

Test Taking Anxiety

Anxiety is created by expectations or thoughts about what is likely to happen. If you say negative things to yourself about your abilities, it produces a corresponding negative emotional reaction, anxiety.

Experiencing anxiety before and during an exam is a normal and expected part of student life. As your body responds to the stress associated with test taking, you may become slightly more aroused and alert. It is in this way that a little anxiety before and during a test may actually enhance your performance.

As anyone with significant test anxiety knows however, too much anxiety can sabotage your performance. Students with test anxiety often report difficulties with concentration, distractibility, and mental blocks, despite hours of exam preparation. They describe "knowing the material cold" the night before, only to find themselves "frozen" and unable to remember answers or respond during the actual exam. Bad exam experiences often compound the problem. Once a student "blocks" from anxiety during a test, s/he is likely to approach the next exam with even more anxiety. The presence of greater anxiety and pressure increases the likelihood that disabling test anxiety will recur. Once test anxiety occurs, it can become a vicious cycle, derailing satisfactory academic performance and grades despite the student's best efforts, ability, and motivation.

Fortunately, test anxiety can be helped, through a combination of improved study habits and test-taking skills, as well as practice with stress/anxiety management and coping strategies.

What does test anxiety feel like?

- Some students feel mainly physical distress symptoms, such as headaches, nausea, faintness, feeling too hot or too cold, etc.
- Others express more emotion, wanting to cry or laugh too much, or feeling angry or helpless.
- The major problem of test anxiety is usually its effect on thinking ability:
 - Having difficulty reading and understanding the questions on the exam paper.
 - Having difficulty organizing your thoughts.
 - Having difficulty retrieving key words and concepts when answering essay questions.
 - Doing poorly on an exam even though you know the material.
 - Going blank on questions or have racing thoughts that are difficult to control
 - Remembering the correct answers as soon as the exam is over.
- Although many students feel some level of anxiety when writing exams, most can cope with that anxiety and bring it down to a manageable level.

Symptoms of Test Anxiety

- Fear of failing before arriving to take the exam.

- Feeling tension as exam is being passed out.
- Physical symptoms such as:
 - increased heart rate
 - shortness of breath
 - perspiring, sweaty palms
 - headache
 - upset stomach
 - tense muscles
- Negative thinking such as: "I am going to fail", "I am dumb", "I shouldn't even bother taking the exam".
- "Blanking out" on information that you studied.
- Recalling information, upon leaving the class room or a short period later, that you "blanked out on" during the exam.
- Frustrated with your grade on the exam because you know you were well prepared.

What Causes Test Anxiety

- Lack of preparation as indicated by:
 - cramming the night before the exam.
 - poor time management.
 - failure to organize text information.
 - poor study habits.
- Worrying about the following:
 - past performance on exams.
 - how friends and other students are doing.
 - the negative consequences of failure.

Test Preparation

First, each student needs to assess his/her study skills and exam preparation methods. Although using inappropriate learning and study strategies can actually increase anxiety, effective study skills will provide a great foundation for beating test anxiety. It sounds obvious, but starting with regular class attendance and regular, advance class preparation helps. Trying to cram in six weeks worth of reading assignments all night before an exam is largely useless. You will end up exhausted, unable to think very clearly, and you probably will not have covered all the material anyway. Use a calendar, planner, or similar method to generally map out study and preparation time in the days/weeks before an exam. Research has shown that students learn best when they have shorter, but more frequent study periods, distributed over a longer period of time. This is called "distributed practice". It is also much easier to find the motivation to study/read course material for an hour than to do so when one feels pressured to sit for three or four hours at a time.

Use available resources. If you don't understand the material, ask questions. See your instructor during office hours if you are hesitant to ask a question during class. Most instructors will be happy to help if you ask, and if you demonstrate an interest in your own learning. If it helps you to study with others, form a regular study group to review class notes and reading. There is no better way to study than to have to present material to others.

PREPARATION FOR TAKING A TEST

1. When the test is scheduled, analyze how much material will be covered and how much time is needed to review.
2. Identify the material you have difficulty understanding and with which you may need assistance. Find answers to your questions as soon as possible.
3. Go over class notes and notes made when reading. Make additional notes from your textbooks to clarify the material.
4. Do not cram. Don't resort to frenzied, last minute preparation. Relax immediately before the exam, and arrive a few minutes ahead. Don't eat just before an exam.
5. Check your recall of main points and important facts by reciting them aloud.
6. Plan your studying so that you finish early and get a good rest on the night before an examination.
7. Complete a careful and thorough review, then try to forget about the test. Be confident -- you have done your best.

DURING THE EXAM

1. When the examination starts, take a few deep breaths, relax your body, clear your mind of all anxiety. You are now ready to take the test and to do well on it.
2. Read the entire exam carefully, especially the DIRECTIONS. Plan your approach and schedule your time. Timing is important. Do not rush. Answering ten questions poorly may give you a lower score than answering nine questions slowly but more completely. Be sure to allow some time to go over your answers, to correct spelling and punctuation errors and to fill in omissions.
3. Answer the questions about which you know the most first, leaving space for those you will work on later. Read each question very carefully. Be sure you follow the instructions.
4. Mark those questions which you cannot answer immediately. Suggest to yourself that you probably studied it and the answer will come to you when you get back to it.
5. 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.
6. 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.
7. When the test is over, forget it. If you studied each day and in your review, you should do well on your exams.

Use your time wisely, but use all your time. Don't rush through a test and leave early just to ease anxiety. Use the time to check your answers or to elaborate on what you have written.

Again, it may sound obvious, but you can't get credit for what your instructor can't read. On essay exams, slow down and make sure what you have written is legible!

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 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.

Stress Management

During the exam, try to manage your anxiety. If you find your mind going blank, close your eyes, and breathe deeply and slowly. Test anxiety sufferers usually have great imaginations, but they imagine all the possible negative consequences of doing poorly on a test. It's not uncommon for their negative "what-if" thinking to lead them to conclude that they will somehow be a lifelong failure and disappointment, not to mention a college flunk-out, all based on one exam. Managing test anxiety means managing "negative imagination", and channeling one's thoughts in more positive and realistic directions. Your future in college and life, and the approval of your family and friends does not depend on any one exam or any one course. Try to substitute more realistic thoughts for the negative ones. Focus on all that you CAN do to earn the grades you want.

Summary

What can you do to control test anxiety?

- Be **well prepared** for the test.
- Include as much **self-testing** in your review as possible.
- Maintain a **healthy lifestyle**: get enough sleep, good nutrition, exercise, some personal "down" time, and a reasonable amount of social interaction.

Lastly, use good stress management daily, not just before an exam. This means managing your time so that you can accomplish your academic work as well as socialize and have fun, while maintaining health through regular exercise, relaxation, and good nutrition.

You can take control of test anxiety so that your performance on a test reflects your real standing in that course. If interfering levels of test anxiety persist, however, talk to a counselor for some specialized help. Shepherd University Counseling Services are located in Gardiner Hall. You can call x5161 or email bbyers@shepherd.edu for an appointment.