

COUNSELLING STRATEGIES IN PREPARING STUDENTS AGAINST E-EXAMINATION ANXIETY IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

Fidel O. Okopi, (Ph.D)
**National Open University of Nigeria,
Lagos.**

And

Joshua Pindar, (Ph.D)
**National Open University of Nigeria,
Lagos.**

Abstract

Learning at a distance, interspersing with occasional face-to-face facilitation and mediated by technology is the main tenet of Open and Distance Learning. This makes it imperative to sensitise the learners on how to prepare for electronic driven examination and avoid examination anxiety. This is more so when most distance institutions are offering their examination on e-platform coupled with phobia associated with e-examination. The paper identifies and explains the concept of anxiety, types, component, test or examination, e-examination at NOUN, possible causes, signs and symptoms, counselling strategies for reducing examination anxiety, and general anxiety reduction techniques

Key word: Counselling, strategies, e-examination, anxiety, open, distance, learning

Man has struggled to cope with stressful situations throughout history (Jha, 2012). In ancient times, the possibility of encountering wild beasts, coming face to face with mortal enemies or coping with devastating natural disasters were the major sources of anxiety. These days however, the nature of anxiety producing stimuli has changed dramatically. Examination has been identified as one of the most stressful and anxiety producing exercise, students have to cope with throughout their schooling period. Psychologically whenever an individual perceives that his or her performance is judged externally, the individual feels anxious. Everyone feels nervous with competitive situations likewise before taking an examination or test or other important events in one's life which is quite natural. Worrying thoughts such as – will I be able to answer all

the questions? Have I done enough revision? Will I be able to pass the examination? How will my friends and parents look at me if I fail the examination? – are all indications of testing anxiety which most students experience.

The Concept of Anxiety

Stedman's medical dictionary (2006) defines anxiety as experience of fear or apprehension in response to anticipated internal or external danger accompanied by some or all of the following signs- muscle tension, restlessness, sympathetic(autonomic) hyperactivity such as diarrhoea, palpitation, rapid breathing, jitteriness, hyper vigilance, confusion, decreased concentration or fear of losing control.

On the other hand, anxiety is characterised by a diffuse, unpleasant, vague sense of apprehension, often accompanied by autonomic symptoms such as headache, perspiration, palpitation, tightness in the chest and mild stomach disorder (Kaplan & Sadock (1996). The Quick Reference Dictionary for occupational therapy defined anxiety as characterized by an overwhelming sense of apprehension; the expectation that something bad is happening or will happen. Bhalla, (2007) opines that if one believes something important to him or her is being threatened, overestimates the threat and under estimates his or her ability to cope with it, or under estimate the resources available to cope with it, then one will feel anxious. From the above definitions, anxiety can be seen as an emotional reaction to perceived danger, a state of apprehension, tension or uneasiness to any anticipated danger. Anxiety does not occur as a single phenomenon: its various forms of manifestation can be classified under two main categories (trait and state anxieties).

Trait Anxiety

Trait anxiety on one hand is a relatively stable aspect of the personality. Individuals, who present anxiety trait in their behaviours, tend to have an attitude reflecting their perception of certain environmental stimuli and situations as dangerous or threatening. In practice, the anxious perceptive style of these persons will eventually become pervasive, extending to and influencing other areas of experience, and in effect finally becoming a characteristic of the personality (Fernandez, 2012).

People who show a more developed anxiety trait are much more prone to reacting to a large number of stimuli and tend to be worried also in situations which for most individuals would not represent a source of threat. These individuals are more likely to present state anxiety in circumstances with low anxiety-generating potential, such as normal day-to-day activities, and will probably experience higher levels of state anxiety in the presence of anxiety-generating stimuli. (Fernandez, 2012 & *Psychology Newsletter*, 2013).

State Anxiety

On the other hand, State anxiety manifests itself as an interruption of an individual's emotional state, leading to a sudden subversion of one's emotional equilibrium.(Dorter, 2012&Fernandez, 2012).A person experiencing 'state' anxiety feels tensioned or worried or might enter a state of restlessness. In such moments, the individual may feel very tense and easily react or over-react to external stimuli. State anxiety involves activation of the autonomous nervous system and the consequent triggering of a series of physiological reactions and conditions. High levels of state anxiety are particularly unpleasant, disturbing and can even be painful to the point of inducing the person to engage in adaptive behaviour aimed at ending these sensations. However, these adaptive reactions may not be successful in attaining their goals and other behaviour patterns of maladaptive type may manifest this time, – which can result in the opposite effect(Dorter, 2012, Fernandez, 2012 & *Psychology Newsletter* 2013).

Meanwhile, anxiety has four components. The four components of anxiety include behaviour, cognitive, physiological and emotional components.

Behavioural Component is activated with the aim of reacting to a situation and re-establishing optimum conditions of wellbeing. Here there are two possibilities: coping with the problem directly or simply avoiding it. In the first instance, if an individual is confronted by an unexpected situation which he or she is not prepared for, the individual will probably react by analysing the problem and proffering an adequate solution. In this case of avoidance however, the individual tends to put off contending with the problem, thereby attaining a sense of immediate relief, but this can give rise to feelings of guilt and may damage self-esteem. This will then increase the risk that such situations will occur again in the future as if by habit. Behavioural indicators of anxiety include procrastination and avoidance, excessive study, over/under eating, poor nutrition, sleeping too much or too little, fatigue or inability to relax, excessive alcohol or drug misuse, tense movement, less coordinated movement or walking faster than normal, fidgeting and nail biting (Bhalla 2007 & Dickson, 2012, Dorter, 2012, Fernandez, 2012 & *Psychology Newsletter*,2013).

The Cognitive Component compasses a series of mental processes that have the purpose of evaluating oneself and the situation one is in.cognitive component of anxiety comprises of concentrating exclusively on aspects perceived as being the most threatening; evaluating reality in an unrealistic and irrational manner: for example, considering a judgement regarding the success or lack of success in a particular task as a global and absolute judgement of oneself (“if I can't do this, I'm a failure) self-effacing opinions and the belittling of one's potential or capacity: for example, accepting inability to perform a certain task, that we do not have what it takes, that we simply can't manage it or in other words, overestimating the external situation to the point of

becoming convinced it is something we cannot control, and feeling so overwhelmed by events as if we were facing a major disaster; perfectionism: the tendency to continuously put off addressing an issue, problem or evaluation on the part of others until some future moment when we feel we are perfectly prepared. (Dorter, 2012 & Fernandez, 2012).

Cognitive indicators of anxiety include negative or defeating self-talk, excessive worry, difficulty with concentration or focus, difficulty in retrieving or selecting key terms or concepts, difficulty in organizing, integrating or expressing one's thoughts, going blank on exam questions, remembering the correct answers after the exam is over, doing poorly on an examination even when one knows the materials, difficulty in reading and understanding the questions on the examination paper (Bhalla, 2007 & Dickson, 2012).

The Emotional Components of Anxiety

Disorders include underlying concerns or experiences that have not been openly addressed. Contemporary psychologists believe that there may be unusual levels of pain and sadness as a result of early relations with parents. When anxiety begins later in life, it may be the result of a combination of factors including sadness or disappointment in oneself. Most psychologists consider underlying conditions as a prelude to anxiety disorders (Hansell & Damour, 2008).

Mood/affective disorders promote low self-esteem, a low sense of self-efficacy based on negative experiences and inabilities, and feelings of hopelessness (Schimelpfening, 2009). Anxiety disorders often have underlying concerns that have not been appropriately addressed. Contemporary psychologists believe there may be unusual levels of pain and sadness resulting from early parent-child relationships (Hansell & Damour, 2008). Individuals with these disorders report severe and multifaceted traumatisation (Nijenhuis, Spinhoven, Van Dyck, Van der Hart, & Vanderlinden, 1998). The presence of physical and sexual trauma predicted somatoform dissociation, and sexual trauma predicted psychological dissociation as well. According to the memories of the dissociative disorder patients, the abuse took place in an inappropriate social context that was emotionally neglectful and abusive. Although not everyone has such abuse in their history, early onset of chronic and intense traumatization best predicted pathological dissociation (Nijenhuis, Spinhoven, Van Dyck, Van der Hart, & Vanderlinden, 1998). The emotional indicators of anxiety include; Feeling guilty, angry, depressed or unsure, frustrations, panic, and sense of hopelessness. While social indicators of anxiety include social withdrawal, avoidance of friends and family, unusual irritability with others and procrastination through increased socializing (Bhalla, 2007) & Dickson, 2012)

A Physiological Component of Anxiety prepares the organism (the person) for action. The main physiological modifications are: an increase in muscular tension, with a consequent increase in blood flow to the muscular tension (so as to be able to react promptly with a flight or fight response if necessary) and tachycardia (rapid heartbeat, with perceptible acceleration of the heart rate), which has the purpose of pumping a greater quantity of blood to parts of the body that have been activated, and an increase in blood pressure. Physiological component sometime precipitate hyperventilation: an increase in respiratory frequency beyond our control. This may lead to dizziness and, in serious cases, to cloudy vision and a progressive decrease in one's capacity to comprehend the situation we are in. Also, an increase in organism's sensibility towards external agents: for example, increase dilation of the pupils and sensitivity to pain.

Physiological signs and symptoms include perspiration, sweaty palms, feeling too hot or cold, headaches, upset stomach, nausea, appetite changes, dry mouth, and more frequent urination. Rapid heart bit, shallow/irregular breathing, dizziness and muscle tightness (Bhalla 2007, Dickson, 2012, Dorter, 2012, Fernandez, 2012 & *Psychology Newsletter.2013*)

However certain amount of nervous tension or anxiety can help improve one's performance, when taking a test or exam. Anxiety causes arousal, and if the level of arousal is within one's optimal functioning zone, then the minds will be clearer, concentration sharper and one's performance will improve. Jha (2012) suggests that if there is too much anxiety, then there will be over arousal outside of the optimal functioning zone and performance will drop. Whereas, too much anxiety can block our thoughts, create a negative frame of mind, and lead to panic and potentially poor exam performance. The intention of this paper therefore, is to draw the attention of student Counsellors to the negative effects of over anxiety on students' examination performance, so that they can help them minimize the anxiety to the level that will improve their performance

Examination Anxiety

It is a fact that, normally, all people experience some level of nervousness or tension before tests or other important events in their lives or situations where their abilities and capabilities are assessed; more so when it involves interface with computer (Soft & hard ware) A little nervousness can actually help motivate us; however, too much of it can become a problem – especially if it interferes with our ability to prepare for and perform on tests (University of Illinois, 2013).

The first step in identifying examination or test anxiety is to distinguish between two types of anxiety. If one's anxiety is a direct result of lack of preparation, it should be considered normal and rational reaction. However, if one adequately prepared but still

panic, “blank out”, and/or overreacts, one’s reaction is considered not rational(University of Illinois, 2013).

While both of these anxieties may be considered normal (anyone can have them) it is certainly helpful to know how to overcome their effects. Testing or examination anxiety is a psychological condition in which people experience extreme distress and anxiety in testing or examination situations especially when it involves the use of computer. It is an emotional reaction to examinations. In the case of e-examination, anxiety manifests when students perceive themselves not computer literate enough for e-examination or not confident in the use of computers and their accessories or appliances. Examination anxiety often involves apprehensions of performance at levels below those at which one would like to perform or even apprehensions of failure (Bhalla, 2007). E-examination anxiety is a product of one’s underestimation of his or her abilities to perform using computer or of the resources available to help individuals to perform to the desired levels in examinations. E-examination anxiety may be a natural reaction to insufficient examination preparation or deficiency in the use of computer or interfacing with computer for the purpose of e-examination. Anxiety is an excessive worry about upcoming examination, phobia of being evaluated through use of computer and apprehension about the consequences.

Taking the Electronic Examination at NOUN

Instruction for students

Taking online exams in NOUN involves the following step wise procedure. Though online examination does not require extensive computing skills, the candidate must acquire the basic skills of reading text on the computer screen and clicking on or typing the right answers. Prior to e-examination, the counsellor should tutor all students on these step wise procedures.

The steps to follow are outlined below

1. Open your web-browser – (Internet explorer or Mozilla Firefox)
2. Log on to the National Open University of Nigeria website; www.nou.edu.ng
3. Click on the e-exam link
4. You will be directed to a page where you will have to choose among the following options:
 - i. Instructions on taking the Electronic Test
 - ii. Log in to take an exam or practice test
 - iii. Download student help
5. Click on the “Log in to take an exam or practice test” link to take a practice test or to take an actual examination. Take note that you will only be able to take an actual examination if it has been scheduled for. you.
6. A login screen

Login screen to MapleTA – NOUN’s e-Examination Platform

7. Enter your Matriculation Number into the user login section.
8. Enter your Matriculation Number as password (lower case only).
9. The System may ask you to verify that your name and other details have been entered correctly. If so check through to see that the details are correct then click on OK.
10. You will be taken to the system homepage.

Link to exam questions for the course/class

12. Click on the exam you want to take under the **assignment name** header to begin the examination. A screen displays the questions

Display of Questions

- a. Note:
 - Use the next button at the top to move to the next question
 - Use the back button to go to a previous question
 - Use the question menu to list the entire question available for the exam and go directly to the one desired.
 - Click on grade if you want to submit your answers for grading.
13. Once you have finished answering the questions click on grade. You will be warned if there are unanswered questions.
14. You will get an instant feedback.
15. To view your results, at the top of the page click View Details.
16. Once you have finished reviewing your results, click Quit & Save
17. To log out of Maple T.A., click the log out link.

Note

Practice questions are available for you so that you can feel comfortable using the system. Simply register for the practice class and go through the sample questions. Before examination, all students should have on hand practice on e-examination step wise computer procedure

Day of the Examination

1. On arrival at the test Centre, your profile will be validated against documents you have submitted and which are in your possession: Passport size photo, international passport, and driver’s license, National ID, any other ID as acceptable at place of work or an office.
2. You will be ushered into a seat with a desktop computer

3. Instruction on the following will be displayed for you: Welcome, what the exams is about, how many test items, time duration to complete, and an extra 10 minutes familiarisation.
4. When you are ready to start the exam click yes on the prompt.
5. Clicking YES will take you straight to the login screen.
6. You will be logged in with your USER LOGIN and PASSWORD
7. You will then be cleared to begin the examination which should last the duration specified. Best wishes(www.nou.edu.ng/noun/e-exam @2011)

Possible Causes of Examination Anxiety

According to Dickson (2012) and Bhalla (2007), there are four main causes of examination anxiety. These are our life styles, insufficient examination preparation, psychological factors and information needs.

Life style issue includes: Inadequate rest, poor nutrition, stimulant use. Insufficient exercise, not scheduling available time and prioritizing commitments and Lack of test taking skills.

Another possible cause is insufficient preparation for the examination. This includes cramming in the night before the exam, inadequate time management and inadequate study skills or study habits or inadequate computer literacy in the case of e-examination.

One other factor is psychological factors which include worrying about past examination performance, poor present performance, anticipated negative consequences of poor performance, how are others doing on the examination compared to you, feeling no control over the examination situation, negative thinking and self-criticism and irrational thinking about examinations and outcomes.

Not providing vital, adequate, prompt, timely and useable Information could constitute a possible cause of examination anxiety. This includes lack of information on examination taking strategies, exam dates and testing location, lack of knowledge of how to apply anxiety reduction techniques while studying, before examination and during examination.

Counselling Strategies for Reducing Examination Anxiety Especially in E - examinations

Distance learning refers mainly to a mode of delivery (independent learning at a distance through the means of self-study materials, occasional face-to-facilitation classroom interfaces and mediated by technology). The separation of teacher and learners and the influence of an educational organization are major features of ODL. One of the core functions of student counsellors in National Open University of Nigeria is preparing the students adequately for examinations by assisting them develop test taking skills especially e-Tutor Marked Assignments and e-examinations. In NOUN, StudentCounsellors adopt the following strategies:

- i. Organise orientation/Induction programmes for old and new students of the University, the Student Counsellors explain to the students the assessment and examination mechanisms involving pen-on-paper examinations, e-examinations and e-Tutor Marked Assignments.
- ii. Helping students acquireadequate computer skills and literacy especially acquiring the basic skills of reading text on the computer screen and clicking on or typing the right answers is what is required to take examination
- iii. Prepare students on study and learning skills as well as test taking skills and techniques includinge-Tutor Marked Assignments and e-examinations through individual and group counselling
- iv. One crucial area of counselling in NOUNis,counsellors making sure that students register appropriate courses forexaminations,
- v. Students manage their study time effectively and efficiently
- vi. At the orientation, the Counsellors place banners and bills in conspicuous places articulating counselling issues that can be resolved with the counsellors includinge-examination and pen-on-paper examination matters and that students should avail themselves of this ample opportunity.
- vii. Counsellors in NOUN prepare students for their studies through workshops, clinics and seminars which come up monthly at every study centres. Also these workshops, clinics and seminars prepare students on how to handle issues related to e-TMAs and e-Examination including pre, examinations and post examinations anxiety
- viii. Counsellors also provide vital information about Tutor Marked Assignment and examination matters including e-tutor Marked Assignments and examinations

- ix. Counsellors in NOUN adequately prepare students with disabilities for e-examinations and also make sure that the necessary equipment and assistance are given to them.
- x. Counsellors also prepare students in prisons on the modality of taking e-Tutor Marked Assignment and e-examinations.

All these strategies are adopted in order to help to minimize or reduce examination anxiety especially e-examination and change those uncomfortable and unhelpful thoughts, feelings and behaviours in the students positively. To help students effectively manage examination anxiety for a better performance, Student Counsellors should counsel students to practice the following techniques or strategies of managing examination anxiety as suggested by Greenberger and Padeskey (1995), Bhalla(2007) & Dickson(2012):

- a. Avoid “cramming” for a test. Trying to master a semester’s worth of material the day before the test is a poor way to learn and can easily produce anxiety. This is not the time to try to learn a great deal of material.
- b. Combine all the information you have been presented throughout the semester and work on mastering the main concepts of the course.
- c. When studying for the test, ask yourself what questions may be asked and try to answer them by integrating ideas from lectures, notes, texts, and supplementary readings.
- d. If you are unable to cover all the materials given throughout the semester, select important portions that you can cover well. Set a goal of presenting your knowledge of this information on the test.
- e. Acquiring basic skills of reading text on the computer screen and clicking on or typing the right answers is what is required to take examination or at least intermediate level of computer literacy or skills in preparation for e-examination

Changing of Attitude

Improving one’s perspective of the test-taking experience can actually help one to enjoy studying and may improve performance. Don’t overplay the importance of the grade – it is not a reflection of one’s self-worth nor does it predict one’s future success. The learners are expected to try the following:

- 1. Remember that the most reasonable expectation is to try to show as much of what one knows as he or she can.
- 2. Remind oneself that a test is only a test – there will be others.

3. Avoid thinking of one in irrational, all-or-nothing terms.
4. Reward oneself after the test – take in a movie, go out to eat, or visit with friends.

Important Basics Information

Students preparing for examination often neglect basic biological, emotional, and social needs. To do one's best; one must attend to these needs. Think of oneself as a total person – not just a test taker. Remember to:

1. continue the habits of good nutrition and exercise. Continue your recreational pursuits and social activities – all contribute to one's emotional and physical well-being.
2. follow a moderate pace when studying; vary your work when possible and take breaks when needed.
3. get plenty of sleep the night before the test – when one is overly tired, will not function at his or her absolute best.
4. once one feels adequately prepared for the test, do something relaxing.
5. constantly practice the use of computer and try as much as possible to upgrade your computer literacy

The Day of the Test

The student to do his or her best on the day of the test the counsellor may suggest the following:

1. Begin the day with a moderate breakfast and avoid coffee if one is prone to “caffeine jitters.” Even people who usually manage caffeine well may feel light-headed and jittery when indulged on the day of a test.
2. Try to do some relaxation exercises an hour before the test – last minute cramming will cloud your mastering of the overall concepts of the course.
3. Plan to arrive at the test location early – this will allow for relaxation and to select a seat located away from doors, windows, and other distractions.
4. Avoid classmates who generate anxiety and tend to upset one's stability.
5. If waiting for the examination to begin causes anxiety, distract oneself by reading a magazine or newspaper.

During the Examination: Basic Strategies

Before one begins answering the questions on the test, take a few minutes and do the following:

1. First review the entire examination; then read the directions twice. Try to think of the test as an opportunity to show the tutor what one knows; then begin to organize time efficiently. Work on the easiest portions of the examination first.
2. For essay questions, construct a short outline for oneself – then begin answering with a summary sentence. This will help one to avoid the rambling and repetition

which can irate the person grading the test. For short-answer questions, answer only what is asked – short and to the point. If you have difficulty with an item involving a written response, show what knowledge one has. If proper terminology evades one, show what one knows with his or her own words.

3. For multiple choice questions, read all the options first, then eliminate the most obvious. Unsure of the correct response? Rely on first impression, then move on quickly. Beware of tricky qualifying words such as “only,” “always,” or “most.”
4. Do not rush through the examination. Wear a watch and check it frequently as one paces oneself. If it appears one will be unable to finish the entire questions, concentrate on those portions which one can answer well. Recheck one’s answers only if one has extra time – and only if one is not anxious.
5. In the case of e-examination, make sure your computer is functioning properly and in good condition

During the Test: Anxiety Control

Curb excess anxiety in any of the following ways:

1. Tell yourself “I can be anxious later, now is the time to take the exam.”
2. Focus on answering the question, not on your grade or others’ performances.
3. Counter negative thoughts with other, more valid thoughts like, “I don’t have to be perfect.”
4. Tense and relax muscles throughout your body; take a couple of slow deep breaths and try to maintain a positive attitude.
5. If allowed, get a drink or go to the bathroom.
6. Ask the instructor a question.
7. Eat something.
8. Break your pencil lead – then go sharpen it.
9. Think for a moment about the post-exam reward you promised yourself.

After the Test

Whether you did well or not, be sure to follow through on the reward you promised yourself – and enjoy it! Try not to dwell on all the mistakes you might have made. Do not immediately begin studying for the next test,..Indulge in something relaxing for a little while (University of Illinois 2007). Bhalla(2007) and Dickson (2012) identified Controlled Breathing, Progressive Muscle Relaxation and Visualization as other strategies or techniques that can be employed to reduce the level of anxiety.

1. Controlled Breathing Technique

It is believed that anxiety can lead to chest pain, breathlessness, shortness of breath or feeling of inability to catch ones breath (Kaplan &Sadock, 1996;Bhalla, 2007 and Dickson, 2012). Bhalla(2007), states that, irregular breathing can increase physical sensations of anxiety. He further maintained that irregular breathing creates an in balance of oxygen and carbon dioxide in the body and the brain, and this also leads to the heightening of the physical symptoms usually associated with anxiety. This in turn will increase one's cognitive interpretations that one is experiencing anxiety. Breath controlling techniques help to restore the optimal balance of oxygen and carbon dioxide in the body and reducethe level of anxiety.

2. Progressive Muscle Relaxation Technique

Evidence also exists that tense muscles can either be a cause or result of anxiety (Kaplan &Sadock, 1996; Greenberger &Padeskey, 1995; Bhalla, 2007, and Dickson, 2012). Progressive Muscle Relaxation is a technique where the body's major muscle groups are alternately tensed and relaxed. The process can proceed from head to feet or feet to head. (Bhalla, 2007 &Dickson, 2012)

3. Visualization Technique

According to Greenberger and Padeskey (1995), Bhalla (2007) and Dickson (2012), the visualization technique of reducing anxiety involves visualizing images and physical scenes that are beautiful, calm and relaxing.

Practicing the above techniques every day for a few weeks will set up an automatic relaxation process that one can activate whenever one notice stress or anxiety starting (Bhalla, 2007)In National Open University of Nigeria, counsellors usually conduct workshops, clinics and seminars on how to deal with examination anxiety. During such workshops, issuespertaining to adequate preparation for examinations whichis the best way to minimize irrational anxiety are discussed.

Conclusion

It is also true that too much anxiety can interfere with exam performance by blocking students' recall or thinking abilities, by fostering negative frames of mind or even by promoting panic reactions. Students should therefore be assisted to manage their exam anxiety to a level that will aid their performance and not deter it. Practising the exam anxiety management techniques highlighted above in addition to other techniques will go a long way in helping students effectively manage exam anxiety and perform better in their examinations.

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Fidel O. Okopi, (Ph.D) and Joshua Pindar, (Ph.D)

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