

Are You "Test Anxious"?

- Are you aware of being really nervous on a test, maybe so nervous that you don't do your best and you lose points, even though you know you've studied well and are prepared?
- Does your stomach ever get tight or upset before or during a test? Hands cold and sweaty? Headaches? Do you have trouble sleeping the night before a test?
- Do you ever find your mind racing, or dull or "muddy," so that you can't think clearly, while taking a test?
- Do you ever forget, during a test, material you studied and learned, maybe only to remember it again later after the test is over?
- Do you "overanalyze" questions, see too many possibilities, choose the complex answer and overlook -- and miss -- the simpler correct one?
- Do you make many careless errors on a test?

A "yes" answer to any one of these questions suggest that you may be experiencing test anxiety.

Of course, everyone is anxious about tests; if you weren't, you wouldn't try. A certain amount of tension is good; it acts as a motivator.

But it has been estimated that as many as 20% of college students may suffer from nervousness which is so severe that two things happen: their grades drop -- anxiety interferes with their mental processes and keeps them from doing their best -- and the quality of their life lessens -- they're miserable.

Most test-takers may benefit from suggestions for ways to keep calm and maintain a productive level of tension while preparing for and taking tests;

Test Anxiety

Introduction

Most students experience some level of anxiety during an exam. However, when anxiety begins to affect exam performance it has become a problem.

What Causes Test Anxiety

- Lack of preparation as indicated by:
 - cramming the night before the exam.
 - poor time management.
 - failure to organize text information.
 - poor study habits.
- Worrying about the following:
 - past performance on exams.
 - how friends and other students are doing.
 - the negative consequences of failure.

Overcoming Test Anxiety

Physical Signs of Test Anxiety

During an exam, as in any stressful situations, a student may experience any of the following bodily changes:

- perspiration
- sweaty palms
- headache
- upset stomach
- rapid heart beat
- tense muscles

Effects of Test Anxiety

- Nervousness:
 - Having difficulty reading and understanding the questions on the exam paper.
 - Having difficulty organizing your thoughts.
 - Having difficulty retrieving key words and concepts when answering essay questions.
 - Doing poorly on an exam even though you know the material.
- Mental Blocking:
 - Going blank on questions.
 - Remembering the correct answers as soon as the exam is over.

How to Reduce Test Anxiety

- Study and know the material well enough so that you can recall it even if you are under stress.
- Learn and practice good time management and avoid:
 - laziness
 - procrastination
 - day dreaming
- Build confidence by studying throughout the semester and avoid cramming the night before the exam.
- Learn to concentrate on the material you are studying by:
 - generating questions from your textbooks and lecture notes.
 - focusing on key words, concepts and examples in your textbooks and lecture notes.
 - making charts and outlines which organize the information in your notes and textbooks.
- Use relaxation techniques, for example, taking long deep breaths to relax the body and reduce stress.

The Immediate Environment

The environment in which you study can have a big effect on how efficient your study time is. Check your place of study for the following conditions:

- Noise
- Interruptions
- Lighting
- Temperature
- Neatness
- Comfort
- Equipment

Minimize distracting noise. Some people need some sound and some like silence. Find what works for you.

Culprits are family and friends. Consider a "do not disturb sign" and turning on your answering machine. You can catch up with folks later.

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75 watt bulbs are best, but not too close and placed opposite the dominant hand.

Better cool than warm.

Have plenty of room to work; don't be cramped. Your study time will go better if you take a few minutes at the start to straighten things up.

A desk and straight-backed chair is usually best. Don't get too comfortable--a bed is a place to sleep, not study.

Have everything (book, pencils, paper, coffee, dictionary, typewriter, calculator, tape recorder, etc.) close at hand. Don't spend your time jumping up and down to get things.

Preparing for or Anticipating Test Anxiety

- What is it you have to do? Focus on dealing with it.
- Just take one step at a time.
- Think about what you can do about it. That's better than getting anxious.
- No negative or panicky self-statements; just think rationally.
- Don't worry; worrying won't help anything.

Confronting and Handling Test Anxiety

- Don't think about fear; just think about what you have to do.
- Stay relevant.
- Relax; you're in control. Take a slow, deep breath.
- You should expect some anxiety; it's a reminder not to panic and to relax and cope steadily with the situation.
- Tenseness can be an ally, a friend; it's a cue to cope.

Coping with the Feeling of Being Overwhelmed

- When the fear comes, just pause.
- Keep the focus on the present; what is it you have to do?
- You should expect your fear to rise some.
- Don't try to eliminate fear totally; just keep it manageable.
- You can convince yourself to do it. You can reason your fear away.
- It's not the worst thing that can happen.
- Do something that will prevent you from thinking about fear.
- Describe what is around you. That way you won't think about worrying.

Reinforcing Self-Statements

- It worked! You did it!
- It wasn't as bad as you expected.
- You made more out of the fear than it was worth.
- You're getting better. You're learning to cope more smoothly.
- You can be pleased with your progress.
- You like how you handled it. You can be proud of it.

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BEFORE THE EXAM:

1. **Put things in perspective.** Remind yourself that your entire future doesn't depend on this exam. There will be other exams and other courses. Many students fail a course or two but go on to graduate from high school or college and have successful careers.
2. **Over-study for the exam.** This will increase your confidence. Also, if you know the material to the point of facility, you will be better able to answer test questions despite your test anxiety.
3. **Remind yourself of past successes.** Think of a tough course in which you struggled but eventually succeeded. Tell yourself that if you did well on that past exam, you can do well on the upcoming exam.
4. **Don't give a test the power to define you.** An exam won't tell you whether you're brilliant or stupid. Your performance on an exam mostly depends on how well you studied for the test, the quality of your prior education, and the test-taking strategies you use.
5. **Visualize completing the test successfully despite your anxiety.** Play the entire "tape" in your mind -- from the moment you wake up on the day of the exam to the moment you finish the exam.
6. Use the word "quiz" rather than "exam" or "test" when you think about the upcoming evaluation.
7. **Practice anxiety control strategies.** As you study, deliberately induce anxiety by saying to yourself the negative thoughts you typically have during an exam (ie. "I'm going to fail.") Now, practice the Anxiety Control Procedure (described below). Remind yourself that you will probably experience some anxiety during the test, but the anxiety won't hamper your performance because you've practiced controlling the anxiety.

DURING THE EXAM

1. **Try to avoid talking with other students right before the exam.** Their anxieties may rub off on you.
2. **Choose a seat in a place with few distractions** (probably near the front).
3. Remind yourself of how hard you studied, how well you did on another exam, and how you've practiced anxiety control.

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4. If you begin to feel overly anxious, do the **ANXIETY CONTROL PROCEDURE**:

- Turn the test paper over and close your eyes.
- Breathe in slowly to the count of seven and exhale to the count of seven.
- Continue this slow breathing until you begin to feel more relaxed.
- Open your eyes, turn the test paper right side up, and give yourself a positive self-talk (ie. "You're sure to do well. You studied hard and remember, you got an **A** on that final in physics.") This whole procedure should take only about a minute to do. It's well worth the time!

5. **Do not obsess about running out of time on the test.** Check the time periodically (say after you've finished a third of the test), but avoid checking too frequently, as this will only distract you and make you more anxious. Remind yourself that it's better to miss a few points by not quite finishing the test than to lose your concentration and thus miss many points.

6. **Approach your studying seriously, but think of the test as a game.** Your goal is to collect as many points as you can in the time available. Don't worry about a particular question. If you're unsure of the answer, guess and move on. Remind yourself that you can miss a few questions and still get an A.

Other strategies you can do to control test anxiety?

- Be **well prepared** for the test.
- Include as much **self-testing** in your review as possible.
- Maintain a **healthy lifestyle**: get enough sleep, good nutrition, exercise, some personal "down" time, and a reasonable amount of social interaction.
- As you anticipate the exam, **think positively**, e.g., "I can do OK on this exam. I've studied and I know my stuff."
- Engage in "**thought stopping**" if you find that you are worrying a lot, mentally comparing yourself to your peers, or thinking about what others may say about your performance on this exam.
- Before you go to bed on the night before the exam, make sure to **collect together anything that you will need** for the exam -- pen, pencil, ruler, eraser, calculator, etc. Double check the time of the exam and the location.
- Set the alarm clock and then get a **good night's sleep** before the exam.
- Get to the exam **on time - not too late but not too early**.
- **Don't talk to other students** about the exam material just before going into the exam.
- Sit in a **location** in the exam room where you will be distracted as little as possible.
- As the papers are distributed, **calm yourself down** by taking some slow deep breaths.
- Make sure to **carefully read any instructions** on the exam.
- As you work on the exam, **focus only on the exam**, not on what other students are doing or on thinking about past exams or future goals.
- If you feel very anxious in the exam, take a few minutes to **calm yourself down**. Stretch your arms and legs and then relax them again. Do this a couple of times. Take a few slow deep breaths. Do some positive internal self-talk; say to yourself, "I will be OK, I can do this." Then direct your focus on questions: link questions to their corresponding lecture and/or chapter.
- If the exam is more difficult than you anticipated, try to **focus and just do your best**. It might be enough to get you through, even with a reasonable grade!
- When the exam is over, **treat yourself**. If you don't have any other commitments, maybe you can go to a movie with a friend. If you have to study for other exams, you may have to postpone a larger break, but a brief break can be the pick up that you need.

You can take control of test anxiety so that your performance on a test reflects your real standing in that course. If interfering levels of test anxiety persist, however, talk to a counselor for some specialized help.

How To Keep Calm During Tests

1. **PREPARE WELL IN ADVANCE.** Keep up day to day, if you can; but don't judge yourself harshly if you don't. Avoid last-minute cramming. Don't go without sleep the night before (though 4 or 5 hours may be enough). Stop studying an hour or so before the test and relax and compose yourself.
2. **KNOW TIME AND PLACE** of the test and what you need to bring. Be on time, neither too early nor too late, with blue books or supplies. Don't rush.
3. **DON'T TALK ABOUT THE TEST** with classmates immediately beforehand, if you know it raises your anxiety level. To do so may nourish group paranoia.
4. Read over the test and **PLAN YOUR APPROACH.** Ascertain point values per part, time limits for each section, which question you'll start with, etc.
5. Don't hesitate to **ASK FOR CLARIFICATION** from the professor, teaching assistant, or proctor if you have questions about directions, procedure, etc., rather than letting anxiety build up because you aren't sure about what you are expected to do.
6. **DEVELOP AN AGGRESSIVE, YET REALISTIC ATTITUDE.** Approach the test vigorously determined that you will do your best; but also accept the limits of what you know at the moment. Use everything you know to do well; but don't blame yourself for what you don't know.
7. **ACTIVITY REDUCES ANXIETY.** If you go blank and can't think of anything to write, go on to another question or another part of the test. On an essay, jot down anything you can recall on scratch paper to stimulate your memory and get your mind working.

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8. RELAX YOURSELF PHYSICALLY during the test, if you notice that you are not thinking well or are tight. Pause, lay your test aside, and take several slow, deep breaths. Concentrate on your breathing. Do this if you notice that you are worrying excessively about one problem, not reading carefully, forgetting information you know.

9. PAY ATTENTION TO THE TEST, not to yourself or others. Don't waste time worrying, doubting yourself, wondering how other people are doing, blaming yourself, etc. Don't worry about what you should have done; pay attention to what you can do now.

Test-Taking Without Fear

- 1. A certain amount of fear or anxiety before or during a test is normal, and it can even help you focus your resources on solving the immediate problem. But, irrational fear, or excessive anxiety about a test situation is detrimental to concentration and performance.
- 2. The good news is that there are ways to eliminate the crippling anxiety and fear that plague some students before and during exams. Before an exam, one should: Practice good study habits, prepare well, be organized, and keep a file for papers.
- 3. Remember: Test preparation begins the first day of class. Keep up with reading assignments, underline important facts, and make written notes of points emphasized by your instructor. Don't wait until the last minute to prepare for a test. Frantic, last-minute cramming usually results in confusion and increased anxiety.
- 4. From your instructor, find out the type of test being given. Does it consist of essays, fill-in-the-blanks, multiple choice, or a combination? Be sure to find out about the length of the exam and the topics covered, and write down the date, time, and place of the exam. Time and effort spent worrying about when and where the exam will be held are wasted and only increase your anxiety.
- 5. Get a good night's sleep before the exam. Fatigue reduces your ability to perform and increases your anxiety. This is another reason that late-night cramming is a bad idea.
- 6. If other classes have taken the test before you, don't be overly concerned by rumors about the difficulty of the test. Tests are always hard for those who are not prepared.
- 7. Have all the necessary paper, pencils, calculators, and other aids permitted by your instructor ready beforehand. Don't be forced to scramble around for supplies just before the exam. Furthermore, the habit of being on time or early will allow you a moment to relax before the test starts.
- 8. Thinking about a pleasant experience for a moment or two can put you in a good frame of mind.
- 9. Listen carefully to pre-examination instructions. If you have any questions, ask them now. Don't be afraid to ask for a clarification of instructions. When you receive your exam, take a moment to read carefully any instructions on the test itself. This will be time well spent. You don't want to give incorrect answers because you misunderstand the instructions.
- 10. In most tests, there will be questions you can't answer. Don't worry about these. Skip them and move on to questions you can answer. After answering the easy questions, go

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back and work on the harder ones. Work as fast and accurately as possible. Budget your time carefully, but remember that excessive worry over a time limit will reduce your performance.

Daydream: Substitute worry thoughts with pleasant ones (being with someone special or being out in the sunshine, etc.) most of us live up to our own expectations; if we spend a lot of time thinking how poorly we'll do, it will increase our chances for failure.

