Academic Coping Strategies

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Each student at this university has developed his own personal way of coping with the pressures of academic life. As each individual differs, so does each coping strategy. While some blatantly admit they “study like crazy,” others shrug and claim they “never pick up a book.” Yet, as the members of a slightly unnerved class assemble to take an exam, they will unanimously agree: “The Test is the number one campus fear.”

Coping strategies are manifested in each student’s study habits. Since studying remains the best way to prepare for an upcoming exam, students develop certain well-defined patterns that can be stereotyped into categories that fit the personality type.

Greta Greek, the dedicated and popular sorority member, uses her tendency to procrastinate and fantasize as a method of avoiding study. She eagerly chose her sociology major because she “loves life and people” and because her older sister saved all her notes for Greta to salvage.

Greta always manages to postpone her studying until about ten o’clock the night before the exam. She can be found in Rice Hall lobby doodling her sorority’s Greek insignia on the margins of her spiral-bound notebook emblazoned with a ferocious image of her favorite mascot, dear ol’ Leo.

She absentmindedly twirls a conditioned lock of her Farrah Fawcett cut as she makes a mental note to rid herself of those dreaded split ends by investing in an expert trim soon. Her mind wanders to visions of last night’s escapades at The Line with her favorite brauny fraternity member, the one with the John Travolta blue eyes and Bruce Jenner muscles.

After several hours of irregular concentration, Greta stumbles to her room, tugs on her powder blue baby-doll pajamas, and crawls onto her bed strewn with stuffed animals. She ponders the cruelty of unreasonable professors who have imposed impossible academic standards that infringe upon her right to an adequate social life and force her to forfeit the much needed time that could have been used to practice for the upcoming Lionette tryouts.

As she drifts into sleep, she consoles herself with the rationalization that a whole night’s study is a true sacrifice. If she fails the test now, it surely cannot be her fault!

Larry Laborer is the student who is working his way through college. His determination and ambition remain steadfast, but he often experiences bouts with discouragement.

Larry can be seen wiping the counter at Pasquale’s for the hundredth time. As he grudgingly glances at a couple romantically exchanging torrid looks over their pepperoni pizza, he fumbles ruefully through his greasy notes kept just under the counter.

He sometimes wonders if it is worth it all. With eighteen hours of school per week, forty hours of work, and rising tuition rates, he seems destined to remain on “BEORG Row” forever. Girls, beer parties, and sleeping late are remote pleasures enjoyed only by other dorm-dwellers who have undoubtedly been born with silver spoons in their mouths.

Struggling hard to maintain a “C”, Larry needs a good test grade to bolster his lagging average before the final exam. He pores over each abstract theory and longs to get his hands around Carl Jung’s throat.

As the last customer files out and the manager announces that it is closing time, Larry remembers he has forgotten to eat supper again. Convinced that he must look like an anorexia nervosa victim, he climbs into his delapidated car and floorboards it to Rivers.

Several hours later Larry closes his notes that reek of Parmesan cheese and falls into his squeaking bunk. If he does not know the damn stuff by now, it is just too bad.

Dora Domestic possesses a sense of perpetual insecurity. She has rather shakily vowed to strike her blow for women’s lib and pursue a college career started fifteen years ago.

Gnawing fear envelops her while she wheels through supermarket aisles, waits to pick her children up at school, and warns up last night’s Hamburger Helper. Dora tucks her children in bed, leaves her husband snoozing under the intellectual weight of the evening paper, and begins to study after putting the final load of clothes into the washer. She had not intended to wash until her children complained of having to “stand” their jeans in the closet.
and her husband revealed that his secretary, while eyeing his shirt, subtly mentioned the name of a laundry that specialized in removal of problem stains.

Four hours, five cups of coffee, and one bag of chocolate chip cookies later, she closes her worn notebook to use as a convenient pillow. As she nears slumber, she harbors a fragile sense of contentment. If the test is multiple choice or matching, she can surely ace it. If not, she can console herself with the realization that her husband’s paycheck is sufficient to support the family. She cherishes a bit of cowardly security in knowing she can retreat to the familiar world of “Hollywood Squares” and “All My Children.”

Vinnie Veteran views college as an exhilarating yet frightening experience. Even the terrors of war cannot compare with the traumas each exam affords. A roomful of adolescents fresh out of high school makes him uncomfortable, and now Vinnie is certain they will all score higher than he will. Being out of school so long is a definite disadvantage as far as he is concerned.

After playing the cassette recording of his notes for the fifth time, he notices the annoyed stares of his family members. (Freud is no match for the Incredible Hulk.) He moves to the kitchen, helps himself to a cold beer, and wonders if his veteran’s benefits are worth the hassle.

With the familiar military determination returning, he rewinds the recorder and vows to show everyone who is “calling the shots.” He recites the notes to himself in the same drab monotone his professor uses. As he lies in bed, he makes a final attempt to psych himself up for the scholastic combat in the offing.

Sally Scholar, the envy of her classmates, braces her frayed nerves for yet another night of study. She trudges to one of LaFayette Hall’s mucky brown chairs that bears the imprint of her now pleated posterior.

Although she has been recopying and reciting notes for a week, she knows this is the big night. She is determined not to allow this test to spoil her perfect 3.0 grade point average.

As she turns through countless pages of scribbles underscored in red and blue, she feels a surge of panic. She cannot seem to remember the basic points, much less the minute details. This is it; they have finally broken the thin barrier between her sanity and utter madness. She convinces herself that her sadist teacher has hated her since day one. He probably pulled her files, discovered her flawless grades, and gleefully decided to ruin her for life.

Despite her rising paranoia, Sally studies ardently until her disgruntled roommate rescues her to watch Carson’s monologue. Even scholars deserve a little comic relief. After three more grating hours of study Sally retires with a Joan-of-Arc sense of dignity. If exams are the price of martyrdom, so be it!

Each of these students will inevitably awake and experience that sinking sensation which accompanies any test day. He will wolf down a breakfast of Cheerios, pop tarts, or Hershey bars without noticing the taste. Each will grab those well-worn notes, thumb through them one last time, and dash to the Education-Nursing Building, swearing that he spends ninety percent of his life at school.

As the class begins to assemble, each student strives to maintain a facade of composure. Everyone shudders to think of the ultimate calamity, cracking up in front of his peers.

Yet as each student makes a concentrated effort to cope with the dreaded experience, an air of vaguely pathetic vulnerability lingers. They realize they are the prey, and their predator will soon move in for the kill.

However, the power of human strength should never be underestimated. The student is never a helpless creature. Footsteps break the tense silence, the door clicks open, and Susie Secretary breezes into the room. As she announces that Professor Pomp is nursing a cold and will postpone the exam until Monday, each seething student silently harbors enough strength to demolish every building from Norton Auditorium to Bibb Graves Hall.