



Test Anxiety



Do you really have test anxiety?

Everyone gets nervous when taking a test – many get anxious even thinking about a test. For some people, the testing situation is so anxiety producing they blank out completely or perform seriously below their level of knowledge. This last sentence defines “test anxiety” – it is different from nervousness. There are three factors to doing a good job in a testing situation.

1. **Preparation.** Your knowledge and preparation by studying are basic to doing well. You may panic in a test due to incomplete knowledge or from not having studied enough. This panic is not true test anxiety.
2. **Test Taking Skills.** The second factor in effective test performance is your test-taking skill. Familiarity with test taking formats and development of good test taking strategies are essential to your academic success.
3. **Emotional State.** The third component to being an effective test-taker is your emotional state. It takes a calm and controlled emotional state for your memory and judgment to work most effectively. We hope this handout will help you reduce your anxiety and give you some ideas about conquering your test anxiety.

Overcoming Test Anxiety

Two major factors are involved in test anxiety: 1) your mental reaction... what you tell yourself about a situation, and 2) your physical reaction... how your body response. This handout contains suggestions and exercises designed to help you overcome both aspects of test anxiety.

I. Your Mental Reaction – Negative Thinking

Many students with test anxiety make a tense situation (testing) worse by making negative self-assessments. You tell yourself you are not prepared. You fantasize about terrible outcomes. You worry about getting nervous (which, of course, makes you even more nervous). Instead of concentrating on the task at hand (the test), you begin to doubt your own self-worth, your intelligence, your goals; you begin to think about your whole career being doomed because of this test and your anxiety.

These are self-defeating statements which can become “self-fulfilling prophecies.” You need a feeling of calm competence to do your best. If you tell yourself you are an incompetent person, it is very likely that a part of you will begin to believe that you are incompetent. Then you will act on your belief and begin to behave incompetently. Below are some examples of self-defeating statements:

I can't concentrate on this test.

I hate tests because I always get so anxious.

What's going to become of me when I don't do well?

My family will be so disappointed they won't love me as much if I don't do well on this.

If I blow this test, it's my whole career, my whole life.

If people are talking about the test when I walk in, I'm done for.

If I don't know the answers to these first three questions, I'm probably going to flunk.

Everyone else knows the right answers.

Follow these steps to correct your negative thinking.

1. **Awareness.** Identify your own negative statements. You may have been doing this so long you are almost unaware of what your statements to yourself are. Formulate your fears into concrete statements and write them down.
2. **Consequences.** Take the statement “If I blow this test, it's my whole career, my whole life.” Note the consequences of concentrating on this: “If I continue to think about my life right now, I won't have time to concentrate on this test.” Now write down the consequences to the statements you listen in Step 1.
3. **Rebuttal.** Now challenge your original statement. Debate these statements, because, almost without exception, these statements are NOT absolute, predictable truths. Often by reformulating these statements during your debate, solutions or other possibilities will come to you. The following is only one rebuttal to the original statement: “No one event determines the rest of my life. I'll concentrate on this test now and worry about the rest of my life at a later time.” Now rebut each original statement with a more realistic, less “catastrophizing,” more confidence-producing statement.
4. **Reverse Negative Thinking.** Now begin to develop **positive self-statements**. Athletes know it is essential to “psyche yourself up” for a big game. Academic situations are no different. Some statements will be more general such as “I know that with practice I'll get over my test anxiety.” Preferably, many will be very specific such as “If the person next to me starts popping his/her gum, I'll repeat to myself ‘relax’ or ‘calm’ and take a deep breath to calm myself.” List some positive self-statements. Make some general ones, but make most of them specific to your trouble areas:

For quite some time you have been making negative self-statements. **You must practice often and regularly to change this old behavior.** Several times a day, repeat to yourself these positive statements. Be sure to repeat them before you study and before you walk into a test.

II. Your Physical Response

Whenever you **perceive** a situation as threatening (which is why your thoughts are important), your body immediately goes into a state of alert. This state may be characterized by any of the following symptoms:

- Sweaty palms or cold, clammy hands and feet
- Feeling your heart beating hard and/or rapidly
- Tense, acid stomach or feeling “butterflies”
- Shallow, rapid breathing
- Tenseness in neck, arms, face
- Feeling shaky or faint
- Blurred vision
- Squeaky voice

Relaxation Training

Your body, when you are anxious, is getting ready for a physical threat; it automatically gets ready for a “fight or flight” response. Engaging in physical activity often alleviates this arousal situation, BUT you can’t jog in the classroom during a test! Relaxation training serves three purposes: 1) If you have minimal skills, you CAN reverse many of the above symptoms if they are due to anxiety; 2) If you practice regularly, your overall level of tenseness is less -- your starting point before an anxiety producing event is at a much calmer and controlled level; and 3) Being skilled at relaxation is the first step in treating test “phobia.” Below are several ways to learn and practice relaxation.

1) General Directions. For all these exercises, it is best to be seated, eyes closed, feet flat on the floor or crossed at the ankles, and hands resting comfortably in your lap. Begin each exercise with a deep breath that you let out gently. As you let it out, feel yourself beginning to relax already. GENTLE AROUSAL -- After the exercise, slowly and gently activate by breathing a little more deeply, wiggling your fingers and toes, and opening your eyes at your own rate.

2) Progressive Muscle Relaxation. (do General Directions first) Clench your fists. While keeping them clenched, pull your forearms tightly up against your upper arms. While keeping those muscles tense, tense all the muscles in your legs. While keeping all those tense, clench your jaws and shut your eyes fairly tight...not too tightly. Now, while holding all those tense, take a deep breathe and hold it for 5 seconds...then, let everything go all at once. Feel yourself letting go of all your tensions. Just enjoy that feeling for a minute as your muscles let go more and more. Just enjoy focusing, gently, on letting go. (do Gentle Arousal.)

3) Breathing Exercise. (do General Directions first) With your eyes closed, and while relaxing quietly, gently focus on the end of your nose. As you breathe in, feel the air coming in the tip of your nose. As you breathe out, feel the air coming out the tip of our nose... Notice that the air coming in is cooler than the air going out... Gently focus on the cool air coming in, and the warm air going out. As your attention wanders, just gently bring it back to the tip of your nose. (do Gentle Arousal).

4) Focus on a Word. (do General Directions first) Pick some word which has “good” vibrations associated with it for you -- a word which you associate with relaxation, comfort, peace. It could be a word such as “serenity” or “cool, peaceful, joy, free,” etc. Now, just let that word hold the center of your thoughts. As your mind wanders to more stressful thoughts, gently bring it back to that word... After a while, perhaps your mind will drift to other gentle, restful thoughts. If so, just let it wander. When it does drift to stressful thoughts, move back to the original word. (do Gentle Arousal).

5) Mental Imagery. The use of mental imagery is a powerful relaxation tool. Develop for yourself a scene in your mind that is calming and soothing -- a mountain meadow, lying on a beach, or whatever works for you. Make this scene as vivid as possible -- what do you see? What do you hear...smell...or feel? Practice relaxing with this mental picture. Here are the steps:

1. Do the "General Directions." Calm your breathing pattern.
2. Take several very slow, very deep breaths. As you exhale, imagine that you are exhaling tension.
3. Now check your body tension. Relax physically.
4. Bring into mind your mental picture as vividly as if you were really there. Allow this image to stay in your mind while you continue to relax even more. (If you are training yourself to use imagery, stay with this step for 5 - 10 minutes. If you are using this exercise to relax before a test, stay on this step for 1/2 to 3 minutes.)
5. Do "Gentle Arousal."

Each time you practice this exercise, you will relax more quickly. Ideally, your mental image will become so powerful that just bringing this picture to mind will cause an automatic relaxation response in your body and mind.

6) Systematic Desensitization

We know that you cannot be relaxed and anxious at the same time. Once you have learned the relaxation response, you can begin to desensitize yourself to anxiety producing thoughts or events (thinking about tests, taking a test, getting anxious during a test, etc.). Anxiety is a "conditioned" response -- things that occur together become linked. You have **learned** that tests are associated with anxiety. Luckily, you can unlearn this connection.

Now write down 10 specific experiences or situations that create anxious feelings about tests. Make some only mildly anxiety-producing (like getting the syllabus with the dates for the tests), and make a few VERY anxiety-producing (like not being able to answer the first 3 questions on the test).

Make your "hierarchy" list from the **least** anxiety producing to the **most** anxiety producing item. You may need to rewrite your original list to make them in the right order. Make these as detailed as possible -- you want the item to create an almost real experience for you when you think about it.

Now you are ready to begin working your way through your hierarchy. You will desensitize yourself to feeling anxious in these situations.

1. Get very relaxed using whatever technique you have found that works best for you.
2. Vividly imagine the situation that is least anxiety producing on your list.
3. The **instant** you feel yourself tense up, do your relaxation until you feel calm (use muscle tensing/relaxing, calming words, breathing, mental image...whatever works for you).
4. Once you feel relaxed, repeat steps 2 and 3 until you no longer get anxious when imagining that situation on your hierarchy.
5. Repeat steps 1 through 4 until you have desensitized yourself to each item on your hierarchy.

It may take you only a couple of times to desensitize yourself to each item, or it may take 15 - 20 times, but continue working your way through your hierarchy until you can imagine all the scenes without experiencing anxiety. Work for about 1/2 hour at a time. The more sessions you spend with this, the faster you will get over your test anxiety.