

Test Anxiety

You nervously walk into the classroom and sit down at your desk. You prepare your space with your pencils, eraser and calculator. You know that you have studied hard for this test. You watch as the other students take their seats and anxiously wait for the test to be distributed.

Finally, the instructor passes out the exam. You write your name on the top of the test and look at the first problem. It is an easy question. The next problem is more difficult. You turn the page to the next problem and even though you have practiced a 100 of problems just like this one, for some strange reason, you can't think of the formula for this problem, or the next problem, or the next one. Oh no...

Suddenly it is clear...you can't do any of the problems on the test. Your heart beats fast, and you feel sick to your stomach. All the information you studied over the past weeks is gone...you are unable to recall anything that can help you. The time is going by fast...30 minutes gone and only two problems completed. You are distracted by other students handing in their perfectly completed tests, gathering their items and confidently walking out of the classroom. How can they be finished so fast? I have barely finished the first page!

The instructor calls for students to turn in the exam. You have managed to answer some of the questions, but you left many unanswered. As you start to walk out of the classroom, the formulas begin to pop into your head as clear as if written on the blackboard. How could you have forgotten something so simple?

The Causes of Test Anxiety

Have you ever found yourself “freezing up” during exams in this way? Do you find it hard to get a good night's sleep the night before an exam? Do you question your mastery of course material even after you have completed all assigned materials and studied as much as is reasonably possible? If you do, you may be experiencing a form of Test Anxiety.

Test anxiety is a result of stress and worry. It occurs physically through episodes of sweating, nausea or “sick feeling” in your stomach, and psychologically through confusion, mental blocks and panic attacks. Whatever the form, test anxiety typically is the result of one of the following three reasons:

Poor study skills

Not knowing how to efficiently study can contribute to exam stress. Organization and preparation are the key weapons in your fight against test anxiety.

Prior negative experiences

You studied long hours for a Chemistry exam, but when the exam was passed out, you discovered that the questions asked were from material you had not studied. As a result, you failed the test. A bad experience like this may undermine your confidence and negatively affect your performance on the next exam.

Fear of the unknown

Not knowing what to expect on an exam is a fundamental source of anxiety. Things go much more smoothly when you have some idea of what to prepare for.

Controlling Test Anxiety

Fortunately, test anxiety is a well-recognized problem that can be effectively controlled with proven techniques.

Plan your attack

You will feel most anxious when you are least prepared. In order to be prepared, it is important for you to develop good study habits. Schedule times to work on your homework on a regular basis; plan to cover a specific amount of homework during each work session. Schedule your study time when you are alert and best able to concentrate and be free of distractions. Recognize habits that you have that cause you to procrastinate and learn to overcome them.

You can seek out help in developing good study skills in a number of ways. Ask academically success friends for tips on how they study. Attend study groups with classmates in order to force yourself to be conscientious in your work. Ask the librarian for books on how to develop good study skills. Contact the Academic Counselor or the Tutoring Center.

Make known the unknown

When you are able to find out additional information about an upcoming exam, anxiety is greatly reduced. Before the test, ask the instructor about the type of questions that will be on the exam, how many points each question will be worth, how long you will have for the exam and so on.

Give yourself a pep talk

Try to stop yourself from thinking negative thoughts by turning bleak statements into encouraging statements. Instead of listening to a negative thought like, "Boy, I'll be lucky to get a 'D' out of this," give yourself positive encouragement: "I have attended all my classes, I have done all of the assignments, I have studied as much as I could, and I am as prepared as I can be." Repeat this statement more than once for encouragement.

Visualize Success

Visualization is a powerful tool for success. Pro athletes imagine themselves making the perfect catch, throwing the perfect pitch, crossing the finish line, and sinking a “hole in one.” Instead of imagining failure, imagine the positive feeling of success. Imagine you are taking your exam and you turn the page to the first question and it is exactly what you studied in your notes. You complete the test confidently, turn the exam in, and receive a great grade. When you use visualization, be sure to create detail – imagine the specific good things that are going to happen.

Focus on detail

Whenever you feel an extreme amount of anxiety, you can help yourself to remain calm by focusing on small details. For example, when an exam is being passed out, study the face of your watch or the noise of the cars passing outside in the distance. By filling your attention so completely, you leave no room for anxious thoughts.

Concentrate on breathing

Deep-breathing exercises are an effective technique for overcoming nervousness and anxiety. Whenever you feel your body reacting to anxiety – sweating, heart racing, and nausea – force yourself to slow down and take deep, calm breaths. Concentrate on the air flowing in and out of your nose and lungs. Do this for four or five minutes and you will find yourself feeling much more relaxed.

Imagine the worst

Before the exam begins imagine the worst thing that can happen. Will you get a “C”? Will you flunk? If you do will you get kicked out of school? Will you get another chance? If you explore your fears to the point of absurdity, they will seem far less frightening.

Don't study right before the exam

You will find that studying right up to the last minute hurts more than it helps. In the last few minutes before an exam, you can't learn anything new, and you may mix up what is already in your long-term memory. Frantically studying for that last little bit of information usually results in more anxiety and confusion. Relax – you have studied as best you can. Give yourself only calming, positive messages before the exam.

Don't go into the classroom too early

It is common to overhear students talking to each other before the exam to try and guess what is going to be on the exam. While it is good to brainstorm with classmate in the days before the exam, at this point listening to other students may undermine your confidence. Trust yourself – you have planned your attack and it is a good one, no matter how much it differs from other students.

Take good care of yourself

Lack of sleep, poor eating habits, excess caffeine and insufficient exercise are destructive to your mind as well as your body. By eating foods low in sugars and fat, and exercising routinely, you can help energize your mind and body.

Expect setbacks

You will experience setbacks whenever you try to change your behavior. Don't let setbacks get the best of you. If you have a bad exam experience, your efforts have not been in vain. Simply try again with a firm resolution to make things better; if you do, ultimately they will be better.

(adapted from the Academic Development, [Carnegie Mellon University website](#))