

Conflict of needs: Study vs. sleep during finals week

Caffeine pill highs commonly leave tired students low

By Chuck Lovejoy

Final exam time has arrived, and with it comes the stress, eye strain and brain overwork that results from studying.

A student's final grade in a class is often heavily dependent on how well he or she performs on these exams. Because "weighting" of the final exams makes them so important, students sometimes resort to extreme measures to stay awake extra hours while studying for them.

One of the most popular methods for staying awake is to take stimulants.

Stimulants come in a wide variety of forms. Caffeine, one of the most widely used "uppers," can be found in carbonated beverages such as Coke and Pepsi and in other drinks such as coffee and tea.

Caffeine also can be found in over-the-counter pills such as Vivarin and No-Doz. Caffeine pills are more effective than a single caffeinated drink because they contain greater amounts of the drug.

But although such pill stimulants are effective, they can be dangerous, says Dr. Steven Peterson, a professor in the Texas A&M Department of Pharmacology and Toxicology. A



Graphics by Kelly Morgan

variety of health problems can result from their use.

For example, ulcers of the stomach and intestinal tract can be aggravated with the introduction of stimulants into the digestive system because the pills contain such high levels of caffeine, Peterson said.

Also, gastrointestinal stress can be caused by excessive use, resulting in diarrhea and severe cramps.

Users of stimulant pills also risk overdoses, he said.

"It is possible to overdose to the point where you can't concentrate," he said. "Once this happens, you're stuck. You have to wait until the effects of the drug wear off."

To prevent overdoses, Peterson advises against the use of the "upper" pills. Although he does not condone it, he said it is much safer to use the caffeine found in beverages.

"You can control intake with beverages, so overdosing is not as likely," he said.

Should an overdose occur, Peterson said, eating a meal will help alleviate some, but not all, of the resulting excess energy. He said food containing protein, such as a cheeseburger (or other meat dish) and a milkshake, is best.

Problems also can occur after the drug has worn off, he said.

"There is a depression associated with the end of the effectiveness of stimulants," he said.

This phenomenon, called "crashing," is not as common with the use of caffeine, but it does occur, Peterson said.

Also, the second round of stimulants will not be as effective as the first, he said. As the body develops tolerance to the drug, increasing amounts will be required to keep the person awake.

"This is where students get into trouble," Peterson commented. "They simply don't know when to stop."

Despite keeping the student awake, Peterson said, the drugs do little else. He said that only endurance, not

study efficiency, improves under the influence of caffeine.

The problem of "state-dependent learning" also may occur, which means that the student who learns under the influence of a drug may have to be under its influence again to recall the material, he said. Although this phenomenon has not been proven to occur with the use of weaker stimulants like caffeine, it has been substantiated with the use of more potent stimulants.

Still, Peterson said this problem's occurrence may be dose-related, meaning that extremely high levels of caffeine, such as those ingested during a marathon study session, could cause "state-dependent learning."

Such physical and mental problems can be severe, and to prevent them, Peterson recommends several alternatives to taking stimulants to help students stay awake while studying for finals.

Included in his suggestions are taking four breaks during every hour of study, for at least 10 minutes of rest.

He also recommends light exercise to enhance wakefulness. A brisk walk or light jog, he says, will greatly improve awareness. They also can improve concentration.

However, there is no substitute for sleep, he said.

"Try to maintain a regular sleep and study pattern," he said. "And make sure you get in some sleep before the final, preferably between midnight and six o'clock in the morning."

The book "Pathways: A Guide to Reading and Study Skills" by Helen Gilbert also recommends sleep. In the book, Gilbert writes that a good night's sleep is essential for good test performance.

Books on study skills and techniques are plentiful and readily available in the Sterling C. Evans Library. It is recommended that students use these books and Dr. Peterson's suggestions to decrease study time, rather than using stimulants to increase it.

Grad student offers hints on studying

By Cray Pixley

Time is steadily ticking away as final exams draw closer. The frenzied dash to pack in as much study time as possible before facing the last crucial test has begun.

The work of an entire semester may hinge upon performance during final exams. It is an understatement to call the end of a semester a stressed-filled time.

Whether students have been keeping pace with professors' lectures throughout the semester or face dusting off the cobwebs on textbooks buried at the back of the closet, they are all prone to pre-test stress.

Making the best of the last days before final exams is crucial to softening the effects of test stress. But the solution for banishing stress is not easily found in the final weeks before exams. No one knows of a magic formula to prevent anxiety.

The best answer is preparation.

Jim Dupree, a doctoral student in counseling psychology, says that last-minute cramming is the primary cause of exam stress.

"If you are just starting to study now for the test, it is a little late," he says. "Students should be gearing up all along. Waiting to the last minute is one of the biggest creators of stress."

Ideally, students should be in the midst of exam preparations by the beginning of December.

For many students, getting started is the hardest part of studying. Still, it isn't easy after that.

Environment and the way students study is as important as how early they begin to prepare, Dupree says.

At home, television and other distractions can limit the effectiveness of study time. Students should seek a quiet place to study, where distractions are minimal. Dupree recommends finding a place that is designed for studying.

"People who study in bed or on the couch often get distracted because they are used to doing other things in that area," he says. "That is why the library or a corner table somewhere can be advantageous."

Once students find their ideal places to study, they should consider the best method of approaching the work in front of them.

When it comes to tackling finals, students may benefit by devising up a schedule. Just putting a schedule on paper often can help students

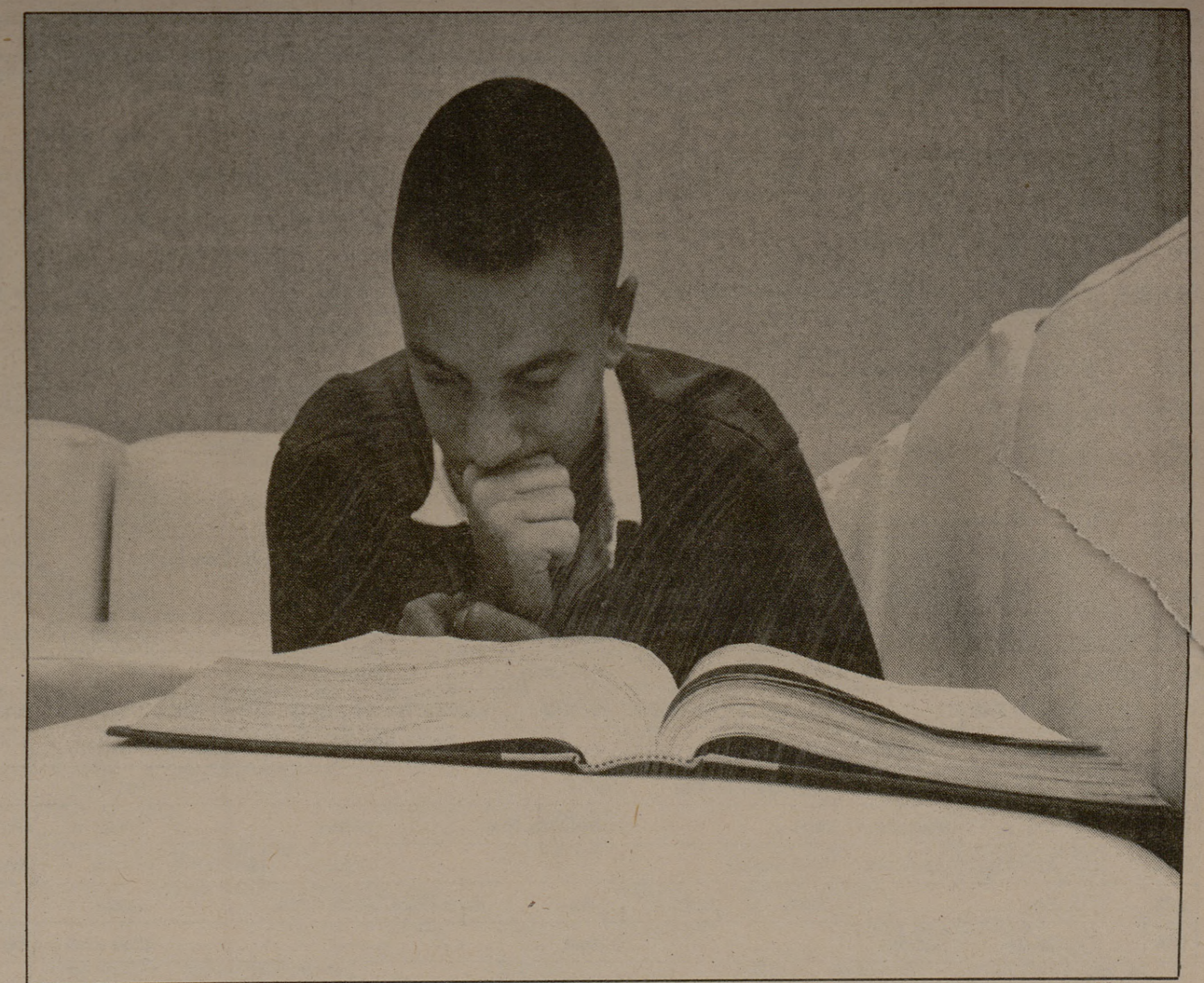


Photo by Kathy Haveman

Jimmy Laurito, a freshman biology major from Dallas, prepares for finals.

overcome what may seem like an insurmountable load, Dupree says. By breaking the study time into pieces, efficiency can be improved.

"If students are planning to study for four hours, do study well for those hours," he says. "Don't plan to study all the way through the night. Plan a good four or five hours and then reward yourself."

By setting a goal and looking forward to a reward, students are likely to make better use of their time, he says. A reward may be a break to watch television, a phone call to a friend or an ice cream cone — whatever provides the best motivation.

Preparation for finals also can be helped along by examining what the professor has asked on previous exams. When students are familiar with the type of questions the professor might ask and the direction he might take, stress is cut down considerably.

Finding the source of test anxiety is no simple issue, but following Dupree's guidelines might reduce stress:

Once a student has prepared thoroughly for an exam, Dupree recommends, it may be wise to put the material away instead of reviewing non-stop.

"I advise students to study as completely as possible the night

before," he says. "Go to sleep and do not review it as you are going to the exam the next day. If you review right before the test you tend to jumble the information."

This is especially good advice for students taking their tests early in the day.

On multiple choice exams, students should not get worry about not knowing the answers.

"If there are some problematic questions, go on to the next and build your confidence by answering other question," he says. "Then go back to those other questions when confidence has been built up."

Students who take a deep breath and begin to familiarize themselves with an exam before jumping into the first question may feel more relaxed, he says.

Also, it is best to read through the questions and get a feel for the details the professor might be looking for when dealing with essay exams, Dupree says.

Even following study suggestions, fighting test stress is not an easy task.

"There is no simple solution in dealing with test stress," Dupree says. "It is a very individualistic problem in dealing with what makes a person nervous."

There is always the age-old advice of preparation and a good night's sleep to fall back on."

Places to study

Students have several options when trying to decide where to study for final exams.

Campus dining halls and snack bars will continue to offer extended study hours. Schedules are as follows:

- Sbis Dining Hall: open Sunday through Thursday from 8:30 p.m.-11:30 p.m.

- Pavilion: open Sunday from 7 p.m.-11 p.m. and Monday through Thursday from 7:30 p.m.-11 p.m.

- MSC cafeteria and snack bar and Pie R Square snack bar: open Sunday through Thursday from 8 p.m.-11 p.m.

- Sterling C. Evans Library will be open for 24 hours starting Wednesday. It will close at 7 p.m. on Dec. 14.

Students can also hit the books at several 24-hour restaurants around town, including the Kettle, the International House of Pancakes and Whataburger. Managers say they do not mind students studying there.

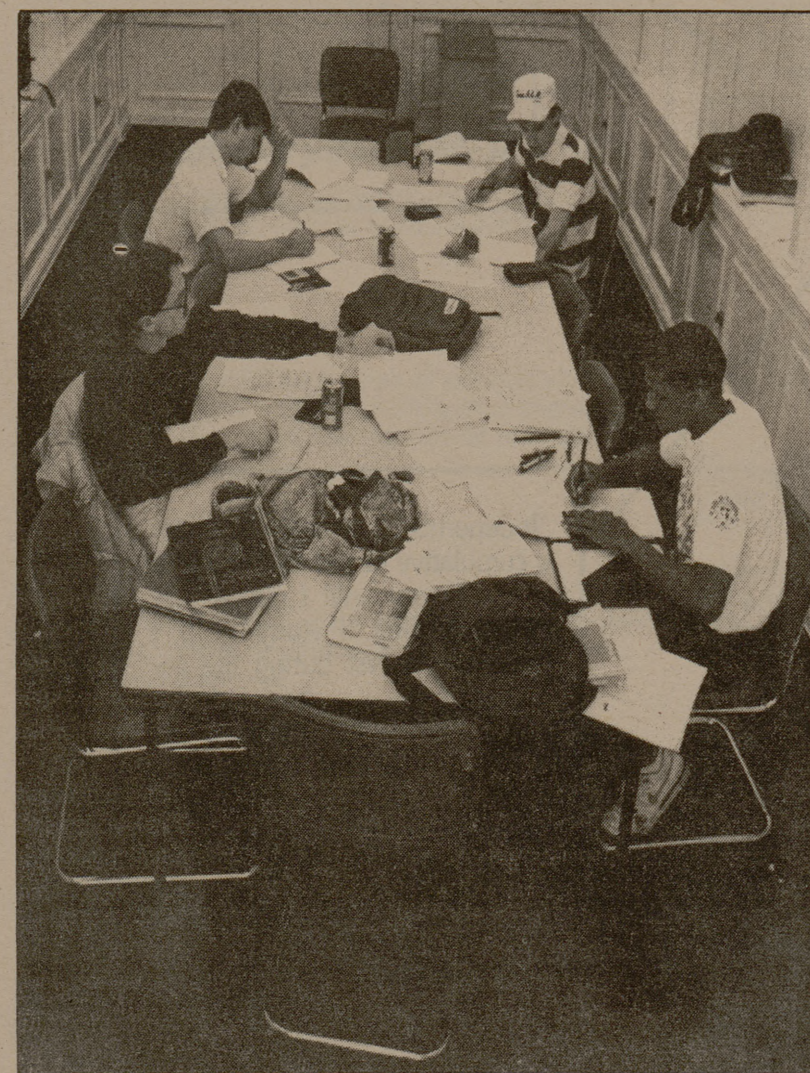


Photo by Kathy Haveman

Electrical engineering majors (clockwise) Marc Combs of Dallas, Robert Howelton, Tracy Spafford and Tony Croes, all from Houston, study for finals in a second-floor group study room in Sterling C. Evans Library.