

## **The “Final” Word**

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Final exam week is almost upon us with the tests, papers, presentations, and final projects that invite so much stress and anxiety. “Oh, if only we could skip the tests and other end-of-the-term tasks” moan many a student. My plan here is two fold: (a) to suggest some ways to reduce the anxiety and stress so common at term’s end and (b) to suggest a changed mindset on these final week tasks.

Controlled, moderate anxiety is actually good for you! A little ‘edge’ is a sign that one is aware of the importance of semester ending tasks. To be totally devoid of stress at this time would be symptoms of apathy, overconfidence, resignation, and/or unawareness of impending important events. This is not a desirable situation. Stress, however, should not come in doses large enough or lasting so long as to induce illness, sleeplessness, loss of appetite, headache, severe mood changes, helplessness, or depression. All these symptoms can be induced by several of the following behaviors.

Dietary misbehaviors that can induce and increase the amount of and the duration of stress include: (a) the consumption of large quantities of caffeine. Caffeine does hype the metabolism; however, it has a downside. Mental agility, information retrieval, and fine tuned decision-making are suppressed. Caffeine messes up the optimum sleep cycle; (b) the consumption of alcohol also is detrimental to preparing for final week duties; alcohol consumption also wrecks havoc on the sleep cycle and depressed mental function; (c) consuming lots of sugar before, between, and during exams [or other tasks] can cause havoc. While sugar – for most people – can give an energy boost, it also boomerangs with a down side that might, for some metabolisms, occur at the end of a test or at the onset of the next task. These downs can be devastating for energy depletion and loss of mental agility; and (d) eating too much food or “junk food” prior to tests, presentations, etc. can induce fatigue and reduce the mental energy needed for peak performance. Being overly hungry, too, can be detrimental to peak mental energy. Eat moderately, consume a balanced diet, and avoid stimulants and alcohol so as to optimize your physical and mental abilities needed for greatest achievement on your end of the term tasks.

Other habits that likely will enhance your opportunities for greater success during finals week include: (a) get a full night of sleep; “all nighters” rarely produce more advantages than disadvantages. Rather than depriving yourself of sleep, go to bed early and arise early for that “last minute review.” The

body has multiple “clocks” that, if scrambled too severely, cause and contribute to stressors. These “clocks” are called your circadian rhythm.” Energy levels, stamina, agility, mood, and memory can be adversely affected by suddenly and artificially adjusting your internal clocks. (b) Study in measured periods of time rather than in overly extended stretches. When you give your mind and body opportunities to refresh themselves, you enhance sustaining energy levels and allow memory to sink in and make those wondrous “connections” that we need to do well. Laboriously long study sessions drain the physical and mental batteries and do not allow the memories recently gained to connect with those already there. All night sessions and overly extended work often push established memories away from consciousness and restrict retrieval and connectivity with recent memories losing you much more than whatever recent gains might have accrued from extended study sessions; (c) Exercise regularly; exercise helps keep body rhythms in synch; reduces stress; facilitates better sleep; helps with digestion, circulation, and ridding the body of waste; and aids in peaking mental function. Your whole body needs to be in its best condition to excel in the rigors of finals week.

End of the term tests, presentations, and related activities are designed not as torture, but as opportunities to showcase knowledge and skill acquisition. Of course, for such knowledge and skills to be showcased, they must have been acquired. If you have not worked hard at acquiring, refining, and sharpening what you know and what you can do, final tasks are likely to be torturous. You cannot acquire knowledge or refine skills offered over 15 weeks in a few days or hours; it requires consistent dedication and effort over the duration of the term.

Final exams, presentations, and projects not only inform instructors how well you have mastered classes; they also validate for students how well they have done. Tests and the like are reinforcers, refinements, and validators of what was done in earlier weeks/terms. University study is not exclusively the consumption of information, the acquiring of skills, and the completion of tasks; it is the ability and the willingness to **perform using** what was learned. If we are unable to put what we have learned to use at a competent level, what good was the process? Assignment grades are external measures and are used as comparison data to measure how we did in relation to others and/or in comparison to some external standard. Performance is our own internal measure of how well we can do. Performance instills pride, confidence, and inspiration to go forward to greater heights.

I hope all students will take suggestions for better performance to heart and have worked hard enough this semester to portend superior grades and prideful performances.