



ELIXIR TO EXAMINATION STRESS AMONG STUDENT - STUDY SKILLS TRAINING AND SYSTEMATIC DESENSITIZATION

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Abstract

Examination stress is a ubiquitous phenomenon that has, in the present times, adversely affected the learning outcomes and performance of the students at all levels- primary, secondary or higher education. It's increasing intensity specifically among students appearing for high stakes board examination evokes a response from the teaching fraternity at the earliest. The reason being that a prolonged experience of stress with respect to evaluative situations is bound to prove detrimental to the mental, physical and emotional well-being of the students. For the nation to develop and progress towards a knowledge society, it is imperative that the students are taught to cope with stressful stimuli and improve performance. Study-Skills Training is an intervention intended to improve their study and test- taking habits and skills. It is based on a cognitive-deficit model which is directed towards improving a variety of cognitive activities that affect the organization, processing and retrieval of information and thereby help in reducing the experience of examination stress. Systematic desensitization as a process can be used to unlearn anxiety reactions by replacing the anxiety response with a calm, relaxed state. Thus, a combination of study-skills training and systematic desensitization has been shown to be effective and superior in alleviating test anxiety.



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Absolute Swaraj- self rule is feasible and can best be achieved when most of the parts of an organism enjoy good health, function efficiently and are in consonance with each other. India, as a nation as well as a society, to keep treading the path of progress and attain absolute swaraj must necessarily ensure the health of its youth- the major constituent of its populace. They hold the key to its future. The development of the nation depends much on the quality and robustness of its youth. The health of the youth, both physically and mentally, must be sound to make it swavlambi, samridh and surakshit. In contemporary times, it is being observed that the student community specifically the adolescent and young adult is found to be overpowered by the debilitating aspect of stress. Lazarus (1968) notes that 'stress suggests excessive demands made on man and animals, demands that produce disturbances of physiological, social and psychological systems'. Though some amount of stress is necessary to make individuals activate their response mechanisms and restore the state of equilibria yet

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its negative impact seems to be casting exceeding ill-effects on health and inhibiting the expression of their full potential. Since the population being referred to here, is in the educative process, the reflection of the adverse effect of stress can be observed in their academic performance.

There are many events and activities in the course of education that are found to affect students, cause serious physiological disturbances and thereby debilitate their mental health. One such event in the educational arena is that of tests, examinations and evaluative situations that has become a major factor in determining physiological disturbances, increasing anxiety and poor performance.

In the recent past the NCRB records attest to cases of suicides on account of increasing pressure of and failure in examinations. Thus, tests or examinations have emerged as one potent class of anxiety-evoking stimuli in our society. Sarason (1959) aptly remarks that “we live in a test-conscious, test-giving culture in which the lives of people are in part determined by their test performance”. Testing is widely used in education, and by the industrial, government and military sectors to help make decisions about people. These tests and other assessment data provide objective and reliable information that directly affects the choices made in the process of vocational guidance and counseling, selection, classification and placement and screening and diagnosis- all of which help shape an individual’s upbringing, school and career. Thus it is no surprise that evaluative situations evoke anxiety reactions in many individuals.

The phenomenon of examination stress has led many test-anxious subjects to experience pain, suffering and misery before, during and after major evaluative events. Many a times the stress causing demands from the environment have made the students experience difficulty in comprehending relatively simple instructions, difficulty in organizing or recalling relevant information during the examination and even facing memory failures. Such anxious students also express concern about the consequences of not performing at a satisfactory level on major exams and embarrassment at probable failure (Sarason & Sarason, 1990). More so, test-anxious college students report suffering from poor mental health and psychosomatic symptoms. Research suggests anxiety and stress in exams may affect both hormonal activity and immune-competence among examinees. In addition to its cognitive and affective manifestations, examination stress may also be expressed in a variety of overt behaviors such as deficient study skills, procrastination, avoidance behaviors and cautiousness in responding.

At this juncture it becomes imperative that the students be taught to handle and manage stress related to exams. If they continue to reel under such pressures they will not be able to develop and hone their latent skills and talents and realize their full potential. In such a case the society stands at a loss of the full contribution of potentially capable students through anxiety-related underachievement or academic failure.

Thus examination stress appears an ubiquitous phenomenon that has, in the present times, adversely affected the learning outcomes and performance of the students at all levels- primary, secondary or higher education. Its increasing intensity specifically among students appearing for high stakes board examination evokes a response from the teaching fraternity at the earliest. The reason being that a prolonged experience of stress with respect to evaluative situations is bound to prove detrimental to the mental, physical and emotional well-being of the students. For the nation to develop and progress towards a knowledge society, it is imperative that the students are taught to cope with stressful stimuli and improve performance.

Researchers have identified high-test-anxious students on the basis of the differing levels of their study and exam-taking skills (Benjamin et al., 1981; Naveh-Benjamin, McKeachie, & Lin, 1987; Paulman & Kennelly, 1984). One type of test-anxious student is characterized by a major deficiency in study and test taking skills. Their poor exam performance results from skills deficits that include problems in acquisition (encoding), organization/rehearsal (study skills), and retrieval/application during a test. These students experience anxiousness during evaluative situations because they recognize that they possess few organizational strategies to help them perform well on exams and that they are less well prepared owing to their inefficient study skills. According to Paulman & Kennelly (1984) such students tend to do poorly in both non-evaluative as well as in evaluative situations because they do not encode and organize the material well in the first place. To manage their stress levels related to examinations they can be taught the following techniques:-

Study-Skills Training

Study-Skills Training is an intervention intended to improve their study and test-taking habits and skills. It is based on a cognitive-deficit model which is directed towards improving a variety of cognitive activities that affect the organization, processing and retrieval of information and thereby help in reducing the experience of examination stress. Study-skills training programs focus on the following two related treatment:-

(a) Study-skills training is designed to teach students how to study, in general, and prepare for tests, in particular. Its procedures aim at helping students to structure their study time more efficiently and become more proficient in encoding, organizing, processing and storing information so that it can be retrieved more effectively and communicated clearly under test conditions. Some common elements in study-skills counseling programs include study planning and time management techniques, monitoring study behaviors, enhancing reading and summarizing skills, acquiring techniques useful for studying for the exam, and learning how to use response management techniques (Allen, 1973).

(b) Test-taking-skills training is designed to impart techniques that help students comprehend test questions and follow test instructions so that the appropriate information can be retrieved, organized and clearly communicated. Emphasis should be laid on understanding deeper levels of processing material, rather than rote memorization. Robinson's (1979) popular SQ3R (= Survey, Question, Read, Recite and review method is an effective method of improving study and test taking skills.

Systematic desensitization

Systematic desensitization as a process can be used to unlearn anxiety reactions by replacing the anxiety response with a calm, relaxed state. The test-anxious client is typically trained in a deep muscle relaxation procedure and while relaxed instructed to visualize an ordered series of increasingly stressful test related scenes. Through repeated pairings of imaginal representations of threatening evaluative situations with deep relaxation, the bond between the threatening evaluative scenes and anxiety is expected to be weakened.

Thus, a combination of study-skills training and systematic desensitization has been shown to be effective and superior in alleviating test anxiety.

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