

Managing Test Anxiety

What is test anxiety?

Test anxiety can be defined as a situation-specific anxiety experienced in **evaluative** situations. This includes the **worry, nervousness, and/or bodily responses** (i.e., sweating, trembling, increased heart rate) you feel in response to a situation where you're getting evaluated (written or oral exams, presentations, driving tests etc.).

Although low levels of nervousness or stress before a test are fairly common and may even be helpful, it is thought that test anxiety lowers test performance through enabling students to shift attention from the evaluative situation to themselves. In addition, it is suggested that individuals exhibiting test anxiety struggle with re-allocating mental resources to solve various tasks, impeding test performance.

How can I plan ahead to reduce test anxiety?

1. **Study the same way you will be tested.** The more prepared you feel for the exam, the less likely you are to feel anxious. It will help significantly if you have practiced beforehand under actual exam conditions: under time pressure, with no notes or books, in a well-lit, quiet, relatively distraction-free space. If possible, try using the exam room to study so that the room is familiar to you. Sometimes it helps students to practice using the actual exam materials, such as the "blue books" used to complete the exam.

Additionally, [evidence-based, active study strategies](#) such as **retrieval practice** can help you assess what you know and learn how to recall that information when you need it, just as you will need to do during an exam. Examples of retrieval practice include using flashcards, quizzing yourself, and taking practice tests without looking at your notes.

2. **Talk to your professor or TA/Al to learn what to expect.** They may be able to confirm that you are on the right track with your studying (or gently steer you in the right direction, if necessary). You can also request clarification about the format of the test or ask if they have any advice for students who want to succeed. Some instructors may be more forthcoming with this information than others, but it can't hurt to ask!
3. **Take care of your body and mind in the days leading up to the test.** Stick to your usual routine as much as possible and make sure you get a good night's sleep (7-9 hours) the night before the exam. Limit your caffeine intake, stay hydrated, and eat a good meal before the test to help with focus and attention. Take breaks from studying to relax, exercise, meditate, or engage in another form of self-care.

4. **Process your thoughts and emotions about the test.** Research has shown that this can help you better understand where your anxiety is coming from, perceive it as less threatening, and learn how to manage it. Here are some exercises you can try:
 - a. **Visualize success:** How will you feel when the test is over and you have done well? What will that look like? Remind yourself of times you have performed well or met your goals in the past.
 - b. **Expressive writing:** For ≈20 minutes per day, write about the positive emotions you are feeling or have felt recently. This technique helps you become more aware of internal experiences (i.e., the emotions that you're feeling during anxiety) and better enables you to work through them (by lessening avoidance coping).
 - c. **Pre-test writing:** Write down your worries 10-20 minutes prior to the test or exam. This can help improve your performance by freeing up "brain space" (working memory) and helps you re-evaluate the anxiety-inducing situation as less threatening.

5. **Incorporate breathing and grounding exercises into your routine.** These strategies can help you manage your anxiety before, during, and after the test. Here are some exercises that have been shown to help relieve anxiety in evaluative situations; you can experiment to learn which one(s) work best for you:
 - a. **Deep breathing:** Place one hand on your chest and the other just below your belly button. Take a few slow, deep breaths (try for 5-6 at a time) and tune into the feeling of your breath moving in out of your body. Remember to relax your belly so that it expands fully.

Note the way your chest and belly rise and fall with each inhale and exhale. Alternate normal and deep breaths several times and pay attention to how you feel when you inhale and exhale.
 - b. **5-4-3-2-1 grounding technique:** Take a few deep breaths to calm yourself, and then tune into your senses. Try to notice small details that your mind would usually tune out as you identify the following:
 - 5 things you can see
 - 4 things you can feel
 - 3 things you can hear
 - 2 things you can smell
 - 1 thing you can taste

- c. **Progressive muscle relaxation:** This exercise is designed to reduce stress by strategically tensing each muscle group in turn for 5-7 seconds, relaxing, and then repeating with another muscle group until you have engaged all of your muscles from your head to your toes.

When you are first learning to do this, you may find it helpful to follow an audio guide, such as [this one](#) by Therapist Aid on YouTube, to learn all the muscle groups and get a sense of the appropriate timing for each step.

- d. **Attention Training Technique:** This technique trains you to re-direct your attention back from yourself to the evaluative situation by practicing splitting, switching, and focusing your attention. To master this technique, watch [this video](#) by Afternoon Break on YouTube at least once each week, and then for the rest of the week, practice the attention training skills without the video. Research suggests that you will notice a reduction in your test anxiety after two or three weeks of practice.

- 6. **Arrive prepared on the day of the test.** Assemble any materials you will need (student ID, pencils, calculator, etc.) in advance, so you won't have to scramble to find them at the last minute. Plan to arrive at testing location 20-30 minutes early to give yourself time to find the correct room, choose a place to sit, and settle in. Minimize negative self-talk, stress-talking with others, panicked last-minute studying, and other potentially anxiety-inducing activities as much as possible during this time.

How can I manage test anxiety during the exam?

1. **Focus on the present moment to calm your emotions and thoughts.** Relax and center yourself with your breathing or grounding exercise(s) of choice. Avoid thoughts about the future or past; instead, pay attention to where you are and what you are doing; for example, say to yourself, "I am in Seigle Hall. It is 3:30pm."
2. **Sit with your back straight and your shoulders relaxed.** This posture will help you feel more comfortable in your seat, and has also been shown to improve confidence and persistence during evaluative or challenging situations.
3. **Preview your test as soon as you receive it and plan your approach.** First, write down any key formulas or pieces of information in the margins or on scratch paper so you will remember them. Then, if possible, look through the test to see what kinds of questions you will be answering and estimate how long you will be able to spend on each question or section. To boost your confidence and earn some "easy" points, start with the questions you are most prepared to answer.

How can I manage my anxiety after the exam?

1. **Schedule time to relax or socialize with friends.** Taking a test is stressful, even under the best of circumstances, and chances are high that your brain and body will need to take a break before moving on to other school-related tasks. So, plan ahead to reward yourself with some well-deserved downtime. This will give you something to look forward to while you're taking the test and help you take your mind off of any lingering anxiety afterwards.
2. **Process your feelings with someone you trust.** Debrief the test with a supportive friend, family member, or mental health professional who can reassure you and help you recognize and disrupt negative thought patterns or behaviors. Consider stopping by a [Let's Talk](#) session or reaching out to [Uncle Joe's](#).
3. **Put the situation into perspective.** Remember that any exam only measures what you know and how well you can recall it, not your worth as a person or your overall intelligence. Even if you do not feel that you performed well, try to keep in mind that the long-term impact of one less-than-stellar test grade is almost always *much* smaller than one might expect.
4. **Embrace a growth mindset that will allow you to view the exam as a learning experience.** After you receive your grade, you will be able to review the exam, which will help you identify your strengths and areas for growth in regard to course concepts, types of test questions, and the study strategies you used to prepare for the exam. From there, you can make a plan to adjust your study strategies and improve your performance on future exams. [This worksheet](#) can help!

Additional resources and further reading:

- [Improve Your Processing; Improve Your Studying](#)
- [Study Strategies for Success](#)
- [Stress Management: Doing Progressive Muscle Relaxation](#) [Univ. of Michigan Health]
- [Habif Health and Wellness Center Mental Health Services](#)
 - [Let's Talk](#) – Confidential drop-in mental health support
 - [Uncle Joe's Peer Counseling and Resource Center](#)

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