

Tips for Coping with Test Anxiety

Identify the cause

- ❖ Consider how you physically, emotionally, and mentally react when taking a test
- ❖ Take the Test Anxiety Inventory
- ❖ Come to the Cater Center to discuss anxiety concerns with an academic coach



If the cause of your anxiety is due to not being prepared:

- ❖ Spread out study time throughout the semester
- ❖ Learn material thoroughly
- ❖ Avoid cramming – especially right before the exam
- ❖ Set realistic goals and expectations
- ❖ Meet with an academic coach to learn about Time Management and Test Preparation

Other tips for before the Exam

- ❖ Arrive a little early
- ❖ Choose a comfortable seat at the test site and avoid sitting near people who may make your anxiety worse
- ❖ Get a good night's sleep
- ❖ Don't go to the exam on an empty stomach but avoid sugar and caffeine which can worsen stress
- ❖ Don't discuss exam material right before the test

For physical and emotional symptoms during the exam:

- ❖ Read all the directions carefully
- ❖ Change positions to help you relax
- ❖ Don't get stuck on a question. Skip it and return to it later.
- ❖ Don't worry about what others are doing. Work at your own pace and avoid rushing because you see others turning their tests in
- ❖ Pause and take slow, deep breaths to help calm yourself
- ❖ Break the exam into pieces and work step by step
- ❖ Use positive reinforcement
- ❖ Avoid negative thoughts during the exam
- ❖ Take a break and stretch or, if possible, go to the restroom or to get a drink

After the exam → Reward yourself! You did your best and can be proud!

Remember:

- Grades are not a reflection of self-worth
- Some anxiety is normal and should be expected
- Anxiety can become a habit

Managing Test Anxiety

What does Test Anxiety Feel Like?

Physical symptoms

- ❖ Headaches
- ❖ Nausea
- ❖ Faintness
- ❖ Feeling too hot
- ❖ Feeling too cold
- ❖ Sweating
- ❖ Rapid heartbeat
- ❖ Shakiness

Emotional Symptoms

- ❖ Want to cry too much
- ❖ Want to laugh too much
- ❖ Feeling angry
- ❖ Feeling helpless
- ❖ Excessive frustration
- ❖ Confusion

Problems Thinking

- ❖ Blank out during test
- ❖ Having racing thoughts
- ❖ Racing through test just to finish it quickly
- ❖ Thinking such thoughts as:
 - I can't do this!
 - I'm stupid!



What Causes Test Anxiety?

EVERYBODY experiences some amount of anxiety in testing situations.

If the anxiety affects your performance on exams, it can become a problem.

Causes

- ❖ Concerns about what others will think about you if you don't do well
- ❖ Threats to self-worth and self-image
- ❖ Concerns about the future
- ❖ Lack of preparation
- ❖ Fear of failure

Stress = The Body's Alarm System

Normal Stress Response

Heart Pounding
Rapid Breathing
Muscles Tense Up
Fight or Flight
Feel Excited or Worried
Feel Frustrated/Determined
Seeing/Thinking Clearly
Acting Rapidly
Facing Problems
Taking on Challenges
Clear Memories
Creating Solutions
Feel Angry or Scared
Feel in Control
Feel Good About Yourself

Extreme Stress Reaction

Heart Feels Like Bursting
Gasping, Feeling Smothered
Muscles Feel Like Exploding
Just Try and Get Through It
Feel Terrified or Panicked
Feel Enraged or Aggressive
Confused, Mentally Shut Down
Automatic Reflexes or Freezing
Desperately Avoiding Problems
Taking Foolish Risks
Memory Like a Broken Puzzle
Making a Mess of your Life
Feel Hopeless or Doomed
Feel Helpless or Out of Control
Feel Worthless, like a Failure

TEST ANXIETY

THE FIVE CAUSES OF TEST ANXIETY:

- Test anxiety is a learned behavior.
- The association of grades and personal worth causes test anxiety.
- Test anxiety can come from a feeling of a lack of control.
- Test anxiety can be caused by a teacher embarrassing a student.
- Being placed into course above your ability can cause test anxiety.
- Test anxiety develops from fear of alienation from parents, family, and friends due to poor grades.
- Test anxiety can be caused by timed tests and the fear of not finishing the test, even if one can do all the problems

THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF TEST ANXIETY:

1. One type of test anxiety is somatic, which is what you are feeling.
2. The second type of test anxiety is cognitive, which is what you are thinking.

TWO REASONS STUDENTS LEAVE THE TEST ROOM EARLY INSTEAD OF CHECKING THEIR ANSWERS:

1. Their anxiety level gets so high that they have to leave.
2. They don't want to be the last one in the classroom.

THE TWELVE MYTHS OF TEST ANXIETY:

- Students are born with test anxiety.
- Test anxiety is a mental illness.
- Test anxiety cannot be reduced.
- Any level of test anxiety is bad.
- All students who are not prepared have test anxiety.
- Students with test anxiety cannot learn math.
- Students who are well prepared will not have test anxiety.
- Very intelligent students and students taking high-level courses, such as calculus, do not have test anxiety.
- Attending class and doing my homework should reduce all my test anxiety.
- Being told to relax during a test will make you relaxed.
- Doing nothing about test anxiety will make it go away.
- Reducing test anxiety will guarantee better grades.

HOW TO REDUCE TEST ANXIETY

RELAXATION TECHNIQUES

There are both short-term and long-term relaxation response techniques that help control emotional (somatic) and worry (cognitive) test anxiety. Once these procedures are learned, the relaxation response will take the place of an anxiety response.

THE TENSING AND DIFFERENTIAL RELAXATION METHOD

1. Put your feet flat on the floor.
2. With your hands, grab underneath the chair.
3. Push down with your feet and pull up on your chair at the same time for about five seconds.
4. Relax for five to ten seconds.
5. Repeat the procedure two or three times.
6. Relax all your muscles except the ones that are actually used to take the test.

THE PALMING METHOD

1. Close and cover your eyes using the center of the palms of your hands.
2. Prevent your hands from touching your eyes by resting the lower parts of your palms on your cheekbones and placing your fingers on your forehead. Your eyeballs must not be touched, rubbed or handled in any way.
3. Think of some real or imaginary relaxing scene. Mentally visualize this scene. Picture the scene as if you were actually there, looking through your own eyes.
4. Visualize this relaxing scene for one to two minutes.

DEEP BREATHING

1. Sit straight up in your chair in a good posture position.
2. Slowly inhale through your nose.
3. As you inhale, first fill the lower section of your lungs and work your way up to the upper part of your lungs.
4. Hold your breath for a few seconds.
5. Exhale slowly through your mouth.
6. Wait a few seconds and repeat the cycle.

LONG-TERM RELAXATION TECHNIQUES

The cue-controlled relaxation response technique is the best long-term relaxation technique. It is presented on side two of the audiocassette *How To Reduce Test Anxiety* (Nolting, 1986). Cue-controlled relaxation means you can induce your own relaxation based on repeating certain cue words to yourself. In essence, you are taught to relax and then silently repeat cue words, such as "I am relaxed." After

enough practice you can relax during tests.

NEGATIVE SELF-TALK

Negative self-talk (cognitive anxiety) is defined as the negative statements you tell yourself before and during tests. Negative self-talk causes students to lose confidence and to give up on tests. Students need to change their negative self-talk to positive self-talk without making unrealistic statements.

During tests, positive self-talk can build confidence and decrease your test anxiety. Using positive self-talk before a test can help reduce your test anxiety and improve your grades.

EXAMPLES OF NEGATIVE SELF-TALK:

- "No matter what I do, I will not pass the course."
- "I am no good at math, so why should I try?"
- "I cannot remember the answers or I have forgotten how to do the problems. I am going to fail this test."
- "I failed this course last semester, and I am going to flunk out again this semester."

EXAMPLES OF POSITIVE SELF-TALK

- "I failed the course last semester, but I can now use my study/ math skills to pass this course."
- "I went blank on the last test, but I now know how to reduce test anxiety."
- "I know that with hard work, I will pass math."
- "I prepared for this test and will do the best I can."
- "I feel good about my self and my abilities. I am not going to worry about that difficult problem. I'm going to use all my test time and check for careless errors. Even if I don't get the grade I want on this test, it is not the end of the world."

THOUGHT-STOPPING TECHNIQUES

Some students have difficulty stopping their negative self-talk. These students cannot just tell themselves to eliminate those thoughts. These students need to use a thought-stopping technique to overcome the worry and become relaxed.

To stop your thoughts in the classroom or during a test, silently shout to yourself "Stop" or "Stop thinking about that." After your *silent shout*, either relax yourself or repeat one of your positive self-talk statements. You may have to *shout* to yourself several times during a test or while doing homework to control negative self-talk. After every shout, use a different relaxation technique/scene or positive self-talk statement.

Thought stopping works because it interrupts the worry response before it can cause high anxiety or negative emotions. During the interruption, you can replace negative self-talk with positive self-talk statements or relaxation. Students with high worry anxiety should practice this technique three days to a week before taking a test. Contact the campus counselor if you have additional questions about how to reduce test anxiety/negative self-talk statements.

REFERENCE:

Paul D. Nolting, Ph.D., *Math Study Skills Workbook, Your Guide to Reducing Test Anxiety and Improving*