

# A Guide to Managing Test Anxiety

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## INTRODUCTION

Several strategies can reduce test anxiety and increase your performance on test day.

A little nervousness before a test is normal and can help sharpen your mind and focus your attention. But with test anxiety, feelings of worry and self-doubt can interfere with your test-taking performance and make you miserable. Test anxiety can affect anyone, whether you're a primary or secondary school student, a college student, or an employee who has to take tests for career advancement or certification.

According to the *ADAA*, causes of test anxiety may include a fear of failure, lack of adequate prep time, or bad experiences taking tests in the past. You're not alone! Here's what you can do to stay calm in the days leading up to and during your test.

## STUDYING

1. **Learn how to study efficiently.** Utilize the Learning, Writing, and Speaking Center to prepare for exam, or discover study techniques and test-taking strategies that work best for you. You'll feel more relaxed if you systematically study and practice the material that will be on a test.
2. **Study early and in similar places.** It's much better to study in increments over a period of time than cramming your studying all at once. Also, spending your time studying in the same or similar places that you take your test can help you recall the information you need during the exam.
3. **Establish a consistent pretest routine.** Learn what works for you and follow the same steps each time you get ready to take a test. This will ease your stress level and help ensure that you're well-prepared.
4. **Talk to your Professor.** Make sure you understand what's going to be on each test and know how to prepare. In addition, let your teacher know that you feel anxious when you take tests. He or she may have suggestions to help you succeed.

## HEALTH

1. **Don't forget to eat and drink.** Your brain needs fuel to function. Eat the day of the test and drink plenty of water. Avoid sugary drinks such as soda pop, which can cause your blood sugar to peak and then drop, or caffeinated beverages such as energy drinks or coffee, which can increase anxiety.
2. **Get some exercise.** Regular aerobic exercise, and exercising on exam day, can release tension.
3. **Get plenty of sleep.** Sleep is directly related to academic performance. Preteens and teenagers especially need to get regular, solid sleep. But adults need a good night's sleep, too, for optimal work performance. With adequate sleep, your ability to think clearly and to deal with anxiety will both improve.

4. **See a professional counselor, if necessary.** Talk therapy (psychotherapy) with a psychologist or other mental health professional can help you work through feelings, thoughts and behaviors that cause of worsen anxiety.

## MENTALITY

1. **Put things in perspective.** Remind yourself that your upcoming exam is important, but your entire future doesn't depend on this exam. Also, it might be helpful to tell yourself that regardless of your performance on the test, it's not life or death.
2. **Remind yourself of past successes.** It's easy to lose perspective when you find that you are no longer the top student in the class. Intellectually, you understand that you're competing against many other bright students, but you may need to remind yourself of that. Also, bring to mind your past successes on exams and remind yourself that the admissions officers know what they're doing, and they have "bet" on your success.
3. **Don't give a test the power to define you.** An exam won't tell you whether you're the most brilliant (or least brilliant) student in your class. Your performance on an exam mostly depends on how effectively you studied for the test, the quality of your prior education, and the test-taking strategies you use.
4. **Visualize completing the test successfully despite your anxiety.** Using vivid images, play the entire "tape" in your mind – from the moment you wake up on the day of the exam to the moment you finish the exam.
5. **Remind yourself that a certain level of anxiety is actually helpful in performing your best.** And remember: you can always use anxiety control strategies to moderate your anxiety level if it becomes excessive.

## TEST TAKING

1. **Get to the test site a little early** but try to avoid talking with other students right before the exam. Their testing anxieties may increase your own. Instead, take a walk around the building and silently talk to yourself, meditate, breathe, and/or pray. Moving your body can help rid you of some of the nervous energy you are experiencing.
2. **Have a positive mental attitude.** Bring a picture of your happy place or come up with a morale-boosting mantra like "I can do this" or "I worked hard and deserve this." Peek at your picture or recite your mantra, right before the test begins.
3. **Remind yourself that you don't know all the material** that could possibly appear on the test and nobody else does either. Still, you can do your best to get some "mileage" out of what you do know. If you encounter a curve ball, don't get upset and lose your concentration. Instead, you can either make an intelligent guess now or mark the question and return later.

4. **Read carefully.** Read the directions thoroughly and read all answers before making a choice or starting the essay. There is nothing worse than putting time into a question and realizing you are not solving for  $x$ , or the essay is off target. Slowing down can help you stay focused.
5. **Just start.** The blank page can maximize your anxiety. After you've read the directions, dive right in by making an outline for an essay answer. Or, find some questions you can ace to build up your confidence and momentum. You can always go back and change things later if needed, but a few quick answers can get the ball rolling.
6. **If you begin to have negative thoughts,** say STOP to yourself and remind yourself of past successes.
7. **If you continue to feel overly anxious,** do the following ANXIETY CONTROL PROCEDURE to reduce your tension. This exercise is so simple, that you may be skeptical about its effectiveness. However, many students have found that it really helps lower their anxiety to a level that is helpful rather than harmful.
  - a. Close your eyes.
  - b. Breathe slowly to the count of seven and exhale to the count of seven.
  - c. Continue this slow breathing until you actually feel your body begin to relax. (Most people find that it takes 2-4 sequences.)
  - d. Open your eyes and give yourself a positive, very specific self-talk (i.e., "You're sure to do well. You studied hard. You're doing the best you can.") This whole procedure should take only about a minute and it's well worth the time.
8. **Do not obsess about running out of time on the test.** Check the time periodically, but avoid checking too frequently, as this will only distract you and make you more anxious. It can be a better strategy to sacrifice a few points by not quite finishing the test than to rush through the last several questions and thus miss many points.
9. **The Most Important Tip:** Approach your studying seriously but think of the test as a game. Your goal is to collect as many points as you can in the time available. Don't obsess about a particularly difficult question. If you're unsure of the answer, guess and move on. Remind yourself that you can miss several questions and still do well.