

# Defining and reducing test anxiety

## What is Test Anxiety?

Test anxiety is a psychological condition in which people experience extreme distress and anxiety in testing situations. While many people experience some degree of stress and anxiety before and during exams, test anxiety can actually impair learning and hurt test performance.

It is normal to feel some degree of anxiety in any situation in which you are evaluated. Examples of these situations include job interviews, athletic try-outs, first dates -- and, of course, tests. Some degree of anxiety in these situations can actually help performance – according the Yerkes –Dodson Law, performance is best at moderate levels of anxiety, rather than at either very high or very low levels



So, a little bit of anxiety is good, but, excessive fear during a test, can make it difficult to concentrate and you might struggle to recall things that you have studied. You might feel like all the information you spent some much time reviewing suddenly seems inaccessible in your mind. You may blank out, not remembering the answers to questions to which you *know* you know the answers.

## Test anxiety usually strikes you in two places:

1. Your head
2. Your body

### Signs of anxiety in your head

- Blanking out
- Racing thoughts
- Difficulty Concentrating
- Negative thoughts about
- Past performance
- Consequences of failure
- How everyone else is doing

- Knowing the answers to the test after you have taken it

### Signs of anxiety in your body

- Nausea
- Headaches
- Cramps
- Fainting
- Sweating
- Dry mouth
- Fast heart-beat
- Increased breathing
- Tense muscles



Although individuals have innate temperamental differences in how prone they are to anxiety, for the most part test anxiety is a learned behavior. The good news in this is that anything that is learned can be unlearned.

*There are many concrete and specific things you can do to change your tendency to become overly anxious on tests.*

**LET'S TAKE A LOOK AT A FEW CAUSES OF TEST ANXIETY, AND THEN AT A FEW SUGGESTION WHICH MIGHT HELP ALLEVIATE THE PROBLEM.**

### Cause #1: You have not mastered the subject yet.

This one seems fairly obvious. If you begin to look over the subjects which might be covered on the test, and you know you haven't prepared or studied, then the solution to this problem is that you spend some time in preparation for the exam.

**Suggestions for Change:** There is obviously only one cure for this kind of anxiety and that is developing a good study schedule. Stay organized by creating a study plan which details what you are going to work on. Make sure this schedule sets out manageable tasks for you to master in a given period of time. And, if you need help, find the right resources for that help.

### Cause #2: You have negative thoughts

Negative thoughts can distract you and make you freeze in a testing situation.

Here are some common negative thoughts

- I always do poorly on tests
- I am going to flunk this test
- If I don't pass this test I am a failure
- Everyone else always does better than me

**Suggestions for Change:** It is essential to talk to yourself in ways that lower rather than raise anxiety, to develop some "counter-propaganda" to challenge the negative predictions. You need to talk to yourself in ways that change your self-talk from negative to positive, from despairing to realistic. Remember, test anxiety is when your worries get in the way of showing the teacher what you know -- so, by definition, **YOU DO KNOW THE MATERIAL**, at least sufficiently to pass the test if not necessarily to ace it, and you need to remind yourself of this.

- **Ask yourself how real is the threat?**

Anxiety is a normal, natural biological and psychological reaction to a real or perceived threat. This means that the test anxious student sees the test as a threat of some sort. If you are prone to test anxiety, an important step in overcoming it is to try and discover in what way you perceive the test as a threat to you. For example, a test might be perceived as a threat to your self-esteem, parental approval, or college plans. Next, try to evaluate if the threat is as real or as serious as you think.. Ask yourself: Am I really a worthless person if I don't get a good grade on this test? Will my parents really hate me? Will this one test really change my future plans?

- **Identify core negative beliefs and self-defeating thoughts.**

The test anxious student essentially believes "I can't do this" I'm stupid and so I'm going to do horribly on this test and when I do, that will be absolutely terrible and I won't be able to handle it." This is a core belief and the self-defeating thoughts that flow from it (and not the test itself) raise anxiety. Performance is then lowered. This core belief and its associated thoughts must be aggressively challenged for anxiety to go down.

- **Take Some Time to Challenge these negative thoughts and core beliefs**

Now, it's time to challenge these thoughts. Take out a piece of paper and write down your negative thought in one column. Then for each negative thought, write down a positive thought that challenges it. Here is an example of how to do this:

Negative Thought	Positive Thought
I always do poorly on tests	I have a good study plan for this test
If I don't pass this test, I am a failure	I am going to try my best, but if I fail I can try again
It is impossible to know everything for this test	I don't have to know everything, I just have to pass

## Cause #3: Your Body Shows Signs of Test Anxiety

Anxiety is like a snowball going down a hill -- it starts small and slowly and gradually builds up size and speed. If you want to stop a snowball going down a hill, the best place to do it is as close to the top of the hill as possible. So it is with test anxiety. It is critical to nip it in the bud, and stop it before it builds up steam. To do this you need to develop an "early warning system" -- you need to be able to recognize the early telltale signs and symptoms in your body that your anxiety is starting to snowball. These signs will be different for different people, but examples are sweaty palms, feeling nauseous, headaches, starting to think negative thoughts, etc. When you detect that your anxiety is starting to build, try some of the techniques below. (<http://www.mnsu.edu/counseling/>)

**Suggestions for Change:** *Use a behavioral relaxation technique to relax your body*

*Behavioral techniques such as deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation and visualization can help you achieve*

*a physiological state of relaxation, when you do, your mind will follow suit. Like any skill, relaxation techniques have to be regularly practiced for you to become adept at using them to relax.*

- **Deep breathing:** *This is a simple technique that you can do almost anywhere. Take a deep breath from your diaphragm and hold it for several seconds. Then, slowly exhale and experience the tension leaving your body. Repeat several times. If you silently say the word "calm" or "relax" to yourself as you exhale, over time thinking of this word alone will be able to evoke a sense of relaxation.*
- **Progressive muscle relaxation:** *This technique involves first tensing then relaxing different muscle groups in your body, one by one (hence the term "progressive"). Physiologically, muscles actually relax (i.e., elongate) more if they are first tensed. If you experience tension in certain parts of your body when you are anxious (e.g., your neck, back, shoulders, forehead, arms), relax those muscle groups one by one: tense the muscle group and hold for a slow count of ten, then relax to a slow count of ten and feel the tension flowing out.*
- **Imagery:** *Imagery means using your imagination to help you relax. You can do this in two ways.*
  - **Coping imagery (mental rehearsal):** *Sports psychologists often have athletes picture themselves performing on the court or field as they would like. Imagine yourself staying relaxed and performing well on the test.*
  - **Visualization:** *Place yourself in a relaxing scene, imagine yourself at the lake, or in front of a cozy fire. Use all five of your senses to make the scene come alive*  
(<http://www.mnsu.edu/counseling/>)

## **A Few Extra Thoughts on Controlling Test Anxiety**

- **Avoid cramming.** If you are prone to test anxiety, frantic, last minute studying is virtually guaranteed to crank your anxiety up. Start studying for a test far enough in advance (perhaps a few days before the test!) to avoid this.
- **Know when to call it a night.** When you are studying for a test, know when to stop studying and get some sleep instead of trying to cram a few extra test points into your brain at the expense of adequate rest.
- **Read for mastery rather than memory:** think about and try to understand what you read and relate it to the rest of the course material, rather than just try to memorize facts and spit them back on the test.
- **On multiple choice tests, first answer all the questions you know and skip over the ones you are unsure of.** Then go back through the test a second time and answer the questions about which you really have to think. This way you will be sure to get all the points coming to you.
- **Dress comfortably and in layers for tests.** If you are prone to test anxiety, you may misinterpret the physical discomfort that results from being dressed too warmly as symptoms of anxiety and start a self-fulfilling prophecy.
- **Take care of yourself:** sleep and eat well.
- **Get some exercise or physical activity.** Exercise is a great stress reliever and can help re-charge your mental batteries. (<http://www.mnsu.edu/counseling/>)