

TEST ANXIETY

Most of us experience some level of uneasiness or tension before and/or during a test. A small amount of tension or stress is expected. Sometimes that nervousness works in our favor, motivating us. However, in larger amounts that tension can interfere or even impair our capacity to think, plan, and perform on tests. The following information will help you to cope and overcome test anxiety.

The first question I ask students consulting for test anxiety is whether their anxiety is a result of lack of preparation, or a consequence of overreacting/panicking during testing. Anxiety produced by inadequate preparation is easy to understand, and can be eliminated with appropriate studying. (Hints on how to improve your study skills are presented in the [Study Skills](#) screen of this program).

If you are adequately prepared but still overreact or panic, you are suffering from test anxiety. In this screen, we will review the steps that will help you to overcome its effects. These steps are:

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BEFORE THE TEST

- **PREPARATION.** Preparation is a key element for reducing anxiety. The higher your level of preparation, the lower your level of anxiety. Moreover, getting ready for your test, increases your self- confidence.
- **NO CRAMMING.** Avoid cramming for a test. This is an ineffective way of studying. If you cram the night before you might be able to pass some parts of your

test, but you will remember nothing afterwards (and in most cases that information will be included in your final.) Trying to learn weeks worth of material the day before the test does not work either. Usually this is not a good time to learn much because you feel anxious. You feel pressured, and probably guilty, for studying at the last minute, therefore you cannot concentrate very well. Please do not tell me that when you study ahead of time you do worse than when you study the day before. Years of research on how to study are against you! If this happens to you it is because you are either, studying in advance without learning, or you have developed the negative habit of learning under pressure. Both are ineffective ways of learning, and both can easily create anxiety.

- **REVIEW ALL THE INFORMATION.** Study from your book, notebook, and any other materials used class. Combine their information. Work on mastering the main, as well as specific concepts presented in your class.
- **ASK YOURSELF QUESTIONS.** This method is well explained in the Study Skills screen of the Counseling Center program. When studying, transform the headings into questions, and answer them using the different sources of information used in class. Ask yourself what kind of questions your instructor may ask you. Try to answer them too. Moreover, ask your instructor for samples of previous tests, and practice with them.
- **USE FLASH CARDS.** Yes, you can use this type of help to organize your study. This kind of help will allow you to allocate your time in an effective way. You will be able to determine what you already know, and spend more time reviewing those materials that need more studying.



THINKING STRAIGHT ABOUT YOUR TEST

CHANGE THE WAY YOU THINK ABOUT STUDYING. Changing the way you think about studying can improve your performance. Studying -and grades- are not a measure of your self-worth. You may be investing too much of your personal definition on studying and grades. This kind of thinking can lead you to see studying as an insurmountable task. These kinds of beliefs are very effective in creating anxiety and stress. And these reactions can reduce, in turn, your capacity to concentrate, and learn. Confirming that studying is an impossible task for you! (Does the concept "vicious circle" ring a bell?)

- **PUT YOUR TEST IN PERSPECTIVE.** A test is only a test. Keep in mind that there will be others. This will help you remove part of the emotional charge we put on our tests, reducing your stress, and allowing you to study better.
- **ELIMINATE NEGATIVE SELF-TALK.** Avoid thinking of yourself in a negative

way. Avoid getting entangled in negative aspects related with studying. Focus on what needs to be done and do it. You will be surprised how much time students spend doing everything else but studying. And negative thoughts are an example of "everything else."

- **INVEST TIME IN PLANNING.** Plan ways to improve your studying. Evaluate your plan accordingly with your performance. Plan ways to keep what you did right; and plan ways to improve what can be improved.
- **PUT YOUR GRADE IN PERSPECTIVE.** Your grade is not necessarily a reflection of your preparation. Most of my students believe that the success of a test anxiety reduction program should be measured by the grades obtained. The reality is that your grades will not improve immediately. It will take time and more than one test to see that kind of results. Therefore, your performance should be evaluated against what you did. If you had a good plan, and you stick to it, that is what really counts; even if the grade was not as high as you would have liked it to be. You might have improved significantly, but the test may have been more difficult than expected. The reverse is also possible, you may have failed your plan and still get a good grade. (E.G., the test included those questions you knew all about.) Again, you should use more than your actual grade to evaluate your performance.
- **DEVELOP REASONABLE EXPECTATIONS.** Take your tests one at a time. Set realistic goals. Show as much as you know as you can. Hope for a result that matches the stage of development you have reached at this point. Unrealistic expectations will only lead to frustration, which, in turn, will become a good excuse to give up.



TAKING CARE OF YOUR BASIC NEEDS

- **KEEP IN MIND THAT YOU ARE MORE THAN A TEST TAKER.** Students concerned about tests usually neglect other aspects of themselves. Do not forget that taking a test is only one of the important things in your life. You should also care for your biological, emotional, psychological, and social needs.
- **"MENS SANA IN CORPORE SANA."** "Healthy mind in healthy body." Exercise. Stay in good shape. Eat consciously. Keep up with your recreational and social activities. All contribute to your well-being and capacity to buffer test anxiety.
- **REMEMBER THAT "FOOD FOR THOUGHT" IS ONLY A LITERARY EXPRESSION.** More often than not you will see students abusing food (e.g., cookies) or beverages (e.g., coffee.) It looks as if they believe that this will help them in studying or taking tests. In fact, the result is often the opposite. A stomach ache will keep you from concentrating. Caffeine may give you the jitters. You may end up feeling light-headed.
- **DOSIFY YOUR STUDY.** Study for short periods of time (see the Study Skills screen for more information.) Follow a moderate pace. Do not forget that your mind

can take more of the same forever. Take breaks.

- **REST THE NIGHT BEFORE THE TEST.** Distract your mind with activities other than studying. Rest. Get plenty of sleep. A refreshed mind will allow you to do your best. An overly tired mind will not function at its best. (This is **the reason why studying overnight usually does not pay off**).
- **DO NOT ABUSE YOURSELF.** Once you feel you know what you need to know, quit studying, and do something relaxing. The only reason why you keep studying way after you are reasonably prepared is your lack of confidence. Be patient. Learning when to stop takes time. Accomplishing it boosts your sense of self-confidence and self-esteem.



GETTING READY

- **FACE THE DAY OF THE TEST WITH PRIDE.** Take responsibility for your actions. If you studied enough, be proud of yourself. What really matters at this point is not the potential grade, but the fact that you did what you were supposed to do. This is an accomplishment in itself!
- **EAT A SENSIBLE BREAKFAST.** Do not abuse food before the test. Some students use food as a way to reduce anxiety. Indulging in food on the day of the test may backfire on you, impairing your performance by making you feel physically uncomfortable (or sick) during the test.
- **RELAX DURING THE HOUR BEFORE THE TEST.** Do something relaxing the hour before the test. It is too late to try to learn what you did not learn before. Last minute cramming will cloud what you have learned before. It will also undermine your confidence.
- **ARRIVE AT THE CLASSROOM EARLY, BUT DO NOT STAY THERE.** Arrive at the classroom early if you want to select a good seat (e.g., a seat away from distractions.) Then, go out of the room and use the remaining time to walk and relax.
- **AVOID "STRESS-CARRIERS."** Politely avoid classmates who produce anxiety and affect your disposition to the test. Do not let them scare, stress, or upset you.
- **BRING A "STRESS-SAVER" WITH YOU.** Bring a magazine or newspaper to read if waiting for the test stresses you.
- **USE PHYSICAL RELAXATION.** Learn and use tensing and relaxing techniques to fight off the tension and anxiety.



FACING THE TEST

- **CHECK YOUR INTERNAL STATE.** How are you? How is your anxiety level? If it is high or moderately high, take some time to relax. Even though it takes time away from your test, relaxing increases your chances to do a more efficient job, saving you time instead.
- **COACH YOURSELF.** Sometimes students get anxious after finding out that do not know the answer to the first or second question. Tell yourself that you are going to do your best. Tell yourself that you are going to answer the questions you know first, then the questions you are not really sure about, and, finally, the questions you do not know. Follow your plan!
- **REVIEW YOUR TEST.** Before you begin answering the questions, review the entire test. Read the instructions carefully; twice if necessary. Stick to your plan, begin working on the easiest questions first.



DURING THE TEST

- **OUTLINE ANSWERS ON ESSAY QUESTIONS.** Develop a short outline of your answers for essay questions. This will help you to organize your answer, avoid irritating repetitions, and skip circular arguments.
- **GIVE SHORT ANSWERS FOR SHORT-ANSWER QUESTIONS.** Answer short and to the point. Use specific terms and ideas. If you cannot remember a technical term, describe it in your own words.
- **READ OPTIONS CAREFULLY.** Read all the options of multiple choice questions. Eliminate the most obvious. Use qualifying words such as "always," or "only," to eliminate others. If unsure, rely on your first hunch, then mark the question with an asterisk or a star and move on. If you have time at the end, go back and review your marked questions.
- **WEAR YOUR WATCH.** Do not rush through the test. Keep track of the time. Pace yourself. If you are running out of time, concentrate on those questions which you can answer. Make sure you match the number of the question with the number of your answer on the Scantron.
- **DO NOT GET STUCK.** Do not get stuck on one question. Skip it and solve the next one. Go back to the question after you finish answering those you can. Remember that you do not get points for trying. * **RELAX YOUR TENSION.** If your tension is hampering your capacity to do your best, tense and relax your body as needed during the test. This exercise releases your tension. Breathing deeply, in and out, also helps to release anxiety. For more information on relaxation, see the [Relaxation](#), [Breathing Techniques](#), and [Biofeedback](#) screens in this program.
- **ASK QUESTIONS.** Ask for more information if you are not sure about a question in your test. Asking your instructor a question can also help to distract you and reduce your anxiety. * **TALK TO YOURSELF.** If your anxiety continues, tell

yourself phrases like "I can be anxious later, now I am going to continue my test." Use any type of internal dialogue (nobody else need to hear you) that can help you do better in your test.

- **IF WORSE COME TO WORSE, USE ANY OTHER LEGAL TRICK TO DISTRACT YOURSELF.** If anxiety continues, use any acceptable way to distract yourself from it. Request permission to go to the bathroom or get a drink, etc. If nothing else works, go sharpen your pencil!



AFTER THE TEST

- **REWARD YOURSELF.** Whether you did well or not, reward yourself for taking, and surviving your test! You deserve it.
- **LATER ON.** Evaluate your study plan. Were you prepared for it? Were you able to control your anxiety and relax. Find out what you did right and repeat it the next time. Find out what needs more work. Do not dwell on your mistakes. You are supposed to make some. Use them as a guide for what needs to be improved, and work on improving them.
- **THEN...** Develop an improved plan and begin studying for your next test!



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