

Overcoming Test Anxiety

Many students feel anxious before a test, especially a final exam. A small amount of test stress is normal and can actually be helpful – it motivates you to study more and keeps you focused. But serious test anxiety can interfere with your ability to demonstrate what you know on a test and jeopardize your grades.

Physical symptoms of test anxiety may include headaches, nausea, elevated blood pressure, mind going blank, sweating, poor concentration and nervousness.

Test anxiety usually stems from one of two causes:

1. **Poor preparation** -- Knowing you do not have a good understanding of the information on which you are being tested. This can trigger panic attacks. Cramming for the test makes you realize how much information you don't know and don't have time to learn.
2. **Past experiences** – Having experiences that shook your confidence, such as poor grades on past tests or negative comments and attitudes from others. You can help yourself overcome test anxiety by preparing yourself emotionally, physically and mentally.

Emotional Preparation

- Seek support and cooperation from friends and family.
- Replace negative self-talk with positive statements.
- Instead of: "I never should have taken this class. I'll probably fail. I blew the last test. I'll never catch up now. I never do well on tests;" try: "I'm ready. I know the information. I've been using good study techniques. I've been to all the classes and kept up with the work. Now is my chance to show what I know."
- Use relaxation techniques such as deep breathing to slow down your body's systems when you feel yourself begin to panic.
- Study with a partner who has a positive outlook and can give you encouragement and affirmation. Stay away from classmates who have a negative attitude about the class.

Physical Preparation

- Get a good night's sleep before the test – being rested and alert will be of more benefit than staying up all night cramming. Exhaustion will contribute to your anxiety.
- Don't go into the test hungry, but avoid junk food, especially sugars.
- Exercise is a good stress buster. Try taking a brisk walk before the test.
- Get to the classroom a few minutes early and do some relaxation exercises before the test begins.
- Try to ignore other students who have last minute anxiety. Stay focused!

Mental Preparation

- Organize your materials for studying
- Use good basic study skills
- Use techniques for studying that are appropriate to your learning style – flash cards and diagrams work well for visual learners, reciting material aloud or studying with a partner works well for auditory learners
- Use good time management to schedule several study sessions to prepare for the test – repetition is the key to remembering information

- Use your notes and text to try to anticipate test questions. Attend any review sessions that are offered. If none are offered, ask the professor to have one, or form a study group. Check with the Tutoring Lab about offering a study group run by a tutor.
- Never miss the class before a test – that’s your chance to ask questions. Find out as much as possible about the test format and what the test will cover.
- Over-prepare – study past the point of recognition to the point of recall. Many students go over and over the information in their notes until everything looks fairly familiar. This may be enough if you only have to recognize a correct answer when you see it (matching or multiple choice, for instance), but may be inadequate if you must come up with the answer on your own or explain a concept.

During the Test

- Quickly look over the whole test before you begin and determine how you need to budget your time. This will reduce worry over whether or not you will have time to finish the test.
- Concentrate on the test instead of on yourself. Become an active test taker. Circle direction words and underline key terms in directions and questions. This helps you stay focused on the task and avoid anxiety.
- Mouth the questions or read them aloud in a whisper. This activates your hearing and asks another of your senses to help you stay focused on the question.
- Use a blank paper or your arm to block off the rest of the test. This allows you to concentrate on the question at hand, and not on how much further you have to go.
- If you feel yourself getting anxious in the middle of the test, stop, close your eyes and do some deep breathing or other relaxation technique to re-center yourself before you go on.
- If noise in the room distracts you, try wearing ear plugs.
- Try to ignore what other students are doing – especially if some begin turning their tests in quickly. You earn points for correct answers, not speed!
- Go through the entire test, answering questions you are sure of first. This will build your confidence and prevent you from getting bogged down and wasting time on one question. Then go back to more difficult questions.
- Don’t leave questions blank – make your best educated guess.

(Adapted from Shenandoah University.)

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