

Test anxiety

What is Test Anxiety?

Test anxiety is a feeling of agitation or distress before, during, or after an exam. Regarding tests, many of us experience physical or mental reactions such as feeling “butterflies” in the stomach, an instant headache, or sweaty palms.

It is normal (and can be useful!) to feel some anxiety before a test. Still, too much anxiety may be harmful to your exam performance.

How do you know if you have Test Anxiety?

Test anxiety has many symptoms which include loss of sleep or appetite, sweaty palms, food cravings, and an inability to concentrate, to name a few.

Below are common test anxiety reactions: select the statements that you identify with most. If you choose more than five symptoms, you may experience test anxiety. These symptoms are not harmful, however if you experience ten or more, you may suffer from severe test anxiety.

- I do not sleep well the night before a test.
- I am always afraid that I will run out of time.
- I get sick if I eat anything before a test.
- I check the time constantly; noises bother me.
- I am irritable and hard to be around before a test.
- I get easily frustrated during the test.
- I see the test as a measure of my worth as a student.
- I have a negative attitude about testing.
- I blank out during the test and can't recall information.
- I think about not taking the test.
- I worry when others are still testing, and I am finished.
- I consistently average my grades before the test.
- I worry when others finish, and I am still testing.
- My body sweats, my heart pounds and I feel nauseous.

OR

Take an [assessment](#) to determine if you have test anxiety and what you can do about it

How does it affect you?

Anxiety may cause you to have physiological, behavioral, or even psychological effects.

- Physiological – rapid heartbeat, knot in stomach, headache, tension, profuse perspiration.
- Behavioral – indecisive about an answer, “going blank”, inability to organize your thoughts.
- Psychological – feelings of nervousness, restlessness, or continual doubt.

What causes Test Anxiety?

Test anxiety has many sources; most commonly it is caused by a lack of exam preparation. Cramming the night before the exam, poor study habits, poor time management, lack of organization of the text, notes, and homework are examples of being unprepared.

Test anxiety can also be caused by worrying about past test performance, how others are doing on the test and the consequences if you don't do your best. These feelings may intensify if you are already on academic probation.

What can you do about test anxiety?

The mind is a powerful tool that may work either for you or against you. Small incremental adjustments can help manage test anxiety. Developing a positive mindset, visualizing success, preparing, and practicing will help. Start by preparing before, during, and after an exam.

What to do at least a week before the exam:

- Give yourself enough time to review the material – start at least a week early.
- Ask your instructor what the format of the test will be: multiple choice, essay, fill in the blank, true, or false, etc.
- Ask your instructor questions such as: How long will the test be (number of questions)? Is there a time limit? Will there be a study guide? Will there be a review session?
- Make a list of the topic/chapters/materials that will be on the exam. Write down formulas, definitions, or key facts that you need to know; look for these in your lecture notes, textbooks, sample tests, quizzes, and handouts.
- If it helps you, make flash cards, outlines, drawings, etc. that will help you learn and remember the material; these visual aids can help during the test.
- Pay attention to the areas your instructor spends a lot of time on in class. If your instructor spends two weeks emphasizing a subject, then assume it will be on the exam.
- DO NOT PROCRASTINATE. Don't worry about the amount of material you need to know. Instead, start studying! Give each topic enough review time and spend the most time on subjects emphasized by the instructor.
- Test yourself on the material. As you write out problems, talk out loud about what you are doing. (Give the lecture!) If you can talk and write about it, you know it.
- The night before the exam, gather any materials that you might need: pencil, pen, calculator, Scantron®, etc. Then, get a good night's sleep.
- Avoid cramming. Cramming requires a great deal of energy, contributes to stress and tension, and does not last. Cramming is one of the reasons you may "blank out."
- Eat a healthy breakfast. Some foods that are recommended to reduce stress include fresh fruits and vegetables. In general, high carbohydrate foods won't sustain you while proteins will. Figure out what's best for you to eat in the mornings.
- Be on time for the exam. Work on relaxing your body and mind incorporating the success strategies you've learned.

What to do during the exam:

- READ THE DIRECTIONS CAREFULLY. Directions include vital information such as where to write your answers, how to write your answers, whether spelling counts, if you need to show all your work, etc. You may lose vital points because you didn't follow directions.
- Pace yourself and budget your time. Avoid looking at the clock – just focus on the test.
- If you blank on a question, skip it, and move on. Sometimes reading other test questions will help you remember answers to those questions you skipped.
- If others are turning in their tests, don't panic. There's no prize for finishing first. Stay focused.
- Remember to relax, breathe, and don't think about fear or the consequences of the exam. Just put your best foot forward and do your personal best.

What to do right after the exam:

- FORGET ABOUT IT. Yes! It's all over. Go home and relax.
- Don't talk to others about what was on the exam. Asking questions such as "What did you get for #35?" will not help you or the other person. Many professors give different versions of the exam (i.e., Version A, B, C) so you might not be referencing the same question. Worrying about an answer after the test is over contributes to test anxiety.
- Treat yourself. If you have no other commitments (i.e., other exams or classes), spend some time relaxing.
- After a couple of hours or days, try to list some factors that can improve your test taking and to help reduce your test anxiety. Even if you list only a few, it's still a starting point that will lead to success in overcoming your test anxiety.

Additional resource:

Contact one of the [MCC Counselors](#) directly and as needed, to do additional work on managing test anxiety.

Adapted from: <https://asc.calpoly.edu/ssl/testanxiety>