Here We Are Again!

By Greg Fields, M.S.

Here we are again! As the semester quickly draws to a close, I want to offer some thoughts on what we all know is coming, ANXIETY. You may think this is common sense stuff. After all, you have been here before, right? Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning for couple of reasons. One, you may not have been here before. This might be your first tangle with tests and paper deadlines. Not always fun! Two, you may have forgotten how easy it is to forget coping skills once the stress meter goes into the red. Notice I did not express an uncertainty about whether anxiety will come. It will! Whatever the case, you need to deal with anxiety in effective ways.

First, remember that anxiety is not all bad. Healthy anxiety prepares you to face challenges. A few butterflies and a bump in heart rate puts you in a state of vigilance. It evokes a sense of urgency so that you can focus attention on the task at hand. Use this to your advantage by picturing anxiety as a friend that pushes you to give it everything you have.

Two, remember to just breathe. This one is for those of you who think that the first suggestion is not realistic. In fact, for you, anxiety may have never been a “friend”; more like a 300 lbs. wrestler who likes to throw you around the ring! Maybe not that bad but still bad. If that is you, just breathe; no Yoga mats required. Simply sit in a chair, hands in your lap, and feet on the floor. Take a few deep breaths in through your nose and out through your mouth. Now, just begin to breathe normally. Focus your attention on the breath without controlling it. Just let yourself be aware of the in and out rhythm for a few minutes. What does this do? The key here is focused attention. Focusing your attention in this way activates the “Upstairs Brain” (Cortex). You need this because it inhibits the activity of the “Downstairs Brain” (Limbic region), which is where fear comes from.

Third, remember to describe it. If the breathing awareness exercise is not comfortable, you just describe it. The same brain principle applies here. Instead of avoiding the anxiety, focus attention on it. Let yourself become aware of where you feel the anxiety in your body. Try to notice all the sensations that come with it. Now, begin to describe the quality of the feeling. Give it a color, size, texture, and weight. Notice whether it remains still or moves around. If you can think of other qualities, name those too. Again, using words (Upstairs Brain) to describe the anxiety (Downstairs Brain) integrates brain function so that you can regulate overwhelming emotional arousal.

There you have it. Three easy ways to work through and with anxiety. Use it up. Breathe it out. Talk it down.