

Take The Test. Don't Let Test Anxiety Take You.

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Are you experiencing test anxiety? The experience of some level of nervousness or tension before an examination is common and expected by most students. Remember, a little nervousness before an examination may actually help you to be more alert and responsive. On the other hand, too much anxiety before a test can be a problem. Students who experience test anxiety report difficulties in attentiveness and distractibility as well as mental blocking. Despite hours of studying and knowing the material well, many experience “freezing” during an exam and feel unable to respond to questions.

The initial step is to differentiate between two types of test anxiety. Do you experience anxiety before a test as a result of a complete absence of test preparation? If you do, then your test anxiety is a common, rational reaction. On the other hand, if you are sufficiently prepared for the exam, and you still overreact or continue to be alarmed, then your reaction is not rational. Take the “Anxiety Quiz” to see where you stand. While it is common for anyone to experience either one of these types of anxieties, it is helpful to understand ways to overcome their consequences.

Quiz: Do you have Test Anxiety?

While taking an examination, do you experience...

- an inability to concentrate or are easily distracted
- persistent “butterflies” in your stomach
- an increase in heart rate or breathing
- confusion or panic
- sweaty palms, nausea or fainting
- mental blocks - despite hours of preparation, an inability to remember answers
- yawning or boredom

Prior to taking the examination, do you experience...

- loss of sleep
- loss of appetite
- irritability
- fear or dread
- feelings of hopelessness

Count the number of items that you have experienced during and prior to a test. While it is common for students to feel some anxiety when taking tests, if you checked two or more of these experiences, your test anxiety may actually be sabotaging your performance.

Test Preparation: The Basics

Preparation before a test is one of the best ways to minimize test anxiety. Poor study skills and inept learning can actually boost anxiety levels. Although it may sound obvious, regular class attendance and weekly preparation are two ways paramount to combating test anxiety. “Cramming” or trying to learn the entire semester in one evening is bound to create stress. Furthermore, research has shown that students learn best when they have brief but frequent study periods over a long period of time. It is much easier to study for one hour than for four hours at a time. During the semester, test yourself by integrating course material from the text, lectures and your notes. Also, use the resources that are available to you. Meet with your instructor during office hours or form a study group to review class readings or notes.

Changing Your Attitude

Irrational beliefs and irrational demands are usually the culprit for most test anxiety despite adequate preparation on the part of the student. Many students who experience test anxiety maintain irrational beliefs about the outcome of examinations such as overplaying the importance of them. In addition, some students place unrealistic demands on their academic performance and find it extremely difficult to accept a poor grade. Furthermore, others experience repetitive thoughts during an exam such as “I can’t do this” or “I won’t make it”. These thoughts compete for attention while taking the exam and interfere with focusing on exam questions. Improving your attitude about the test taking experience may help you to appreciate studying and enhance your performance. Remember that the test is not a direct reflection of you. The following techniques adapted from David B. Ellis, *Becoming a Master Student*, are helpful in dealing with your thoughts and worries about the test.

1. When you find yourself dwelling and your thoughts are racing uncontrollably, mentally yell, “Stop!” This action will create a break in your racing thoughts in order to use other techniques also mentioned here.
2. When you are ruminating or preparing for the worst, replace thoughts of doom with daydreams. Fill your mind with thoughts that are pleasant to you.
3. Mentally visualize yourself succeeding on the exam. Many times we live up to the expectations we set for ourselves.
4. Keep yourself focused and concentrate on one point in the room where you are taking the test. By focusing intensely you are not permitting anxiety ridden thoughts to crowd your mind.
5. Think of yourself in a positive sense. Avoid talking to yourself negatively and give yourself encouragement during the test. Tell yourself things such as “I am handling this well” or better yet, “I am doing an excellent job on this test”.
6. Be sure to remind yourself that the test is only one of many and there will be others. Try to consider the worst thing that could happen if you were to fail the test. You will find that the “catastrophe” that awaits you is probably more reasonable than you thought.

On Test Day

To ensure that you do your best on the day of the test, you should do something relaxing one hour before the test begins. If waiting for the test creates stress for you, distract yourself with another activity that is enjoyable to you such as reading a magazine. Also, arrive to the test location early. This allows you time to get settled, to prepare mentally and to relax. Try to select seating away from distractions such as doors and windows and don't talk to classmates who may generate anxiety or upset you. Before you begin, relax and breathe. Calm your physical sensations by focusing on your breathing.

Once you receive the test, take a few minutes to review the entire exam in detail. Ensure that you know how the test is set up in order to divide your time appropriately between problems. Ask your instructor if any part of the exam is unclear to you. Do not lose time trying to figure out ambiguous instructions on your own. In addition, wear a watch to the exam and check your time so that you will not need to rush through any part of the exam. Try to answer the easiest and shortest questions first and return to harder questions later. Remember to recheck your answers if you have additional time and **ONLY** if rechecking does not cause you to become anxious. Most important is to concentrate on the present rather than thinking about what could, should or would have been while taking the test.

If Anxiety Persists....

- Distract yourself by asking the instructor a question
 - Get a drink of water or go to the restroom
 - Have something to eat
 - Try to maintain your positive attitude
- Get additional help if you need it. If you feel that you experience some of these characteristics of behaviors, you may want to consider contacting the Academic Support Center or Counseling and Psychological Services on campus.