



TEST ANXIETY



It's safe to say that every student, at one time or another, experiences some level of anxiety before a test. Actually, a little nervousness is a good motivator. Your body is on alert and your energy helps you to perform your best. However, if your anxiety is so intense that it starts to affect how you perform on a test, it has become a problem.

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF TEST ANXIETY? WHAT DOES IT FEEL LIKE?

It comes in all "shapes and sizes." Different people experience it in different ways. These symptoms can appear while studying for your test or while waiting to go into the test as well as during the test.

Some physical symptoms are headaches, nausea, faintness, feeling too hot or too cold, rapid heartbeat, muscle tension, etc.

Some emotional symptoms are feeling angry or helpless, difficulty concentrating, feelings of panic, wanting to laugh too much or wanting to cry, procrastination, apathy (almost not caring any more about doing well), etc.

Then what happens? Once these symptoms appear, your thinking processes become impaired. The more you feel these symptoms and focus on them, the more the symptoms increase and then you're into a vicious cycle.

THERE ARE TWO KINDS OF TEST ANXIETY. WHICH KIND DO YOU HAVE?

1. If your anxiety is a direct result of—poor preparation, cramming the night before, poor time management, procrastination or poor study skills—you can consider this a normal or reasonable reaction (and something you can remedy by fixing those problems just mentioned). Being **under-prepared** can most certainly trigger panic attacks, with good reason, before you even get to the classroom for the test. But this is the kind of anxiety you can readily deal with—see other handouts or attend workshops on various study skills. You can learn and then use effective study strategies.
2. If you're **adequately prepared** and do have good study skills but yet panic or blank out, this is the type of anxiety this handout is focusing on. Keep on reading.

OK—WHAT ARE SOME POSSIBLE CAUSES OF THIS KIND OF TEST ANXIETY?

If you don't think about some of the causes for you, you will have a harder time getting a handle on it. Test anxiety can...

- Be caused by associating your grades with your self worth.
- Develop from a fear of letting down family, friends, significant others, etc. with bad grades.
- Stem from a feeling of lack of control and an inability to change your life situation.
- Caused by being embarrassed by a teacher, past or present. For example, being "put down" when trying to solve some math problems. A lot of times this has happened in a student's past.
- Be caused by being a perfectionist. Don't assume you're a failure if you do less than perfect. That is an overwhelming thought and can set you up for anxiety. There are many, many examples of successful people who weren't "perfect."
- Result from timed tests and the fear of not finishing the test, even if you can do all the problems or questions.
- Cause you to worry—worry about doing poorly on previous tests, worry about how others are doing, or worry about the negative consequences of failure.

In other words it can come from 1. **pressure** (from self or others), and/or 2. **past experiences**, and/or 3. **fear of failure**.

CHANGE THE WAY YOU THINK ABOUT TESTS. KEEP THEM IN PERSPECTIVE.

Do you view them as a threat? No matter how important they may seem, tests are only a small part of your educational experience and an even smaller part of your life. So do tests reflect on the kind of person you are or your chances to succeed in many different areas? Of course not!

What are tests supposed to be for anyway?

- Tests can **motivate** students to study and learn the course content.
- Tests provide **feedback to the instructors** about whether or not they are getting the content across to their students.
- Tests give **feedback to the student** about how well s/he is doing in their courses.
- And, yes, tests are used to decide a student's **course grade**—but if you do poorly on one test, you can still pass the class, graduate and be successful. Fifty years from now will that test matter?

Rethink the way you look at tests. Tests do not measure your worth as a person. Tests do not reflect your IQ. And tests are not a matter of “life and death,” etc. Keep your thoughts rational.

OK—ONCE I’VE (1) “RETHOUGHT” TESTS AND (2) HAVE AN IDEA WHERE MY FEAR HAS COME FROM, ARE THERE SOME SPECIFIC THINGS I CAN DO?

Counselors in the Counseling Center are prepared to help you discover ways that will work for you regarding test anxiety. Each student is different and has come from different experiences. Don't hesitate to make an appointment.

Some other things you can do to help yourself are...

- **Be prepared.** Get those study skills in good shape. Don't procrastinate. Instead have a well-organized study plan schedule.
- **Practice taking tests.** That way you're rehearsing and simulating the real event. Make up test questions, test yourself and time yourself. Form a study group. Each one of you contributes a set number of questions. Put them together and you have a simulated test situation.
- **Exercise!** Exercise is great for reducing stress. The day before the test, do some kind of exercise (if not everyday!). You might try taking a short walk before the test too.
- **Take it easy** the day of the test. Prepare the night before by gathering all the supplies, lay out your clothes, etc. Review (not study or cram) your note cards before going to sleep and repeat a few affirmations. Get a good night's sleep (don't pull an “all-nighter”), and set your alarm so you get up in plenty of time. Rushing before a test—as well as cramming—sets you up for test anxiety.
- **Eat right.** Too much sugar and too much caffeine will give energy but you crash too soon. Not eating and eating too much can leave you feeling drained and make you tired.
- **Avoid “crowd panic.”** If, before the test is handed out, you tend to tune into what other class members are discussing—such as what they studied or questions they're asking each other or what they don't know, etc.—you may set yourself up to be anxious. Get your things ready and then go out in the hall to wait and get away from the conversation. Focus your mind on something else other than the test.
- Along the same lines, **don't try to cram** last minute things into your mind while waiting for the test (studying notes for example). This is a setup for trouble. Relax and do something else such as deep breathing, reading a magazine, and loosening muscles.

Counselors in the Counseling Center can help you further with the following test anxiety relievers as well as suggesting others...

- Learn to do **deep breathing**, and know how to do **instant relaxing** of your muscles. These are good stress-relievers anyway and good for you on a daily basis.
- **Imagine yourself as successful.** See yourself as calm relaxed, confident, etc. Athletes do it all the time.
- Engage in **positive self-talk**. There are positive—as well as negative—messages we constantly give ourselves. Be aware of “self-fulfilling prophecies.” Use them to your advantage, not to your disadvantage.

SO WHAT CAN I DO IF I NEED MORE HELP THAN WHAT I’VE JUST READ HERE?

The counselors in the Counseling Center have more information and tips to share. Just let them know. Or you can attend one of the academic success workshops held each semester in the Success Center. Pick up a schedule of Success Center workshops for days and times.