

Test Anxiety

test taking

Many students suffer from anxiety when taking exams. Use this guide to help identify your problem areas and find freedom from test anxiety.

Q: What is test anxiety?

A: Some anxiety just before or during a test is quite normal. In fact, when your body is more alert and your senses are heightened, that small amount of anxiety can actually help you stay focused during the exam. However, when anxiety is so overwhelming that it causes you to be distracted, flooded with emotion, or unable to concentrate, anxiety has become counterproductive.

Q: What does test anxiety feel like?

A: Physiologically, test anxiety involves adrenaline and other stress hormones that your body releases. If you have severe anxiety, your body “thinks” that you are in danger. It produces arousal responses such as sweating, increased heart rate, increased breathing, and tightening of chest, shoulder, or back muscles. No wonder you can’t think!

Cognitive and emotional factors also play a role. What you tell yourself about a test or about your abilities has a great impact on how well you will perform. Pay attention to your “self-talk.” Is your self-talk calming you down or making you more anxious?

In addition, the importance you place on a particular exam or course may negatively impact your performance. This added pressure can easily overtake your focus and attention. If you feel you “have to” ace a particular test in order to please your parents, meet perfectionist expectations, avoid feelings of failure, or be accepted into a program—that’s too much pressure for a single exam! Instead, try to remind yourself that the outcome of one exam doesn’t determine who you are as a person or how well you’ll succeed in life.

Q: How can I reduce test anxiety?

A: There are several ways you can start to reduce test anxiety.

1. Give yourself plenty of time to study. Anxiety can come from poor planning. Start studying the week before an exam so that you can have repeated spaced review and are really comfortable with the material. Cramming only increases anxiety. Check out the CFL's handout "*5-Day Study Plan*" for ideas about how to space your review.
2. Commit yourself to a healthy lifestyle. Regular exercise and a good diet can help control anxiety. Avoid over-caffeinating or energy drinks which impact your stress level. Faced with a choice of doing an all-nighter or going to bed, go to bed. Getting enough sleep will dramatically increase concentration during an exam.
3. Make room for positive self-talk. Try writing down all your fears and concerns about the test before you leave your room the day of an exam. Studies have shown that if we write out our fears and talk them out on paper, we clear our minds for focus. As you walk to class and settle into your chair, remind yourself of how you have studied, how you have attended class, and how you will be able to accomplish what the test is going to ask of you. Pray for calm.
4. Be aware of what distracts you, and respond accordingly. If you're easily distracted by visual or auditory stimulation, sit somewhere in the classroom that minimizes such distractions. If you get nervous when others finish an exam and start leaving, sit with your back toward the door.
5. Use simple relaxation techniques before the test. For example, close your eyes and take 5 deep, cleansing breaths. Or starting with your feet and moving up, tighten and relax your muscles.
6. If your test anxiety persists, process your feelings and fears with a trusted friend or counselor. A counselor may be able to help you understand why test anxiety is a problem for you. A counselor may also be able to help you reduce your anxiety and learn how to manage it.