



What Is Test Anxiety?



Test anxiety is actually a type of **performance anxiety** — a feeling someone might have in a situation where performance really counts or when the pressure's on to do well. For example, a person might experience performance anxiety when he or she is about to try out for the school play, sing a solo on stage, get into position at the pitcher's mound, step onto the platform in a diving meet, or go into an important interview.

Like other situations in which a person might feel performance anxiety, test anxiety can bring on "butterflies," a stomach-ache, or a tension headache. Some people might feel shaky, sweaty, or feel their heart beating quickly as they wait for the test to be given out. A student with really strong test anxiety may even feel like he or she might pass out or throw up.

Test anxiety is not the same as doing poorly on a certain test because your mind is on something else. Most people know that having other things on their minds — such as a breakup or the death of someone close — can also interfere with their concentration and prevent them from doing their best on a test.



What Causes It?

All anxiety is a reaction to anticipating something stressful. Like other anxiety reactions, test anxiety affects the body and the mind. When you're under stress, your body releases the hormone adrenaline, which prepares it for danger (you may hear this referred to as the "fight flight or freeze" reaction). That's what causes the physical symptoms, such as sweating, a pounding heart, and rapid breathing. These sensations might be mild or intense.

Focusing on the bad things that could happen also fuels test anxiety. For example, someone worrying about doing poorly might think thoughts like, "What if I forget everything I know?" or "What if the test is too hard?" Too many thoughts like these leave no mental space for thinking about the test questions. People with test anxiety can also feel stressed out by their physical reaction and think things like "What if I throw up?" or "Oh no, my hands are shaking."

Just like other types of anxiety, test anxiety can create a vicious circle: The more a person focuses on the bad things that could happen, the stronger the feeling of anxiety becomes. This makes the person feel worse and, because his or her head is full of distracting thoughts and fears, it can increase the possibility that the person will do worse on the test.

Who's Likely to Have Test Anxiety?

People who worry a lot or who are perfectionists are more likely to have trouble with test anxiety. People with these traits sometimes find it hard to accept mistakes they might make or to get anything less than a perfect score. In this way, even without meaning to, they might really pressure themselves. Test anxiety is bound to thrive in a situation like this.

Students who aren't prepared for tests but who care about doing well are also likely to experience test anxiety. If you know you're not prepared, it's a no-brainer to realize that you'll be worried about doing poorly. People can feel unprepared for tests for several reasons: They may not have studied enough, they may find the material difficult, or perhaps they feel tired because didn't get enough sleep the night before.



What Can You Do?

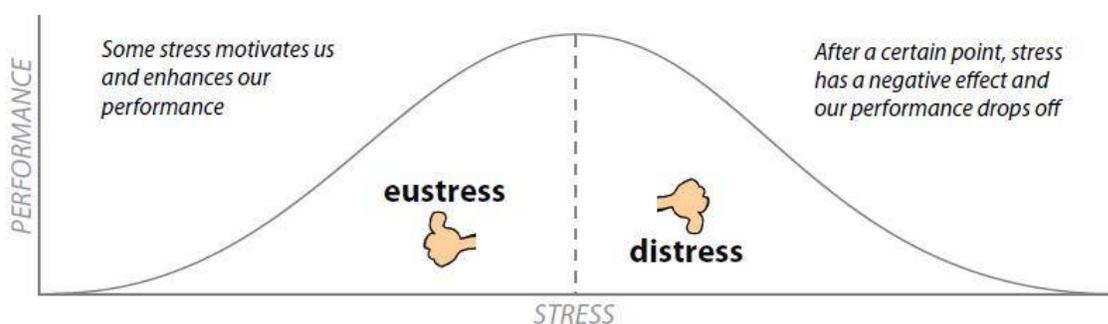
Test anxiety can be a real problem if you're so stressed out over a test that you can't get past the nervousness to focus on the test questions and do your best work. Feeling ready to meet the challenge, though, can keep test anxiety at a manageable level.

Find out what it is about exams that make you anxious. There are many different reasons why people experience test anxiety. Some might not have prepared well. Some are perfectionists and worry about making mistakes on the test. It could be the possibility of failure or the hype surrounding the exam. By pinpointing the cause, you can more easily find ways to deal with the anxiety.

Use a little stress to your advantage. Stress is your body's warning mechanism — it's a signal that helps you prepare for something important that's about to happen. So use it to your advantage. Instead of reacting to the stress by dreading, complaining, or fretting about the test with friends, take an active approach. Let stress remind you to study well in advance of a test. Chances are, you'll keep your stress from spinning out of control. After all, nobody ever feels stressed out by thoughts that they might do well on a test. It is important to remember that anxiety is a normal thing and our reactions to it (butterflies, headaches etc.) can also be normal. However if you experience too much stress, your performance on your test could deteriorate. Some anxiety is good; too much can cause lowered performances. It can help remind you that you want to do your best and it can provide you the energy you need to prepare! Look at anxiety as a tool to help you prepare for an exam.

Don't worry, you're not the only one.

Everyone is anxious about tests, of course. If you weren't, you wouldn't try. It's fairly obvious that too much stress is a problem. However, a certain amount of stress before the test is good. It acts as a motivator and can enhance performance.



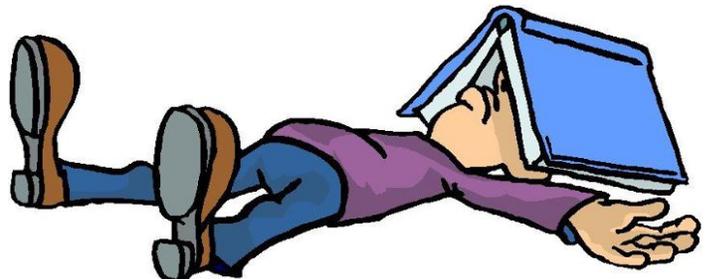
Ask for help. Although a little test anxiety can be a good thing, an overdose of it is another story entirely. If sitting for a test gets you so stressed out that your mind goes blank and causes you to miss answers that you know, then your level of test anxiety probably needs some attention. Your teacher, your school guidance counselor, VIBE coach, or a tutor can be useful resources to talk to if you always get extreme test anxiety. Be sure that your teacher knows that you have test anxiety well before the test. There may be other options to evaluate your knowledge or performance within the subject matter.

Be prepared. Some students think that going to class is all it should take to learn and do well on tests. But there's much more to learning than just hoping to soak everything up in class. That's why good study habits and skills are so important — and why no amount of cramming or studying the night before a test can take the place of the deeper level of learning that happens over time with regular study.

Many students find that their test anxiety is reduced when they start to study better or more regularly. It makes sense — the more you know the material, the more confident you'll feel. Having confidence going into a test means you expect to do well. When you expect to do well, you'll be able to relax into a test after the normal first-moment jitters pass.

Things you can do to help yourself be better prepared:

- ✓ Create a Study Plan
- ✓ Review notes
- ✓ Study with a friend or study group
- ✓ Ask teacher for a study guide
- ✓ Create study notes
- ✓ Use flashcards
- ✓ Make notes from textbook
- ✓ Go over old exams and assignments
- ✓ Use Exambank



Take care of yourself. It can help to learn ways to calm yourself down and get centered when you're tense or anxious. For some people, this might mean learning a simple breathing exercise. Practicing breathing exercises regularly (when you're not stressed out) helps your body see these exercises as a signal to relax.

And, of course, taking care of your health — such as getting enough sleep, exercise, and healthy eats before a test — can help keep your mind working at its best. Remember that your brain cannot function well if the basics are not taken care of (you can't think logically if you are hungry! All you will think about is how hungry you are!) Fresh fruits and vegetables are often recommended to reduce stress. Stressful foods can include processed foods (artificial sweeteners, carbonated soft drinks, chocolate, junk foods, chips), eggs, fried foods, pork, red meat, sugar, white flour products & foods contain preservatives or heavy spices. Take a small healthy snack to the test. This will help take your mind off of your anxiety. A exercise program is said to sharpen the mind. Your mind will feel more alert after exercise!

Use relaxation techniques. There are many different ways that people can use to relax. When you learn to relax, the brain can focus better on the task at hand. Meditation is a popular way to relax. Mindfully focusing on your breathing and ridding your body of tension is a wonderful way to calm down. For some, using aromatherapy to relax is very effective. Try using an essential oil while you are studying, then take the same scent on a tissue and smell it if you find yourself stumped on the test. The sense of smell can often bring memories of things you did when you last smelled it to mind – for example, something that you read or studied! You can also use a soothing smelling oil in the same way to help you calm your nerves. Don't use too much though, other people may not appreciate it! Some people like to use visualization techniques to take them to that “happy place”. This technique works by taking the brain on a quick ‘vacation’ away from tension. After feeling a bit of relaxation, you may feel better prepared to tackle the test in terms of stress! Visualization can also be used to picture yourself having success on the test. If you visualize what it looks and feels like to be successful or stress free, you can more easily



During the exam.

- ✓ Tell yourself “I can be anxious later, now is the time to take the exam”.
- ✓ Focus on answering the question, not on your grade or others’ performances.
- ✓ Counter negative thoughts with other more valid thoughts like, “I don’t have to be perfect”
- ✓ Tense and relax muscles throughout your body; take a couple of 4 X 4 breathes and try to maintain a positive attitude
- ✓ If allowed, get a drink or go to the bathroom
- ✓ Ask the instructor a question if one comes up during the exam.
- ✓ Eat
- ✓ Break your pencil lead – then go sharpen it.
- ✓ Think for a moment about the post-exam reward you promised yourself



After the exam. Review how well you did in controlling your anxiety after you finished your exam. List what worked and use these strategies again. It does not matter how small the items are; they are building blocks to success. What did not work or what can be worked on for improvement?

Everything takes time and practice, and learning to beat test anxiety is no different. Although it won't go away overnight, facing and dealing with test anxiety will help you learn stress management, which can prove to be a valuable skill in many situations besides taking tests. Think about practicing relaxation techniques while you study. This will help train your brain to relax and you will find that you will have an easier time relaxing in a stressful situation if you have practiced! And finally, whether you did well or not, be sure to follow through on the reward you promised yourself – and enjoy it! Try not to dwell on all the mistakes you might have made. Do not immediately begin studying for the next test indulge in something relaxing for a little while.