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INTRODUCTION

You might have figured out by now that just reviewing your notes and studying the exam material might not prove to be enough for you to pass the medical coding certification exam.

As the cost of the exam has increased and the amount of information you must learn has grown, so has the importance of knowing how to prepare for and take the certification exam.

The biggest hurdle for most people is overcoming the stress and anxiety about taking the exam. This was the overriding feedback we received from hundreds of exam takers. The one question we got the most is “how can I reduce exam stress and anxiety”?

Being stressed out over taking an exam is not something new. Since elementary school the thought of taking an exam has stress out just about everyone. Have you ever heard or used the phrase “I just don’t test well”? That is “code” for “I am so stressed out I can’t think straight”!

From the smallest quiz to year end finals, we have all been there at one time or another. YOU ARE NOT ALONE!

Learning how to manage stress begins with learning what stress is, what causes it, and how to create an environment to reduce and control it.

This guide will review simple ways to reduce exam stress and anxiety. We recommend using this guide along with The Exam Strategy and several practice exams to get the best results.
WHAT IS STRESS

Stress is a normal physical response to events that make you feel threatened or upset your balance in some way, such as situations beyond your control.

When you sense danger or events beyond your control the body’s defenses kick into high gear.

This can be a good thing during an emergency or other event but can also be a bad thing when you are trying to concentrate or think clearly for long periods of time such as during a five hour and forty minute certification exam.

What Causes Stress and Anxiety

Stress is caused by the fear, plain and simple. The fear of the unknown. The fear of failing. The fear of being unprepared. The fear of loss.

Anything that is beyond our control can cause fear or the sense of danger and this causes the body to release stress hormones, thus increasing your stress and anxiety level.

There are other factors that cause stress including family, income, job, and other factors but the main focus of this report is stress directly related to preparing for and taking an exam.

What Are The Side Effects Of Stress
When stress is not controlled it can cause a significant amount of problems for people taking an exam. You have likely already experienced some of the side effects of stress including:

- Memory Problems
- Lack of Concentration
- Poor Judgement
- Negative Thoughts

All of these side effects will hurt your exam preparation or performance. As a matter of fact, in some cases they cause people to “lock up” and have difficulty even taking an exam.

So how can you control or minimize the effects of stress and even make it work for you?

**Learn to Relax**

Learning how to relax can reduce stress dramatically. There are different techniques to help you relax and each have their own set of benefits.

**Slow Breathing**

Slow breathing is the easiest method to quickly relax and reduce stress. Take a deep breath and exhale slowly. Repeat this several times until your muscles are totally relaxed and your heart rate slows.

If you have ever watched a sporting event you have seen top athletes using this method to slow their heart rate, reduce adrenaline flow, and relax their muscles. This helps them think more clearly, react more rapidly, and perform at a higher level. This is exactly what you want to do.

Use this method before studying and prior to and during the exam itself! This should be your safety net when you start to feel anxious or stressed out.
People think meditation is something complex. It isn’t. It is simply the process of relaxing your mind and body.

Set aside ten minutes prior to study time and ten minutes prior to taking the exam to meditate. It will help you relax and open your mind for better memory retention and recall.

Follow these simple steps to enjoy a deeper sense of relaxation.

• Sit in a relaxed position.
• Close your eyes.
• Rest your hands, palms up, on your lap.
• Breathe slowly and slightly deeper than normal.
• Concentrate on your breath coming in and going out.
• Quiet your mind. If you are thinking of something try to release the thought and concentrate on breathing again.
As you become relaxed repeat a calming word or phrase such as “I feel calm” or “I can achieve”, or even “I am the best”.

After ten minutes open your eyes slowly.

This should thoroughly relax you and give you positive thoughts and energy. Now your mind is free to accept new information when studying and ready to recall learned information more rapidly during the exam.
One of the most important actions you can take to reduce stress and anxiety is set up a study routine.

By setting up a regular study routine you remove the stress of trying to find time everyday to study. Schedule the time in advance. Commit to it and stick to it.

You know what time you have to go to work everyday, so why not know what time you are going to study everyday?

A good study routine should consist of study time every day. This will give you time to absorb the information when you are alert and can concentrate fully.

It should not consist of hours upon hours of study time in one day and then no study time for several days. This will wear you down and reduce your ability to retain and recall information.

The best time to lay out a schedule is about a month to forty five days prior to the certification exam. This will give you enough time to review all the material in a timely manner without cramming it all in at the last minute.

The ideal daily study time is an hour to two hours per day maximum! This will ultimately depend on your work, home, or family schedule of course but try to arrange something close to this if possible.

If you schedule four to five hours or more in one day you are most likely defeating the purpose and wasting your time as your retention will start to decrease in hours three and beyond.
This is specially true if you have a family that requires your time. Scheduling three or more hours per day will add MORE stress to your life and reduce your sleeping time.

Either way this is exactly what you want to avoid at all costs!

Scheduling time each day keeps you mentally fresh and absorbing good information PLUS it keeps your family happy too!
Whenever possible try to study with a partner. Each of you bring a different perspective to the learning process. This is a good way to retain new information because you are more focused on the task at hand.

Plus, when you commit to study with a partner the chances that you will actually study increase.

It is kind of like working out. It is hard to get motivated to workout daily. That is just a fact.

When you commit to meet a friend to workout it is much easier to keep your routine. And the company never hurts. You both motivate each other to do more than you would alone.

The more you feel that you are not “in this alone” the more relaxed and confident you will be.

**Note: IMPORTANT**** Study with a positive minded person. Don’t get stuck listening to negative people and their excuses why they can’t do this or that. These people are always looking to drag people “down to their level” and are always reluctant to change.

If you arrange to study with a buddy and the person starts being negative... get out now! Don’t waist your time trying to bring them up.... it won’t work! Stay positive and spend your time studying... not counseling. Leave that to the professionals.
DEVELOP YOUR CONCENTRATION

Concentration is described as “intense mental application; complete attention”.

Your ability to concentrate is vital to your exam success. The more you concentrate on the subject matter the better you will retain and recall the information when the time comes.

When you concentrate on the material it allows less time to worry about other “stressors” or to give time for negative thoughts to enter in.

Training your mind to concentrate on the task at hand keeps positive thoughts flowing and blocks out negative thoughts.

Some of the benefits of developing your concentration included:

- Peace of mind
- Self confidence
- Inner strength
- Ability to focus your mind
- Increased memory
- Ability to study and comprehend more quickly

Here are some exercises to help you develop your concentration.
1) Select one thought and concentrate on it for ten minutes. This will be difficult at first but the more you do it the easier it will be to block out all other thoughts and concentrate on the one thought you have chosen.

2) Count the words in a paragraph. Count them again to ensure accuracy. Once you have completed this, count several paragraphs and then an entire page.

3) Take an object such as a spoon, fork, or anything out of a drawer. Try to concentrate on the object without mentally describing the object in words. Just focus on the object from all directions.

4) Draw a circle and color it in with any color. Now focus on the object and try not to think of any words, just focus on the object for several minutes.

5) Lie down and relax all your muscles. Once you are completely relaxed concentrated on your heartbeat and imagine your blood flowing through your body. After several minutes you should be able to feel the blood moving through your veins.

6) Watch the second hand on a clock. Focus just on the second hand and nothing else. Do this for two to three minutes and fight off the urge to let any other thoughts interfere with your concentration.

7) Close your eyes and visualize the number one. Say the number “one” in your head once you visualize it clearly. Now let it go and focus on the number two and repeat the process up to ten.

8) Take a coin out of your pocket. Relax every muscle in your body and concentrate on the coin and only the coin. View everything about it, its shape, color, material makeup nicks, words. Now close your eyes and
visualize the coin in full detail. If you can not visualize the coin in full detail
open your eyes and try again.

9) Sit in a chair and relax. Focus on a spot on the wall and release all other
thoughts from your mind. Now while looking at the spot on the wall focus
on your breathing. Breath in and out slowly. Do this for several minutes.

10) Read an article in the newspaper. Capture the essentials of the article.
Now describe the article in as few words as possible to a friend or just
aloud to yourself.

Learning to concentrate fully on the task at hand is difficult but the benefits
are enormous. It is easy to let your mind wander off and loose your thought
process during a lengthy exam. The greater your concentration the better
your exam score. This is critical, specially in the later hours of the exam when
it is easy to get distracted because you begin to get tired. This is when this
training will pay off. Many people do not even complete the exam. You *will*
because you stayed focused all the way through.

*Note: IMPORTANT**** These exercises are not for everyone,
however, they are a valuable tool when learning to increase your
concentration and mental focus.*

Try to do the exercises every other day. You will notice an increase in your
information retention and recall. Plus this will help you study more
efficiently and effectively!
POWER OF POSITIVE THINKING

Positive thinking can reduce stress, improve your overall health, and make you much more fun to be around.

Are you a “glass half full” or “glass half empty” person? Answering this questions is a good way to find out if you are an optimist or a pessimist.

If you always see the good side of things (glass half full) then you are an optimist. If not, then you are a pessimist.

Why is this important? Well, the mind is always thinking and creating “self-talk”. Self-talk is the endless stream of thoughts that run through your head.

Self-talk is based on information, reason, logic, and prior experience. Self-talk also comes from misconceptions created because of misinformation or lack of information. This can be negative or positive, depending on your outlook.

For example, if someone asked you to jump over a hurdle and you’ve never jumped a hurdle before, your mind would tell you either “you can do this” or “no way you can do this”. This is commonly referred to as self-talk.

Your mind begins to “set limits” based on self-talk. Learning to channel this in a positive direction it can help you achieve more than you ever imagined.

Although it is unclear exactly why positive thinkers experience health benefits, one of the theories is it helps them deal with stressful situations better. They are thinking of the best outcome, not the worst outcome, and this creates less anxiety and stress. This is better for the mind and the body.
In the end, the mind will do what you train it to do. For example, do you ever catch yourself saying subconsciously that you can't do something? Of course you have. We all have. That is because we haven't trained our minds to accept the challenge of the task we want to perform.

It is our job to change the way we think. Think positive thoughts. “I CAN do this”. “I am the best”. “I will pass the exam”. Train your mind to think positively and this will reduce your stress level and give you a confident feeling going into the exam.

Do not let others, or your surroundings, dictate your mental state of mind. YOU have the ultimate control and YOU control whether you think positive or negative thoughts.
BUILDING CONFIDENCE

Confidence shows in everything you do. From how you look at life to how you treat others. Confident people are people who take action. The “doers” in the world.

Confidence also effects how you take the exam. If you are confident in your ability to pass the exam it lowers your stress level and opens your mind for clearer thinking.

“One important key to success is self-confidence. An important key to self-confidence is preparation.”
Arthur Ashe

Confidence is developed through a series of “wins” or “achievements”. It is developed through facing your fears and overcoming them. This gives you strength and confidence in your ability to overcome. The more you overcome, the more confident you become.

So how do you build confidence in your ability to pass the certification exam? Simple.... preparation! Face your fears head on and prepare every day until you know you are going to pass!

Take a practice exam over and over and over again. Get your timing right and follow the Exam Strategy tips to build your confidence. There is no substitute for hard work and hard work builds confidence.

“You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you stop to look fear in the face. You are able to say to yourself, ‘I have lived through this horror. I can take the next thing that comes along.’ You must do the thing you think you cannot do.”
Eleanor Roosevelt
SLEEP AND NUTRITION

The final piece of the puzzle to reducing stress is proper sleep and nutrition. Your body and mind can only function at its highest level if you give it proper rest and proper nutrition (fuel).

Your body and mind needs time to rest and good food to perform. This is very easy to overlook and many times it is the first thing you sacrifice when you are preparing for an exam.

Once you think about it you can see why these are essential ingredients to successful exam preparation.

Sleep

Why is sleep so important? Because it is the only time our body has a chance to recharge.

You should get at least six hours of sleep each night so your body and mind are fresh and ready to go the next morning.

Stress can impact sleep patterns to the point that is unhealthy. To get a better nights sleep try these simple tips to reduce stress and rest up.

1) List problems bothering you with possible solutions before bed.

2) Put work into perspective. When work is over, leave it. Turn it off.

3) Designate cell free time. Even if it is only a half hour or during dinner.
4) Never check work email before bed.

5) Try to simplify one thing each day.

6) Grab a nap if you can. Sleep reduces stress hormones.


8) Pets can significantly lower your heart rate and blood pressure.


10) Take a fifteen minute walk. Exercise is the BEST stress reliever!

**Nutrition**

Proper nutrition to reduce stress you say? Yes, it’s true!

Proper nutrition plays a key role in our body’s performance and ability to rest.

There is plenty of information about the ties between nutrition and sleep.

One of my favorite articles is called “Sleep Deeper With Better Nutrition”.

It covers a mound of information about protein super foods and herbs that will help you get a better night sleep naturally.

I prefer this over prescription drugs or other methods because it is natural and enhances the body’s ability to rest.
GETTING HELP

Is there a certain section of material that is just not making sense or sinking in? GET HELP! Don’t wait or, worse yet, be too shy to ask for help. Search out help as fast as you can. Now is not the time to be shy or hesitate to ask for assistance.

Most teachers or instructors are more than willing to give you a helping hand. That is their profession and most of them generally love to help people. Take advantage of their help if you need it.

REMEMBER, YOU ARE NOT IN THIS ALONE!

Reaching out for help and getting it will give you a feeling of accomplishment and confidence. That confidence will be your friend and something you want to continually build upon as you ready yourself for the exam.
SUMMARY

Stress is caused by the fear. Plain and simple. The fear of the unknown. The fear of failing. The fear of being unprepared. The fear of loss.

Anything that is out of our control can cause fear or the sense of danger and this causes stress.

Stress, when it is not controlled, can cause a significant amount of problems that can be counter productive to exam preparation and taking.

Some of the symptoms, or side effects of stress include:

• Memory Problems

• Lack of Concentration

• Poor Judgement

• Negative Thoughts

Learning how to relax can reduce stress dramatically. There are different techniques to help you relax and each have their own set of benefits including slow breathing, meditation, building a study routine, studying with a buddy, positive thinking, building confidence, and eating right and getting plenty of sleep.

There are several key areas that will help you reduce stress and anxiety.

The easiest and arguably the most important. It is the development of a study routine.

A good study routine should consist of study time every day. This will give you time to absorb the information when you are alert and can concentrate fully.
It is not always possible to study with a partner, but whenever possible try to do so. Each of you will bring a different perspective to the learning process and this can be a good way to retain new information.

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