

Test Anxiety

If you sometimes flub questions when you know the answer, if you freeze during tests, if you have difficulty sleeping as exams approach, if you tend to weep uncontrollably during finals week – then you might be suffering from test anxiety.

A little tension before a test is good. That tingly, butterflies in the stomach feeling you get from extra adrenaline can sharpen your awareness and keep you alert. Sometimes, however, the tension is damaging. When it is, you are suffering from test anxiety, a condition that prevents you from doing your best on exams.

The condition is characterized by feelings of nervousness, fear, or dread. Specific symptoms can include insomnia, loss (or increase) of appetite, and an inability to concentrate. Boredom is also a symptom of anxiety. A surface lack of interest in a subject may mask a deep seeded anxiety about future performance.

During an exam symptoms include confusion, panic, mental blocks, fainting, or nausea. Frequent yawning immediately before a test is a common reaction. Yawning looks like boredom but it's usually a sign of tension. Oxygen is not getting to the brain because the body is tense, and a yawn is one way your body increases its supply of oxygen. Symptoms after the test include mock indifference, (“*I answered all the multiple choice questions as None of the above because I was bored.*”), guilt (“*Why didn't I study more...*”), anger (“*The teacher never wanted me to pass this stupid course anyway.*”), blame (“*If only the textbook wasn't so dull.*”), or depression (“*It's hopeless, I'm just not smart enough.*”).

Stress Management

Two components:

- Test anxiety has two components, mental and physical. The mental component includes feelings, sensations and tensions.

The following techniques deal with both the physical and mental components of stress in any situation, whether it is test anxiety or stage fright.

Dealing with thoughts

Yell stop! *When you are aware that your thoughts are racing, your mind is cluttered with worries and fears, and your thoughts are spinning out of control, mentally yell, “Stop!” If you're in a situation that allows you, yell it out loud. This action is likely to break the cycle of worry. Once you've stopped if for a moment, you can use any one of the following techniques.*

1. *Daydream.* When you fill your mind with pleasant thoughts, there is no room left for anxiety. If you are worried about an upcoming test, substitute those worry thoughts with visions of what you like to do. Dream about being with a special friend or lying in the sun.
2. *Visualize Success.* Most of us live up to our own expectations, good or bad. If you spend a lot of time mentally rehearsing what you will do when you fail, you increase your chances for failure.

Once you've stopped the cycle of worry take time to rehearse what it will be like to succeed. Be very specific. Visualize taking the test successfully. The key to successfully using this tip is detail. Think of yourself in the classroom. Notice your surroundings. When you get the test, see yourself previewing it, looking at each question in every section. You discover that you know all the answers. Imagine yourself writing quickly and confidently. In your mind, watch yourself hand in the paper with confidence. Visualize your celebration when you find out you got an A. As soon as you realize

you are feeling anxious about an upcoming test, begin using this technique. The more you do this visualization, the better it will work.

3. *Focus.* Focus your attention on a specific subject. Examine details of a painting, study the branches of a tree, observe the face of your watch including the tiny scratches in the glass, listen to the sound of the lights in the room, listen to the air conditioner or the heating system, listen to the sounds made by other students or by yourself sitting at the desk. Touch the surface of the desk; rub your hand across the material of your shirt. Concentrate all your attention on one point. Don't leave any room in your mind for anxiety related thoughts.

This focusing is very similar to meditation techniques. The idea is to occupy your mind with some sensation (sight, hearing, touch) or a mantra. A mantra is a word or syllable that is continually repeated in meditation (ohm, love, yes, etc.).

4. *Praise yourself.* Talk to yourself in a positive way. Many of us take the first opportunity to say "Way to go, dummy, you don't even know the answer to the first question on the test." The alternative is to give yourself some loving encouragement.

Consider phrases like "I am very relaxed," "I'm answering these questions very well," "I'm writing very neatly," "I never forget anything and I have a lot of tools to help me recall." With positive self-talk, it is possible to feel that you are lying to yourself. An alternative is to consider that you're just prematurely telling the truth. Or, as the old saying goes, "Fake it until you make it."

5. *Consider the worst.* When you are worrying about something, rather than trying to stop worrying about it consider the very worst thing that could happen. Expand on your fear. Take the fear to the limit of absurdity. For example, if you're sitting in a test worrying about whether or not you're going to be successful, stop for a moment (consider yelling "stop!" under your breath without moving your lips). Imagine the catastrophic problems that might occur if you fail the test. You might say to yourself, "Well, if I fail this test, I might have to take it over and over again and then I might fail it again. And then, I might lose my financial aid and get kicked out of school for academic problems. And if I get kicked out of school I couldn't get a job so I'd start drinking and pretty soon I'd be a bum on skid row."

Generally, you start to chuckle when you see the absurdity. It's at this point that you can backtrack and find out what is a reasonable fear. In the testing situations, you worry that you might fail the entire class if you fail this test might be justified. That's probably as far as the rational fear will take you. At this point ask yourself, "Can I live with the worst, with what's rationally probable?" The answer is usually yes. If it's not, use another technique.

This method works because when you consider the worst that could happen, the cold facts are hardly ever as bad as those undefined fears. Shine a light on your fears and they may be more manageable.

Dealing with feelings

1. *Breathe.* You can calm physical sensations within the body by focusing your attention on your breathing. Concentrate on the air going in and out of your lungs. Experience it as it passes through your nose and mouth. Do this for two to five minutes. If you notice that you are taking short, shallow breaths, begin to take longer and deeper breaths. Fill your lungs and your abdomen, then release the air.

A visualization that can be effective when you are focusing on your breathing is to imagine yourself standing on the tip of your nose. Watch the breath pass in and out of your nose as if it were a huge ventilation fan for an underground mine.

2. *Scan your body.* Simple awareness is an effective technique to reduce the tension in your body. Sit comfortably and close your eyes. Focus your attention on the muscles in your feet and notice if they are relaxed. Tell the muscles in your feet that they can relax. Move up to your ankles and repeat this

procedure. Next go to your calves, thighs and buttocks, telling each group of muscles to relax. Do the same for your lower back, diaphragm, chest, upper back, neck, shoulders, jaw, face, upper arms, fingers, and scalp.

3. *Tense and Relax.* If you are aware of a particular tense part of your body, or if you discover tension when you are scanning your body, you can release this with the tense relax method. To do this, find a muscle that is tense and make it more tense. For example, if your shoulders are tense, pull them back, arch your back, and tense your shoulder muscles even more tightly, then relax. The net result is that you'll be aware of the relaxation and allow yourself to relax more. You can do the same thing with your legs, arms, chest, face, and neck. Clench your fists, squint your eyebrows, straighten your legs, tense your abdomen and then relax.
4. *Use guided imagery.* Relax completely and take a quick fantasy trip. Close your eyes, relax your body, and imagine yourself in a beautiful, peaceful, natural setting. Create as much of the scene as you can. Be specific. Use all your senses.

For example, you might imagine yourself at a beach. Hear the surf rolling in and the seagulls calling to each other. Feel the sun on your face and the cool sand between your toes. Smell the sea breeze. Feel the mist from the surf on your face. Notice the ships on the horizon and the rolling sand dunes. Some people find that a mountain scene or a lush meadow scene works well. You can take yourself to a place you've never been or recreate an experience out of your past. Find a place that works for you and practice getting there. When you become proficient you can return to it quickly for trips that may only last a minute, even while you are taking a test.

5. *Describe it.* Focus your attention on your anxiety. If you are feeling nauseous, or have a headache or pain in your abdomen, concentrate on that feeling. Describe it to yourself. Tell yourself how large it is, where it is located in your body, what color it is, what shape it is, what texture it is, how much water it might hold if it had volume, and how heavy it is. Be with it. Describe it in detail and don't resist it.

Oddly enough, if you can completely experience a physical sensation it will often disappear. This is a technique used by people suffering from severe untreatable pain.

6. *Exercise aerobically.* This is one technique that won't work in the classroom or while you're taking a test, but it's an excellent way to reduce body tension. Do some kind of exercise that will get your heart beating at twice your normal rate and keep it beating at that rate for 15 to 20 minutes. Aerobic exercises include rapid walking, jogging, swimming, tennis, handball, tag, football, basketball, or anything that gets your heart beating very quickly.

When these techniques don't work, when anxiety is serious, get help! If you become withdrawn, have frequent thoughts about death, get depressed and stay depressed for more than a few days, or have feelings of hopelessness, see a counselor.

Depression and anxiety are common among students. Suicide is the second leading cause of student deaths. This is a tragedy because the conditions are treatable. Many schools have counselors available or they can refer you to community agencies where inexpensive counseling is available.