

Test Anxiety

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Symptoms

It is normal to feel nervous about an exam. In fact, it is beneficial to be moderately stressed right before the exam. A little tension can give you just the right amount of adrenaline you need to do your best. It can heighten your awareness and sharpen your reflexes, allowing you to perform more quickly. It can even help you recall information you may not have otherwise remembered.

However, if your level of stress rises too high, it can result in insomnia, loss of appetite, and sometimes even hair loss! This can obviously affect your performance on the exam. So how do you know if you suffer from test anxiety? Here is a checklist to see if you may be a little too frazzled...

Test anxiety quiz (don't stress, it's a take home!) (True/False)

- I have trouble sleeping at night and spend those last few minutes before sleep worrying about upcoming exams or projects.
- The day of an exam, I experience drastic appetite changes and either overeat, or skip breakfast and lunch.
- While studying for or taking an exam, I often feel a sense of hopelessness or dread.
- While studying or taking an exam, I have problems concentrating and I sometimes feel bored or tired.
- I often yawn during an exam or while studying.
- During an exam, I often feel confused or panic.
- During an exam, I experience sweaty palms, mental blocks.
- While taking an exam, I sometimes experience headaches, vomiting, or fainting.
- After the exam, I pretend the exam meant nothing to me, and discard the result as meaningless.
- When I am finished with an exam, I sometimes feel guilt and blame myself for not studying enough.
- I sometimes get angry or depressed after an exam.
- As a general rule, I view test taking as a stressful situation and dread it.

If any of these statements were true for you, you may suffer from test anxiety. The first thing to do is realize that it is not a lost cause, and you can manage the anxiety to work for you, instead of against you.

Is Test Anxiety Bad?

NO! In fact it is general stress that helps motivate us to succeed. Take for example that football game you saw last weekend. If the players did not feel somewhat anxious about the outcome of the game, they may not have worked to their full potential. Stress only becomes our enemy when it becomes an end in itself. When the focus of our energy turns to anxiety rather than the task at hand, it becomes detrimental to your efforts.

Dealing with Thoughts

Yell STOP!

If you feel yourself beginning to brew a storm of anxiety, stop what you're doing and mentally draw a blank. Wait for the clouds to clear before continuing. If you are in an environment that permits it, actually tell yourself to STOP! This may embarrass you a little, but at least it will get your mind off the stress. It may take a while for your mind to clear, but wait for it. The time spent doing this will in the end be less than the time lost due to poor performance because of stress.

Daydream

Work! Work! Work! All through school, you are told this. In class, your teacher may have scolded you for daydreaming. Now, forget all that. Allow yourself the benefit of daydreaming. If you feel overwhelmed by the material, let your mind wander. Think of being with a friend or at a place of comfort and let your body relax. Feel the physical tension in your body release, and then return to the grindstone.

Visualize Success

Anyone who has been involved with some form of athletics knows the value of visualization. Basketball players who visualize their shots have a higher scoring ratio. The same applies for academics. Most people contemplate what failure will feel like. Doing this only sets you up for the fall. Instead, spend time visualizing success. Rehearse what it will feel like to get that A. Be specific with your goals, and physically produce them for yourself. If your goal is to ace an upcoming exam, put a copy of a previous exam on the bulletin board in your dorm or apartment and write a big 'A' on it. If your goal is a specific GPA for the semester, write that figure on the board and chart your progress. Thinking positively results in a higher level of energy and stress levels drop.

Focus

Focus on the task at hand. Alright, I know I just said take time to daydream, and you should. But afterwards, when you are working, do not allow outside influences to pervade your thoughts. This allows for efficient use of time. If you have multiple projects, as most of us do, work on one at a time. If you feel yourself stressing about another course, write a note and assure yourself you'll get to it. Then, forget about it until you are finished with what you are doing.

During an exam, if you feel yourself becoming overwhelmed, take a few moments to focus on something in the room. Consider the texture of the desk or your eraser, listen to the sounds of the lights in the room, or focus on something within the room. This can help you clear your mind of outside thoughts before continuing the exam.

Praise yourself

Talk to yourself using positive language. Treat yourself as you would a friend. By the way, this is good advice throughout life, not just during an exam. Rather than saying, 'Way to go dummy, you don't even know the answer to the first question!' try, 'Get back to that question, maybe it will come to you as you work through the rest of the exam.' Encourage yourself and promise yourself a treat after you finish the exam regardless of your feelings toward your performance. This helps you to focus on something other than the importance of this particular exam. Keep in mind that no one exam is going to completely devastate your career as a student.

Dealing with Physical Tension

Here are a few exercises you can try to help relieve the tension in your body. It can help you relax and boost your energy level.

Focal Breathing

Often, stress is a result of a lack of oxygen. This exercise focuses on breathing and optimizing oxygen intake on every breath. Start by exhaling all the air in your lungs. Exhale slowly for ten seconds. Then, keep exhaling until you feel your lungs are completely empty. Breathe in through the nose to a count of eight. Keep your shoulders down and focus on filling your rib cage. As you feel it expand, start to push down into your abdomen. You should feel your lower body expand and near the end, pressure in your lower back as your diaphragm lowers.

Exhale slowly, focusing your breathing by shaping your lips in an ooh position. Pretend there is a candle in front of your mouth that you are trying to blow out. Focusing on this type of breathing will help to focus your mind as well as work to re-oxygenate your blood and reenergize your body.

Body Check

Sit down someplace comfortable and close your eyes. Focus on the muscles in your feet and notice if there is any tension. Tell the muscles in your feet that they can relax.

Do the same with your ankles, then move up to your calves, thighs, and buttocks. Tell each group of muscles to relax. Work slowly being sure to scout out any tension that may be hiding in obscure places.

Do the same for your lower back, diaphragm, chest, upper back, neck, shoulders, jaw, face, upper arms, lower arms, fingers, and scalp. Pretend you are tracking an electrical current through your body that it starting at your toes and escaping from your fingertips and scalp. You may have to do this twice to be sure not to overlook any tension, but be thorough in your search.

Tense and Relax

When scanning your body, you will find tense muscles or groups of muscles. This method will help you to relax that area. Focus on that muscle and increase the tension. If your shoulders are tense, flex them and pull them back. Arch your back to make them even tenser and hold that position for a count of five.

Then, relax the muscle slowly and keep relaxing the muscle until all the tension is gone. In this way, you can consciously purge that area of all stress.

Exercise Aerobically

This is more of a lifestyle than a practical on-site method. Still, it can help to reduce general stress and even improve your health. Do some form of exercise that elevates your heart rate and keeps it beating at that rate for twenty to thirty minutes. It should be something you enjoy, and that you can do at least three times a week. Aerobic exercise includes cycling, basketball, running, swimming, and tennis just to name a few.

Do's & Dont's

- Don't cram for an exam. The amount you learn won't be worth the stress.
- Don't think of yourself or the test in a negative sense.
- Don't stay up late studying the night before. You need the sleep. Begin studying a week in advance if possible.
- Don't spend time with classmates who generate stress for you on test day.
- Don't take those last few moments before the test for last minute cramming. Try to relax and spend that time reading the newspaper or some other distraction.
- Do remind yourself that the test is only a test.
- Do focus on integrating details into main ideas.
- Do reward yourself after the test with food or a movie or some other treat.
- Do something relaxing the last hour before the test.
- Do tell yourself that you will do your best on the test, and that will be enough!

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