

22 Strategies for Overcoming Test Anxiety

It's completely normal to experience some form of test anxiety prior to an exam. However, anxiety becomes problematic if it gets to a point where it begins to negatively affect your performance. In case you find yourself getting caught in a test-related worry-spiral, we've prepared some strategies to help you relax, prepare and focus on the task at hand.

What Causes Test Anxiety?

Although the root of test anxiety may seem self-explanatory (the obvious answer being, it's a test!) according to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA), there are three primary causes of test-related anxiety:

1. **Fear of Failure:** If your self-worth is tied to your test score the pressure to perform well may become unbearable.
2. **Lack of Preparation:** It's easy to get anxious and overwhelmed if you wait until the last minute to study (or don't study at all).
3. **Poor Test History:** A negative mind-set that stems from poor past results may influence how well you do on future tests.^[1]

Finding the Right Relaxation Technique

Finding the right relaxation technique is a very personal endeavor that will likely involve some trial and error. The goal here is to refocus your attention towards calm and increase your awareness of your body. What works for someone else may not be the best option for you, so if at first you don't succeed... try these:

1. **Autogenic relaxation:** With this technique, you use visual imagery and body awareness to reduce your anxiety. For example, begin by picturing yourself in a peaceful setting (whatever works best for you) then focus on slowing down your breathing, bringing down your heart rate and relaxing your arms and legs.
2. **Progressive muscle relaxation:** This technique involves slowly tensing and relaxing each of your muscle groups. For example, start by flexing and releasing your toes and working your way up to your head and neck (or vice versa). Tense your muscles for at least five seconds and then relax for 30 seconds, and so on.
3. **Visualization:** The visualization technique consists of forming calming mental images while trying to use as many senses as you can. For instance, start by closing your eyes (ideally in a quiet spot) and imagine yourself on beach, focus on the smell of the salt water, the sounds of the waves crashing and the warmth of the sun on your body.

In addition to testing out the above relaxation techniques, you can also try calming activities such as meditation, massage, yoga or anything that includes soothing repetitive movement such as walking, swimming or knitting.

Building A Strategy for Success

The thing about anxiety is that it thrives on the unknown. To that end, there are some concrete steps you can take to reduce your fears and ensure that you're at the top of your game when you sit down for your test. So take a deep breath and get ready to:

- **Improve your time management skills:** It's easier to develop good study habits if you create a schedule to manage your time. Start studying in small increments (so you don't get overwhelmed) at least a week or two before the exam rather than trying to cram or pull an all-nighter.
- **Be prepared:** Taking a practice test is also a great way to get more comfortable with both the material and the circumstances you'll face during the actual test.
- **Approach the exam with confidence:** Visualize successfully completing the test and practice shutting down negative thoughts (you can say "NO" aloud or in your head). Remember that you are not your test grade!
- **Treat your body well:** Get enough sleep (more on that below), eat regular meals – avoiding processed foods as much as possible – and give yourself time to decompress. Stress and anxiety are amplified when you're exhausted.
- **Sweat it out:** A new study the University of Maryland School of Public Health found moderate exercise can help reduce future stress and anxiety, and the emotional and mental health benefits may have lasting effects. ^[1]
- **Visit your counseling center:** Most college and university campuses have mental health resources available to provide you with support. Take advantage of them!

How to Get a Good Night's Sleep

When you are well-rested you can have more energy, be more productive and feel more emotionally balanced. However, as you may already be aware, sleep and anxiety don't mix. Whether you have trouble falling asleep because you can't stop your mind from racing or you wake up multiple times throughout the night – the following are some simple strategies to help you sleep better:

- **Stick to a sleep schedule:** Try to go to bed and get up at the same time every day (that includes weekends!) as this consistency reinforces your body's sleep-wake cycle to promote a better sleep.
- **Give it 15 minutes:** If you can't fall asleep within 15 minutes or so, get up and do something else (like reading a book) rather than trying to force it. Remember, no televisions, computers or Smartphones as they will stimulate you and keep you up!
- **Be careful of what you eat and drink:** Physical discomfort from going to bed hungry or stuffed will keep you up. Nicotine, caffeine and alcohol before bed can also disrupt your sleep (and cause middle-of-the night trips to the bathroom.)
- **Create a bedtime ritual:** Whether it's taking a warm bath or listening to soothing music (try classical) doing relaxing activities before bed is a great way to wind your body down for sleep.
- **Make your bedroom your haven:** An ideal room for sleeping is cool, dark and quiet. Black-out shades, earplugs or white noise machines can do wonders. Comfy bedding also helps!

Tips for Test Day

So you've done your studying, perfected your relaxation techniques and slept like a baby – now it's time to take the test. Don't be discouraged if you still feel pangs of anxiety, as a little worry is normal, no matter how prepared you are. Here are some helpful hints to get you through the hardest part:

- Allow yourself plenty of time (arrive early).
- Make sure you eat a healthy snack beforehand.
- Before you start, read the directions carefully.
- Budget your time wisely – you can always skip a question and go back.
- If you have to write an essay, create an outline first.
- Stay focused on the test and not the other students.
- If you feel yourself starting to panic take a deep breath and try one of the relaxation techniques discussed above.
- Remember, you are capable, confident and prepared!

[i] adaa.org/living-with-anxiety/children/test-anxiety

[ii] nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/news/fullstory_129368.html

Source: <https://www.elearners.com/education-resources/online-learning/sure-fire-strategies-for-overcoming-test-anxiety/>

Feeling stressed and need to talk?

Call/text Jessi Whetsel @ 605-237-8425 or email jessi.whetsel@lakeareatech.edu

