

Overcoming Test Anxiety

Test anxiety is an uneasiness or apprehension experienced before, during, or after an examination because of concern, worry, or fear. Almost everyone experiences some anxiety. But some students find that anxiety interferes with their learning and test taking to such an extent that their grades are seriously affected.

What can be done about it?

Fortunately, there is a great deal that you can do to keep the anxiety from interfering with your performance. First, it's important to know that you don't have to eliminate it entirely. It helps to be "up" for exams. You just want to reduce the anxiety to a manageable level.

Getting prepared for the exam is more than half the battle. Attend all of your classes, find out what you're expected to know and when the exams are scheduled. Keep up with your work so that you can avoid "cramming" for exams. Become more efficient in your study habits. Have a study schedule that makes use of "wasted time". Study in a location where you can concentrate, get interested in the material, and give it your complete attention. Use a method such as SQ3R (Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Review) for reading your textbooks. Make flashcards and review them often. Learn how to take good notes. Go over them right after class and review periodically. Make outlines and summary sheets. Ask yourself, "What is the important information?" Being in a study group with motivated classmates is often helpful. Most colleges have Reading and Writing Centers to help you improve your study and test taking skills. Free tutoring is also usually available. In general, organized, self-confident students with efficient study habits may actually spend less time studying than others who receive lower grades.

So How Do You Get To Be Self-Confident?

1. Research shows that the **self-talk** of test-anxious students almost always tends to be negative and self-defeating. "Everyone in this

class is smarter and faster than I am." "I always mess up on tests."
"If I don't do well on this exam, then I'll flunk the course." "These
are trick questions." "This is a weed-out course."

Become aware of what you say to yourself. Try writing your
negative thoughts and then disputing each one with a positive
statement. Start to encourage yourself as you would a friend.
Repeating your positive statements to yourself will help reprogram
your mind for success instead of for failure.

2. Other Techniques:

Visualize yourself doing well and reaching your goals.

Aim for an A level of understanding. Don't overprotect
yourself by saying you'll be lucky to get a C, so why study
more?

Try not to compare yourself with others.

Become an expert in learning what is going well and what you
can do to improve. Collect data by keeping a journal.

Reward yourself after studying instead of getting involved in
avoidance behaviors.

Practice relaxing (progressive relaxation, self-hypnosis, guided
imagery, etc.) so that relaxation becomes an automatically
learned response.

Aim for a state of relaxed concentration. When you
concentrate, you have all of your energy focused on your
work with none wasted on worry.

Take care of yourself by eating well and getting enough sleep.

Plan time to exercise regularly and do it.

3. Test Taking Strategies

Before:

Take a practice test the day before with conditions as much like
the test as possible.

Review your summary sheets for an overall view of the material. Recite in your own words

Get enough sleep. Avoid caffeine which increases anxiety.

Remember to encourage yourself and STOP critical statements.

Give yourself time to feel composed and to be on time for the exam. Avoid anxious classmates who are talking about the exam.

During:

Look over the entire test, READ THE DIRECTIONS, plan your approach, and schedule your time.

Start with the easiest question first.

Focus your attention on the test. Don't waste time and energy worrying, thinking about the consequences of not doing well, or wondering what others are doing.

If you don't know an answer, mark the question.

Suggest to yourself that you probably studied it and the answer will come to you when you get back to it.

If you start to feel anxious, practice your relaxation techniques. Use anxiety as a cue to relax. Close your eyes, take three deep breaths and then back to the task.

Essay Exams. Organize your thoughts in a brief outline. Look for key words such as compare, contrast, describe, identify. Start with a short summary or topical sentence and then make your points. Don't ramble. Remember what the professor emphasized.

Objective (short-answer) Exams. Think of your own answer before looking at the choices provided. Eliminate clearly wrong answers and make an educated guess (unless there is a severe penalty for wrong answers). After you have answered those you know, return to those you checked. Think about only one question at a time. After you have

answered those you know, return to those you checked.

If your time is running out, concentrate on those questions you know well and/or have the most weight.

Use all the time allowed for reviewing your answers, completing ideas. Only change answers if you are sure of yourself.

After:

Reward yourself for having tried. Don't go over the test questions with others. No matter how the test went, you can learn from the returned exam.

Final Thoughts

List the resources which are available: tutoring, extra-help, reading and writing center, etc.

List at least three specific steps which you can take now to meet your goals. (Check those suggestions you plan to follow).

If you are still experiencing test anxiety after using these suggestions, you may want to meet with a counselor.

Brochure Author: Barbara Probert, Ph.D. **Series Editor:** Jaquelyn Liss Resnick, Ph.D. **Published by:** University of Florida Counseling Center 301 Peabody Hall, Gainesville FL 32611 (352) 392-1575 © 2003