



CONQUERING TEST ANXIETY

Test anxiety isn't an inevitable college experience.
It is of our own creation,
which gives us the power to change it.



University of Findlay

Office of Counseling Services

Test Anxiety

Nervousness or increased adrenaline before a test is fairly common, even in the days leading up to the test. This level of stress can be productive, much like getting 'up' for a game. There are times for some, however, that this testing stress becomes burdensome and can interfere with performance. Take some time to work through this packet and learn skill sets that can pay off for classes to come.

STEP 1. Complete the **Test Anxiety Survey**. Be honest in your responses. Do not try to under or over-report for any preferred outcomes; this doesn't help you in the long term. Pay attention to the categories that cause the most interference for you with testing.

STEP 2. Give thoughtful consideration of your **causes and symptoms**. This isn't about judgment of you as a student. It is about managing/eliminating symptoms so you can perform your best. Be honest with yourself if preparation is a key factor.

STEP 3. Evaluate your cognitions. Cognitions are the basic thoughts we tell ourselves, a personal monologue that can either be helpful, calming, and encouraging...or can be our worst enemy. We all have some of these, some of the time. Review list of cognitive distortions and identify your top one or two offenders. We are looking for the ones that interfere or cause the most distress.

STEP 4. Practice, practice, practice! Take a three-prong approach to managing test anxiety.

1. Manage your mind! Prepare/over prepare. See preparation tips.
2. Manage your thoughts! Monitor, change, and practice effective self-talk (cognitions)
3. Manage your body! Healthy self-care (sleep, caffeine, alcohol, nutrition, exercise), relaxation, breathing.

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Survey for Test Anxiety

Question	Yes		No
1. I often worry about not being as smart as other students taking the same exam.		W	
2. Right before the exam I spend a lot of energy worrying about what I haven't studied.		W	
3. I find it difficult to study or prepare for the exam because of worry over doing poorly.		W	
4. During the test, I feel as though the test is composed of all trick questions designed to trap me.		W	
5. I imagine that my instructor is my adversary and will score my test with vengeance.		W	
6. I always do poorly on any type of test.		W	
7. Before and/or during the exam, the palms of my hands usually begin to perspire.		E	
8. I am generally a bundle of nerves before and during the exam.		E	
9. Before the exam, I usually have physical disturbances (headache, upset stomach, etc.).		E	
10. I am generally a bundle of nerves after the exam.		E	
11. I often draw a blank during the exam.		P	
12. When I get my test back, I realize I have made careless errors.		P	
13. When the professor returns my exam, I often realize I knew the correct answers to the items I missed on the exam.		P	
14. I am easily distracted when taking a test.		B	
15. I stay up very late studying for a test.		B	
16. My eating habits include a lot of sugar and/or caffeine before a test.		B	
17. When I get anxious about a test, I drink alcohol to calm down.		B	
18. I always ask other students how they felt about the exam; how well they performed.		B	
19. I spend time before the exam talking about how difficult the exam will be with other anxious students.		B	

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Scoring Results for Survey for Test Anxiety

For every YES answer, give yourself one point.

Worry	Emotionality	Performance	Behavior
1.	7.	11.	14.
2.	8.	12.	15.
3.	9.	13.	16.
4.	10.		17.
5.			18.
6.			19.
Total:	Total:	Total:	Total:

Total Score: _____

- 0 - 6** If you are performing poorly on exams, the problem may or may not be anxiety as much as adequate preparation. You may want to schedule a conference to discuss your YES answers and identify other possible sources of low test performance.
- 7 - 11** You may need to discuss some of your YES answers with an academic counselor.
- 12 - 15** Test anxiety could be reducing your test-taking effectiveness. Attending a Test Anxiety Workshop is recommended.
- 16+** Attending the Test Anxiety Workshop is highly recommended. You may also wish to consider working one-on-one with a counselor.

Definitions

Worry: Over concern resulting in negative thoughts about an upcoming test or exam (ex. not as smart as other students, know will flunk the test, etc.)

Emotionality: Autonomic or subconscious reactions to a testing situation (ex. increased heart rate, muscle tension, headaches, etc.).

Performance: How well you think and answer questions during a test (ex. drawing a blank, careless errors, etc.)

Behavior: Reactions to a test situation that you consciously control (ex. drinking alcohol, high intakes of caffeine or sugar, etc.).

STEP 2: Causes & Symptoms

Causes

Fear of failure. While the pressure to perform can act as a motivator, it can also be devastating to individuals who tie their self-worth to the outcome of a test.

How does this apply to you? Do your grades/performance define you? Who do you get pressure from?

Lack of preparation. Waiting until the last minute or not studying at all can leave individuals feeling anxious and overwhelmed.

What do you do well?

What do you need to improve?

Poor test history. Previous problems or bad experiences with test-taking can lead to a negative mindset and influence performance on future tests.

When did you first notice test anxiety? Any prior bad experiences?

*Individuals with other anxiety disorders or anxiety in the family have a stronger propensity toward testing anxiety.

Have you struggled with other anxiety? Explain:

Any family history of anxiety disorders?

Step 2 (cont.)

Symptoms

Physical symptoms can include:

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> headache | <input type="checkbox"/> feeling faint |
| <input type="checkbox"/> nausea | <input type="checkbox"/> light headedness |
| <input type="checkbox"/> diarrhea | <input type="checkbox"/> Other |
| <input type="checkbox"/> excessive sweating | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> shortness of breath/shallow breathing | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> rapid heart rate | |

Test anxiety can lead to a panic attack, which is the abrupt onset of intense fear or discomfort in which individuals may feel like they are unable to breathe or having a heart attack.

Have you ever had a panic attack (or what you believe might have been a panic attack)?

Emotional symptoms can include:

- Feelings of anger
- Fear
- Helplessness
- Disappointment
- Trapped
- Other

Behavioral/Cognitive symptoms can include:

- Difficulty concentrating
- Mind going blank
- Thinking negatively
- Comparing yourself to others
- Other:

Step 3: Cognitions

Cognitive distortions are basically thinking errors, negative thoughts that have become a pattern and ultimately shape how we view situations, others, or even view ourselves. Just as they were learned once-upon-a-time, they can also be unlearned, which will help reduce anxious thoughts and feelings. Read the definitions and circle those you identify with.

DEFINITIONS OF COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS

1. **ALL-OR-NOTHING THINKING:** You see things in black-and-white categories. If your performance falls short of perfect, you see yourself as a total failure.
2. **OVERGENERALIZATION:** You see a single negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat.
3. **MENTAL FILTER:** You pick out a single negative detail and dwell on it exclusively so that your vision of all reality becomes darkened, like the drop of ink that discolors the entire beaker of water.
4. **DISQUALIFYING THE POSITIVE:** You reject positive experiences by insisting they “don’t count” for some reason or other. In this way you can maintain a negative belief that is contradicted by your everyday experiences.
5. **JUMPING TO CONCLUSIONS:** You make a negative interpretation even though there are no definite facts that convincingly support your conclusion.
 - a. **Mind reading.** You arbitrarily conclude that someone is reacting negatively to you, and you don’t bother to check this out.
 - b. **The fortuneteller error.** You anticipate that things will turn out badly, and you feel convinced that your prediction is an already-established fact.
6. **MAGNIFICATION (CATASTROPHIZING) OR (MINIMIZATION):** You exaggerate the importance of things (such as your goof-up or someone else’s achievement), or you inappropriately shrink think until they appear tiny (your own desirable qualities or the other fellow’s imperfections). This is also called the “binocular trick.”
7. **EMOTIONAL REASONING:** You assume that your negative emotions necessarily reflect the way things really are: “I feel it; therefore, it must be true.”
8. **SHOULD STATEMENTS:** You try to motivate yourself with should and shouldn’t, as if you had to be whipped and punished before you could be expected to do anything. “Musts” and “oughts” are also offenders. The emotional consequence is guilt. When you direct should statement towards others, you feel anger, frustration, and resentment.
9. **LABELING AND MISLABELING:** This is an extreme form of overgeneralization. Instead of describing your error, you attach a negative label to yourself: “I’m a loser.” When someone else’s behavior rubs you the wrong way, you attach a negative label to him: “He’s a jerk.” Mislabeled involves describing an event with language that is highly colored and emotionally loaded.
10. **PERSONALIZATION:** You see yourself as the cause of some negative external event which in fact you were not primarily responsible for.

Step 4: Practice New Skills

1. Preparation (academically)

Study more—a lot more. It may seem obvious, but insufficient study time is the biggest underlying problem for students who suffer from test anxiety. The simple fact is that most students who struggle with exams have not studied enough. Don't be satisfied with doing well on homework, note review, or practice tests. Remember that the testing conditions are going to put pressure on you, and this pressure is going to affect your ability to recall things you know. The solution is simply to learn your material so well that you can easily recall it even under difficult conditions.

* Repetition widens the pathways to memory. The more times you do something, the easier it will be to do. *

Be prepared. Develop good study habits. Study at least a week before the exam, in smaller increments of time and over a few days (instead of pulling an "all-nighter"). Try to simulate exam conditions by working through a practice test, following the same time constraints. Take responsibility for your preparation. Don't blame others, the 'system,' time, etc. Put in the work. It's college. If it was easy everyone would do it. You're here because you're smart.

Develop good test-taking skills. Read the directions carefully, answer questions you know first and then return to the more difficult ones. Circle key words. Outline essays before you begin to write.

Stay focused. Concentrate on the test, not other students during your exams. Try not to talk to other students about the subject material before taking an exam.

Available Resources: Academic Support Center, Tutoring, faculty office hours, peer groups, practice tests (sometimes found on line related to your text), Counseling Services.

2. Learn Effective Cognitions/Self-talk (mentally)

Maintain a positive attitude. Testing is an opportunity to show what you know. Focus on feeling challenged rather than threatened. Remember that your self-worth should not be dependent on or defined by a test grade. There is no benefit to negative thinking.

Create rewards and reasonable expectations for studying can help to produce effective studying habits.

Listen to self-talk/ Practice positive thinking: reframe negative self-talk/anxious talk into calming messages, rational affirmations. Reframe the experience of testing; it's just piece of paper, doesn't define you, only one test. Telling yourself you are a bad test taker, or can't do it leads to self-perpetuating anxiety—makes it worse not better. Instead of thinking, "I have to do well on this exam," think, "I will do well on this test because I have studied as much as I can. I know what I need to do to be successful."

Identify your strengths. Make changes where you see room for improvement

Visualize success. Fill your mind with affirmation. Remind yourself that you have done everything within your power to be ready, and that you will be successful as a result. Picture yourself answering the test questions with ease. Accept that you will do well, and that you have nothing to worry about. You're capable. Prepare a mantra. ("You're prepared. You can succeed")

3. Practice good self-care (Physically)

Practice relaxation techniques. If you feel stressed during the exam, take deep, slow breaths and consciously relax your muscles, one at a time. This can invigorate your body and will allow you to better focus on the exam. Focus your practice on calming yourself—by dismissing unwanted thoughts, refocusing your mind and controlling your breathing. Deliberate relaxation helps you to control your breathing, your heart rate and your thought processes. There are many forms of meditation available to you

- *Triangle breathing is a good technique. Start with slow, deep, diaphragmatic breathing. Inhale over three slow counts, hold for three counts, exhale over three counts. Repeat three times.*
- *Relaxation, mindfulness, prayer, meditation: All are helpful methods. Find which works best for you. Headspace and Calm are a couple of apps that might help leading up to the test.*

Stay healthy. Get enough sleep, eat healthfully, exercise and allow for personal time. If you are exhausted—physically or emotionally—it will be more difficult for you to handle stress and anxiety.

- *Find your optimal sleep range and honor this. For most people, less than 6 hours per night causes difficulty with concentration and recall. Avoid all-nighters. Being sleep deprived increases anxiety and lowers recall/performance.*
- *Eat healthy: choose fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean proteins. Eat something healthy one to two hours before your test, but not to the point of being uncomfortable or too full.*
- *Maintain your exercise. If there isn't enough time for your gym workout, take a fast-paced walk around the block, run the stairs of the residence hall, do jumping jacks in your room, or practice mini yoga sessions, which you can find on YouTube.*
- *Monitor caffeine use. Minimal-moderate caffeine will produce good results for some, but not all. Excessive caffeine adds to heightened anxiety and poor concentration. Avoid alcohol and other drugs, both while studying or while testing. Avoid use of alcohol to calm the nerves. This creates another self-perpetuating problem.*

Extra Test-taking Tips & Strategies

Before the Test

Plan your arrival to the test. Arrive a few minutes early for the test, but not too early.

Avoid anxious talk with peers. Listening to classmates' review questions the last minute, or express their own fears or lack of preparation only hurts you. Tell your closest peers that you are going to 'get in the zone' and not to take it personally.

Manage distractions: If ambient noises distract you, check with your faculty about seating location (avoid the door), use of ear plugs (not ear buds).

Review only on test day: Don't study up to the last minute. If you've studied well beforehand, you shouldn't need to study on test day. A nice review to jog your memory is ok, but you're probably not going to learn a lot of new stuff on the day of an exam.

During the Test

Remember, tests don't cause anxiety. The anxiety is your creation, and you can control it. Try regarding your test as a puzzle, there for your amusement only. Remind yourself that it's only a game. Sure, you're trying to score points—but it's only because winning the game is more fun than losing. (an opportunity to show what you know, rather than a threat to prove you don't)

Skim the test—but only if you think you can. Some people find skimming a test—to jog your memory and identify easier questions—is a helpful strategy. Others find that scanning a test makes them nervous. It's a good idea, but it's not for everyone. Decide whether this practice will help you.

Keep moving: Don't stay stuck in the mud. Don't let yourself struggle with a question. Give yourself enough time on it to try to jog your memory, but then move on to the next one. Remind yourself that even as you answer other questions, your brain is still searching for the answer to the one you skipped. Answering other questions while waiting may just help jog that memory. Build on success of question you know.

Use Data Dump technique: write on scrap or back side of test important facts, mnemonics, formulas to refer to later in the test

Yes, you're ready!

Take a few deep breaths. Relax your muscles. Begin with a short private affirmation (I'm prepared; I will succeed).

Sources: American Anxiety Disorders Association (AADA), Survey adapted from BGSU,