

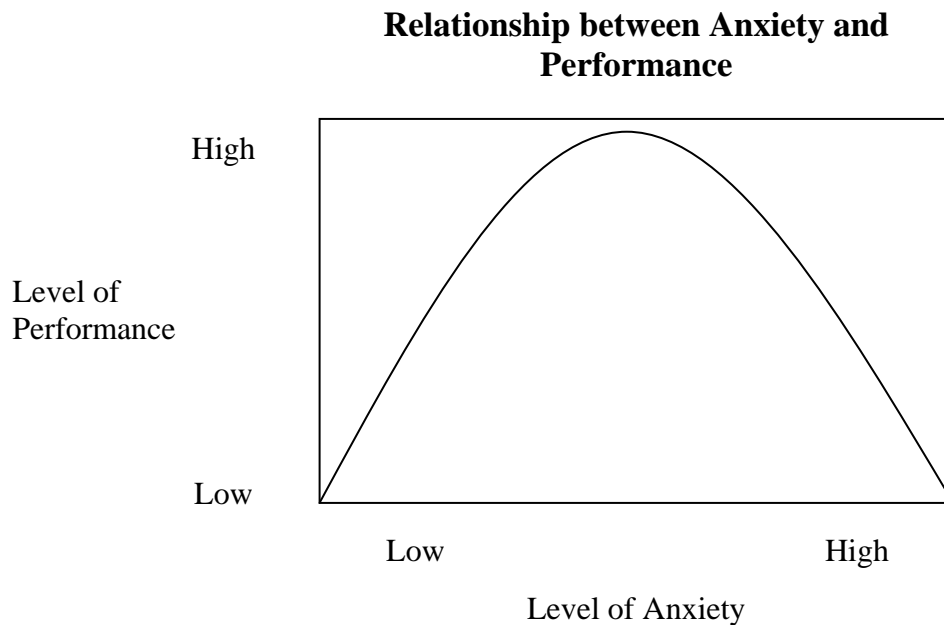
Understanding Academic Anxiety

I. What is anxiety?

Anxiety is your body's way of telling you that there is something in the environment in need of your attention. It is basically a series of biochemical changes in your brain and body, such as an increase in adrenaline (causing your heart to beat faster) and a decrease in dopamine (a brain chemical that helps to block pain). These changes result in a state of heightened attention to the source of the anxiety. High levels of anxiety cause your body to prepare to fight or run away from the perceived threat - commonly called the "fight-or-flight response."

II. How does anxiety affect academic performance?

Anxiety is not a bad thing. It is true that a high level of anxiety interferes with concentration and memory, which are critical for academic success. Without any anxiety, however, most of us would lack the motivation to study for exams, write papers, or do daily homework (especially in classes we find boring). A moderate amount of anxiety actually helps academic performance by creating motivation. The graph below illustrates the relationship between anxiety and performance.



III. What can I do to reduce my anxiety?

Academic anxiety has four components – worry, emotionality, task-generated interference, and study skills deficits. The method of reducing your anxiety depends upon which of these you are experiencing. Read the following descriptions and identify which of these are causing you problems:

- 1. Worry:** Thoughts that prevent you from focusing on and successfully completing academic work. For example, predictions of failure, self-degrading thoughts, or preoccupation with the consequences of doing poorly. Some effective techniques for managing this component include: using positive mental imagery, disputing negative and self-defeating thoughts with more productive, realistic thoughts, and self-hypnosis.
- 2. Emotionality:** Biological symptoms of anxiety. For example, fast heart-beat, sweaty palms, muscle tension. The most effective strategies for dealing with emotionality are muscle and breathing relaxation exercises.
- 3. Task-generated interference:** Behaviors related to the task at hand, but which are unproductive and prevent successful performance. For example, constantly checking the clock during an exam, or spending a lot of time on a test question you cannot answer. Since these behaviors can take on many forms, the best management technique is to work with a study skills instructor or a counselor to identify the specific behaviors that cause problems and create a plan to reduce or change them.
- 4. Study skills deficits:** Problems with your current study methods which create anxiety. For example, last-minute cramming resulting in not knowing answers to test questions or poor note-taking during lecture resulting in confusion about a major assignment. Many students experience the first three components of academic anxiety as a result of study skills deficits. If this is the case, then your grades will not improve unless study skills are addressed. A study skills instructor can help you with this.

IV. What if my anxiety level is too low?

This may seem like a strange question, but if your anxiety level is too low you may be experiencing the same low level of academic performance as a student with an excessively high anxiety level (see the graph on the previous page). If you find yourself falling weeks behind on your homework, spending little or no time preparing for exams, and failing to turn in assignments, while not feeling particularly motivated to change, you may be suffering from too little anxiety. If this is the case, the best strategy is to figure out how your performance on daily coursework is related to the goals you have that you care the most about. One useful method for doing this is seeking career counseling.