

What is Test Anxiety?

Almost everyone feels nervous before an exam - it is normal.

- "Butterflies" in the stomach
- "Will i be able to answer the questions?"
- "Have I done enough preparation?"

What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is a normal reaction - **apprehension, tension, or uneasiness** - to any perceived threat or anticipation of danger. If we believe something important to us is being threatened, and we overestimate the threat, underestimate our ability to cope with it, or underestimate the resources we have available to cope with it, then we'll feel anxious. When threatened, your body triggers a number of physical and mental reactions.

Test anxiety is a type of **performance anxiety that can affect a test taker before, during or after a test**. A certain amount of test anxiety keeps us energized, motivated, alert, and focused. But too much anxiety can interfere with test performance by blocking our recall or thinking abilities, by fostering negative frames of mind, or even by promoting panic reactions.

Test anxiety, just like other types of anxiety, tends to occur like a wave. It will increase from the time you first recognize it, come to a peak and then naturally subside. When you're under stress, your body releases the **hormone adrenaline**, which prepares it for danger (you may hear this referred to as the "fight or flight" reaction). That's what causes the physical symptoms, such as sweating, a pounding heart, and rapid breathing. These sensations might be mild or intense.

Generally, if a person feels more stressed, strained or anxious when taking a test than at any other normal time in their life, then they are probably suffering from test anxiety.

Symptoms of test anxiety may include the following:

Before the test:

- Crying easily, feeling irritable, getting frustrated quickly
- Extreme nervousness, dread, fear, or hopelessness
- Fear of something 'bad' happening before arriving to take the test
- Drastic appetite changes - overeating, or skipping breakfast and lunch
- Trouble sleeping the night before

During the test:

- Inability to remember facts that were known before the test
- Excessive yawning (body's method of increasing oxygen to the brain)
- Upset stomach, asthma attacks, headaches, perspiration, sweaty palms
- Other physical indicators: rapid heartbeat
- , shortness of breath, dry mouth, nausea, dizziness, muscle tension
- Mock indifference- "I don't care - this test doesn't matter anyway!"
- Other negative thinking: "I'm going to fail", "I am dumb", or "I shouldn't even bother taking the exam".
- Mind races or feels dull or 'muddy'
- Trouble organizing thoughts, feeling confused or panicked
- Trouble reading and understanding questions
- Trouble following directions
- Making many careless errors on a test
- Blanking out on information that you studied

After the test:

- feelings of guilt, anger or depression - blaming a poor performance on others
- Remembering the correct answers after the test is over
- Frustrated with your grade on the test because you know you were well prepared
- Pretend the test meant nothing, and discard the result as meaningless

These reactions can be organized into three categories:

- **Physical**
- **Emotional**
- **Cognitive**

When combined - the state of test anxiety flourishes! Each category is connected to the other, so anything that can be done to lessen one reaction will lessen the impact of the other two categories.

Are some people more prone to test anxiety than others?

While anyone can get anxious before taking a test, people who worry a lot or who are perfectionists are more likely to have trouble with test anxiety. This is because people with these qualities sometimes find it hard to accept mistakes they might make, or to get anything less than a perfect score. In this way, even without meaning to, they put added pressure on themselves.

Students who aren't prepared for tests but who care about doing well are also, likely to experience test anxiety. If you know you're not prepared, it's not difficult to realize that you'll be worried about doing poorly! People can feel unprepared for tests for several reasons: they may not have studied enough, they may find the material difficult, or perhaps they feel tired because they didn't get enough sleep the night before.

Students who experience test anxiety are often masters at avoidance and may also have a problem with procrastination. They avoid studying, and then a day or two before the test they start to worry that they have not studied enough. Procrastination leads to last minute cramming, which can result in the information becoming disorganized in the student's brain.

This pattern of avoidance creates a vicious cycle: Procrastination leads to last minute cramming, which leads to anxiety, which leads to self-doubt, which leads to excessive anxiety during a testing situation, which may lead to the inability to remember or think logically.

Students who experience test anxiety also tend to be **people who put a lot of pressure on themselves to perform well**. They often have unusually high expectations for themselves and, in the past, have been very good students.

When these students begin to experience low grades for the first time **their image of themselves as a smart person begins to erode**. They then put pressure on themselves to perform better, but oftentimes put off studying longer than they should. This initiates a cycle of self-doubt and irrational belief that can result in high anxiety levels during testing situations.

Some things that can increase test anxiety are:

Insufficient test preparation

- Cramming the night before the exam
- Inadequate time management
- Inadequate study skills or study habits

Worrying about...

- Past exam performance
- Poor present performance
- Negative consequences of poor performance
- How others are doing on the exam compared to you
- Exam anxiety reactions themselves

Stimulant use

- Caffeine including pop and energy drinks
- Nicotine
- Cannabis
- Prescription drugs
- Amphetamines - drugs that increase the activity of certain chemicals in the brain.

If you are using substances to help deal with the anxiety – they may help you feel better for a little while but they can make symptoms worse and harder to manage over time.

If the anxiety is severe, persistent, or generalized beyond exam situations, you may benefit from seeing a physician or counsellor.

What are some things that can reduce exam anxiety?

There are a number of things you can do to help reduce test anxiety and turn those uncomfortable and unhelpful thoughts, feelings, and behaviours around.

Traditional strategies such as developing improved study and test-taking skills can make a significant difference. For example, students can learn classroom note-taking and organization techniques to assist in better preparation for tests.

Along with study skills, students can learn effective study habits for tests. Study habits have to do with planning (how, when, and where you study), time management and organizational skills.

Of course, taking care of your health – such as getting enough sleep, exercise, and healthy food before a test – can help keep your mind working at its best. Students who get a full eight hours sleep the night before a test are more likely to figure out problems, than those who stay awake, studying, the entire night before.

Research indicates that when students have tools and strategies that build both emotional skills and healthy physical habits they can overcome test anxiety and its associated symptoms. As a result, they improve their ability to prepare for and perform on exams.

The most frequently mentioned strategies address the following areas:

- Relaxation
- Knowledge of testing conditions
- Adequate preparation through improvement of test-taking and study skills
- Effective health habits, exercise, and good nutrition
- Monitoring of thinking patterns and positive self-talk

Everything takes time and practice, and learning to beat test anxiety is not different. Although it will not disappear overnight, facing and dealing with test anxiety will help you learn good stress management practices, which can prove to be a valuable skill in many situations besides taking tests.

Relaxation Methods

The body and the mind are interconnected, as a result, becoming relaxed physically helps us to relax mentally, and becoming relaxed mentally helps us to relax physically.

Relax your Breathing

Anxiety can lead to shallow, fast or irregular breathing. Likewise, shallow, quick, or irregular breathing can increase the physical sensations of anxiety. Those breathing patterns can create an imbalance of oxygen and carbon dioxide in the body and brain, heightening the physical reactions associated with anxiety.



Controlled Breathing Strategies:

Practice this method of breathing for at least 4 minutes because that's roughly how long it takes to restore the optimal balance of oxygen and carbon dioxide.

- **Breathe in slowly and deeply to a count of 4, hold the breath for a count of 2, and breathe out for a count of 8.**
- With one hand on your upper chest, and the other on your stomach; the hand on your stomach should move in and out as you breathe, the hand on your chest should remain stationary.
- Breathe either through your mouth or nose; whichever is more comfortable.
- Breathe gently, slowly, and deeply and avoid taking big gulps of air.
- Practice this method of controlled breathing a few times each day in situations in which you feel anxious.

Relax Your Muscles

Tense muscles can be a result of anxiety as well as a cause of anxiety. Although most people carry muscle tension in different areas of their bodies, most people report increased levels of relaxation and decreased levels of physical tension and anxiety on completing the progressive muscle relaxation exercise.



Progressive Muscle Relaxation Strategies:

- Progressive muscle relaxation is a technique where the body's major muscle groups are alternately tensed and relaxed
- The process can proceed from head to feet or feet to head
- Tense and relax the muscles in the forehead, eyes, jaw, neck, shoulders, upper back, biceps, forearms, hands abdomen, groin, hips, buttocks, thighs, calves, and feet.
- Tense the first muscle group for 5 seconds and then relax for 10-15 seconds; repeat, and do the same for the next muscle group until all muscle groups have been tensed and relaxed.



Chair Method:

- Put feet flat on the floor. With your hands, grab underneath the chair.
- Push down with your feet and pull up on your chair at the same time for about five seconds
- Relax for 10 seconds; repeat the procedure 2 – 3 times
- Relax all your muscles.

Relax through Visualization

Visualization (or imagery) methods are techniques for learning to relax and reduce anxiety. Imagery involves actively visualizing scenes that are tranquil and relaxing for you.



Visualization Strategies

- The scenes you imagine can be scenes that may or may not exist. The important thing is that they are tranquil and relaxing for you.
- The specific scene is less important than how the image makes you feel
- The more sense you incorporate in your image, the more relaxing the visualization is likely to be
- By imagining smells, sounds, tastes, and tactile sensations that go along with your image, you will increase your ability to relax. i.e. – you might imagine yourself walking along a tree-lined mountain path, notice the bird songs, the light through the trees, the fragrance and colour of the leaves, and the feel of the breeze.



Five Finger Relaxation Technique

Begin this method by closing your eyes and using the deep breathing method. After a few deep breaths:

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| Step 1 | <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Touch your thumb to your first finger and think back to a time when your body felt a deep healthy fatigue (i.e. After a long hike/bike ride)- Remember the feeling of your muscles relaxing and your heart beating slowly |
| Step 2 | <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Touch your thumb to your second finger and think back to a time when you had a big achievement in your life or when you had finished an important project- Feel the pride of accomplishing something important to you |
| Step 3 | <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Touch your thumb to your third finger and think back to the nicest compliment you have ever received- Feel the warmth and happiness from the compliment |
| Step 4 | <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Touch your thumb to your fourth finger and go back to the most beautiful place you've been to or can imagine- Allow the beauty to soak in. Feel safe and secure and let all the tension and stress go. Reflect and enjoy for a while. |

Relax Your Thoughts

If you notice thoughts coming into your head (that have nothing to do with the test), that is **COMPLETELY normal**. Our brains are designed to think but we can learn to refocus our attention. Take this as an opportunity to be kind to yourself and not judge. Just notice that you are having thoughts, then redirect your attention back to the present moment.



Five Senses Mindfulness Exercise

- Sit comfortably. Notice your breathing. Focus on each part of your breath – the inhale, the exhale, the space in-between
- Bring awareness to each of your **5 senses. One at a time, for about one minute each.** The point here is to focus on the present moment and how each sense is being activated in the moment.
- **Hear:** Begin to notice all of the sounds around you. Try not to judge the sounds – just notice them. Sounds might be internal, like breathing or digestion. Sounds might be close by or more distant like the sound of traffic. Are you now hearing more than you did when you started?
- **Smell:** Now shift your attention to notice the smells of your environment. Maybe you smell food. You might notice the smell of books and paper. Sometimes closing your eyes can sharpen your attention.
- **See:** Observe your surroundings and notice the colours, shapes and textures. If you really look, you may notice things that have gone unnoticed.
- **Taste:** You can do this one even if you don't have food in your mouth. You may notice an aftertaste of a previous drink or meal. You can just notice your tongue in your mouth, your saliva, and your breath as you exhale.
- **Touch:** Bring your attention to the sensations of skin contact with your chair, clothing, and feet on the floor. You can notice the pressure between your feet and the floor or your body and the chair. You can observe temperature like the warmth or coolness of your hands and feet. You can feel several objects on your desk to fully focus your attention on the present.



The Thought Stopping Technique

- Silently *shout* to yourself "Stop" or Stop thinking about that."
After your silent *shout* relax yourself or repeat one of your positive self-talk statements. Not unrealistic positive messages, of course, but ones that are practical and true.
- You may have to *shout* to yourself several times during a test or while doing homework to control negative self-talk!
- Thought stopping works because it interrupts the worry before it can cause high anxiety or negative emotions.
- Students with high anxiety should practice this technique three days to one week before taking a test.
- Some positive thoughts:
 - ✓ "I can be anxious later, now is the time to take the exam."
 - ✓ "I don't have time to be perfect."
 - ✓ "This test will not permanently affect my life. I'm going to feel calm and relaxed."
 - ✓ I've studied hard and I know the material, SO I'M READY TO DO THE BEST I CAN."
 - ✓ "I have the ability to do this."
 - ✓ "This test does not reflect on my intelligence."

The Do's and Don'ts of Dealing with Test Anxiety

DON'T

- 👉 Arrive too early or late to the exam
- 👉 Discuss the exam with others, while you're waiting for the exam. The anxiety of others can 'rub off' and suddenly you begin to doubt yourself.
- 👉 Forget to breathe properly during the test! Take deep breaths to help you relax.
- 👉 Get bogged down and worry about questions you don't know; move on to the next question. The answer may come to you or you may get clues from other exam questions
- 👉 Rush through the test, but work at a comfortable pace and don't worry how far along classmates are on the test.
- 👉 Dwell on your mistakes
- 👉 Cram for an exam. The amount you learn won't be worth the stress.
- 👉 Think of yourself or the test in a negative sense.
- 👉 Stay up late studying the night before. You need the sleep. Begin studying a week or two, in advance, if possible.
- 👉 Spend time with classmates who generate stress for you, on test day.
- 👉 Take those last few moments before the test for last minute cramming. Try to relax and spend that time doing something else.

DO

- 👍 Use positive statements
- 👍 Change body position now and then
- 👍 Go to the bathroom 15 minutes before the exam starts so that your bladder is empty for the long stretch
- 👍 Stretch
- 👍 Eat a small handful of nuts before the exam- this will give you an energy boost
- 👍 Work on the easiest portions of the test first
- 👍 Remind yourself that the test is only a test
- 👍 Eat a balanced breakfast-this will give you energy and mental stamina
- 👍 Get a good night's sleep
- 👍 Something relaxing the last half hour before the test
- 👍 Reward yourself after the test

Sources:

Anxiety Canada www.anxietycanada.com

- Resources, apps using cognitive behavioral therapy, step-by-step guides for anxiety management

Anxiety Canada Youth www.youth.anxietycanada.com

Teens Health www.kidshealth.org/en/teens/test-anxiety

SFU Library www.libsfu.ca/about/branches-depts.slc/learning/exam-anxiety

Kids Help Phone www.kidshelpphone.ca/topic/emotional-well-being/anxiety-panic

- Resources, live chat, text, phone 1-800-668-6868