Study Skills Tip of the Week
Do You Have Test Anxiety?

What is Test Anxiety?
Anxiety is a state of apprehension, uncertainty and fear which results from anticipating either a realistic or imagined threatening situation. Students who suffer from test anxiety report difficulties with concentration, mental blocks, and a variety of other physical symptoms which can occur before or during the test. These symptoms are the result of physiological changes that occur when a threat is perceived. Adrenaline floods the body and blood moves from the cerebrum (the intelligent part of the brain) to the cerebellum (the primitive part of the brain). Blood pressure goes up and the heart beats rapidly. This is called the “fight, flight or freeze system and is the reason that many test-anxious students report “mind blanking” during tests.

How to Reduce Test Anxiety
To reduce test anxiety, you need to address both the physical and mental states. Relaxation and breathing techniques help reduce both mental and muscular tension.

The relaxation response is any technique or procedure that helps you to become relaxed and will take the place of an anxiety response. Someone simply telling you to relax or even telling yourself to relax, without proper training, does little to reduce your test anxiety. There are both short-term and long-term relaxation response techniques which help control emotional (somatic) test anxiety. These techniques will also help reduce worry (cognitive) anxiety. They involve breathing and large and small muscle relaxation. Mediation relaxes the brain and helps dispel the negative thoughts so that you can focus on the tasks at hand. You must be calm and relaxed in order to control the ‘fight, flight or freeze” response. For more information and instruction in the short or long term relaxation response and the mental relaxation techniques, call for an appointment with ACCESS A+ 815 753-1126

Negative self-talk is a form of worry (cognitive) anxiety. This type of worrying can interfere with your test preparation and can keep you from concentrating on the test. Worrying can motivate you to study, but too much worrying may prevent you from studying at all. When confronted by difficulty, you often feel incompetent, which leads to a lack of confidence in your abilities. Rather than working hard to understand one concept at a time, test-anxious students worry about the entire course. Negative self-talk causes students to lose confidence and to give up. Negative self-talk can be difficult to recognize and control.
Overcoming Negative Self-Talk
Negative self-talk consists of irrational statements that must be recognized and changed. Keep track of your own negative self-talk. Write it down. Examine what you say to yourself and learn to substitute neutral statements.

Suppose a student thinks, “I’m never going to pass this test. I failed the last one and the same thing will happen again.” If a student has gotten help since the last test and has studied, failure is unlikely. The student is not giving himself/herself credit for working hard. A good rational statement to substitute might be, “I’ve worked hard since the last test. I’ve learned from my mistakes, and I know that I understand the material, so I have a good chance of doing well on this test.”

Be careful not to substitute overly positive statements such as “I know I’m going to make an A on this test.” Statements such as this can create a new threat and a new fear of failure. Substitute realistic, neutral statements and give yourself credit for what you have accomplished.

Overcoming Test Anxiety
Just being aware of your anxiety and negative self-talk is a good start. There are many other positive steps you can take to overcome the mental aspects of test anxiety.

- Remember that anxiety is a learned behavior, therefore, it can be unlearned.
- Acknowledge your feelings. Admit that you are anxious
- Stop yourself from thinking irrelevant thoughts or putting yourself down.
- Rework negative statements into neutral statements and think in positive terms. Think “I can” or “I want” instead of “what if.”
- Get instruction and practice relaxation and breathing techniques.
- Look at your study habits. Is there room for improvement?
- Ask for help with difficult material. Access has tutors available at three locations from 6-11, Sunday-Thursday nights. There is also one-on-one tutoring available. See www.tutoring.niu.edu for more information.
- Focus your attention away from yourself and toward the task at hand.

For more information about this and other study strategies call

ACCESS A+ Program
100 A Williston Hall (815) 753-1126
www.tutoring.niu.edu

Sources of Information:
Cuesta College Academic Support Center, San Luis Obispo, CA  http://academic.cuesta.edu/acasupp/as/704.htm
http://howtostudy.org
McNeely, Abigail, “Beating the Big Bad Wolf: Conquering Test Anxiety”, Austin Community College