Enhancing Academic Performance
Through Refocusing Attention to Increase Concentration

Awareness - Identify Your Cues that Tell You to Initiate Coping

a. **Emotionality: Become aware of Bodily Tension** - Feeling overly upset, jittery, nervous, tense, heart pounding, stomach cramps, fatigue, shallow breathing, panicky, knees bouncing, hands sweaty or shaking, lump in throat, eyebrows knit tightly, shoulders hunched.

b. **Worry: Become aware of Negative Self Talk** - Worrying about your performance, comparing yourself to others, ruminating too long and fruitlessly over alternate answers or responses, being preoccupied with bodily reactions associated with anxiety, ruminating about possible consequences for doing poorly on the test (disapproval, punishment, loss of status or esteem, damage to career plans), thoughts or feelings of inadequacy (active self criticism or labeling self "stupid" or "worthless").

Coping Through Breathing and Mindfulness

a. **Mindful, Relaxing Breaths** - long and slow, begin by exhaling fully and "breathing out" through areas of tension... feel tension melting away... feel more and more relaxed... gently inhale allowing your abdomen to rise, not your chest. This is diaphragmatic breathing, aka, “belly breathing.”

b. **Say to Yourself** - (abdomen rises as you inhale) "I am calm..." (abdomen falls as you exhale) "I am warm..." Imagining increasing the feeling of warmth in your hands actually initiates the relaxation response and increased mindfulness.

Coping through Refocusing Attention (TIC-TOC)

**Strategy 1: Increase Your Focusing Skill** - Train your mind to hold your attention to a word or task. When your attention wanders, gently bring your attention back. These techniques are similar to those taught in Raja yoga meditation or Benson's Relaxation Response.

**Strategy 2: Develop Performance Rituals** - Create a physical and mental atmosphere that helps you to concentrate, and use it every time you study, write a paper, or take a test. These rituals are designed to cue both the body and the mind to initiate focused concentration.

**Strategy 3: Notice Anxiety Thoughts** - When you notice "Task Interfering Cognitions," use a trigger word to help you to notice your thoughts, such as or "TIC-TOC". Be kind and gentle with yourself as you just notice them.

**Strategy 4: Use Coping Self Talk to Gently Refocus Attention and Increase Concentration** - Practice using short phrases that focus on positives rather than negatives, the present moment rather than the past or future, and the process rather than the outcome. These are called "Task Orienting Cognitions." Write your phrases on cards to pull out and use while studying or writing. *See examples, next page.*
Examples of Coping Self Talk To Refocus Concentration

Refocus Concentration Back to the Task or Exam

You can learn to bring your concentration back onto the task or exam by monitoring your self talk. Practice using short phrases that focus on positives rather than negatives, the present rather than the past or future, and the process rather than the outcome. These are called "Task Orienting Cognitions."

Adapt the phrases below and write them on cards to pull out and use while studying or writing. Use them frequently so that they easily come to mind when you are working on a test or a task.

What is it that I have to do?
Focus on the task; exactly what does the question ask? It doesn't say this...or this...it just asks...
Just think about what I can do about it. That's better than getting anxious.
Don't look for tricks, just what does it say?
What's the basic question, what’s the main point?
I'm getting lost in detail; stand back and look at the big picture.
That's a stupid question.... O.K. Maybe I just don't get the point. Let me do a quick job on it and invest my energy where it will pay off more.
Now let's see, what does it say exactly...no need to interpret or add anything - just exactly what does it say?
Damn, I should know that .... oh! TIC-TOC. Just let it go now, no need to get upset. I'll mark the question so I can come back to it later for a fresh look at it -- that often works.
Well here it comes, just as I expected; I'm feeling anxious. Just take a moment now to breathe deep and slow...I am calm...I am warm...good.
A little anxiety is good...just keep it manageable.
Uh oh! Lots more to do before I finish... oh, TIC-TOC! Now, relax... just take one question at a time.
They finished the exam early! I wonder... O.K. TIC-TOC. There's no way I can know what's going on with them. Forget them and just focus back on what I'm doing.
I'm not going to be able to do it! I'm going to lose control! Hmm, TIC-TOC. Oh, yep, my mind is doing what it typically does. Now, take a deep breath, refocus... now, what does this next question say?
It's working. I changing my attention and I’m refocusing. Good!


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