES

BE THE ROBOT!

- Assembly line – think like a robot; don’t overheat the machine
- Test strategies
  - What are they looking for?
  - Gather evidence
  - What are they looking for?
- Answer in your head
- Find the best answer
CREATING AN ADAPTIVE TESTING MINDSET

• Once a plan encounters a challenge it will often not survive, which requires adaptation and sometimes improvisation.

• When you encounter resistance/difficulties, simplify your approach
  • Regroup
  • Reframe
  • Recharge

• Minimize and actively address doubt.
  • Doubt is paralyzing
  • Paradox is you CANNOT positive self-talk your way out of it
  • Must act to overcome
BE IN THE PRESENT

- Take time to breathe and reboot
- Grounding
- Focused tapping
- **Mindfulness Meditation**: Mindfulness is a process that leads to a mental state characterized by nonjudgmental awareness of the present experiences, such as sensations, thoughts, bodily states, and the environment. It enables us to distance ourselves from our thoughts and feelings without labeling them as good or bad.

- **Psychotherapy**: Working with a psychologist, counselor, or social worker can help you learn new ways to cope with anxiety in daily life.

- **Medication**: Medication can help you manage the symptoms of anxiety and increase your quality of life. Research shows a combination of medication and psychotherapy can be extremely effective.

- **Exercise**: Exercise decreases stress hormones like cortisol. It also increases endorphins—your body's "feel-good" chemicals—giving your mood a natural boost. It also provides a great distraction from unhelpful thoughts.

Source: Anxiety.org; Therapy Group of DC; Very Well Mind
RESOURCES

- Counseling & Wellness Services
- Academic Support Services
- Disability Resource Services
- College/Faculty Mentors
- Personal Support Systems
  - Family
  - Friends
  - Classmates
Science isn’t always perfect and neither are you.

There are no “miracle cures”

Commit to one or two techniques and practice them (daily)

Medical/counseling intervention if needed

Physical activity is a MUST!

You are a life long learner
QUESTIONS?