

Test Anxiety

Feeling nervous about a test is common. In fact, a little anxiety can even help make you more alert on exam day. However, high test anxiety can get in the way of doing well. What can you do? Step one is to reflect on the reasons for your anxiety, which can help you try and address it with targeted strategies.

Academic Problems

Do you get test anxiety because you are not keeping up with your work or not understanding the material? If so, ask for extra help before the exam from your prof or TA, a tutor, or a friend. Create a study plan to help yourself stay on track and avoid cramming the night before a test. Make lists or use a planner to remember and prioritize your homework and study tasks. Break work into smaller “chunks” and spread them out over time with breaks in between. Give yourself rewards for getting chunks of work done (e.g., after reading two chapters, you get to watch one episode of your favorite show, play a game for 30 minutes, or take a 20-minute walk) to stay motivated. If getting started with studying is the biggest problem, start with the easiest task to get yourself “warmed up” for harder tasks.

Try these online workshops for more study skills and time management tips:

<http://advising.ucsc.edu/success/online/index.html> or visit the Learning Support Center or your advisor if you need additional help with study skills.

Self-Criticism or Distorted Thoughts

If your test anxiety is related to harsh self-criticism or unrealistic expectations (e.g., “I must get all As”), consider talking to a mentor or counselor to get some perspective and support. Try to remember that your self-worth is not based on a grade. Changing unhelpful thought patterns, such as criticizing yourself or expecting the worst, is a skill that takes some time to build. First, get better at recognizing helpful versus unhelpful thoughts. If you have unhelpful ones (e.g., “If I fail this test, my life will be over,” “I’m a failure”), try weighing the evidence—are the thoughts true? Exaggerated? Use reason and evidence to combat exaggerated or distorted thoughts and de-escalate catastrophic thinking. Learn to be more compassionate and accepting of yourself while working on improving things over which you have control (e.g., it’s more useful to realistically evaluate what went well or poorly on a test and focus on what didn’t go well than to tell yourself “I’m stupid,” which is not likely to be helpful; you will feel more motivated if you give yourself encouragement than if you tear yourself down).

“Performance Anxiety”

Sometimes test anxiety is similar to other sorts of performance anxiety (e.g., giving a talk, performing on stage, playing in a big sporting event)—the symptoms are mostly physical (e.g., sweating, shaking, racing heart) and you have them even though you prepared and are not consciously getting down on yourself. When this is the case, physical relaxation techniques can be useful, such as deep breathing, light stretching, drinking a warm cup of tea, using a stress ball, or gently tensing and then releasing your muscles. Positive thinking and imagining success can also help. In extreme cases when behavioral techniques haven’t worked, a doctor may prescribe medications like beta blockers.

Tips to Prepare for Exam Day

Study before the night before an exam so you don’t have to cram. The night before the exam, do a final review of the important material. Get a good night’s sleep. Eat something healthy before the exam; foods with protein can give you sustained energy. Avoid interacting with people before the exam who are freaking out. Get to the testing location a few minutes early so you won’t worry about being late and can choose the seat that is best for you if that helps you feel more calm (e.g., near a door, in the back, away from other students).

Try some of the following strategies during the exam:

- Expect *some* anxiety: Some anxiety is normal and keeps you alert so you can try your best.
- Read the directions carefully before starting. If it helps you to budget your time, skim through all the questions before starting. If it makes you more anxious, don't skim first—just get started.
- If you tend to run out of time on exams, prioritize the questions that are worth more points, or start with all the easier questions and go back to the harder ones.
- Tell yourself that the exam is only a game. Remember, tests don't cause anxiety—it's our reaction to them that causes anxiety. Try regarding your test as a puzzle, there for your amusement. Sure, you're trying to score points—but only because it's fun.
- If you're taking an essay test and your mind goes blank, just pick a question and start writing something. It may help your mind remember the answers.
- Take slow, deep breaths. Counting to 5 while breathing in as your lower abdomen expands, holding for a few seconds, and counting to 5 while breathing out can help you relax.
- If you get physical anxiety symptoms (e.g., sweating, feeling hot, tingling hands), don't focus on them—focus on something “grounding” instead, such as the feeling of your feet on the floor or the feeling of taking deep breaths.
- If your mind starts going toward anxieties and fears, redirect your thoughts to focus on the next step of your exam and continue taking it step by step.
- Use positive reinforcement: Imagine yourself successfully completing the test, acknowledge that you are doing your best, remind yourself that you studied and prepared.
- Realize that anxiety can be a “habit,” and it takes practice to create new habits that work better for you.
- Don't panic if others start handing in their exams before you. There's no reward for finishing first. Take all the time you need to finish and review.
- Don't second-guess your answers and change them at the end unless you are certain a different answer is right. Often, your first thought is correct.

Overall Stress Management and Wellness

No matter the reason for your test anxiety, it's important to practice good self-care (e.g., eating well, getting enough sleep, avoiding drug and alcohol abuse, setting good boundaries, finding ways to relax). If you aren't taking care of yourself, it's extremely difficult to manage stress and test anxiety. Find healthy ways to de-stress in your day-to-day life, like regular exercise, meditation, yoga, music, a hot shower, time with friends, hobbies, or being outdoors. Do things to address stress on a regular basis—don't wait until it's out of hand. Yes, it's hard to balance it all, but the better care you take of yourself, the better you'll be at managing stress and anxiety, including test anxiety.