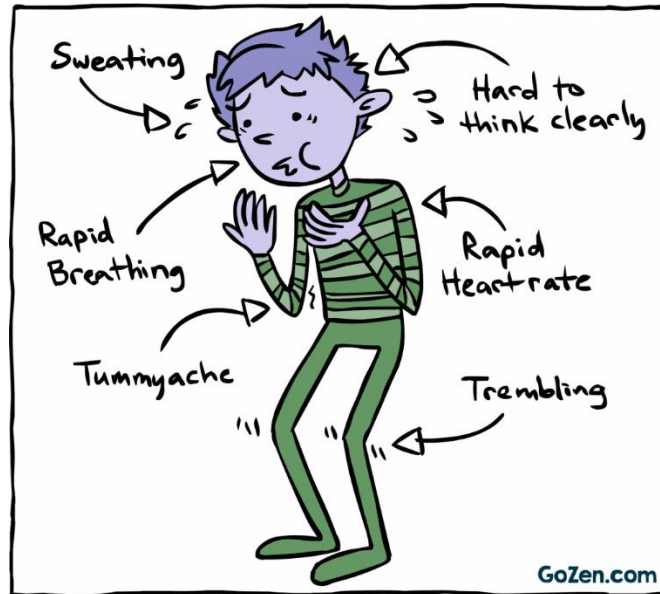


## Test Anxiety

If you have test anxiety, you may experience physical symptoms, such as an upset stomach, sweaty palms, a racing heart, etc. You may also have trouble recalling information and thinking clearly. If test anxiety is interfering with your performance or your quality of life, try some of the suggestions below.



### WHILE STUDYING:

Set up your study goals and take one step at a time to not overwhelm yourself.

Allow yourself plenty of time to accomplish all the things you have to do before the test.

Build up confidence by reviewing the material frequently, in small blocks of time each day for several days before a test.

If you are feeling anxiety building, try one of the following stress buster exercises.

### Stress Busters:

Engage in deep breathing for 2-5 minutes. Close your eyes and concentrate on the air going in and out of your lungs. Take long, deep breaths, fill your lungs and abdomen, hold your breath, and then exhale.

Tense and relax different muscle groups. For example, if your shoulders are tense pull them back and hold them for a few seconds, then relax. This will help you to be aware of the relaxation of muscles and help you to relax more.

Engage in guided imagery for a few minutes. Pick a scene that you find peaceful, beautiful, and natural. Think about what you see, what you hear, what you feel and what you smell while in this scene.

Try to describe the anxiety. Focus your attention on your anxiety and think about the feelings it causes: How large is it? Where is it located in your body? What is its color, its shape, and its texture? If you can completely experience a physical sensation it will often disappear.

Aerobic exercise will help you to release anxiety and excess energy and, as a result, reduce body tension.

Engage in positive self-talk. This involves: (a) thinking about rational responses to counter negative thoughts (e.g., instead of saying “I’m going to fail this test” say “I have the ability to do this, I just need to get some help.”); (b) thoughts that help you to cope with stress (e.g., “a little, anxiety is helpful will just try my best.”); and (c) thoughts that keep you on task (e.g., “I can write this paper if I break it into smaller steps.”)

### **PRIOR TO THE TEST:**

Arrive early so you can sit where you are most comfortable, and avoid people who are anxious and might cause you to doubt your knowledge.

When you receive the test look it over, read the directions twice, and then organize your time efficiently.

Don’t rush through the test, but work at a comfortable, pace and don’t worry about how far along your classmates are on the test.

### **DURING THE TEST, Try some of these options:**

Try deep breathing and muscle relaxation. You may want to take a break for a few minutes during the test and try them.

Get a drink of water and try to clear your mind.

Move onto easier questions if you feel stumped by one; you can go back to it if you have time.

Eat something or chew gum as an anxiety distraction.

Ask the instructor a question if you are not clear about the wording of a question.

Think about post-exam rewards for a minute as a way to motivate yourself.

Utilize positive self-talk. Come up with positive statements which help to keep you calm, such as “This is only one test,” “I am familiar with this material,” “This test doesn’t reflect on my intelligence,” etc.



Here are some strategies that may help reduce your test anxiety:

**Learn how to study efficiently.** Your school may offer study-skills classes or other resources that can help you learn study techniques and test-taking strategies. You'll feel more relaxed if you systematically study and practice the material that will be on a test.

**Study early and in similar places.** It's much better to study a little bit over 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 at test time.

**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.

**Talk to your teacher.** 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.

**Learn relaxation techniques.** To help you stay calm and confident right before and during the test, perform relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing, relaxing your muscles one at a time, or closing your eyes and imagining a positive outcome.

**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.

**Get some exercise.** Regular aerobic exercise, and exercising on exam day, can release tension.

**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.

**Don't ignore a learning disability.** Test anxiety may improve by addressing an underlying condition that interferes with the ability to learn, focus or concentrate — for example, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or dyslexia. In many cases, a student diagnosed with a learning disability is entitled to assistance with test taking, such as extra time to complete a test, testing in a less distracting room or having questions read aloud.

**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 or worsen anxiety. Ask if your school has counseling services or ask if your employer offers counseling through an employee assistance program.

### **Possible Causes of Test Anxiety:**

Think about the nature of your fears and come up with an answer to the fear -- either a change in behavior or a change in thinking (reframing the situation). Possible answers are listed below, but you can also come up with your own.

#### Realistic Fears:

I'm not ready for this test. **Answer:** Work on your time management and perhaps your perfectionism.

If I fail this exam, I might have to repeat the year. **Answer:** Talk to your advisor, dean, or counselor and try to be as realistic as you can about your options. In most cases, second chances are built into the system.

#### Unfounded Fears:

My family, classmates, and professors will think that I'm not very bright. **Answer:** At this level of education, everybody is smart, and intelligence is not the primary factor separating top performers from lower ones. After you graduate you will be judged on your work performance, so you will have plenty of opportunities to distinguish yourself.

I used to think I was smart, but now I'm no longer sure. **Answer:** Almost all students experience this kind of doubt. It's perfectly normal.

### **Letting Go of Perfectionism:**

Before entering college you may have been a perfectionist who went into exams feeling that you had studied everything you needed to know. It can be emotionally difficult to let go of perfectionism, but you must try. In college it is virtually impossible to learn every detail, so you need to focus on the most important concepts and learn those well enough to teach them. Remind yourself that your understanding of the major concepts will help you guess well on some of the details that you are unable to recall during the test.

To help curb your perfectionism, try this: Set a time limit and then go through a set of lecture notes with the goal of pulling out only the most important concepts and facts. Tell yourself that if you have time later on you will return to “gather” the less important information. (Knowing that you can

return will make it emotionally easier to leave minor details behind for now.)

### **Before the Exam:**

Put things in perspective. Remind yourself that your upcoming exam is important, but your entire future doesn't depend on this exam. (For example, many successful medical professionals have a few academic struggles in their past.) Also, it might be helpful to tell yourself that regardless of your performance on the test you will not be diagnosed with a terminal illness at the end of it.

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.

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.

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.

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.

Give yourself practice tests and use them not only to work on your test-taking but also to practice controlling your anxiety level. Deliberately induce anxiety by saying negative things to yourself and then practice the Anxiety Control Procedure. If you're afraid of not being able to finish the exam in time, do timed practice questions.

Get a good night's sleep for several days before the exam. With adequate sleep, your ability to think clearly and to deal with anxiety will both improve. You might try imagining yourself as a professional athlete: ask yourself how you would prepare yourself mentally and physically for an important game. Doing a moderate workout early in the evening (5:00 or 6:00) may help you sleep more soundly at night. If you often have trouble sleeping, consult your physician.

High anxiety can increase the impact of caffeine, so on test days reduce your intake.

### **During the Exam:**

Get to the test site a little early, but try to avoid talking with other students right before the exam. (Their 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.

If possible, choose a seat in a place with few distractions (probably near the front). You might also want to bring earplugs to limit distractions.

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.

Expect a few curve balls on the exam. Remind yourself that you're not expecting to get 100% on the exam; you're expecting an A (or a Pass). Also, your sense of what questions should appear on the test is not going to match perfectly with what the writer of the test had in mind. Therefore, when you encounter a curve ball on the exam, don't get upset and lose your concentration. Instead, you can either make an intelligent guess now or mark the question and return later.

If you begin to have negative thoughts, say STOP to yourself and remind yourself of past successes.

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.

Close your eyes.

Breathe in slowly to the count of seven and exhale to the count of seven.

Continue this slow breathing until you actually feel your body begin to relax. (Most people find that it takes 2 to 4 sequences.)

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.

Move your body. Roll your shoulders, stretch your legs, get up for a bathroom break if it's allowed.

Banish all thoughts of how well or poorly you might be doing on the exam. It's hard to guess accurately, and thinking about your score will only increase your anxiety.

Most students prefer to carefully work through the questions once rather than rushing through the exam and leaving time at the end for checking. (Nervous test-takers are especially prone to changing correct answers to incorrect when they go back to check their answers.)

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.

HERE'S 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.