

test anxiety

taking tests

Make It Happen:

time management
 concentration
 reading
 listening
 memory
taking tests
 writing papers
 self-regulation
 learning styles
 motivation

Many students suffer from anxiety when taking exams. Use this guide to identify your problem areas and find freedom from test anxiety.

What is test anxiety?

Some anxiety just before or during a test is quite normal. In fact, when your body is a bit more alert and your senses are heightened, that small amount of anxiety can actually help you stay focused during the exam. However, when anxiety is so overwhelming that it causes you to be distracted, flooded with emotion, or unable to concentrate, anxiety has become counterproductive.

What does test anxiety feel like?

Physiologically, test anxiety involves adrenaline and other stress hormones that your body releases. If you have severe anxiety, your body “thinks” that you’re in danger and produces arousal responses such as sweating, increased heart rate, increased breathing, and tightening of chest, shoulder, or back muscles. No wonder you can’t think!

Cognitive and emotional factors also play a role. What you tell yourself about the test or about your abilities has a great impact on how well you will perform. Pay attention to your “self-talk.” Is your self-talk calming you down or making you more anxious?

In addition, the importance you place on a particular exam or course may be negatively impacting your performance. The added pressure can easily overtake your attention. If you feel you “have to” ace a particular test in order to please your parents, meet perfectionist expectations, avoid feelings of failure, or be accepted into a program—that’s too much pressure for a single exam! Instead, try to remind yourself that the outcome of one exam doesn’t determine who you are as a person or how well you’ll succeed in life.

Did you know that successful test-taking involves more than just what happens on the day of the test? The Center for Learning has handouts on “Stages to Successful Test Taking” and “5-Day Study Plan.” Visit us for more test-taking and study resources.

test anxiety

taking tests

Make It Happen:

time management
concentration
reading
listening
memory

taking tests

writing papers
self-regulation
learning styles
motivation

How can I reduce test anxiety?

- First, give yourself plenty of time to study. Anxiety can come from poor planning. Start studying the week before the exam so that you can have spaced review and are really comfortable with the material. Cramming only increases anxiety. Check out the CFL's handout "5-Day Study Plan" for ideas about how to space your review.
- Commit yourself to a healthy lifestyle. Regular exercise and a good diet can help keep stress at bay. Avoid caffeine and other mood-altering substances, which each impact your anxiety level. Getting enough sleep will dramatically increase concentration.
- Permit only positive self-talk, especially in the hours before and during the test. Focus on what you know.
- Be aware of what distracts you, and respond accordingly. If you're easily distracted by visual or auditory stimulation, sit somewhere in the classroom that minimizes such distractions. If you get nervous when other people finish an exam and start leaving, sit with your back toward the door.
- Use simple relaxation techniques before the test. For example, deep breathing, meditation, massage, or stretching/relaxing muscles can help with anxiety.
- Process your feelings and fears with a trusted friend or counselor. A counselor may be able to help you get a handle on why test anxiety is a problem for you. A counselor may also be able to help you reduce your anxiety and learn how to manage it.

Did you know that successful test-taking involves more than just what happens on the day of the test? The Center for Learning has handouts on "Stages to Successful Test Taking" and "5-Day Study Plan." Visit us for more test-taking and study resources.