

MANAGING TEST ANXIETY



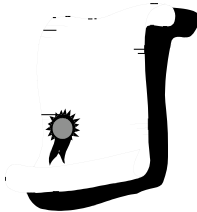
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WHAT IS TEST ANXIETY?

Almost every student experiences nervousness before or during a test. Some people become so anxious that they do poorly on tests even when they know the material. Test anxiety can cause us to lose concentration, become distracted, experience mental blocks or have physical symptoms such as nausea, “butterflies” in the stomach, sweaty palms or headaches. This extreme form of nervousness is what is called test anxiety.

The reasons for test anxiety are varied: past experience with tests, fear of failure, lack of preparation, over-competitiveness, a perfectionist attitude and low self-esteem are some of the contributing factors. One way to begin to control test anxiety is to understand that failure is not the end of the world, nor does one test determine your entire future. Tests are not a measure of your intelligence or creativity, nor do they determine what kind of person you are or how much you can contribute to society. Tests are merely a measure of how much you can recall on a particular day about a particular subject.

Changing your attitudes and behaviors and learning ways to cope with stress will reduce your test anxiety. In this module you will learn how to eliminate test anxiety by preparing yourself academically, mentally and physically.



PREPARING ACADEMICALLY

Developing good study habits will give you more confidence when taking tests. The basics of good test-taking lies in good study habits. (See the module on **Developing Effective Study Habits** for more in-depth information.)

- 1. Start early:**
Begin preparing for exams from the first day of class. Be familiar with the syllabus, the textbook, the assignments, and the test dates. Get tutoring help if needed. Complete all assignments on time and always come to class prepared, having completed the reading assignments and other required work.
- 2. Stay on top of your course work:**
Be sure all your work is up-to-date. Attend all classes and take good notes. If in doubt about any of your study skills, take a study skills course

or work with a counselor to receive the training and assistance you need. You can reduce the number of hours of test preparation and streamline the study process using good study techniques.

3. Organize yourself:

Start early in the class and stay on top of your course work. Organize both your time and your notes by using a day planner and a three-ring binder for notes.

Use both a weekly and a monthly schedule. Day planners come in all sizes and price ranges. Check your campus bookstore and other stores to find one that meets your needs. For a monthly schedule, simply use a wall calendar to keep track of appointments, test dates, and dates of important assignments. Get in the habit of scheduling your time. Organize your notes, handouts and other class materials in a binder. Review your notes periodically and make summary sheets as you study.

4. Review regularly:

Do a pre-class and a post-class review of your notes to further reinforce your recall of the material. Schedule weekly review sessions of all your notes and your textbook reading.

Once you have identified the most important ideas from your textbook and notes, do not simply reread them. Formulate questions about the material and answer those questions **out loud**. This will help to embed the information in your memory and your recall will be much better during the exam.

5. Find out about the exam:

Find out what the test will cover, the types of questions it will contain (essay, objective, or both), and how long the test will be. Find out if there are old exams the instructor would allow you to review.

During the exam, be sure to listen carefully to preliminary instructions, read directions carefully, and give each test question your full attention. To learn more about test-taking strategies, refer to the module on **Improving Skills in Test-Taking**.

6. Get help when you need it:

As soon as you know you are having difficulty in a course, get help. Go to the SOAR office or your ARA and request tutoring. Use the Learning Lab, Math Lab and Writing lab when needed. Talk to your instructor about your need for extra help.



PREPARING MENTALLY AND PHYSICALLY

1. Develop Positive Self-Talk

One of the best ways to prepare yourself mentally for any sort of challenge is to develop and maintain a positive attitude. To stop negative thinking, first become aware of your self-talk about tests. Is it self-promoting, motivating and enhancing to your success, or is it fearful, self-defeating and discouraging?

Exercise:

Replace the following negative self-talk with positive self-talk, according to the example below:

Example:

Negative Self-Talk: *Three tests in one week is more than I can handle. This time I know I'll bomb out.*

Positive Self-Talk: *I choose to study well and be fully prepared to do my best on these three tests. I know I will succeed.*

I can't do these math problems.

Please, no essays! I'm not a good writer.

I can't figure out a thing in this chapter. I'll just forget it.

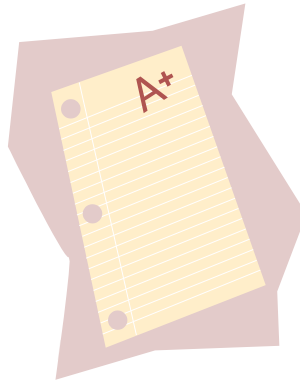
There's no way I can remember all of this!

Students who repeatedly say things like, "I never do well on tests," "I know I'll forget everything," "I might as well quit while I'm ahead," are programming themselves for increased anxiety and failure. Why not support yourself with positive self-talk that promotes success and relieves anxiety?

Whenever you find yourself engaging in negative self-talk, stop and change your thought. Here are some suggestions for positive self-talk:

I do better on tests all the time.
I have a good memory.
I recall easily what I study.
I choose to do well on tests.
I choose to succeed.
I can do this.
I have the ability.

I put forth my best efforts.
I am intelligent.
I am good at taking tests.
I am a thinker.
I enjoy taking tests.
I accept good grades.



2. Learn to relax:

When you are relaxed and calm, your mind works more efficiently and you do better on any task you undertake.

There are many ways to promote relaxation. Some simple techniques are: **deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, visualization and physical exercise.** It is particularly important to practice these before and during any tests, or at times when you feel anxious or nervous.

Relaxation Breathing:

When you are tense, you probably notice that your breath is shallow and more rapid. This type of breathing produces tension and contributes to greater anxiety. In order to relax, your breathing must be slow and deep, filling the lungs completely and exhaling completely. Here are some simple instructions for relaxation breathing:

1. **Inhale slowly through your nose and allow your stomach to expand to bring air into the lower part of your lungs.**

2. Continue filling up your middle and upper lungs until you can take in no more air. Raise your shoulders and expand your chest to reach your full lung capacity.
3. Slowly exhale through your mouth, emptying the air from your lungs in one long, steady exhalation. Resume breathing, this time counting the length of each inhalation and exhalation, starting with a count of 5, then working up to a longer count. Be sure to inhale and exhale to the same count.



Progressive Muscle Relaxation:

This technique works by consciously ordering your body to relax by tensing and relaxing each of your major muscle groups. It can be practiced anywhere and should always be accompanied by complete breathing. The technique is simple to follow.

Start at your feet. Tense both feet as if you are squeezing them into a tight ball. Hold the tension for five seconds, then release the tension. Let your feet relax. If you have applied the right amount of tension, you will feel a tingling sensation as blood flows back into your feet.

Move up to your calves. Tense tightly, hold for five seconds, and release the tension. Move on up your body to your **thighs, buttocks, abdomen, stomach, hands, forearms, upper arms, shoulders, neck, and face.** Practice the same method of tensing, holding for five seconds, then releasing the tension for each group of muscles.

Be sure to monitor your breathing and resist the urge to hold your breath as you tense your muscles. After practicing this technique for only a couple minutes, you will feel more relaxed throughout your entire body.



Exercise:

Practice the above methods of breathing and tensing and relaxing all the muscle groups of your body. Be sure to continue the slow, deep breathing throughout the muscle relaxation exercise. Describe the results you got:



Use visualization:

Use your imagination to create a place where you feel completely comfortable, happy, relaxed and free from worries. If it is the seashore, think of the sounds of the waves, the seagulls flying overhead, the warm sand beneath your feet, the smell of the salt air, etc. Close your eyes and picture yourself there. Use all your senses in creating your visualization. ***Feel as if you are really there!***

The more vivid your visualization is, the more your body and mind will respond as if you were actually there. Your brain does not distinguish between real and imagined thoughts. Just as you can work yourself into a frenzy by worrying, you can think yourself into a calm state by visualization.

The same method of visualization can be used to enable you to perform to the best of your ability. For a few minutes, close your eyes and visualize yourself approaching the test room confidently, reading through the test and knowing you are well-prepared, then taking the test easily and happily. Picture yourself leaving the test room fully satisfied that you did your best. Visualize the test coming back to you with an acceptable grade on it.



Get physically active:

No matter how busy you are or how many excuses you can come up with to avoid physical exercise, the truth is that being physically active is a great way to relieve stress in your life. If you are not normally an active person, choose a form of exercise you can tolerate, such as walking outside everyday for at least fifteen to twenty minutes.

If you enjoy exercising but don't have time, work into your schedule at least thirty minutes of some form of brisk exercise at least three times a week. Consider giving up a TV program or exercising during the program. Besides getting rid of stress and tension, you'll feel better, sleep better, and have more energy.



BRAIN GYM

Brain Gym is a method of stimulating your brain to improve learning and performance. It enhances comprehension, attention, concentration and reduces stress. It works equally well for people affected by learning disabilities, ADD or ADHD. Brain Gym helps maintain active thinking and memory and improves communication and creativity.

You can do Brain Gym exercises at any time. They are easy to learn and practice. They can be done in less than **five minutes** and do not require special equipment or space. The results you get will be immediate, long-term and demonstrable.

Basics for the brain:

Water and Oxygen

Water and oxygen are essential for brain functioning. Drinking lots of water improves brain performance because it stimulates chemical and electrical connections and assists oxygen distribution to the brain. Water keeps the surface of the air sacs of the lungs moist so that oxygen can dissolve and move more easily into the blood.

Brain Gym Exercises

Brain Buttons
Cross Crawls
Hook-ups
Lazy Eights (for writing)

Brain Buttons:

Promote clear thinking.
Stimulate carotid arteries.
Improve reading, writing and following directions.

Place one hand over the navel. This brings attention to the gravitational center of the body. With the other hand, gently rub the indentations between the first and second ribs directly under the collarbone. This stimulates the carotid arteries leading to the brain and restores and maintains normal blood pressure to the brain. Brain Buttons are good to use when tired or needing to stay alert or focused.

Cross Crawls:

Stimulate both brain hemispheres.
Promote coordination and concentration.

This is a cross-lateral walking in place exercise, similar to the crawling motion babies use. Perform it very slowly. Lift one knee, touch the knee with the opposite hand. Repeat on other side. Continue this at least ten times on each side. Cross Crawls activate the vestibular system (inner ear, gravitation, forward, backward and vertical movement) and frontal lobes (goal-directed behavior, concentration, emotional control, motor projection, coordinates messages from other lobes.)

Hook-Ups:

Stimulate electrical circuits in brain.
Promote attention, brain functioning and emotional centering.

Cross one ankle over the other. Stretch arms out in front with back of hands together and thumbs pointing down. Cross one hand over the other and interlock the fingers. Roll the locked hands straight down and in toward the body so they eventually rest on the chest with the elbows down. This activates the sensory and motor cortices of each hemisphere of the brain. While in this position, rest the tongue on the roof of your mouth behind the teeth. This brings attention to the mid-brain. This configuration results in connecting the parts of the brain associated with emotions and higher thinking, allowing you to become more focused and receptive to learning.

Lazy eights:

Promote eye/hand coordination and relaxation.



Draw an infinity symbol with a continuous flowing movement. Start in the middle, draw counterclockwise first, up, over, and around. Then draw clockwise, up, over and around and back to the midpoint. Do five or more continuous repetitions with each hand, then five or more reps with both hands together. This exercise stimulates right and left eye integration. It is good for balancing, enhancing peripheral vision, tactile awareness, relaxing the muscles of the hand, arms, and shoulders, and for visual tracking. It helps students relax during a test and frees you from writer's block.

Thinking Caps:

Stimulate brain activity and cognitive processing.

Unroll the outer edges of the ears from top to bottom several times. This stimulates the whole hearing mechanism. It is useful when trying to recall technical information.

The link between hearing in the temporal lobe and memory in the limbic system appears to be very strong. (Acupuncturists identify over 148 points in the outer ear as corresponding to different areas of the body from head to foot.)

The Calf Pump:

Facilitates communication and promotes verbal skills.

Place one foot about twelve inches behind the other foot, with heel up. Take a deep breath and as you exhale, lower the heel of the back foot to the ground and bend the front knee forward. The torso should remain upright, not leaning forward. Repeat several times.

Stress can trigger a response called the *tendon guard reflex*. It tightens the muscles in the calf. This exercise lengthens and relaxes these muscles. It has an interesting link to verbal skills and facilitates communication in speech-impaired and autistic children.

The Energizer:

Promotes energy; improves hearing.
Sends more oxygen to the brain.

Place your hands on the desk in front of you. Lower your chin to your chest, feeling the stretch in the back of your neck. Taking a deep breath, scoop your

head forward and up, then back, allowing it to go as far back as is comfortable. Arch slightly and open the ribcage. Then exhale, curving the back and bringing the chin back to rest on the chest. This can be done during breaks between learning tasks.

This exercise is a lengthening and deep breathing activity that increases oxygen, relaxes neck and shoulder muscles and assists in cerebrospinal fluid flow around the central nervous system. It activates the vestibular system and wakes up the brain. By relaxing the shoulders, this improves hearing and brings more oxygen to assist in nervous system functions. It helps to wake up the system, especially after long periods of time at the computer.



TAKE GOOD CARE OF YOURSELF

Practicing good self-care will determine your ability to function effectively no matter what your challenges in life. Good self-care means eating the right foods, exercising, avoiding things that are harmful or not conducive to your health, and taking good care of your mental health as well. Below is a checklist to help you determine if you are taking good care of yourself. Identify for yourself any areas that may need improvement.



MY SELF-CARE CHECKLIST

(Check only those items that you feel you are presently part of your normal daily routine.)

- I eat a balanced and healthy diet.
- I drink water throughout the day.
- I get regular exercise.

- ___ I get an adequate amount of sleep most nights.
- ___ I am free from habits that detract from my health.
- ___ I mostly think positive thoughts about my life.
- ___ I am doing what I want with my life.
- ___ I feel good about myself as a student.
- ___ I have important relationships that enhance my life.
- ___ I take care of my health.
- ___ I ask for help when I need it.
- ___ I have adequate time for rest and recreation.

Depending on your responses to this checklist, are there specific areas in your life that need attention? How would you go about improving them? Write your ideas below:



Module Summary

These are some simple and easy to follow techniques for overcoming the mental and physical stress associated with test anxiety. Practicing just a few of

these techniques will bring noticeable results in alleviating anxiety and improving your performance.

Work with your counselor on how best to apply these and other methods for dealing with stress. Please explore other modules on **Stress Management, Memory, Mnemonics and More, Developing Effective Study Habits, and Improving Test-Taking Skills.**