

test anxiety

identification

Some anxiety before or during tests is to be expected and, in fact, can enhance our motivation to study and our test taking ability. However, when anxiety reaches levels that are actually detrimental to performance—in terms of ability to study for a test or ability to take it—then it is often labeled as “test anxiety.”

One should also distinguish between anxiety that occurs because of inadequate preparation for a test and anxiety that occurs despite adequate preparation. We would expect high levels of anxiety if we were unprepared to write an exam. However, if you are well-prepared and still experience a sense of panic, then you are likely experiencing test anxiety.

Some of the symptoms that are commonly associated with test anxiety include:

Emotional

- Panic
- Fear
- Anger
- Wanting to cry
- Inappropriate laughter
- Feeling helpless
- Worry about failing the exam
- An urge to leave the situation

Cognitive

- Going blank on questions
- Difficulty reading and understanding exam questions, or needing to reread them
- Difficulty organizing your thoughts in written responses
- Doing poorly on the exam even though you know the material
- Being easily distracted during the exam
- Remembering the right answer after the exam

Physical

- Upset stomach
- Sweating and trembling hands
- Muscle tension in the shoulder and back of the neck
- Dry mouth
- Pounding heart
- Headache
- Tight chest and shallow breath

coping strategies

1 thorough preparation

Thorough preparation is absolutely key to reducing your level of anxiety and includes any of the following strategies:

- Review all available information, including your textbook, lecture notes, and previous assignments and labs.
- Discuss anything confusing in the above materials with other students, teaching assistants, or instructors.
- Review information over the course of days and weeks if possible, rather than cramming.
- Develop a specific study schedule and stick to it closely.
- Generate some questions based on your textbook and lecture notes and try to answer them without looking at your notes.
- If you do not have time to study all of the course information, ask your instructor what would be more important to focus on and study it well.
- Take a practice exam under conditions similar to the real exam.

2 change your overall mindset

Thorough preparation is absolutely key to reducing your level of anxiety and includes any of the following strategies:

- A real education is about learning rather than marks.
- One test will rarely change your life: there will be other opportunities to demonstrate your knowledge and skills.
- Grades do not have to reflect your self-worth.
- Success should be evaluated on whether you followed your study plan, rather than your grades. They will improve over time.
- Grades do not necessarily predict your future success.

3 change your overall mindset

Change your overall mindset by focusing on the following ideas:

- A real education is about learning rather than marks.
- One test will rarely change your life: there will be other opportunities to demonstrate your knowledge and skills.
- Grades do not have to reflect your self-worth.
- Success should be evaluated on whether you followed your study plan, rather than your grades. They will improve over time.
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4 change any negative self-talk

Identify, challenge, and ultimately change any negative self-talk. Examples of typical negative self-statements include:

- “I’m going to fail this exam.”
- “Everyone else knows this material better than I do.”
- “Why even bother to study? It never pays off.”
- “The exam questions never reflect what I know anyway.”
- “I can never do well on this kind of exam (i.e., multiple choice, short answer, essay).”
- success.

Once you have identified your typical negative self-talk, look for evidence about the statements, and if there isn’t solid evidence then create more accurate and positive self-talk, such as:

- “This test will be difficult, but I have time to prepare.”
- “I don’t know how prepared other people are. I just need to put in my best effort.”
- “Consistent study will usually pay off.”
- “The more I know, the better I will perform.”
- “I need to learn how to write these kinds of exams.”

5 use thought-stopping

Use thought-stopping to get yourself out of any vicious cycles of worry. This approach can involve attaching an elastic band to your wrist and flicking it lightly on your wrist to change the focus of your attention. Yelling “stop” or another word or phrase may also be helpful, either alone or in conjunction with the above strategy.

6 learn how to relax your body

Learn how to relax your body, which can help you regain a sense of focus, using some of the following psychologically-based relaxation skills:

1. **Diaphragmatic Breathing** – breathe slowly and deeply to the count of five as you inhale and then again as you exhale. If you are doing it properly, both your chest and then your stomach will rise as you inhale.
2. **Autogenic Training** – repeat certain key phrases to yourself as you progressively relax your body. These include:
 - “Breathing smooth and rhythmic.”
 - “My heartbeat is calm and regular.”
 - “My arms and hands are heavy and warm.”
 - “My legs and feet are heavy and warm.”
 - “I am calm.”
3. **Progressive Muscle Relaxation** – tighten and then relax different muscle groups in your body. Hold tension in the muscle for approximately 7 seconds and then relax the muscle for 20 to 30 seconds. You can target any muscle group in your body, particularly those that are chronically tense.
4. **Passive Muscle Relaxation** – progressively focus on each muscle group in your body, starting from either your head or your feet, and use the power of your mind to relax that part of your body. Imagining a wave of relaxation flowing through your body may help.
5. **Imagery** – focus on whatever images you find most relaxing, whether that is a trip to the beach or sitting in front of a fire. Use all of your five senses to heighten your level of relaxation.

7 self-care

Anxiety is reduced when we are taking care of our basic needs and making self-care a priority. This would include:

- Maintaining a regular exercise routine.
- Establishing a healthy diet.
- Developing a regular sleep cycle, and getting plenty of sleep the night before the exam. Do not pull an

all-nighter, since we retain less information studying this way, and having little or no sleep before an exam merely creates additional stress.

- Stay involved in both recreational and social activities to enhance your overall well being.
- Take frequent breaks while studying.

8 prepare yourself the day of the exam

Prepare yourself the day of the exam in the following ways:

- Eat a sensible breakfast. Overindulging the day of the exam may lead to sluggishness or an upset stomach. Do not skip breakfast, since being hungry will put stress on your body.
- Relaxing an hour before the exam (using the previously described techniques) rather than studying. Cramming at that stage will not pay off and merely increases anxiety.
- Arrive early (5 - 10 minutes) to the exam location so that you can pick a seat you are most comfortable with (i.e., away from distractions). Avoid being late, as this will increase anxiety.
- Bring some distracting materials (i.e., newspaper, magazines) to focus on before the exam, or go for a short walk.
- Avoid classmates who may increase your anxiety with questions you cannot answer or whose own anxiety is contagious.
- Avoid caffeine (i.e., in coffee, tea, or soft drinks) before the exam.

9 during the exam use some of the following strategies:

- Quickly review the whole exam before you answer any of the questions.
- Take time to read the instructions carefully: twice if you need to. Remember, this is time well spent.
- Begin by answering the easiest questions first to build up your sense of confidence.
- If you blank out on a question or cannot answer it, skip it and go on to another. Often, some answers to questions will come as your work on other parts of your exam.
- When you are unsure about an answer, mark the question and go back to it if you have time at the end of the exam.

- If you get overwhelmed with anxiety, use some of the relaxation techniques you have learned to relax your mind and your body: doing so can help you regain mental clarity.
- Keep track of the time so you can pace yourself appropriately. How much time you spend on a question should depend on how much the question is worth.
- If you are unsure about what is being asked in a question, ask the instructor or proctor for clarification. If their clarification is unhelpful, just do the best you can with your understanding of the question—you're probably not alone in being unsure.
- Eliminate any negative self-talk and replace it with more helpful statements to yourself.
- Use other distraction skills to reduce your anxiety such as: sharpening your pencil, having a drink, eating a snack, or going to the washroom.
- Avoid focusing on what other students are doing during the exam, as this is an unhealthy and unhelpful distraction.
- Do not panic when you are not the first to hand in your exam. You do not get extra marks for finishing early: A person finishing early could mean they found the exam easy or they were not prepared and gave up early—work at your own pace.
- Use any extra time to review your answers, but do not change your answers unless you are absolutely sure the changes are correct.

10 After the exam, try the following:

- Reward yourself whether you think you did well on the exam or not. Reward your effort.
- Focus on what you did right rather than any mistakes you may have made.
- Do not discuss the exam questions with other students. It will likely only increase your anxiety.
- Evaluate your success in reducing your anxiety and develop a new plan to reduce it further on your next exam.
- Do not immediately start studying for another exam. Take some time to relax first.

