

Letting Go of Test Anxiety

If you freeze during tests and flub questions when you know the answers, you might be suffering from test anxiety. A little tension before a test is good. That tingly, butterflies in the stomach feeling you get from extra adrenaline can sharpen your awareness and keep you alert. Sometimes, however, tension is persistent and extreme. It causes loss of sleep, appetite, and sometimes even hair. That kind of tension is damaging. It is a symptom of test anxiety, and it can prevent you from doing your best on exams. Other symptoms include nervousness, fear, dread, irritability, and a sense of hopelessness.

Boredom also can be a symptom of test anxiety. Frequent yawning immediately before a test is a common reaction. Yawning looks like boredom, and it is often a sign of tension. It means oxygen is not getting to the brain because the body is tense. A yawn is one way the body increases its supply of oxygen.

You might experience headaches, an inability to concentrate, or craving for food. For some people, test anxiety makes asthma or high blood pressure worse. During an exam, symptoms can include confusion, panic, mental blocks, fainting, sweaty palms or nausea.

Symptoms after a test can include:

- Mock indifference: "I answered all the multiple choice questions as 'none of the above' because I was bored."
- Guilt: "Why didn't I study more?"
- Anger: "That teacher never wanted me to pass this stupid course anyway."
- Blame: "If only the textbook weren't so dull."
- Depression: "After that test, I don't see any point in staying in school."

Test anxiety has two components, mental and physical. The mental component of stress includes all your thoughts and worries about tests. The physical component includes feelings, sensations, and tension. The following techniques deal with the mental and physical components of stress in any situation, whether it is test anxiety or stage fright.

Dealing with Thoughts

1. **Yell "Stop!"** When you notice that your thoughts are racing, that your mind is cluttered with worry that your thoughts are spinning out of control, mentally yell, "Stop!" If you're in a situation that allows it, yell it out loud. This action is likely to momentarily break the cycle of worry. Once you've stopped it for a moment, you can use any one of the following techniques.
2. **Daydream.** When you fill your mind with pleasant thoughts there is no room left for anxiety. When you notice yourself worrying about an upcoming test, substitute your thoughts of doom with visions of something you like to do. Daydream about being with a special friend or walking alone in a special place.
3. **Visualize success.** Most of us live up to our own expectations, good or bad. If you spend a lot of time mentally rehearsing how it will be to fail, you increase your chances for failure. Once you've stopped the cycle of worry, take time to rehearse what it will be like when you succeed. Be specific. Create detailed pictures, actions, and even sounds as part of your visualization.
4. **Focus your attention on a specific object.** Examine details of a painting, study the branches on a tree, or observe the face of your watch (right down to the tiny scratches in the glass). During an exam, take a few seconds to listen to the sound of the lights in the room. Touch the surface of your desk and notice the texture. Concentrate all your attention on one point. Don't leave room in your mind for anxiety-related thoughts.
5. **Praise yourself.** Talk to yourself in a positive way. Many of us take the first opportunity to say, "Way to go, dummy. You don't even know the answer to the first

question on the test." Most of us wouldn't dream of treating a friend that way, yet we do this to ourselves. An alternative is to give yourself some encouragement. Treat yourself as well as you would treat your best friend. Consider telling yourself, "I am very relaxed. I am doing a great job on this test."

6. **Consider the worst.** Rather than trying to stop worrying, consider the very worst thing that could happen. Take the fear to the limit of absurdity. Imagine the catastrophic problems that might occur if you fail the test. You might say to yourself, "Well, if I fail this test, I might fail the course, lose my financial aid, and get kicked out of school. Then I won't be able to get a job, so the bank would repossess my car, and I'd start drinking. Pretty soon I'd be a bum on skid row. . . ." Keep going until you see the absurdity of your predictions. After you stop chuckling, you can backtrack to discover a reasonable level of concern.

Your worry about failing the entire course if you fail the test might be justified. At that point ask yourself, "Can I live with that?" Unless you are taking a test in parachute packing and the final question involves demonstrating jumping out of a plane, the answer will almost always be yes. (If the answer is no, use another technique. In fact, use several other techniques). The cold facts are hardly ever as bad as our worst fears. Shine a light on your fears and they become more manageable.

Dealing with Feelings

1. **Breathe.** You can calm physical sensations within your body by focusing your attention on your breathing. Concentrate on the air going in and out of your lungs. Experience it as it passes through your nose and mouth. Do this for two to five minutes. If you notice that you are taking short, shallow breaths, begin to take longer and deeper breaths. Fill your lungs so that your abdomen rises, then release all the air. Imagine yourself standing on the tip of your nose. Watch the breath

pass in and out as if your nose were a huge ventilation shaft for an underground mine.

2. **Scan Your Body.** Simple awareness is an effective technique to reduce the tension in your body. Sit comfortably and close your eyes. Focus your attention on the muscles in your feet and notice if they are relaxed. Tell the muscles in your feet that they can relax. Move up to your ankles and repeat the procedure. Next go to your calves and thighs and buttocks, telling each group of muscles to relax. Do the same for your lowerback, diaphragm, chest, upper back, neck, shoulders, jaw, face, upper arms, lower arms, fingers, and scalp.
3. **Tense and Relax.** If you are aware of a particularly tense part of your body or if you discover tension when you're scanning your body, you can release this with the tense-relax method. To do this, find a muscle that is tense and make it even more tense. If your shoulders are tense, pull them back, arch your back, and tense your shoulder muscles even more tightly, then relax. The net result is that you can be aware of the relaxation and allow yourself to relax more. You can use the same process with your legs, arms, abdomen, chest, face, and neck. Clench your fists, tighten your jaw, straighten your legs, and tense your abdomen all at once. Then relax.
4. **Use Guided Imagery.** Relax completely and take a quick fantasy trip. Close your eyes, relax your body, and imagine yourself in a beautiful, peaceful, natural setting. Create as much of the scene as you can. Be specific. Use all your senses. For example, you might imagine yourself at a beach. Hear the surf rolling in and the sea gulls calling to each other. Feel the sun on your face and the cool sand between your toes. Smell the sea breeze. Feel the mist from the surf on your face. Notice the ships on the horizon and the rolling sand dunes.

Some people find that a mountain scene or a lush meadow scene works well. You

can take yourself to a place you've never been or re-create an experience out of your past. Find a place that works for you and practice getting there. When you become proficient you can return to it quickly for trips that may last only a few seconds. With practice you can even use this technique while you are taking a test.

5. **Describe it.** Focus your attention on your anxiety. If you are feeling nauseated or if you have a headache, then concentrate on that feeling. Describe it to yourself. Tell yourself how large it is, where it is located in your body, what color it is, what shape it is, what texture it is, how much water it might hold if it had volume, and how heavy it is.
6. **Be with it.** Describe it in detail and don't resist it. If you can completely experience a physical sensation, it will often disappear. People suffering from severe and untreatable pain have used this technique successfully.
7. **Exercise Aerobically.** This is one technique that will not work in the classroom or while you're taking a test. Yet, it is an excellent way to reduce body tension. Do some kind of exercise that will get your heart beating at twice your normal rate and keep it beating at that rate for 15 or 20 minutes. Aerobic exercises include rapid walking, jogging, swimming, bicycling, basketball, or anything that elevates your heart rate and keeps it elevated.
8. **Get help.** When these techniques don't work, when anxiety is serious, get help. If you become withdrawn, have frequent thoughts about death, get depressed and stay depressed for more than a few days, or have prolonged feelings of hopelessness, see a counselor. Contact Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) at 255-5208.