

COPING WITH TEST ANXIETY

About Test Anxiety

Some mild anxiety is natural—it helps to keep you alert—but too much may cause physical distress, emotional upset, and concentration difficulties. Your symptoms might cause you to experience difficulties with various aspects of test-taking, including the following: 1) reading and understanding questions, 2) organizing thoughts, and 3) retrieving key words and concepts. You might also experience mental blocking—e.g., “going blank” on questions and remembering the correct answers when the exam is over. The causes of test anxiety vary. Usually there is some real or perceived activating agent, such as past experiences of blanking out on tests. It could also be a lack of preparation for an exam; if this is the case, problems with time management, poor study habits, inability to organize material, and cramming the night before the exam all might serve to increase your anxiety. If you have adequately prepared for a test, your anxiety may be the result of negative thinking and worry—e.g., you might be focusing on past performances on exams, how friends and other classmates are doing, or the negative consequences you expect if you do poorly.

Coping With Test Anxiety

While studying: Allow yourself plenty of time to accomplish all the things you have to do before the test. Build up confidence by reviewing the material frequently. Set up your study goals and take one step at a time to avoid feeling overwhelmed. If you still feel anxious, there are several types of exercises which can help you get through this period.

Prior to the test: Arrive early so you can sit where you are most comfortable; avoid other students who are anxious and/or who might cause you to doubt your knowledge. When you receive the test, look it over, read the directions twice, and then organize your time efficiently, writing down how long you will devote to each section. Don't rush through the test; rather, work at a comfortable pace and don't compare your progress to that of your classmates.

During the test: If you feel anxious, you may need to take a brief break to clear your head. Try one of these options: 1) get a drink of water or go to the bathroom, 2) eat something or chew gum as an anxiety distraction, 3) move on to another section of the exam, or 4) ask the instructor a simple question.

The following stress reduction/relaxation strategies may also be helpful. Keep in mind that it may take some practice before a given technique works for you, so be sure to take some time to try these coping mechanisms for the first time when you are *not* feeling your most anxious.

- **Engage in regular exercise.** Exercise will help you to decrease anxiety, reduce body tension, and increase relaxation. Even if you are short on time, try a daily 10-minute walk around campus and/or a few yoga poses or other stretches as part of your morning or pre-bed routine.
- **Engage in deep breathing.** Close your eyes and concentrate on the air going in and out of your diaphragm (just above your belly button). Take long, deep breaths, imagining your belly swelling as you inhale, and then exhale slowly.
- **Try progressive muscle relaxation.** This involves tensing and relaxing different muscle groups. For example, if your shoulders are tense, clench them even tighter and hold for 5 seconds, then relax for 15-20 seconds; move on to other major muscle groups. This strategy helps to increase your awareness of how your muscles feel when they are relaxed.
- **Engage in guided imagery.** Pick a scene that you find peaceful, beautiful, and natural (either real or imagined). Think about what you see, what you hear, what you feel, and even what you smell while in this scene. The more detailed scene you can image, the more easily you will be able to call the scene to mind, and the more relaxed you will feel.
- **Engage in positive self-talk.** This involves developing more rational, coping self-statements to counteract negative thoughts. For example, instead of telling yourself "I'm going to fail this test," say something like "I have the ability to do this, I just need to get some help" or "I've never failed a test before." Positive self-talk also includes thinking about your situation from an alternate perspective (e.g., "A small amount of stress can be helpful. I will just try my best"), and reminding yourself to keep on task (e.g., "I just need to study one more chapter tonight").
- **Try to describe the anxiety.** Focus your attention on your anxiety and think about the feelings it causes: How large is it? Where is it located in your body? What is its color, its shape, and its texture? If you can completely experience a physical sensation, it will often help reduce the sensation and even increase the likelihood that it will disappear.