

# TEST ANXIETY

Some students perform poorly on tests for reasons other than lack of preparation or poor study skills. This common problem is called test anxiety and it occurs when students are too nervous to recall learned material during an exam. If a student has not adequately studied for a test and feels very nervous, that does not qualify as true test anxiety. Test anxiety may be caused by a number of factors such as poor test performance in the past, lack of confidence, feelings of extreme pressure or fear of failure, nervousness about having to perform or a number of other problems. For many people, test anxiety is often a long term problem that began as far back as elementary school. For others, it starts in college. Whatever the origins of test anxiety, it is important to understand that a small amount of anxiety is both normal and beneficial. It helps improve motivation and often improves performance. Too much tension, however, hinders performance and becomes damaging. If you experience extreme nervousness, dread or fear before exams and have put forth your best effort to prepare in advance, you may be suffering from test anxiety. Simply put, test anxiety prevents you from doing your best on exams.

Symptoms of test anxiety can be separated into 2 categories: mental stress & physical stress.

- **MENTAL STRESS** - includes your thoughts and worries about tests (before, during or after tests)

Examples:      Negative thoughts - *"I can't pass this test."*  
                    All or nothing thinking - *"I always fail tests!"*  
                    Pressure - *"I have to make an A on this test."*  
                    Inability to concentrate  
                    Personal myths - *"I'm not the brains in the family."*  
                    Irrational beliefs - *"Everyone in class can tell I failed."*  
                    Mind reading - *"My teacher thinks I'm stupid because I made a mistake."*

- **PHYSICAL STRESS** - includes physical feelings, sensations and tensions

Examples:      - Muscle tension, Nausea, Shortness of breath  
                    - Perspiration, Clammy hands and feet, Rapid heartbeat  
                    - Blurry or tunnel vision, Restlessness, Increased blood pressure  
                    - Heightened awareness of surroundings (especially the behavior of people sitting nearby, watching the clock, awareness of when others finish their test, classroom noise, etc)  
                    - Mental blocks or a general inability to perform complex intellectual tasks

## HOW IS TEST ANXIETY DIFFERENT FROM FEAR OR OTHER ANXIETIES?

- Fear is not related to a specific object or event where there is real danger (i.e. fear of snakes or someone holds a gun to your head)
- Test anxiety is more intense than average nervousness before a test and is not subject specific (i.e. only occurs during math tests)
- Not caused by lack of preparation or poor test testing skills (although, these circumstances will likely cause someone with test anxiety more nervousness)
- The anxiety is basically limited to test taking scenarios (general anxiety will overlap into other areas of life)

## HOW CAN I OVERCOME TEST ANXIETY?

### Step #1: Change the Way You Think

The following techniques may be very helpful in changing the way you think:

Get really okay with worst case scenario: You need to play out in your mind the worst thing that can happen if you fail and then you MUST see how life is going to be just fine (i.e. you will still have friends and family that love you, you can always do better on the next exam, you will be alive, etc.).

Keep it in Perspective: Remember that it is just a test, nothing more. It is a measure of how you did, on that day, at that specific time, and doesn't necessarily represent what you know or who you are as a person or student. It just a piece of paper with words on it, and all the evaluator wants to know is that you know the material. Keep it at that level. It is not war, disease, poverty or crime.

Create a safety net: What is your back-up plan? Just like creating a fire and safety plan, you hope you never need it, but it is there just in case. Psychologically this is an important exercise to getting over the test anxiety. You have to see that not everything is riding on this exam.

Thought Stopping: Tell yourself to "STOP!" when you notice that your thoughts are racing and your mind is cluttered with worries or fears. You can say stop to yourself or out loud if appropriate.

Challenge Absolute Thinking: When you notice yourself saying things like, “I always fail,” challenge your logic. Do you absolutely always fail? Probably not! Perhaps you could try saying “sometimes” instead of “always.” Be careful of words like *always, never, all* or *every*. Those words don’t give you any room for improvement.

Let Go of Irrational Personal Myths & Beliefs: Example: “I’m just not the smart person in the family.” What kind of sense does this make? Isn’t there room for more than one smart person in your family? Be cautious of those old sayings or dialogues from your past. If you had a hard time in 6th grade and your brother made all A’s, does that mean you are an incompetent student for all eternity? Our past failures do not have to stay with us forever. Watch out for old family scripts too. We may have been labelled as the “ditsy blond” of the family or the “all brawn no brains” jock. If we believe it, it will probably come true. LET IT GO!

Be Positive & Praise Yourself: Avoid negative pressure such as, “I have to pass this test.” Instead say, “I would like to pass this test. I am prepared. I know I can do it.” If you can create an affirmation for yourself and read it daily, it will help you.

Avoid Making the Situation Worse: Avoiding studying and preparation makes a tense situation worse. You can increase your confidence by preparing as much as possible. Go to class everyday, take notes and stay in touch with your teacher. Your instructor may be able to offer some good advice or suggest a tutor.

Visualize Success: Mentally picture yourself successfully taking the test. Be specific - visualize the scene in great detail including the surroundings, the test itself, people around you, etc. Imagine you confidently answering all the questions correctly, feeling relaxed and later receiving an A.

Concentrate: Practice focusing all your attention on a specific object. Look at each little detail of something like your hand. Notice the shape and texture. Concentrate completely on the one object and don’t let your thoughts wander to anxiety-prone areas. Use this as practice to improve your concentration AND to help you meditate. When exam time comes, you can do this technique at your desk prior to the exam to help you relax and orient yourself. This is similar to a mantra, which is a word or syllable repeated in meditation (i.e. peace, om, relax, success, etc.).

## **Step #2: Relax Your Body**

Use the following techniques to help learn how to relax & use them regularly:

Deep Breathing: You can relax your body by focusing your attention on your breathing. Find a comfortable sitting or reclined position. Concentrate on beginning to relax and exhale all air. Breathe in deeply through your nose and exhale slowly out of your mouth. Increasingly slow each breath and try breathing in and out to a count of 5. Couple this technique with visualization and/or concentration. Imagine all your anxiety flowing out with each exhale or silently repeat the word “r-e-l-a-x” as you exhale.

Deep Relaxation: Tense and relax each major muscle group of your whole body. The key here is to notice the difference between the competing states of relaxation and tension. You can't be both at the same time! Exaggerate the existing tension a bit and then concentrate on letting it go. You can start with your scalp or brow and move all the way down to your toes. This exercise is designed to help you become aware of your physical tension. Keep in touch with your body- it will tell you when you are tense.

Guided Imagery: Relax completely and take a quick fantasy trip. You may want to begin by using deep breathing techniques to help you relax initially. Find a comfortable position, close your eyes and relax your body. Next, imagine yourself in a beautiful, peaceful scene. Create as much of the scene as possible. Be specific and use all of your senses. For example, some people enjoy a sunny beach or peaceful mountain scene.

Aerobic Exercise: Do some kind of exercise that will get your heart beating at twice your normal rate and keep it beating at that rate for at least 15 to 20 minutes (check with your physician for guidance). Some examples include rapid walking, jogging, swimming, tennis, aerobic dance or basketball. Physical exercise is often very effective in relieving bodily tension.

**\*\*\*IMPORTANT TIP**: Physical relaxation exercises need to be used on a regular basis (often daily) so that when you need to relax, your body and mind will automatically be able to calm down. Turn relaxation exercises into a good habit. A habit takes about 4-6 weeks to become fully ingrained in your routine; so be patient. It takes a while to learn to be anxious during tests. So, it takes time to learn NOT to be anxious and feel mostly relaxed in testing situations. But, it can be done. If you need help learning these techniques, visit the Counseling Center. The counseling staff is trained to help you better manage test anxiety.

## TEST PREPARATION TIPS TO REDUCE ANXIETY:

- Approach the exam with confidence. Use whatever strategies you can to personalize success: visualization, logic, talking to your self, practice, team work, journaling, etc.  
View the exam as an opportunity to show how much you've studied and to receive a reward for the studying you've done.
- Be prepared! Learn your material thoroughly and organize what materials you will need for the test. Use a checklist.
- Choose a comfortable location in your classroom for taking the test, with good lighting and minimal distractions. You may need to move away from your normal seat, if possible.
- Allow yourself plenty of time, especially to do things you need to do before the test and still get there a little early. Avoid arriving very early. If the people in the exam room are anxious, either step outside the classroom until it is time to go in, or do some visualizations and create a “bubble” around you.
- Avoid thinking you need to cram just prior to the test since this typically spikes anxiety.
- Strive for a relaxed state of concentration. Avoid speaking with any fellow students who have not prepared, who express negativity or who will distract your preparation.
- A program of exercise is said to sharpen the mind.
- Get a good night's sleep the night before the exam.
- Don't go to the exam with an empty stomach. Fresh fruits and vegetables are often recommended to reduce stress. Stressful foods can include processed foods, artificial sweeteners, carbonated soft drinks, chocolate, eggs, fried foods, junk foods, pork, red meat, sugar, white flour products, chips and similar snack foods, foods containing preservatives or heavy spices.
- Take a small snack, or some other nourishment to help take your mind off of your anxiety. Avoid high sugar content (candy) and caffeine, which may aggravate your condition.

## DURING THE TEST:

- Read the directions carefully
- Budget your test taking time
- Change positions to help you relax
- If you go blank, skip the question and go on – circle it and come back to it later.
- If you're taking an essay test and you go blank on the whole test, pick a question and start writing. It may trigger the answer in your mind. Don't panic when students start handing in their papers. There's no reward for finishing first.

## **IF YOU FIND YOURSELF GETTING NERVOUS DURING THE TEST:**

- Relax; you are in control. Take slow, deep breaths
- Don't think about the fear. Pause: think about the next step and keep on task, step by step.
- Use positive reinforcement for yourself: Acknowledge that you have done, and are doing, your best.
- Expect *some* anxiety. It's a reminder that you want to do your best and can provide energy - just keep it manageable.
- Realize that anxiety can be a "habit" and that it takes practice to use it as a tool to succeed.

## **AFTER THE TEST, REVIEW HOW YOU DID:**

- List what worked, and hold onto these strategies. It does not matter how small the items are: they are building blocks to success.
- List what did not work for improvement.
- Celebrate that you are on the road to overcoming this obstacle.

**If you are aware that you have a problem with test anxiety**, be sure your instructor knows before any testing begins (and not the hour before!). They may be able to help!

## **Resources**

### BOOKS

Chin, Beverly, *How to Ace Any Test*, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2004.

Davis, Martha, Robbins-Eshelman, Elizabeth, & McKay, Matthew. *The Relaxation & Stress Reduction Workbook (5<sup>th</sup> edition)*. New Harbinger Publications, Inc., 2000.

Ellis, David. *Becoming a Master Student (10<sup>th</sup> edition)*. Houghton-Mifflin, 2002.

Phillips, Robert, *Reduce Your Test Anxiety!: 128 Strategies to Help You Make the Grade*, Balance Enterprises, Inc., 1996.

### WEBSITES

[www.aug.edu/counseling/testanxiety](http://www.aug.edu/counseling/testanxiety)

<http://ub-counseling.buffalo.edu/stresstestanxiety.shtm>

[www.howtostudy.org/resources\\_skill.php?id=16](http://www.howtostudy.org/resources_skill.php?id=16)

[www.sdc.uwo.ca/learning/mcanx](http://www.sdc.uwo.ca/learning/mcanx)

[www.wright.edu/cps/sudentsuccess/testanxiety.htm](http://www.wright.edu/cps/sudentsuccess/testanxiety.htm)

[www.studygs.net/tstprp8](http://www.studygs.net/tstprp8)

[www.campusblues.com/test.asp](http://www.campusblues.com/test.asp)

### AUDIO CASSETTES/CDS

Multiple relaxation recordings available from Whole Person Associates.

1-800-247-6789

[www.wholeperson.com](http://www.wholeperson.com)