

Dealing with Test Anxiety

The first step to help you deal with test anxiety is to clarify whether you suffer from anxiety related to taking tests, or whether you get anxious when taking tests because you have not prepared. In either case, appropriate preparation will be immensely helpful, but for those who truly suffer from “test anxiety,” the following section entitled “Anxiety Coping Strategies” will be particularly important.

Preparation Strategies

- Be smart about how you study – avoid cramming! This is not the time to try to learn a great deal of material in a short amount of time. Develop a strategy for combining all the information presented over the semester, and then focus on mastering the main points.
- Start preparing far enough in advance so that you are able to identify any areas you do not understand so that you can get the help you need.
- Organize your time for studying. Try to pick times when you are not likely to be interrupted or distracted.
- Make your study area comfortable and uncluttered.
- Find a location where you are less likely to be interrupted or distracted. If you can't find an ideal location, figure out a way to minimize disturbances and distractions (for example, if you have to study at home when the children are awake, arrange for another adult to take charge of the children to keep them from interrupting you.)
- When studying, ask yourself what questions are likely to be asked and answer them by using ideas from lectures, textbooks, and handouts.
- Avoid speaking with students or other people who express negativity and/or anxiety, or who will distract you from your preparation.
- Have all the materials you will need for the test gathered together the night before the exam.

Self-Care

- Stay away from drugs and alcohol (including caffeine – too much caffeine will keep you awake, but is likely to produce a state of jitteriness that will contribute to your anxiety and impair your ability to concentrate).
- Exercise is useful for working off the physical effects of anxiety in the body, and is said to sharpen the mind.
- Eat three healthy meals a day.
- Get plenty of sleep, especially the night before the exam. Staying up late studying (or for any other reason) the night before the exam will hurt more than help.
- Engage in activities that are relaxing to you.

Helpful Attitudes

- Remind yourself that you have made a healthy choice to address your test anxiety and that you have done a good job preparing.
- Visualize yourself being successful.

- Stop negative thoughts and worrying. When you find your mind turning to these types of thoughts – literally hold your hand up and say “STOP! I have prepared and I am going to do fine.”
- Stay relaxed and comfortable, but alert. If you find yourself getting anxious, concentrate on taking deep slow breaths (all the way down into your belly) and then slowly exhaling. See attached instructions for “Eliciting the Relaxation Response.”

Exam Day

- Eat a healthy meal before the exam.
- Recommended foods = fresh fruits and vegetables
- Foods to avoid = processed foods, carbonated soft drinks, chocolate, eggs, fried foods, junk food, sugar, white flour products, foods with preservatives, and heavy spices.
- Do something relaxing the hour before the test.
- Try to arrive at the test location early so that you can relax and mentally prepare yourself. It may help to review your notes one final time, but do not cram – it will only increase your anxiety and may end up confusing you.
- Avoid any classmates who generate anxiety and may upset your relaxed state of mind.
- While waiting for the exam to begin, if you find your anxiety building use deep breathing and distract yourself by reading the newspaper, a magazine, or a book.

During the Test

- Review the test and read the directions twice – many people miss important information on a first read-through.
- If possible, write down any lists, diagrams, tables, etc. that you will find useful on the back of the test for later.
- Answer the easy questions first. This will improve your confidence.
- Next answer the questions with the highest point values.
- Leave the most difficult questions, or the ones with the least points for last.
- Multiple-Choice Questions – first eliminate the answers you know are wrong. If you are unsure, rely on your first impressions – they are more likely to be correct. Beware of tricky words, such as “only,” “always,” “never,” or “most.”
- Essay questions – first make a short outline to help you organize your thoughts, then begin with a summary sentence. The first paragraph should present a summary of what you are going to say, including the main points you intend to make. (If you run out of time, the teacher will at least know what you intended to cover). Then finish the essay by discussing each of your main points in detail – provide specific facts, examples, or quotations from your notes and readings.
- Wear a watch and check your time throughout. If you are running out of time, concentrate on those questions you know you can answer well.
- After you have finished, if you have time, review your answers before you turn the exam in. Make sure you answered all the questions, and check for misspelled words, grammatical errors,

or math mistakes. Be very cautious about changing an answer unless you are certain your first answer was incorrect. Remember, first impressions are generally correct.

Anxiety Coping Strategies

- Change your fear-based or negative thoughts to statements that will be helpful to you. For example:
 - “I have done a good job preparing so I should do fine.
 - “I can be anxious later, now is the time to focus on the exam.”
 - “I don’t have to be perfect.”
- Use deep breathing to induce the relaxation response. (See instructions below).
- Focus on answering each question, not on your grade or how other students are doing.
- Tense and relax your muscles systematically throughout your body.
- If fearful thoughts arise, simply change the focus of your thinking back to the exam question, then the next question, and the next – step by step.
- Expect some anxiety and look at it as a reminder that you just want to do your best. If it starts to feel unmanageable, remind yourself that you have tools now to cope with it.

Relaxation Response Instructions

- Sit in a comfortable place (do not lie down).
- Once you have settled into a comfortable position, begin to slow your breathing. Focus your attention on the inhalation as you breathe in, and on the exhalation as you breathe out. After you have taken several deep slow breaths, start to concentrate on taking the inhalations all the way down into your belly. If you are doing it properly, as you inhale your belly should expand (as if you are slightly pregnant). On the exhalation, your belly should return to its normal state. Continue to simply focus your attention on your breathing – each inhalation and each exhalation.
- It can be helpful, especially in stressful situations, to add words to the inhalation and exhalation. For example, on the inhalation you can say (silently to yourself) “inhaling peace;” “inhaling relaxation;” or “inhaling confidence,” etc., and on the outbreath you can silently say “exhaling stress,” “exhaling fear,” or “exhaling anxiety,” etc.
- It is quite normal for thoughts to come and go as you elicit the relaxation response. Simply note that your mind has wandered, ignore the thoughts, and gently return your attention to your breathing.

After the Test

- Analyze what worked and keep those strategies for future use.
- Analyze what did not work and decide what needs to be modified so that these strategies can work better, or come up with new approaches completely.
- Save your test to use as a study guide for future tests.
- Reward yourself!!! Try not to dwell on what didn’t go well (if anything). Focus on the fact that you chose to learn how to cope with test anxiety, and remember that any behavior change is a process. You need to practice in order to do anything well! It will get easier and easier over time.