



Overcoming Test Anxiety

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A Step-by-Step Guide

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**PERCENT OF U.S.
STUDENTS WITH TEST
ANXIETY**

Test anxiety is incredibly common. If you've ever heard the term "I don't test well," this is what is meant. The reasons behind test anxiety vary. Despite the number of studies on test anxiety, the phenomena is not a clinical diagnosis and does not carry with it the same special services benefits, as it is not a qualifying condition.

However, test anxiety is a phobia. As such, confronting this fear through appropriate exposure and steps can alleviate symptoms and create a more effective, efficient, and less anxious test-taker.

Possible Symptoms

- Upset stomach
- Headache / Dizziness
- Anger, Guilt, Fear
- Sweaty palms
- Blanking out
- Shame, Helpless
- Racing heart
- Over/Negative Thinking
- Etc.

Possible Causes

The following is not an exhaustive list. Consider when and how your fears first came up, or how they come up now. What changes in behavior or thinking occur?

Realistic Fears

- I'm not ready for the test. **[Answer: Work on time management and perhaps perfectionism.]**
- If I fail this exam, I may have to repeat a class or start in another semester. **[Answer: Speak to your counselor and instructors about your options and try to be as realistic as possible. Sometimes, things aren't as dark as they seem.]**

Unfounded Fears

- I used to think I was smart. Now, I'm not sure. **[Answer: Almost every student experiences this type of doubt. It's perfectly normal. Remember this is a new level of academic challenge to rise to.]**
- My family, classmates, etc. will think I'm not smart. **[Answer: You've already proven that you have the academics and will to be here. In the career field, you will be judged on performance not intelligence. You have plenty of opportunities to distinguish yourself.]**

Letting Perfectionism Go

Before this program, you may have been a perfectionist who went into exams feeling that you had studied everything you needed to know. Emotionally, this habit can be hard to let go. At this level, it's virtually impossible to learn every detail. You need to focus on the most important concepts. Having these drilled into yourself will allow great inference on some details you are unable to recall later on a test.

To help curb perfectionism, try:

- Set a time limit, then go through a set of lecture notes
- Pull out only the MOST important concepts and facts
- Tell yourself, "If I have time later, I will return the less important information."
- Knowing you can return will it emotionally easier to leave minor details behind

Strike the Balance (p+p=P)

A cousin of perfectionism is poor prioritization. At this level, your education must viewed as important as a necessary job. This means planning and prioritizing how to study in such a way that you maximize performance. Planning (p) + Prioritizing (p) = Performance (P). Approach studying seriously. Whether you make collecting points a game or like a job, follow the p+p=P in finding the balance.

Before An Exam

1. **Put things in perspective.** Your ENTIRE future doesn't rest on this upcoming exam. Yes, it's important. Maybe even a final. But, it's not the end of all things.
2. **Remind yourself of past successes.** Remember all those times where you have succeeded. Think of those things that make you proud of you.
3. **Don't give a test the power to define you.** No test will you whether you're the most (or least) brilliant student. Your performance depends on how well you prepared, the quality of your education, and the test-taking strategies you use.
4. **Visualize completing the test despite your anxiety.** Using vivid, mental images, play out the entire "reel" in your mind from the moment you wake up that day to the moment you finish the last question and walk out of the room.
5. **Remind yourself that a certain level of anxiety is actually helpful in performing your best.** As long as you use good test-taking strategies and have properly prepared, you can control your anxiety to this healthy level.
6. **Give yourself practice tests and use them not only to work on your test-taking but to practice controlling your anxiety.** Deliberately put yourself in the stressful situation to begin inoculating yourself. Practice the Anxiety Control Procedure.
7. **Get a few good nights of sleep before the exam.** Sleep is the body's natural way of purging itself of the bad and renewing itself. You'll never be as good as you can be without adequate sleep. If you're consistently having trouble sleeping, a physician should be consulted.
8. **Decrease stimulant consumption.** Caffeine's impact is increased by anxiety, as are other neural stimulants like energy drinks. On test days, reduce your intake.

During the Exam

1. **Arrive early, but avoid talking with other students before the exam.** Others' anxieties may increase your own. Instead take a walk around the building. Meditate, breathe, pray. Moving your body and focusing your mind will relieve nervous energy.
2. **If possible, choose a seat with few distractions.** You may also want to bring earplugs.
3. **Remind yourself that you don't know all of the material that could possibly be on the test and NO ONE ELSE DOES EITHER.** Still, you can do the best with what you know and how well you've prepared.
4. **Expect a few curve balls on the exam.** Remind yourself that you don't have to be perfect. Your sense of what should be on the test is not going to match the test writer's mind. When you encounter these curve balls, don't get upset and lose concentration. You can either make an intelligent guess or mark it and come back later.
5. **If you begin to have negative thoughts.** PAUSE. Tell yourself, "STOP." Remind yourself of past successes.
6. **If you continue to feel anxious, perform the Anxiety Control Procedure**
7. **Move your body.** Roll your shoulders. Stretch your legs. Take a bathroom break (if allowed).
8. **Banish all thoughts of how poorly you might be doing on the exam.** Thinking about a score while taking an exam is highly inaccurate, and it will only increase your anxiety.
9. **Carefully work through the questions once and TRUST YOUR GUT.** Avoid rushing through and doubling back. This often leads to changing correct answers. Only reserve marking and going back for very difficult questions.
10. **Do NOT obsess about running out of time.** Check the time periodically but not obsessively. Your goal is to collect as many points as possible. It's better to do this and run out of time than ramp up your anxiety, rush, and miss more points.

ANXIETY CONTROL PROCEDURE

1. Close your eyes
2. Breathe in slowly to the count of seven
3. Breathe out slowly to the count of seven
4. Continue this slow breathing until you feel your body begin to relax (For most people 2 -4 cycles)
5. Open your eyes and give yourself a positive, very specific self-talk. ("You're sure to do well. You studied hard and correctly. You're doing the best you can.")

The whole procedure should only take about a minute.

TL,DR Version

Start Preparing Early - cramming doesn't work. Start studying early and decrease in smaller blocks each day.

Create a Study Plan- without one, you won't block off the appropriate amount of time at the correct time of day for you.

Learn HOW to Study- it's not as simple as reading and rereading notes. There is science and art to studying correctly and well.

Keep a Positive Attitude- self-worth doesn't rely on a test's outcome. Remind yourself of this. Follow the Anxiety Control Procedure.

Read Carefully- handouts, instructions before you begin, each question, possible answers. Not doing this is the main reason for careless answers.

Utilize Practice Tests- you may have to make them yourself or find similar ones online, but they will aid in overcoming anxiety and getting your timing down.

TL,DR Version

Sleep, Eat, Drink- your body needs the correct fuel and right amount of rest for a few days before the exam. Don't starve it.

Start With What You Know- move through the test slowly answering what you know first. Save really hard questions for later.

Use "Boring" Methods- flashcards, word lists, recopying notes. None of these are fun. But they greatly aid in memory retention.

Arrive Early, Stay Focused- take a walk around the building and don't talk to other test-takers. Don't worry about the other test-takers. Bring earplugs, if they help.

Dress Comfortably- stay appropriate, but wear something that is comfortable and helps you relax. Stay away from clothes that need adjusting or are too tight.

Take A Break- even if only at your seat. Perform the Anxiety Control Procedure, stretch your arms and legs, roll your shoulders. Go to the bathroom (if able).

Additional Resources

Jim Wright - Managing Test Anxiety. Ideas for Students (PDF)

What Is Test Anxiety? Kendra Cherry (Article)

Sources

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